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Africa Journal of Management special issue: *Social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa*

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## **Special issue editorial: Social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa**

### **Introduction**

Africa is at a crossroads. On one hand, it faces numerous intractable sustainable development challenges, including widespread and persistent poverty (Schoch & Lakner, 2020), increasing competition for resources (Economist, 2020), and the intensifying effects of global climate change (United Nations, 2020). These challenges are exacerbated by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Paci, 2021). On the other hand, many African economies are growing rapidly (EY, 2021); whilst over the last decade significant progress has been made in governance and sustainable development across the continent (Signe & Gurib-Fakim, 2019). Many African cities have become centres of (social) innovation and entrepreneurship (FT, 2019), with Africans shaping their own destinies and developing local solutions to the challenges they face. Perceptions outside Africa are also changing, with the opportunities and potential of the continent and its peoples increasingly recognised. This special issue of the Africa Journal of Management aims to reflect and speak to these transformations. The papers in it present novel empirical and theoretical insights on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa, adding to this emerging field and showcasing the contributions research from and utilising Africa data can provide for wider social innovation and entrepreneurship scholarship (George, 2015; Rivera-Santos et al, 2015; George et al, 2016).

Social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa are the subject of growing academic attention (Bitzer et al, 2015; Rivera-Santos et al, 2015; Holt & Littlewood, 2017; Littlewood & Holt, 2018a, 2018b; Mirvis & Googins, 2018; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021; Steinfield & Holt, 2019; Sottini et al, 2021 etc.). Nevertheless, research has struggled to keep pace with rapid developments on the ground and in practice. Scholarship on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa also remains fragmented, with many research questions unanswered. For this reason, this special issue of the Africa Journal of Management was convened.

The papers in this special issue all contribute to advancing the field of research on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa, and to wider social innovation and entrepreneurship scholarship. In the next section, we review the state of the field. We then introduce each of the papers and discuss their contributions. Finally, we explore areas for further enquiry, building on the perspectives and insights offered by this special issue.

### **Social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa: The state of the field**

Socially innovative and entrepreneurial activity has a long history in Africa, even if attaching such labels to it is a more recent phenomenon. Cooperatives have existed in Africa for more

than a hundred years, and various kinds of community enterprises since at least the 1960s, if not before, especially if one considers more traditional (informal) community organising. Non-governmental organisations have also long supported livelihood, enterprise, and community development in Africa, whilst the global fair trade movement emerged in the 1980s connecting developing economy producers – including those in Africa - with consumers in developed markets.

Literature exists on this historical social venturing in Africa. For example, work on African cooperatives (Hamer, 1981; Holmén 1990; Schwettmann, 1993), on fair trade and Africa (Tallontire, 1999; 2000), and on microfinance in Africa (Webster & Fidler, 1996; Buckley, 1997). Nevertheless, it is over the last decade particularly that practices of social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa, and academic writing on this subject, has proliferated. This review of the state of the field therefore focusses on works published since 2011, and a landmark study by researchers at the University of Johannesburg, supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Belgian government, which examined South African social enterprises. This study entailed in-depth case study research with 24 South African social enterprises, shedding light on their histories, social business models, target markets, and challenges faced (Steinman, 2010; Fonteneau, 2011; Steinman & van Rooij, 2012).

Social innovation and entrepreneurship are intertwined phenomena. Social innovation is the process of creating and implementing solutions to sustainable development challenges. Such innovations come in varied forms, from the development and provision of new products and services, to systems change and new ways of organising for the benefit of society. Social innovation may be undertaken by individuals, collectives, and structures inside organisations, by organisations in any sector - or indeed boundary spanning hybrid organisations - and through cross-sector collaborations. Social entrepreneurs are important agents of social innovation, with such innovations realised through their social ventures. Social entrepreneurship describes the process of their venturing for sustainable development, and how social entrepreneurs use resources in innovative ways to pursue opportunities to catalyse social change and/or to address societal needs (Mair & Marti, 2006).

Across the above definitions, we see how social innovation and entrepreneurship intersect. Social entrepreneurs may be social innovators, whilst their social enterprises and associated processes of social entrepreneurship, may act as the vehicle for delivering a social innovation. Social innovation is not, however, limited to social entrepreneurs and enterprises. Social innovation and entrepreneurship are furthermore distinct concepts. We therefore review literature on them separately below – starting with social entrepreneurship - before returning to their intersection later in the editorial.

