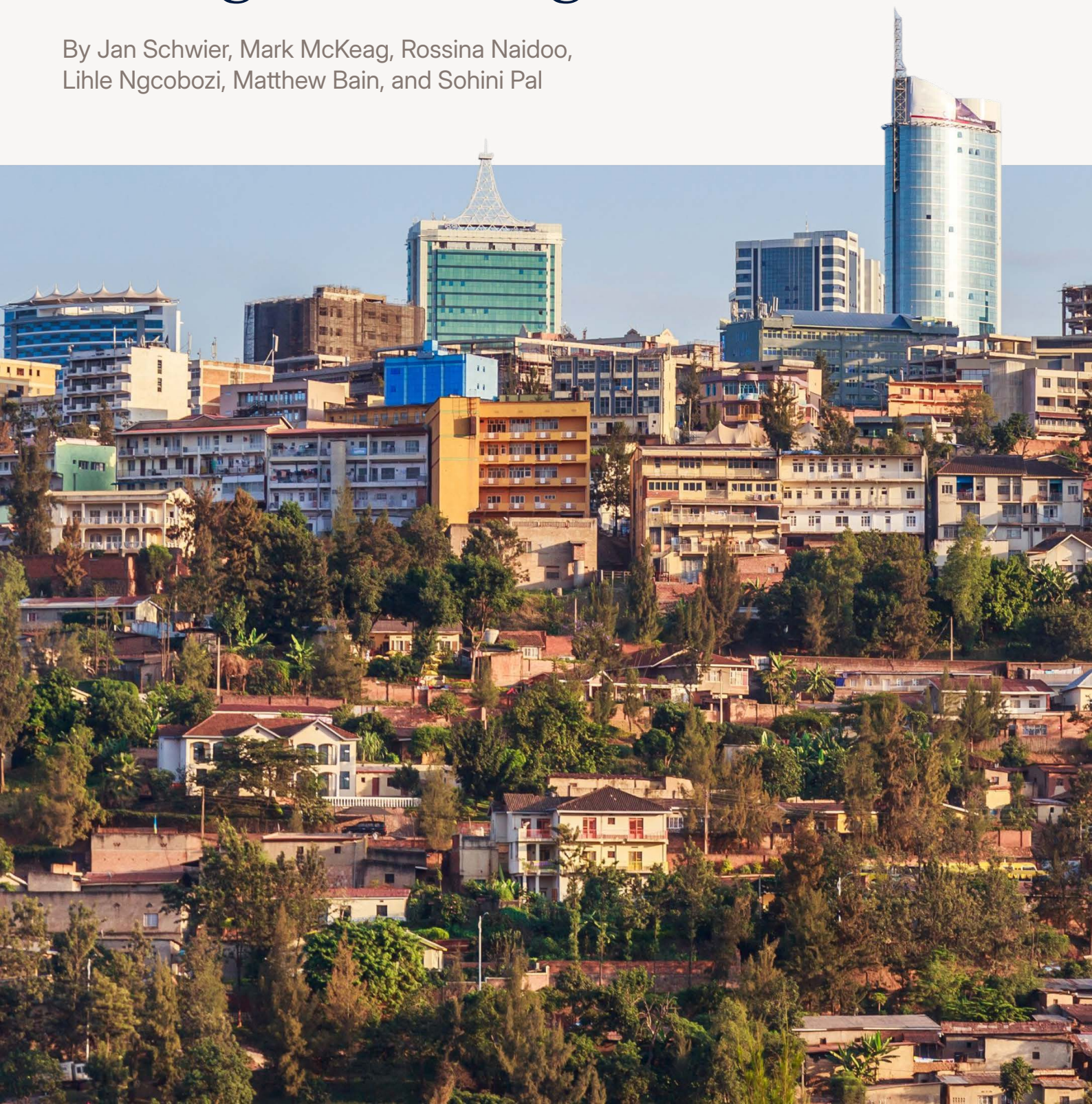
REPORT NOVEMBER 2026

The Bridgespan Group

Africa's Social Impact Centres: The Development Opportunity Hiding in Plain Sight

