

UNRAVELING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN ABU DHABI

As the United Arab Emirates (UAE) nears its Golden Jubilee this year, with strategic focus on the next 50 years, the country is keen to ensuring an enhanced quality of life for all its inhabitants. With the growth that the emirate of Abu Dhabi (capital of the UAE) has experienced in a short amount of time, comes the social responsibility for health, safety, and prosperity of the emirate and its people.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) witnessed rapid development since the discovery of oil in the 1960s, from a penurious desert region to a modern state. With infrastructural growth and industrialization came novel social strains and gaps that local communities grappled with. The UAE's leadership has focused efforts on innovation across all sectors to address these gaps and meet social needs. As the UAE's social, cultural, and economic foundations continue to evolve, especially due to globalization, social innovation can be an effective tool to address complex and interrelated social issues.

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE UAE

Internationally, quality of life is based upon the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) "Better Life Index," which encompasses housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, education, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance [1]. While definitions of social innovation are various, they all allude to one underlying condition: social innovation is primarily driven by improving the quality of life [2]. This is a complex endeavor given the rapid changes arising due to globalization, urbanization, population growth, and technological advancements. The Economist Intelligence Unit built the Social Innovation Index 2016 to assess the social innovation capacity of 45 countries, measuring their capacities for social innovation across four pillars: policy and institutional framework, financing, society, and entrepreneurship.

Although the UAE was not included at the time, the performance of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries represented was quite low [3]; given that the concept and projects are still new to the region that comes by no surprise.

Several of the main impediments to driving social innovation efforts in the MENA region include lack of funding and government support, resistance, corruption, rigid regulatory frameworks, and unskilled human capital [4]. Governments are vital stakeholders to social innovation's progress by orchestrating efforts and supporting access to resources. Despite the regional impediments, the sentiments of the UAE's government and its community are aligned, there is a readiness to adopt new technologies and innovations to accelerate the nation's prosperity, and there are adequate resources to drive the social innovation agenda.

Zooming into the capital of the UAE, Abu Dhabi's social sector is developing and growing through the activation of social enterprises, social innovation hubs, organizations, and accelerators. For example, the Authority for Social Contribution – Ma'an was formed by the Department of Community Development (DCD) in 2019 to strengthen ties between the government, private sector, and civil society to help drive social innovation and build a culture of social contribution and participation. DCD has also set up its own social innovation division to further reinforce Abu Dhabi's social infrastructure by steering the social innovation agenda. Moving forward requires a robust push towards incorporating social innovation as a core element in the culture of public, private, third sectors, and civil society.

Crystalizing the operational framework will significantly assist the UAE in keeping pace with benchmark countries and global best practices. This would also enable policy makers and corporations to accurately understand the UAE's social innovation capacity, challenges faced, and areas for improvement.

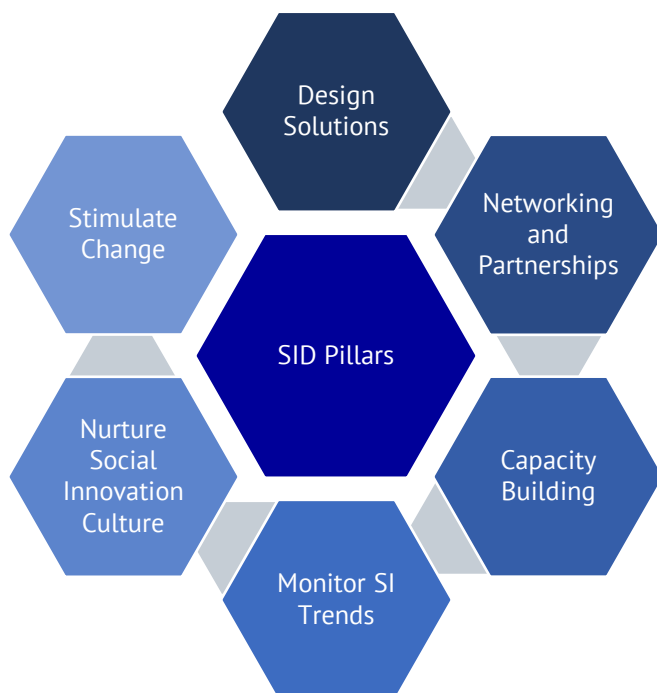
GALVANIZING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN ABU DHABI