Focussing first on work examining social entrepreneurship in Africa, a significant early study in this area was the Trickle out Africa research project [www.trickout.net](http://www.trickout.net). Through this project, which ran from 2011-2013<sup>1</sup>, researchers examined social and environmental entrepreneurship across 19 sub-Saharan African countries using quantitative survey and multiple case study research. Outputs from this project assessed the contextualised nature of African social entrepreneurship, within particular countries (Littlewood & Holt, 2018a) and across countries (Rivera-Santos et al, 2015); the strategies of African social enterprises (Littlewood & Holt, 2018b); how they acquire and mobilise resource and use bricolage (Holt & Littlewood, 2017); assess impact (Holt & Littlewood, 2015); and issues of hybridity (Littlewood & Holt, 2020).

This project was timely, and a forerunner for growing scholarly attention on social entrepreneurship in Africa. Subsequent work has addressed varied topics. First, adopting a strategic organisation perspective, scholars have studied African social enterprises'/entrepreneurs' approaches to resource mobilisation amidst scarcity (Ciambotti et al, 2019; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021; Reypens et al, 2021), how they scale (Ciambotti et al, 2020; Busch & Barkema, 2021), and how they manage strategic change (Hailey, & Salway, 2016). The topic of social enterprise models across Africa has also garnered attention (Claeyé, 2017; Rwamigabo, 2017), whilst recently scholars have turned their attention to network, systems, and ecosystem perspectives on social entrepreneurship in Africa (Ciambotti et al, 2021; Sottini et al, 2021; Busch & Barkema, 2022).

Shifting from an organisation to more individual focus, researchers have examined African social entrepreneurs' passion and leadership (Thorgren & Omorede, 2018), their motivations (Wanyoike & Maseno, 2021), cultural experiences (Mafico et al, 2021), and skills (Urban, 2008). Other work has adopted a more overarching perspective, commenting on the state of practice and the academic field (Mirvis & Googins, 2018). Finally, and illustrating the growing maturity of work in this area, scholars have adopted more critical perspectives, moving beyond positive cases, and considering factors that may limit the effectiveness of social entrepreneurship models and interventions in Africa (Cieslik, 2016), and even instances of social enterprise failure (Siwale et al, 2021).

In summary, scholarship on social entrepreneurship in Africa has advanced considerably over the last decade. Nevertheless, there remain limitations and gaps. For example, the geographical coverage of existing work is unbalanced, with a few countries (notably South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria) receiving most attention. There are 54 countries in Africa, home

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<sup>1</sup> The Trickle out Africa project continues to the present time, with various resources for academics, practitioners and policy makers available on the project website: [www.trickleout.net](http://www.trickleout.net). The year 2013 was the end of the funding period for the project.

to diverse ethnic groups and peoples speaking many different languages, following different religions, and engaging in diverse cultural practices (Zoogah et al, 2015). These significant differences might influence social entrepreneurs' motivations and decisions, as well as the models, strategies, and ways they operate their ventures (George et al, 2016).

Institutional environments across and within African countries also vary enormously, thus further study is needed into how this influences social entrepreneurship processes, social enterprises, and social entrepreneurs. The range of theories deployed and tested in existing work likewise remains limited, whilst African data has much potential to contribute to theory elaboration, extension and building, including to explain some of the unique phenomena present on the continent (George et al, 2016; Nkomo, 2017). Finally, methodologically, much existing work deploys qualitative methods, often focussing on case studies in one country. There is scope for such methods to be further employed to gain deeper insights, but also for the use of quantitative methods to assess larger datasets, including across African countries (Sgrò et al, 2020), or comparing African data with that collected elsewhere. For example, work by Rivera-Santos et al (2015) examining the influence of contextual dimensions (acute poverty, informality, colonial history, and ethnic group identity) on the way social ventures perceive themselves and on their choice of activities using data from 19 African countries. Or Ciambotti et al's (2021) use of survey data from Ghana and Tanzania to examine what drives social entrepreneurs to engage in entrepreneurial bricolage, finding a significant role for relational capital in their adoption.

