

*Placing African Social
Entrepreneurs at the Forefront
of the Development Narrative:
Africa Forward
- Catalyst 2030*

Africa Forward is an initiative created in 2023 by the African Chapters of Catalyst 2030, primarily focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa, to promote actions placing the continent's challenges at the heart of collaborative and partnership-driven opportunities between local social enterprises and entrepreneurs. This innovative initiative acknowledges that African leadership within the social enterprise ecosystem possess the knowledge and experience to address the continent's unique problems. By doing so, it seeks to reshape the narrative that Africa needs saving and place African social entrepreneurs at the forefront of solution development and innovation. Africa Forward aims to build a novel and collaborative "social innovation space for Africans by Africans" (Oduola Osunloye, Africa Forward's Project Manager). The first step in this shift was social innovators from 23 African countries coming together to develop Africa Forward's strategy. The strategy development process led the social innovators to examine the continent's challenges collectively, rebalancing the power dynamics that see them as passive recipients of aid or support and not active agents of change.

The first seed for establishing the Africa Forward initiative comes from the African social entrepreneurs within Catalyst 2030. There was growing dissatisfaction with the decision-making process and funding

distribution within the international development sphere and the desire for more participation:

"We were tired of more of the same, where the outcomes for people on the continent's society were determined by people not based on the continent."

Oduola Osunloye, Africa Forward's Project Manager

Creating Africa Forward represented Catalyst's 2030 African Chapters stepping forward and moving away from silo thinking by coming together to respond to colonial dynamics in philanthropy, which decides the programmes, allocation, and opportunities established within the continent. This involved abandoning individualistic ways and putting collaboration and collective practices at the centre.

Moreover, African members of Catalyst 2030 have noted the lack of narratives about social innovators and local changemakers in Africa. Instead, prevailing stories often portray the continent solely in terms of poverty, corruption, and a lack of leadership or agency.

Africa Forward serves as a means to challenge these stories as well as the notion that ideas and projects developed by local entrepreneurs

are of lesser value, insufficient or not innovative enough to address the continent's most pressing issues. It aims to redefine the narrative surrounding the role of social entrepreneurs in the continent's development. This initiative is driven by Africans, for Africans, and with Africans.

Since its launch, Africa Forward's members have been actively involved in consolidating and establishing how to operationalise this initiative with a highly participatory approach, ensuring all members had their voices heard. The African Forward Conference in Naivasha, Kenya, was a key part of such a process. The gathering brought together members of Catalyst 2030, chapter chairs, donors and relevant stakeholders from over 23 different African countries to engage in co-creation and non-extractive exercises to develop Africa Forward's visionary strategy and action plan. Catalyst 2030 provided the backbone and the framework for Africa Forward to exist and, through a bottom-up and empowering approach, encouraged decisions to be made by people from the continent for people in the continent.

The conference was also crucial because it led to significant agreements among the members, mainly on the initiative's four pillars :

1. narrative shift,
2. ecosystem development,

3. funding

4. job creation

and the three cross-cutting pillars: youth and gender, climate change, training and capacity development.

Africa Forward's strategy for shifting the narrative is multi-faceted. It involves highlighting the success stories of African social innovators through engaging platforms such as webinars and online café sessions. It also focuses on promoting the indigenous solutions emerging from within the continent. With this shift, Africa Forward aims to benefit social innovators and entrepreneurs by allowing them to expand their enterprises, positively influence policies regarding the social innovation sector, attract more funding, and create opportunities for collaboration and networking. More importantly, to stop relying on

“external views of, let me call them, our friends out of Africa” since “a lot of our members rely a lot on the support that comes from outside of Africa, and that support influences how Africa moves”

Africa Forward's Co-Chair

Africa Forward looks to promote the solutions designed by African social innovators for their own communities and equal partnerships with external

actors. The latter means not only a shift in mentality but a shift in how they communicate and move forward with their partners. For example,

“Do you want to work with us? Or don't you want to work with us? Bring your resources to support what we have already decided works for us. We are good with that. Otherwise, keep your resources; if we can reach that point, we're good.”

Africa Forward's Co-Chair

However, promoting this shift can be challenging. It is vital to African Forward's future actions to recognise their nuances across the different African countries. The initiative is moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach,

“trying to solve problems in each country, not treating Africa as a country and solving them as one”

Oduola Osunloye, Africa Forward's Project Manager

Africa Forward is a nascent initiative. Its first significant outcome is the strategy and action plan, shaped and endorsed by the members from various African chapters, a collective of over 600 individuals. The Africa Forward conference is an essential first outcome since it underlines that its members are not beneficiaries

but active partners and co-creators of this initiative, strengthening this sense of community and facilitating further interactions among social entrepreneurs across the continent.

“We've made the network smaller for them and closer to home. It's that shift in thinking from beneficiaries to partners; when you think of yourself as a beneficiary, you think of it as a giving relationship. But when you think of yourself as a partner, it's a give and take.”

Oduola Osunloye, Africa Forward's Project Manager

Ensuring that social entrepreneurs play a central and active role in this initiative is crucial for reshaping the narrative that depicts the continent as devoid of innovative and creative individuals capable of driving change. It would also promote more equal relations between social innovators and external organisations, ensuring everyone has a seat at the table. The initiative hopes to see a more robust and well-positioned landscape for African social enterprises, more democratisation of the funding processes, and collaboration across sectors on the continent moving forward.

Learnings:

Networking and cross-continent knowledge exchange are integral

to this initiative and bring immense value. By leveraging Catalyst 2030's established channels, members connected, paving the way for an initiative tailored to the needs of African social innovators. Partners, in each African chapter, were essential and committed to driving the initiative forward on the ground.

- ▶ ICSOs can harness the influence of key individuals or networking champions to advocate for their innovative initiatives, redirecting focus towards addressing their specific needs.

The goal is to transform the approach to narratives by showcasing African social innovators and entrepreneurs as catalysts for change. The initial step involves ensuring that members position themselves as active partners rather than beneficiaries. In practical terms, this means providing opportunities for co-creation.

- ▶ ICSOs can invest in fostering collaborative spaces that prioritise open dialogue and creativity, devoid of predefined agendas or outcomes. This approach allows for the organic emergence of

innovative ideas and long-term collaborations.

- ▶ Allocate time and resources to actively engage with partners in discussions aimed at uncovering their respective strengths.
- ▶ Africa Forward is fundamentally centred on fostering collaborative action among social innovators in Africa. However, collaboration and co-creation can pose challenges, particularly regarding consensus-building. A crucial lesson from Africa Forward's journey is the importance of setting aside preconceived opinions and embracing the diversity of ideas emanating from its members. There might be opposing ideas when bringing people and organisations together to co-create, and this should be embraced rather than avoided.