In 2018, the Department of Community Development (DCD) was established to develop and regulate Abu Dhabi's social sector and its services to ensure "a dignified life for all" [5]. With Abu Dhabi being one of the world's largest melting pots, home to over 200 nationalities, identifying and solving challenges must be tailored to the specific needs of the population. International indices (i.e. OECD's Better Life Index, the Sustainable Development Index, and the Human Development Index) are analyzed to support in deriving areas of improvement. Furthermore, DCD focuses on evidence-based approaches through research, monitoring, and innovation. The Social Innovation Division (SID), under DCD's Social Monitoring and Innovation Sector, aims to support wider policy change, utilize social innovation capacities, and establish an integrated ecosystem, to meet DCD's strategic objectives. The Quality of Life survey, designed by the DCD's Social Monitoring Division, is disseminated to segments across Abu Dhabi's population to gauge

baseline levels of well-being which are analyzed to produce a list of social challenges for which the Social Innovation Division design interventions.

Some of the social challenges identified through the extensive Quality of Life survey include high incidence of divorce and substance use disorders, high prevalence of mental disorders and chronic diseases, declining cohesion of family, and low civic engagement, among others. The way in which DCD has addressed these is creating comprehensive strategic plans. Some of these strategies include People of Determination (the official term in the UAE for people with disabilities), vulnerable groups (e.g., ex-offenders, drug abusers, victims of abuse, etc.), and substance abuse designed by DCD's respective expert divisions, each with emphasis on specific targeted beneficiaries (i.e., family, elderly, women, youth, domestic helpers, migrant workers, etc.). For the Social Innovation Division, social innovation entails investigating all members of the Abu Dhabi community, gathering key scientific insights on their specific needs, and developing creative solutions that ensure a desirable quality of life in the emirate.

The Social Innovation Division also prides itself on a unique Activation Plan, represented by six pillars (see figure), of various social innovation arenas. Social innovation is not simply the solving of complex issues (wicked problems), it places beneficiaries at the heart of the process. In addition to the aforementioned pillars that help drive and sustain social innovation in Abu Dhabi, a solid ecosystem of stakeholders and contributors are integral to the momentum needed for social impact. One such example is a collaboration between the Social Innovation Division and New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Addressing the social challenge of limited daily physical activity among the elderly population within the emirate, Social Innovation Division and NYUAD embarked on a journey to develop a nudge that would not only promote and increase physical activity among the elderly, but also provide guided opportunities to remain on track with their daily physical activity journey and remain motivated to do so. The collaboration led to the Forever Fit program (see figure) that allowed the elderly to assess their own physical activity and goals, while guiding and prompting them through a booklet, weekly nudges, and online video guides that help them remain active. In the pilot phase of the program, researchers were able to observe significant increase in daily physical activity and satisfaction among the elderly participants in program.



SID Six Operational Pillars

WHAT'S YOUR MOVE?



Are you new to exercise?
Do you exercise on a regular basis?

To start, pick one of the three categories that describes you best.



EVERY MOVE COUNTS

You want to start engaging in simple activities that will help you build strength and gain energy. Turn to page 4 to start your journey.



KEEP MOVING FURTHER

You are already moderately active and want to continue improving yourself with new and more challenging exercises. Turn to page 6 to continue your journey.



FOREVER FIT

You are regularly active and have built strength, but don't want to stop there. Turn to page 8 for exercises that will help you remain forever fit!