Moving from social entrepreneurship to social innovation, we note that social innovations are not the purview of social entrepreneurs alone. In Africa they may be enacted by actors in the public, private or third sectors (Bitzer et al, 2015), by hybrid organisations (Littlewood & Holt, 2020), and through cross-sector partnerships (Bitzer & Glasbergen, 2010; Powell et al, 2018). Accordingly, literature on social innovation in Africa is found in various disciplines, academic outlets, and is discussed amongst diverse scholarly communities, with work often focussing on particular manifestations of social innovations. One such area of work is that concerned with corporate social innovation in Africa. This includes studies of social innovation as part of corporate responsibility (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010; Adomako & Tran, 2021), and corporate efforts to serve base of the pyramid (BoP) markets in Africa (McFalls, 2007; Dolan & Scott, 2009; Onsongo, 2019; Grimm, 2020; Lashitew et al, 2020; Muthuri et al, 2020).

Recent work on social innovation in Africa has examined the role of universities as innovation agents (Kruss, 2012; Brundenius et al, 2017; Mdleleni, 2022). Other kinds of organisations have also received growing scholarly attention, for instance technology hubs, incubators, accelerators, makerspaces etc. Such organisations act as enablers and intermediaries for

social innovation and innovators in Africa (Gathege & Moraa, 2013; Littlewood & Kiyumbu, 2018; Jimenez, 2019; Busch & Barkema, 2022). Nevertheless, these various organisations and the work they do still need to be better understood.

Moving beyond work on particular types of organisations, some studies have focussed more on the actual social innovations, their antecedents and impacts, as well as the processes through which they emerge (Nwuneli, 2016). Examples include work on the MPesa mobile money transfer and payment services in Kenya (Hughes & Lonie, 2007; Lashitew et al, 2019; Kingiri & Fu, 2020), on energy saving cook stoves (Holt & Littlewood, 2015), solar lights and innovative models for their distribution (Munro et al, 2016), and wider social franchising (Perrigot, 2021).

Recent work has also started to take stock and look across multiple social innovations, drawing upon African data. Steinfield & Holt (2019) theorise the reproduction of social innovations in subsistence markets, drawing upon case examples of social innovations in Africa. They develop a typology capturing different modes of reproduction, and identify three archetypes of reproduced social innovations, noting how frugal innovations can emerge from these archetypes. Steinfield and Holt's (2019) work illustrates the growing sophistication of research on social innovation in Africa, and the potential of such work to contribute to the wider field. Some of the cases in Steinfield and Holt's (2019) paper also relate to the work of African social entrepreneurs and enterprises. This again highlights the linkages between social innovation and entrepreneurship and supports consideration of both in this special issue. Social entrepreneurs devise and/or adopt and disseminate social innovations through their venturing.

To conclude, in this review we have shown how social entrepreneurship and social innovation scholarship on Africa has proliferated over the last decade, but also that gaps, limitations and questions remain. There is significant scope for further enquiry, new theory building and theory extension, and for work on and from Africa to contribute to literature and debates in the wider social innovation and entrepreneurship fields.

### **The Special Issue Papers**

We will now introduce the special issue papers. We turn first to those papers providing insights on social entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. Rayburn and Ochieng (2022) adopt a grounded theory approach to reveal how transformative entrepreneurship can occur through prompting self-determination and uncovering transcendent motivations to help others. This form of entrepreneurship focuses on improving the societal and economic wellbeing of

communities, and values people and relationships above profits. Their research, set across four unique informal settlements in a major urban centre in sub-Saharan Africa, provides insights into how organisations can identify and work with community members to foster more transformative entrepreneurs.

The work by Nilsson and Samuelsson (2022) introduces the concept of spatial awareness to capture how social entrepreneurs utilise their understanding of resource differences in various spaces. It is set within the specific context of South Africa, but has parallels across sub-Saharan Africa where rich and poor live side by side. The authors, through a comparative case study of South African social enterprises, trace how social entrepreneurs' spatial awareness allows them to engage in spatial bricolage to create frugal innovations, mobilising resources from the resource-constrained as well as the resource-affluent environments.

The context of South Africa is also explored in the contribution by Bignotti and Myres (2022), where through a cluster analysis of survey results from social enterprises in South Africa the authors reveal two archetype models: *beneficiary-centric entrepreneurial nonprofits* and *customer-centric social businesses*. Their findings, while partially aligning with prior literature, emphasise that the mode of social enterprise is in part a product of the social problems present – conditions that emerge from the country's unique past and present, and the service provisions provided (or not provided) by the government and other organizations. In sum, they underscore the importance of social location on influencing the models of social entrepreneurship that emerge.

