

Why is it so hard to define social entrepreneurship

By Ebuka Ukwunna

Introduction

Every year, hundreds of young people across Africa apply for LEAP Africa's Social Innovators Programme (SIP), an accelerator fellowship designed to empower young social entrepreneurs from across Africa. Data show that of the hundreds of applications received, only a small percentage are actually social entrepreneurs. That is, the majority of applicants are traditional business owners from across Africa. This common thread has been observed throughout the 10 years existence of LEAP Africa's Social Innovators Programme (SIP). This common trend begs the question: Why do people misunderstand social entrepreneurship? Why is it so hard to define social entrepreneurship? Is there a blurry line between social enterprises and traditional businesses? What are the characteristics or features that distinguish social enterprises?

After in-depth analysis and consistent engagement over the years with different constituents, findings revealed that one key reason for this lack of clarity is the different forms in which social entrepreneurship exists. Social entrepreneurs across the globe are involved in addressing social problems in diverse fields, using innovative methods and approaches to tackle these problems. These fields include health, environment, education, energy, food shortages, and climate change. Another reason for this misunderstanding is that the average social enterprise addresses a social problem like a [regular charity but also generates profit like a business](#). Social entrepreneurship combines principles and practices from both the business and social sectors. This diversity of forms and the nature of the intersection of business and traditional nonprofits make it challenging to have a one-size-fits-all definition for social entrepreneurship.

What is social entrepreneurship?

According to Alex Nicholls, the simplest way to define social entrepreneurship is "[private action for public good](#)¹." However, there are distinct characteristics that set social enterprises apart. Firstly, a social enterprise must focus on solving a social or environmental problem that positively impacts a community or locality.

[Helpmum](#)², a social enterprise founded by Dr. Abiodoun Adereni, a 2018 SIP fellow, is focused on solving the problem of maternal and infant mortality in Africa. According to UNICEF, Nigeria accounts for 10 percent of global deaths for pregnant mothers at a rate of [576 per 100,000 live births](#)³, the fourth highest on Earth. Helpmum is solving this problem by providing clean and affordable birth kits for women in deprived and underserved communities. HelpMum's birth kits have positively impacted the lives of over 10,000 women in over 100 communities in Nigeria, with a 90% success rate. This is an example of a social enterprise that is creating a positive impact in a community by solving a problem.

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https://www.socialinnovationatlas.net/fileadmin/PDF/einzeln/01_SI-Landscape_Global_Trends/01_04_Concept-of-Social-Entrepreneurship_Nicholls-Collavo.pdf

² <https://helpmum.org/>

³ <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/situation-women-and-children-nigeria>

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Secondly, social enterprises must employ innovative and novel approaches in their business models, challenging the traditional norms in their field. Damilola Asaleye, a social entrepreneur based in Ibadan, Nigeria, is tackling the epileptic power supply issue in Nigeria through an innovative approach. Her social enterprise, [Ashdam Solar](http://ashdamsolar.com/)⁴, a renewable energy company, provides clean, affordable, and uninterrupted smart energy solutions to homes and businesses in rural and urban areas across Nigeria through the installation of solar home kits, panels, and inverters. With over 500 homes now accessing electricity due to the efforts of Ashdam Solar, Damilola intends to extend its impact to 1,000 homes in the next three years. Another example of innovation in social entrepreneurship is [Farm Kiosk](https://farmkioskafrica.com/)⁵, an agribusiness social enterprise founded by Charles Bwanika that is working on creating a borderless agribusiness space in Uganda and across East Africa. By utilizing innovative technology, such as web portals and mobile apps, Farm Kiosk connects smallholder farmers to markets, farm equipment for hire, and agribusiness service providers. This innovation has impacted [5,840 smallholder farmers, of whom 58% are female](https://web.facebook.com/farmkioskafrica/?_rdc=1&_rdr)⁶.

Lastly, whereas traditional businesses are predominantly focused on profit maximization and shareholder satisfaction, social enterprises must be financially sustainable, adopting smart business practices to generate profit while scaling impact.

In conclusion, social entrepreneurship is a complex and diverse field that combines principles and concepts from both the business and social sectors. While defining social entrepreneurship in concrete terms may be difficult, we can identify certain fundamental characteristics that distinguish social enterprises from traditional businesses. These include a focus on solving a social or environmental problem, employing innovative approaches in their business models, and being financially sustainable while scaling impact.

As more businesses and entrepreneurs turn their attention towards creating positive social and environmental change, we are likely to see new and innovative approaches to tackling some of the world's most pressing problems. In this way, social entrepreneurship will continue to play an important role in shaping the future of business and society.

⁴ <http://ashdamsolar.com/>

⁵ <https://farmkioskafrica.com/>

⁶ https://web.facebook.com/farmkioskafrica/?_rdc=1&_rdr