Forever fit nudge

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

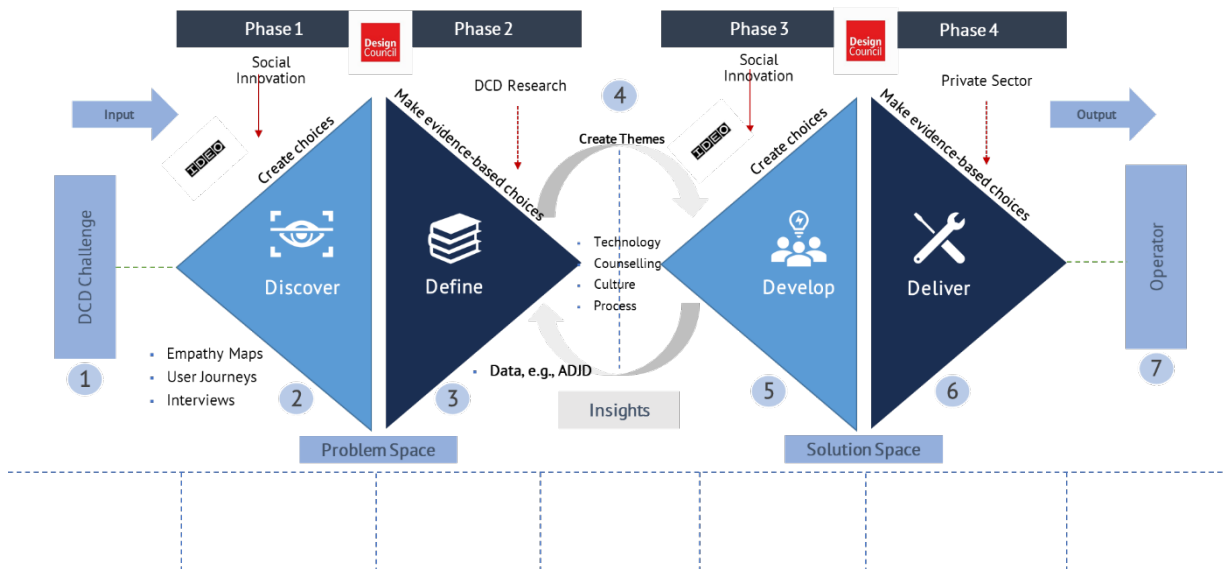
Thus far, we have established a definition of social innovation and contextualized its function in Abu Dhabi. This section is a discussion of its operation - the tools needed to activate social innovation. The multidisciplinary approach allows the Social Innovation

Division to not only understand Abu Dhabi's performance globally, but also observe social dilemmas comprehensively and act to resolve the specific challenge.

Tools, such as design thinking, benchmarking, desktop research, and future foresight are useful in social innovation to safeguard the impact and sustainability of the intervention. Considering these valuable tools in designing solutions, the SID team developed a model that merges aforementioned tools, yet aligns with the division's operational model and ecosystem. The Social Innovation Division's double diamond (see figure) observes key elements in the user-centric design thinking model (economic viability, technical feasibility, and social desirability) while combining double diamond principles (research and solutions) into a customized model for the division's mandate. Beginning with the social challenges (as curated and identified from the Quality of Life survey), keeping the beneficiary at the center of the process throughout, and ending with a product, process, or service to be piloted and scaled with one of our operators, SID ensures a holistic approach to developing innovative solutions while ensuring the sustainability of the intervention.

The Social Innovation Division's Double Diamond is the cornerstone in the success of the Forever Fit program (which demonstrated an over 200% increase in physical activity among Abu Dhabi's elderly in the pilot phase). The social challenge of limited physical activity among the elderly in Abu Dhabi was identified, together with developing personas, empathy maps, benchmarking, focus groups, surveys, and a deeper understanding of the cultural differences with the elderly in Abu Dhabi as

SID Double Diamond (adapted from Design Council, Double Diamond)



opposed to other cities, we were able to define the root cause of the limited physical activity among this segment was due to lack of discipline and motivation. Using these insights, we developed various nudges that could address these root causes. The nudges were piloted and tested with the segment using randomized control trials, which led to the conclusion of Forever Fit being the ideal solution to support Abu Dhabi's elderly on their physical activity journey. Upon completion of the pilot, the team gathered lessons learned and participant feedback to enhance the program, prior to transferring the project to one of DCD's operators, that specializes in elderly well-being.

CONCLUSION

As social innovation begins to gain momentum in the MENA region, the emirate of Abu Dhabi continues galvanize and promote social innovation practices in

solving social challenges via idiosyncratic solutions and processes. DCD's strategic positioning within the community affords it a competitive advantage to lead social innovation efforts in the region, through the establishment of the SID, making it the hub of social innovation. Its success centers around the impact of interventions developed, with the support of strategic partners and subject matter experts. Though social innovation continues to rise it must not be confounded as a trend; it continues to evolve as communities collaborate to solve real problems. Hence, the innovative tools are useful in providing guidance to practical methods that lead to successful solutions.

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