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Cover image: Business district in Kigali, Rwanda. Adobe Stock

Foreword

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DIRECTOR

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When we first approached The Bridgespan Group about this research, it came from a question we had been sitting with at the Bertha Centre for some time: we wanted to know more about the centres across the continent of Africa that were doing work similar to ours in the space of social innovation and entrepreneurship towards social justice and equity. We wanted to connect with them, to learn from them. A report by Bridgespan in 2017 had featured the Bertha Centre as one of a handful of university-based centres in Africa. Since then, we have seen the outlines of something significant happening across the continent, work building within universities and beyond universities that could well be connected.

For years, organisations like ours have been doing work that doesn't fit neatly into the categories within academia, for-profit, or nonprofit. We are not quite a traditional nonprofit, not quite a research institute, not quite an incubator or accelerator – and yet we are, in some form, all three. We suspected we weren't alone in this. What we didn't know was how many others across Africa were built or evolved to work in the same way, doing similar work under different names, in different institutions.

When we worked with Bridgespan's team on this research as a thought partner – reviewing early findings, connecting the team to centre leaders in our own networks, and pressure-testing the emerging framework against our own knowledge and experience – we wanted a study that centre leaders would recognise themselves in, not one that flattened our differences into a tidy category for the sake of a neat narrative.

What emerged, we believe, does justice to that complexity while still finding the throughline identified in the research. Social impact centres are not always visible in the way a service-delivery organisation or a research unit is. Our impact is often indirect, cumulative, and slow to show up in a results framework.

The research confirms what many of us have sensed anecdotally: that centres across the continent, whatever we call ourselves, are converging on a shared purpose – engaging the conditions and systems that let others create lasting social change – and that we play complementary, recognisable roles in doing so. It also honestly names where we fall short: the fragmentation, the funding pressures that push us to stretch too thin, the absence of a shared language for measuring what we do. These are not comfortable findings, but they are the ones that matter most if this field is going to mature.

The finding about the need for increased collaboration amongst centres across the continent, in particular, struck a nerve for us. It is a strange thing to read data confirming that an entire field of organisations working towards the same goal is, by and large, working independently. We have felt this tension ourselves, but we have also been fortunate enough to work on

initiatives where funding is not only tied to programmes but equally to the relationship-building. We know that centre leaders want to collaborate – the appetite across the sector is real and consistent. What's missing is the infrastructure and the resourcing to make it possible: dedicated support for convenings, for centres to invest in the role of ecosystem coordination that few are currently able to take on, and for the slower, trust-building work that meaningful partnership demands. If this research helps make the case that collaboration is not a soft add-on but a core investment the field needs, it will have done something important.

Our hope is that this report – and its companion piece – does two things. First, that this report gives centre leaders across Africa a mirror – a way of seeing their own work as a valuable, impactful part of something larger, and the confidence that comes from that recognition. Second, that the companion piece gives funders a clearer map of where deeper investment could unlock more towards the continent's further development.

We are grateful to every centre leader, funder, and expert who gave their time and candour to this research, and to the Bridgespan team for the rigour and care they brought to a subject that resists easy categorisation. This report is a starting point, not a conclusion. We look forward to continuing the conversation that it opens.

SECTION 1

Understanding Social Impact Centres

This research describes what makes social impact centres unique and why it matters that they represent an emerging field in the social sector.

As recently as 2018, scientists found a new "organ" in the human body: a network of fluid-filled spaces across the body that acts as a "highway" to carry nutrients across cells, absorb shocks, and provide structural support. This vital piece of human anatomy had been missed by researchers for decades because it doesn't show up under a standard microscope. The organ was named the interstitium, from Latin roots that mean "in-between spaces."[1]

There is perhaps no better analogy for social impact centres. These organisations go by many names – "centres," "hubs," "institutes," "foundations," or "networks" – and work to strengthen the conditions – mindsets, practices, capabilities, and networks – that can make lasting change possible in Africa. Here, we provide a bird's-eye view of what we believe is a critical but emerging field. We hope this research starts a conversation for social impact centre leaders who recognise the promise of this work – especially as the sector itself undergoes an overhaul – and encourages them to view themselves not as individual organisations but as vital, yet often overlooked, pieces to the puzzle.