In the paper presented by Iddy, Alon, and Litalien (2022), attention turns to a growing model of social entrepreneurship and innovation, that of social franchises. Using a grounded theory case-study method, their research explores why social franchise continue to thrive and grow despite informal and formal institutional structures that could weaken them. Drawing attention to the importance of knowledge transfers, they trace how knowledge is replicated and adapted across different countries in Africa (Rwanda and Uganda) with varying institutional frameworks, illuminating the diversity of actions, practices, networks and approaches used to gain legitimacy and support for a social franchise model.

The next paper by Bucci and Marks (2022) focuses on a specific phase of the (social) entrepreneurship process – the incubation phase. Through a phenomenological study of social entrepreneurs attending incubator programs in South Africa, the authors unveil the various sources of knowledge, networks and support that stem from these programmes. They also reveal a potential mismatch between the programme content, focused more generally on entrepreneurship vested in profit-orientation, and the social goals of the entrepreneurs. Their



study highlights the need for incubator programs to take a more holistic approach to learning, distilling knowledge that is not only about profits but also about social impact.

In the final paper of this special issue, Corsini (2022) explores the case study of a makerspace in Ethiopia. These spaces (also known as FabLabs, techshops and hackerspaces) are community-based design and production facilities that can be used by, and empower, marginalized communities. They allow entrepreneurs to design and produce solutions that address local problems. This paper, using a specific case example in Ethiopia, extends Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and our understandings of how legitimacy is gained through a continuous and bi-directional process, as well as identifying concrete strategies that may be employed by makerspaces to support their legitimacy.

The papers in this special issue begin to answer our call to address gaps and limitations in the literature. They provide insights into under-researched geographical areas, emphasise the importance of context, and include cross-country comparisons. South Africa is particularly well represented in the papers, perhaps reflecting a greater maturity and embeddedness of social innovation and entrepreneurship practice there, and longer tradition of research. Nevertheless, South Africa focussed work aids our wider understanding and theorising of social innovation and entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa, especially given the rich diversity of the South African context, and the variety of models, practices and experiences present there.

The special issue papers consider social enterprises, entrepreneurs, processes of social innovation and entrepreneurship, and how these interact with wider macro-environments. They draw attention to new forms of social venturing, such as social franchising and the actions of transformative entrepreneurs. They also go beyond this to examine enabling and intermediary actors – incubators and makerspaces – and so engage with current work on social innovation/entrepreneurial networks and ecosystems. The papers deploy diverse theories, concepts and perspectives, including some hitherto less applied in social innovation and entrepreneurship literature, for instance ANT and spatial bricolage. Theory is built and extended through the adoption of grounded theory approaches, and particularly – although not exclusively – qualitative methods. Finally, the papers have significant implications for practice and those looking to support social innovators and entrepreneurs in Africa, and elsewhere, for the enrichment of society.

### **Where next for research on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa?**

This special issue, and the papers in it, represent a timely addition to the field of research on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa. Nevertheless, critical research questions remain or arise from the work presented. We therefore challenge future researchers to consider and address the following research topics:

- There remains a need for further individual level study of African social innovators and entrepreneurs, particularly through a lens of intersectionality (Collins, 2015), that leans in to appreciate the varied and overlapping advantages and disadvantages supporting or inhibiting their endeavours. Scholarship might look at what are their unique attributes or ways of working, what motivates them, what constrains their actions, and how they can be better supported. Work deploying psychological and sociocultural perspectives, methodologies, and theories is also needed. Future contributions might also focus on particular demographic groups e.g. women or youth social innovators and entrepreneurs in Africa, to shed light on under-researched populations.
- As showcased by the papers in this special issue, social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa occurs within and across varied organisational settings, from social enterprises and cooperatives, to fair trade and more traditional business ventures, including African and non-African multinational corporations. Public and third sector actors may also be socially innovative and may enter into partnerships with each other and the private sector to deliver services and/or address intractable sustainable development challenges. More work is needed on this multifarious organising for social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa. Such work might examine the strategies of socially innovating and enterprising organisations in Africa, as well as topics like their approaches to marketing, internationalisation, operations management, stakeholder relations, leadership, their social business models etc. Future research might also compare social innovation and entrepreneurship processes across different organisational forms.
- Hybridity is a key theme in social entrepreneurship scholarship, including that focussing on social entrepreneurship in Africa. Social entrepreneurs and enterprises may have dual or even triple economic, social and environmental objectives, the pursuit of which can cause tensions, but also create opportunities and spur innovation. There remains much scope for further research examining how African social entrepreneurs manage hybrid tensions and opportunities, how such hybridities manifest in different forms of social venturing in Africa, and the various forms such hybridity can take beyond social and economic logics, for example integrating other hybrid logics (e.g. community, religious or environmental logics), or formal/informal dualities.
- There remains much scope to better understand and theorise processes and forms of social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa. This may include utilising and adapting existing but hitherto un/under applied innovation and entrepreneurship theories and perspectives — e.g. national systems of innovation, entrepreneurial effectuation — as well as those from wider management scholarship and further afield — e.g. feminist theories, temporal perspectives, business ethics theories and philosophy, and post/decolonial perspectives, such as the African concept of Ubuntu. It may involve

