

How socially-led innovation can bring positive change in unchartered times

By [Muhammad Nabil](#)

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There's an old and somewhat overused saying attributed to Winston Churchill that is nevertheless appropriate in these uncertain times: never let a good crisis go to waste. A global pandemic certainly qualifies as a crisis, but what good can we generate from this exceptional challenge?



Muhammad Nabil, partners and startups strategy lead, Microsoft 4Afrika

In my work with Microsoft 4Afrika, I have had a front-row seat to the innovation and creativity many African startups have employed to address pressing economic and social gaps and needs.

“ Whether it’s using agri-tech to improve farmer crop yields, using technology to deliver finance solutions to the previously unbanked, or pairing solar power and IoT to solve power reliability issues, African innovation is alive and thriving, and the Covid-19 pandemic has only fanned these flames of ingenuity. ”

Crisis drives socially-drive innovation

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, it’s been inspiring to support and work with startups who are adapting their businesses and creating new platforms to support relief efforts. We offer technical and business support to startups, hackathons and ideation sessions hosted by our partners, and work with partners throughout Africa to help them adapt and develop their solutions to address the current situation.

In Egypt, the local angel investor network Cairo Angels ‘We’ve got your back’ campaign has helped one startup develop a platform that connects vulnerable elderly people with volunteers who do their shopping and run errands for them, while a three-day Wild Card hackathon Microsoft 4Afrika supported saw SMEs and startups participating head to head to develop response systems designed to deliver social relief for those suffering Covid-19 disruptions.



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In South Africa, Zindi, the first data science competition platform in Africa, has rolled out a series of weekend hackathons to a data science ecosystem of engineers, scientists, academics, companies, NGOs and institutions, targeting a set of Covid-19-related datasets. And #Africa Vs Virus, an African Development Bank Ideathon supported by Microsoft, addressed challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We're also looking at other ways to support entrepreneurship and innovation at this time. Our partnership with the Cairo Angels Investment Readiness Programme will see us introduce five of our partner startups across Africa to Cairo Angels, with the aim of matching them to investors for long-term gains. We'll also be matching startups and providing mentorship through the Gemini Uplift Initiative, which aims to help startups maintain operational continuity and financial sustainability through three tracks, money, matching and mentorship, linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We'll continue to explore new ways to support social enterprise startups and hopefully ensure their success and sustainability.

“ *What the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted is that unusual times require an unusual response, and it can't be business as usual.* ”

It's clear that as we move into uncharted territory, we need a new approach, not only for how we live our lives, socialise and move around, but also for how we approach business. In Africa, there is a prime opportunity for the continent's business economy to race towards social entrepreneurship. An agile and dynamic business ecosystem is a vital trigger for effective social enterprise.



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Enterprise for good

Social entrepreneurs identify issues and uplift those communities most vulnerable to the effects of disruption. Driven by the desire to identify and address the inequalities of the day, these entrepreneurs are well-placed to fill the gaps between government and the markets to promote a more sustainable and inclusive economy in times of crisis and beyond.

Earlier this year, Microsoft announced its intention to support social entrepreneurship through its Global Social Entrepreneurship Programme. Social entrepreneurship bridges the gap between what society needs, and what business needs in the form of profits. Our Global Social Entrepreneurship Programme recognises these entrepreneurs who are

purposefully contributing to positive change in their communities. Inspired by the commitment of social entrepreneurs, the programme actively seeks to support startups with diverse perspectives and backgrounds across a variety of impact sectors. And we're not alone in our belief that social entrepreneurship needs nurturing.

In January 2020, the World Economic Forum, during its 50th annual meeting, called for businesses to adopt the concept of stakeholder capitalism to overcome income inequality, societal division and the climate crisis. It's simple – we have to move away from shareholder capitalism if we hope to equitably address the concerns that threaten our planet.

Neither is this a new concept – the Davos Manifesto of 1973 set out for the first time the stakeholder concept that businesses should serve the interests of society rather than simply their shareholders, and the Davos Manifesto 2020 builds on that, providing a vision for stakeholder capitalism that touches on a range of important issues of our time.



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Leveraging the power of social entrepreneurship

This work is already happening with startups that are creating new businesses, built around powerful technologies, and designed to make the world a better place. Upepo Technology in Kenya is one such example, a firm that develops IoT (internet of things) solutions for the country's water sector. The company partners with utilities to deploy smart water metering devices that provide real-time monitoring of water infrastructure, moving towards a more holistic view of water consumption in Kenya, with the ultimate goal of providing access to water for people across the country.

ICE Commercial Power in Nigeria is another – the company deploys modular, cloud-connected solar power systems (called microgrids) to provide clean, reliable electricity to small businesses. To achieve this strategy at scale, ICE incorporates strong community engagement in target communities by training and employing local youth to participate in the development of their communities. The ICE strategy delivers sustainable impact and job creation in communities that need it most.

If we are to continue encouraging investment in social value, it is up to all of us to unite in supporting the growth of social enterprise at grassroots level. With the social entrepreneurship movement gaining steady momentum across the continent in the business sector, I am certain Africa can strike a global note for social impact beyond Covid-19.

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