

The IMPACT Framework: What African Social Enterprises Can Learn About Lasting Impact

by [Akolade Oladipupo](#) [January 2026]



Dr. Nneka Okekearu (4th from right); LEAP Africa Executive Director, Kehinde Ayeni (5th from right), alongside social innovators at the 12th SIPA. [Source: LEAP Africa]

Across Africa’s social innovation ecosystem, founders are navigating urgency on all sides. Community needs are pressing, funding cycles are tight, and expectations to scale are constant. In this context, it is easy for organisations to stay in motion while losing sight of the fundamentals that make impact possible.

This reality was the focus of the opening Breakfast Session at LEAP Africa’s [12th Social Innovators Programme and Awards \(SIPA\)](#), held in November

2025. Facilitated by [Dr. Nneka Okekearu](#), Director, Enterprise Development Centre, the session was intentionally designed to allow social innovators to pause and reflect. It created space for them to step back from delivery and interrogate the design of their work.

The conversation was structured around an **IMPACT framework**, introduced by Dr. Okekearu during the session as a practical lens for examining how social

ventures define problems, design solutions, serve beneficiaries, sustain operations, and communicate value. Rather than being presented as theory, the framework was applied in real time, using participants' own organisations as case material.

Through guided discussion and peer reflection, founders were encouraged to examine assumptions that often go unchallenged as organisations grow. Questions about *who truly benefits, where value is created, and what sustainability really means* were brought out of the abstract and into practical focus.

Why clarity matters in high-pressure ecosystems

Africa's development context is often described as urgent, complex, and resource-constrained. For social innovators, this environment creates both opportunity and risk.

Opportunity, because unmet needs are visible and vast. Risk, because constant crisis conditions leave little room for reflection, learning, or recalibration.

The Breakfast Session opened with a recognition of this tension. Participants were invited to acknowledge how easily social enterprises can become reactive, moving from one funding cycle, partnership, or operational emergency to the next. In such conditions, activity is mistaken for progress, and growth for impact.

Research on social enterprises in emerging markets consistently highlights this challenge. Studies have indicated that while African social enterprises are highly mission-driven, many struggle with weak business models, unclear value propositions, and fragile sustainability foundations.^{1,2} The session's premise was therefore deceptively simple: before scaling impact, founders must first sharpen clarity.

Identifying the real problem: moving beyond symptoms

Poorly defined problems often lead to fragmented solutions and diluted results.

The first anchor of the session focused on problem definition, a step that is often assumed rather than tested. Participants were asked a disarming question: *Are you solving the real problem, or only its symptoms?*

Using the analogy of treating a headache without addressing dehydration, Dr. Nneka Okekearu showed how social ventures can stay busy yet miss the underlying causes they aim to address. This distinction is critical. Solutions that focus on symptoms may deliver short-term outputs, but they rarely produce lasting outcomes or systems-level change.

During the session, one participant initially described their work as tackling a "mentorship gap" among young people. Through guided discussion, the underlying challenge emerged as a deeper issue of values erosion, identity, and social reorientation. Mentorship was not the problem itself, but one of several tools required to address it.

This reframing aligns with established thinking in social innovation literature. Kania and Kramer's work on collective impact highlights how poorly defined problems lead to fragmented solutions and diluted results.³ Similarly, the World Bank has noted that development efforts often fall short when they focus on visible symptoms rather than structural drivers.⁴

The takeaway was clear: **meaningful impact begins with intellectual honesty**. Founders must be willing to question their own assumptions and describe, in plain language, the real condition they are trying to change.

¹ Zulu, D. (2014). [Exploring the key challenges affecting the viability and sustainability of social enterprises in Zambia](#). *Acad Strateg Manag J* 13(1):1-16.

² Sivotwa, T.D., Mucheri, P. (2025). [Understanding the nature of social enterprise in Africa: evidence from Zimbabwe](#). *J Afr Bus*. 2025. doi:10.1080/08276331.2025.2503120.

³ Kania, J., Kramer, M. (2011). [Collective impact](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9(1):36-41.

⁴ Kraay, A., McKenzie, D. (2014). [Do poverty traps exist? Assessing the evidence](#). *J Econ Perspect*. 28(3):127-48. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Mapping the solution: simplicity as discipline

Start with users' lived experiences rather than organisational capabilities

Once the problem was clarified, attention turned to the solution itself. Participants were asked to describe how their intervention works in just three steps, and within one minute.

At first glance, this appeared overly restrictive. Yet the exercise quickly revealed how complexity accumulates unnoticed. Many participants struggled to articulate their models succinctly, uncovering hidden inefficiencies, redundancies, or untested assumptions.

One education-focused venture described its model as recruiting, vetting, training, and deploying teachers. This prompted a critical question: should the process begin with recruiting teachers, or with understanding the communities where they will work? The discussion highlighted a common tendency among social enterprises to design from a supply perspective, based on what they can offer, rather than from a demand perspective grounded in what communities actually need.