making connections with related processes and concepts like frugal innovation, sustainable entrepreneurship, inclusive innovation, shared value etc. as some of the special issue authors do. It could also entail theoretical elaboration and extension to better explain the particular manifestations of social innovation and entrepreneurship found in African contexts, or new theory building to elucidate some of Africa's unique phenomena.

- Africa is heterogeneous and dynamic. The histories, sociocultural, and political systems of Africa's 54 countries vary enormously, as do their economies. The papers in this special issue recognise these differences and contribute to addressing some of the imbalances in the country coverage of extant literature, for example Corsini's (2022) work set in Ethiopia, and Iddy et al's (2022) in Rwanda and Uganda. Nevertheless, there is much work still to do. Future studies could further examine how processes of social innovation and entrepreneurship, social innovators and entrepreneurs, and their ventures are shaped by contextual factors and forces in Africa. Institutional, political economy, and geographical perspectives may be further deployed in such efforts. African cross-country studies are needed, but also research exploring commonalities and differences between social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa and elsewhere – in developed, emerging and developing economies. Future research might also examine within country differences, and meso and local level institutional influences (including traditional institutions) on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa. Multi-level research deploying these perspectives is also needed.
- As several of the papers in this special issue highlight, social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa do not occur in isolation. Social innovators, entrepreneurs and their ventures are enmeshed in relationships, and often draw upon their networks to access resources, gain and maintain legitimacy, and achieve wider strategic objectives. Social innovation and entrepreneurship may also be a collective endeavour. There remains much scope for further adoption of network and systems perspectives and theories (e.g. social network theories, ANT, entrepreneurial ecosystems, innovation systems etc.) when examining social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa. Questions also remain about the role of various wider actors that foster social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa, including universities, hubs, makerspaces, international organisations [for instance Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation], corporations, and the state or government. The African state is largely ignored in the literature beyond descriptions of 'weaknesses' or 'voids', yet they are a key actor. How are African governments supporting social innovation and entrepreneurship? What more could they do? How does social innovation and entrepreneurship support the work of African governments? What lessons can be learnt from this for the continent and elsewhere?

- The effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continue to be felt across Africa. Countries have implemented various control measures, but people are still becoming ill and dying directly and indirectly because of COVID-19. Economies are also being damaged, and progress towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals set back. Whilst research has begun to explore the short and long-term implications of the pandemic for social economy organisations (Hamann et al, 2020), there is much scope for further study. Questions abound as to the pandemic's effects on social ventures of different kinds, on their work and the communities they serve. Future research might also examine new social innovations emerging in response to the pandemic or look forward to what the role of social innovation and entrepreneurship is in the socio-economic transformation of a 'post'-pandemic Africa and world.
- Finally, social innovation and entrepreneurship are not politically neutral. Their meaning, practice, antecedents, and consequences are debated and contested. This is the case in Africa as elsewhere, although there are particular tensions, points and spaces of contestation around them in African contexts, for example, in relation to issues of colonialism/decolonising, development aid, and big philanthropy (Moyo, 2009). Work adopting critical perspectives that challenge taken for granted assumptions and understandings about social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa are therefore needed.

It is our hope that this special issue stimulates further conversations and more research on social innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa. This is an important and exciting research area, and we hope the themes and questions identified can help to guide future scholarship, which we look forward to reading. Thank you to the editors of the Africa Journal of Management for giving us this opportunity. Thank you to the paper authors for your excellent contributions. Finally, thank you to all our paper reviewers – listed below - without whom this special issue would not have been possible.

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