This research describes what makes social impact centres unique and why it matters that they represent an emerging field in the social sector. We lay out the ways in which social impact centres contribute to the work of building the infrastructure of social impact in Africa and then outline opportunities that centres can consider when thinking about what comes next. We hope this research helps inspire more conversations about the work centres do, the gaps that exist, and how this sector can move forward together, collaboratively, to shape the next decade of Africa's development.

1.1 What makes social impact centres unique

At first glance, social impact centres seem very different from one another and from traditional nonprofits or intermediaries. They have diverse institutional forms – some might be linked to universities or affiliated with national or regional public institutions, while others are independent entities or linked to global organisations or networks. They also wear many hats when it comes to the work they do, combining approaches from traditional nonprofits, research institutes, think tanks, or business incubators.

Take the example of the Uganda-based Social Innovation Academy (SINA), a network of self-organised communities across Africa that supports disadvantaged young people in becoming social entrepreneurs who solve local problems. Instead of separating education, personal development, and entrepreneurship into different programmes, SINA combines them into a single experience, where scholars run and co-own their community. As Etienne Salborn, founder of SINA, puts it: "SINA is not an incubator or

accelerator[I] in the usual sense. … In fact, we're not just one thing. We support education, mindset, and social enterprise[II] creation at the same time, because the enterprise grows out of the person and the community."

Then there's the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI), which began with a group of practitioners, the Africa Grantmakers Network, identifying gaps around credible research on philanthropic investments in Africa. Today, it is embedded within the Wits Business School in Johannesburg, South Africa, and serves not only as an academic institute offering accredited courses on philanthropy but also as an intermediary working with other universities, philanthropic organisations, governments, and practitioners to shape social investments across the continent.

The challenge of classifying these organisations into neat categories points to something larger: centres occupy a unique position that existing descriptors don't fully capture. Much like the interstitium, they often sit in an "in-between space" at the intersection of academia, government, civil society, communities, and the private sector, and operate across multiple ecosystems. And this position is one of strength – albeit underutilised – because it helps them connect the dots and bridge boundaries in a way few other players can.

In fact, that's the throughline that emerged from our conversations with leaders across social impact centres: despite the differences in form, there is a cohesiveness in function; specifically, in how these centres think about social impact.

1.2 A common agenda for change

We found that regardless of how centres are set up or operate, they not only deliver programmes but also try to solve a more fundamental problem that's consistent across the continent: strengthening the conditions under which others can create social impact more effectively.

To be sure, centres approach this in different ways. For centres like the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE) in South Africa, the primary focus is on shifting mindsets as it believes that knowledge or technical skills alone are not enough to create lasting change. As Pedro Tabensky, director at AGCLE, puts it, "[In the conventional education system], we're creating specialists that will be able to go into the marketplace and occupy roles passively, as opposed to actually trying to transform and change things for the better." That's why AGCLE aims to develop a pedagogy that can connect, as Tabensky puts it, "the thinking part of the human being and the rest of the human being" to create individuals who not only have technical skills but also can think and act ethically in complex situations.

Nicole Senn, head of communications and programme coordination at the Twende Social Innovation Center in Tanzania, echoes a similar sentiment around bridging the gap between ideas and practice, although, for Twende, the focus is on creating spaces and tools that can help young people thrive. As Senn puts it, "There are so many talented young people across Tanzania who lack access to the tools, training, and spaces that they need to bring their ideas to life. On top of that, a lot of education [that is delivered] is mostly based on theory … but makerspaces are limited. So, alongside our innovation and social enterprise hub, we have also created

We found that regardless of how centres are set up or operate, they not only deliver programmes but also try to solve a more fundamental problem that's consistent across the continent: strengthening the conditions through which others can create social impact more effectively.