This insight echoes evidence from design thinking and human-centred development approaches, which emphasise starting with users' lived experiences rather than organisational capabilities.⁵ Solutions designed without this grounding often require costly adaptation or fail to deliver meaningful impact.

The three-step discipline pushed participants to strip away excess and refocus on core value creation. In doing so, it reinforced a simple but powerful idea: **simplicity is not a lack of sophistication, but a sign of deep understanding.**

⁵ IDEO.org. (2015). [The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design](#), 3rd ed. San Francisco: IDEO.

Pinpointing the beneficiary: from broad targets to real people

The third anchor of the session focused on a fundamental question: *who, exactly, benefits from social innovation?* Participants were encouraged to move beyond broad labels such as “youth,” “women,” or “communities,” and instead develop clear, well-defined beneficiary personas.

Drawing from private-sector practice, the discussion highlighted the importance of understanding beneficiaries' language, aspirations, constraints, and lived realities. For ventures working in fragile or underserved contexts, this also means recognising trauma, trust deficits, and differing conceptions of value.

Examples from the room revealed both progress and areas for improvement. A housing platform serving tenants, landlords, and artisans was prompted to clarify which tenant segments truly anchored its model. Another venture working with farmers showed how narrowing its focus to specific regions and financial behaviours led to stronger alignment with partners and funders.

This level of precision matters. Evidence from impact evaluations shows that interventions designed for “average users” often serve no one well.⁶ In contrast, clearly defined beneficiaries enable better service design, clearer metrics, and stronger accountability.

The session also recognised that social enterprises often operate within complex systems involving funders, governments, and institutional partners. While these stakeholders matter, maintaining clarity about the primary beneficiary is essential to avoid mission drift.

⁶ Banerjee, A., Duflo, E. (2011). *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Accounting for sustainability: oxygen, blood, and difficult truths

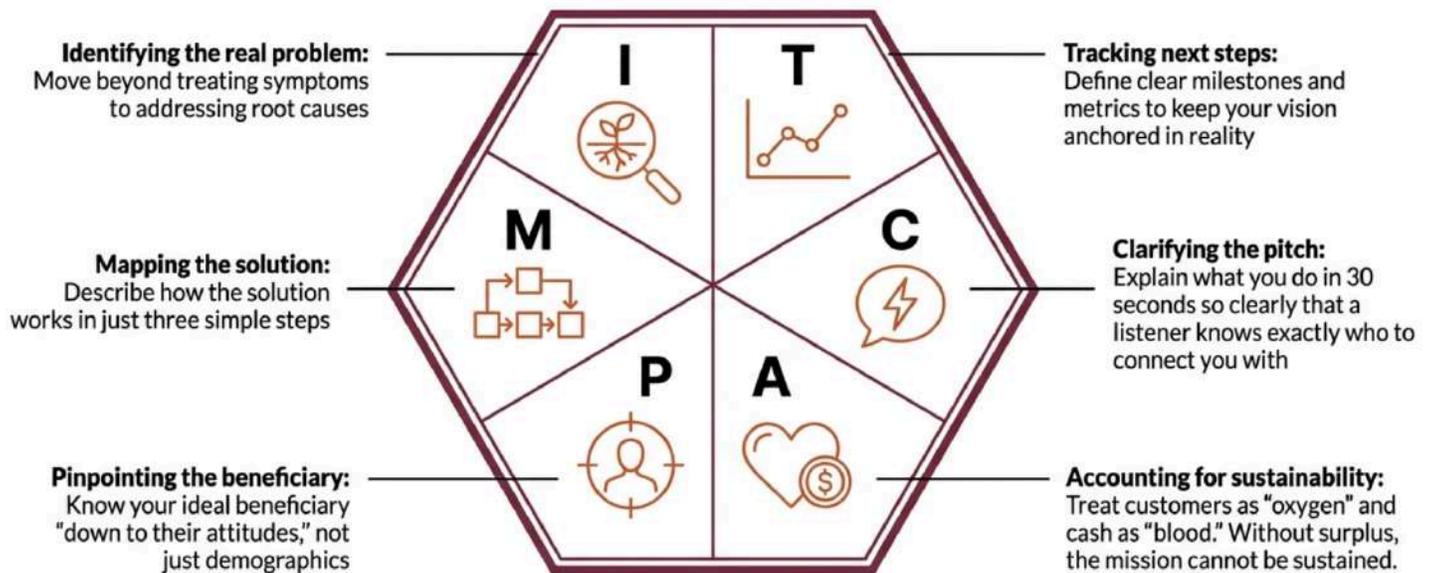
Perhaps the most candid part of the session focused on sustainability. Here, the facilitator introduced a vivid metaphor: beneficiaries are the oxygen that keeps an organisation alive, while cash flow is its blood. Without both, even the most inspiring mission cannot be sustained.

