

CONCEPT NOTE

# TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## Introduction

Social enterprises have emerged and are recognized as key actors in addressing many of the complex issues of the world. Social enterprises focus on creating benefits to society as a whole, rather than generating wealth for the owners of the enterprises. As drivers of positive social change, social enterprises support causes around poverty alleviation, equality, education, health, clean water, sanitation, the environment, and sustainable development, among others.

Central to social enterprise practice is innovation. Defined as introducing new ideas to products, services, processes, markets or systems, innovations are often viewed as the development of impactful, sustainable solutions to preexisting challenges and problems in society. And in recent years, the social enterprise sector has paid increasing attention to the intersections between technological innovations and sustainable development.

The relevance and significance of technological innovations in the social enterprise sector can be discussed at the following different levels:

1. Buy-in from the community
  - a. When the social enterprise partners the community in co-creating a technological innovation, the community is more likely to buy into and adopt the innovation.
  - b. The community is more likely to buy into and adopt the technological innovation if the innovation is aligned with the community's aspirations.
  - c. The community is more likely to buy into and adopt the technological innovation if the innovation is able to address the community's priority needs.
  - d. When the technological innovation is able to harness the community's assets, resources and strengths, the innovation is more likely to result in empowerment of the community.
  
2. Frugal innovation
  - a. For a frugal innovation to have a positive impact on a grassroots community, it needs to be safe.
  - b. For the frugal innovation to have a positive impact on the grassroots community, it also needs to be simple to use.

- c. Additionally, for the frugal innovation to have a positive impact on the grassroots community, it needs to be swift, i.e., the community needs to be able to adopt the innovation as quickly as possible.
  - d. The cost to the grassroots community of adopting the frugal innovation needs to be as low as possible (i.e., the innovation needs to be affordable for people at the base of the pyramid).
  - e. The costs incurred by the social enterprise in developing the frugal innovation, and then introducing it to the grassroots community, need to be kept low. This minimizes the developmental and production costs that are then passed on to the community.
  - f. Members of the grassroots community who are satisfied with the frugal innovation make good ambassadors for the innovation. They can be trained up by the social enterprise as microentrepreneurs. Using a microconsignment model, the microentrepreneurs can sell the innovation to other individuals and families in the community. The social enterprise thus also creates a livelihood opportunities for the microentrepreneurs.
3. Universal design
- a. People with disabilities should be viewed as people with different abilities. Instead of just focusing on their liabilities and deficiencies, the social enterprise needs to also appreciate these individuals' assets, resources and strengths. The social enterprise can partner these individuals, and harness their assets, resources and strengths, in order to co-curate universal designs that are socially inclusive.
  - b. To curate impactful universal designs, the social enterprise needs to act as a bridge or connector, linking together the various relevant stakeholders. Curation of universal designs needs to be a collective effort that taps on the expertise and resources of the various stakeholders.
4. Digital learning platform
- a. A digital learning platform enables students to create their own expansive content. By contrast, a textbook is limited by its fixed content.
  - b. A digital learning platform enables students to engage in proactive learning. By contrast, classroom teaching typically constrains students to engage in passive learning.
  - c. In the new normal of COVID-19, digital learning platforms, as well as IT skills of both teachers and students, play an important role in education.
5. Technology, innovation and sustainable development
- a. When the social enterprise organizes technology-based initiatives for the community, such initiatives build up community resilience. These initiatives thus contribute to social sustainability.
  - b. When the social enterprise advises businesses on investments in sustainable products and business models, it encourages the businesses to engage in corporate innovations. These innovations thus contribute to environmental sustainability.
  - c. When the social enterprise conducts digital upskilling programs for the community, such programs help to bridge the digital divide in the

community. These upskilling programs thus contribute to economic sustainability.

6. Crossing cultural and international boundaries
  - a. When a technological innovation is diffused across cultural and international boundaries, the social enterprise is likely to face different challenges.
  - b. The technological innovation might need to be adapted for different cultural and national contexts.
  - c. Sociocultural issues might complicate the adoption of the technological innovation by communities in different cultural and national contexts.
  - d. When the technological innovation is diffused across international boundaries, the social enterprise might face issues related to intellectual property protection, funding, human resources, and development of new organizational partnerships.
  
7. Social impact management and measurement
  - a. The social enterprise might need to set up a social impact management and measurement system to monitor, assess and improve the impact of the technological innovation on the community.
  - b. The social impact management and measurement system might also enable the social enterprise to effectively communicate the technological innovation's impact to the community and other stakeholders (e.g., impact investors, NGO partners, national agencies, and intergovernmental agencies).

### **Overall Concept and Objectives**

The Multi-Stakeholder Platform on Technological Innovations for Sustainable Development seeks to gather social entrepreneurs, social enterprises and other stakeholders in the social enterprise ecosystem who are interested in or passionate about technological innovations. The platform aims to achieve four objectives:

1. To facilitate learning and exchange of experiences and best practices of technological innovation adoption and diffusion among social enterprises and other key stakeholders;
2. To facilitate cooperation among social enterprises and other key stakeholders, so that they can project their collective impact in harnessing and mobilizing technological innovations to achieve the SDGs;
3. To facilitate cooperation among social enterprises and other key stakeholders, so that they can collectively develop and advocate changes in government policies and programs which would encourage and support the adoption and diffusion of technological innovations in the social enterprise ecosystem;
4. To facilitate cooperation among social enterprises and other key stakeholders, so that they can collectively attract and generate resources and support from the business sector, national agencies and intergovernmental

agencies for the adoption and diffusion of technological innovations in the social enterprise ecosystem.

### **Outputs and Milestones**

Given its infancy, the Multi-Stakeholder Platform on Technological Innovations for Sustainable Development plans to focus on learning and exchange of experiences and best practices during its first year of operation. A regular series of webinars, featuring technology-driven social enterprises from different Asian economies, will be organized. The webinar series will enable the platform to build up a core group of social enterprises and other key stakeholders who are passionate about technological innovations, particularly in relation to achieving the SDGs.

Once the core group for the platform is formed, it can then move on to explore and concretize collaboration in the following areas:

1. Harnessing and mobilizing the collective impact of technological innovations in achieving the SDGs;
2. Developing and advocating changes in government policies and programs, so that adoption and diffusion of technological innovations in the social enterprise ecosystem can be better supported;
3. Attracting and generating resources and support from the business sector, national agencies and intergovernmental agencies, so that adoption and diffusion of technological innovations in the social enterprise ecosystem can be enhanced.