[I] Organisations that help turn ideas into viable businesses. Typically, incubators offer very early-stage support, while an accelerator helps speed up the growth of a startup. For the context of this research, we have considered incubators and accelerators that nurture organisations with social change as their core mission.

[II] Businesses that have social and/or environmental objectives as the reason for their commercial activity.

> What makes these centres distinct is this 'practitioner' orientation. One, they're conducting research that's more applied and grounded in the realities of what it looks like to create impact on the ground. Two, many aim to help equip local leaders to solve locally [with this research and fellowship programmes]. … Both of these things are hugely needed.
>
> SHIVANI GARG PATEL
> FOUNDER, NEXTBRIDGE IMPACT

a space where [young people] can come in and actually create and make things. Unlike other incubator programmes where you have to come in with an idea, Twende allows people to come in, whether they have an idea or not, and help them become innovators and entrepreneurs, and create solutions to local problems."

For centres like the Makerere Innovation and Incubation Center (MIIC) in Uganda, the missing piece of this puzzle is stronger links to industry. As Allan Lule, startups management and operations lead, puts it, "We felt that graduates from university who are trying to set up ventures out of universities don't have intentional support that matches up with the needs of entrepreneurs." To address this, it developed a programme in partnership with the Ugandan government that has close ties with industry and helps create pipelines where problems from the industry are brought to innovators to create effective business-to-business or business-to-consumer models. "We don't realise how much industry affects impact," says Lule.

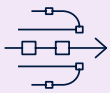
Regardless of approach, however, the core of the centres' work remains the same: helping talented, passionate, local leaders with the tools and the supporting environment they need to create lasting social impact. This is what makes these centres unique. As Shivani Garg Patel, founder of NextBridge Impact and member of the advisory board at the Skoll Centre, sums up, "What makes these centres distinct is this 'practitioner' orientation. One, they're conducting research that's more applied and grounded in the realities of what it looks like to create impact on the ground. Two, many aim to help equip local leaders to solve locally [with this research and fellowship programmes]. They are unique because they have a front seat to what change looks like and then [they're] helping influence, inspire, and cultivate those who are at the start of their journeys. Both of these things are hugely needed."

Recognising this underlying pattern that emerged from our conversations helped us define "social impact centres" for the purposes of this research. We broadened the definition we used in our 2017 report, *Onward: Accelerating the Impact of Social Impact Education*.[2] (See "Appendix 1. Criteria defining African social impact centres.")

Largely, we found that social impact centres share the following characteristics:

MISSION-DRIVEN, LOCALLY LED

They are mission-driven organisations, whether nonprofit, for-profit, or a combination of both, that operate in Africa and advance social or environmental outcomes, with a strong focus on Africa.



ENABLING THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

They support and shape the work of individuals, organisations, or systems to create change, instead of only directly delivering services. They do this in many ways – for example, developing leaders and changemakers, translating knowledge into practice and vice versa, or supporting impact-driven organisations and community-led innovation.



CONNECTING THE DOTS

They connect the dots across different kinds of actors (private sector, academia, government, and civil society) to contribute to change at the sectoral level – strengthening norms, influencing policy, or coordinating ecosystems.