Participants were asked to confront several uncomfortable truths. First, not all customers are worth serving. Some impose hidden costs through delayed payments, excessive demands, or misalignment with the organisation's values. Retaining such "customers from hell" can weaken rather than strengthen impact.

Second, non-profits were urged to rethink their relationship with money. While the language of "profit" may feel uncomfortable, the need for surplus is non-negotiable. Without it, organisations cannot pay staff, invest in systems, or weather shocks.

Third, the session highlighted cross-subsidy models as a pragmatic pathway to equity and sustainability. Charging higher-income users to subsidise access for low-income groups allows organisations to maintain dignity, value, and viability simultaneously.

These insights reflect broader trends in the social enterprise sector. Studies show that ventures with diversified revenue streams and cost discipline are far more likely to survive beyond five years.^{7,8} Sustainability, the session emphasised, is not a betrayal of mission but a prerequisite for it.



A schematic overview of the IMPACT Framework.

Clarifying the pitch: communication as a strategic asset

The fifth anchor of the framework addressed communication, not as branding, but as a tool for strategic clarity. Participants were asked to deliver

30-second pitches explaining what they do and why it matters.

The exercise highlighted how brevity reveals thinking. Pitches that resonated were those that articulated a clear problem, offered a tangible solution, and showed a concrete outcome. Those that struggled often reverted to vision statements or jargon, leaving listeners uncertain about the value.

⁷ Staicu, D. (2018). [Financial sustainability of social enterprise in Central and Eastern Europe](#). Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence.12(1):907-917.

⁸ Bansal, S., Kumar, S., Chandra, V. (2023). [Can social enterprises aid sustainable development? Evidence from India](#). Heliyon. 9(2):e13456.

This matters because social entrepreneurs rely heavily on relationships, referrals, and trust. A clear pitch allows others to connect founders to resources, partners, and opportunities, even in the absence of immediate funding.

Research on entrepreneurial ecosystems supports this focus. Clear narratives improve legitimacy, reduce transaction costs, and accelerate collaboration.⁹ For social innovators operating in crowded spaces, the ability to articulate value quickly is a competitive advantage.

Taking and tracking next steps: grounding ambition in metrics

The final anchor turned attention to the future. Participants were asked to define what success looks like and how it will be measured. Aspirations such as reaching millions of beneficiaries were examined through practical questions: *How many per year, per month, per week?*

This exercise illustrated how metrics turn vision into action.

By breaking goals into manageable milestones, organisations can track progress, identify gaps, and adapt strategies in real time.

The emphasis on tracking aligns with growing recognition of the importance of data in social innovation. While not all impact can be quantified, the absence of clear indicators often obscures failure until it is too late.¹⁰

Beyond frameworks: the role of mentorship and peer learning

While the session was structured around the IMPACT framework, its deeper value came from the collaborative environment it fostered. The room was

marked by openness, constructive challenge, and mutual learning. Participants shared failures as openly as successes, and questions were met with reflection rather than ready-made answers.

Dr. Okekearu also pointed out a critical insight: resilience alone is not enough to sustain a venture over time. Without addressing foundational elements like governance, team capacity, and careful management of stakeholder expectations, even the most promising initiatives can falter. This insight underscores that building sustainable impact is an ongoing process, one that demands continuous reflection and support. Mentorship, peer learning, and a commitment to evolving in response to real-time challenges are crucial to this journey.¹¹

Conclusion: designing for impact before scaling it

In Africa's rapidly evolving social innovation ecosystem, it is easy to equate scaling with creating real impact. However genuine impact does not come from expansion alone, it comes from intentionally designing and executing solutions with focus. While frameworks like IMPACT provide valuable structure, the real challenge lies in refining ideas, questioning assumptions, and ensuring that mission and execution are consistently aligned.

In an environment marked by urgency and complexity, pausing to think critically about what truly matters is not a luxury, it is essential. This deliberate approach reinforces a key truth:

Lasting impact is not about doing more, but about doing less, and doing it better.

As the continent's social innovation ecosystem matures, moments of clarity and self-reflection will become even more essential. Meaningful change demands discipline, clarity, and the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. The path forward may not always be obvious, but it begins with a sharp focus on what drives real, sustainable impact.

⁹ Lounsbury, M., Glynn, M.A. (2001). [Cultural entrepreneurship: Stories, legitimacy, and the acquisition of resources](#). Strategic Management Journal. 22(6-7):545-564.

¹⁰ Patton, M.Q. (2011). Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use. New York: Guilford Press.

¹¹ Fernando, I.N. (2023). [Stakeholder pressure in social entrepreneurship: Balancing mission and market demands](#). J Soc Entrep.14(2):156-172.