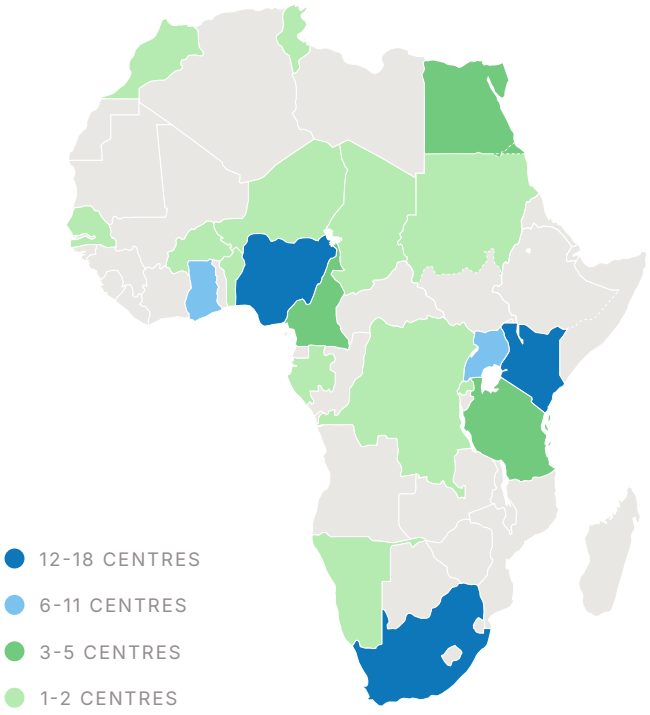
When viewed through this lens, social impact centres emerge not as individual organisations that look very different in approach or form, but rather as a cohesive social infrastructure – the "connective tissue" that helps foster innovation, learning, and coordination across the sector. But because their work is hard to classify and leads to long-term and often indirect impact that is more difficult to measure, this set of organisations is often overlooked in the larger conversation around development on the continent.

Our research found at least 82 organisations that match this definition. Since 2010, the number of social impact centres has grown fivefold, per our analysis, with independent and university-linked models being the most common.

FIGURE 1

Regional Distribution of Social Impact Centres

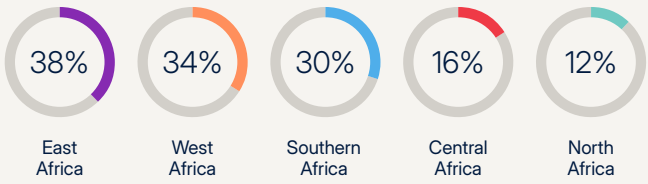
Headquarters country of social impact centres across Africa



82
Social impact centres

5x
Growth since 2010

Regional activity



South Africa has the highest concentration of ***centre headquarters*** at 22%, followed by ***Kenya and Nigeria***, each at 15%.

65% of centres operate in a ***single country.***

35% work across ***multiple countries.***

Note: Percentages do not total 100 because centres may operate in more than one region.
Source: Bridgespan social impact centres database, updated June 2026.

We also found that although social impact centres have faced real funding constraints due to disruptions in funding for social change across Africa, many of them have displayed a remarkable ability to adapt and improvise. For instance, despite the lion's share of funding for centres coming from philanthropy (78 percent of centres in our survey reported large institutional and foundation partners as their primary source of funding), many centres also have a diverse mix of funding sources (52 percent of centres in our survey reported funding through a mix of income-generating activities, while 41 percent noted research grants as a source of revenue).

This adaptability has helped build resilience. While centres name funding as one of their top future priorities in our survey, especially when it comes to strengthening operations or realising their ambitions, 96 percent also note that they expect their funding to remain the same or increase over the next three years. This resilience is a further validation of the work that these centres do, and surfaces the potential of this work to grow, given adequate support.

Research Methodology

PRIMARY INTERVIEWS

Our core research approach for this report drew on 33 interviews with leaders of social impact centres, funders, and experts.



ONLINE SURVEY

We received 31 responses from a survey of social impact centres on general organisational information; operating and partnership models; approach to impact measurement; sources of funding; and priorities for the sector's future.



SECONDARY RESEARCH

We used publicly available information to conduct a landscape analysis identifying social impact centres in Africa, including their geographic distribution, focus areas, and engagement patterns, and validated these findings through interviews. We also conducted a literature review, including past Bridgespan work on field building, and corroborated the findings with subject matter experts.



EXPERT CONSULTATIONS

We engaged field and sector-level experts through one-on-one consultations, including our thought partner on this project, the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship.



SECTION 2

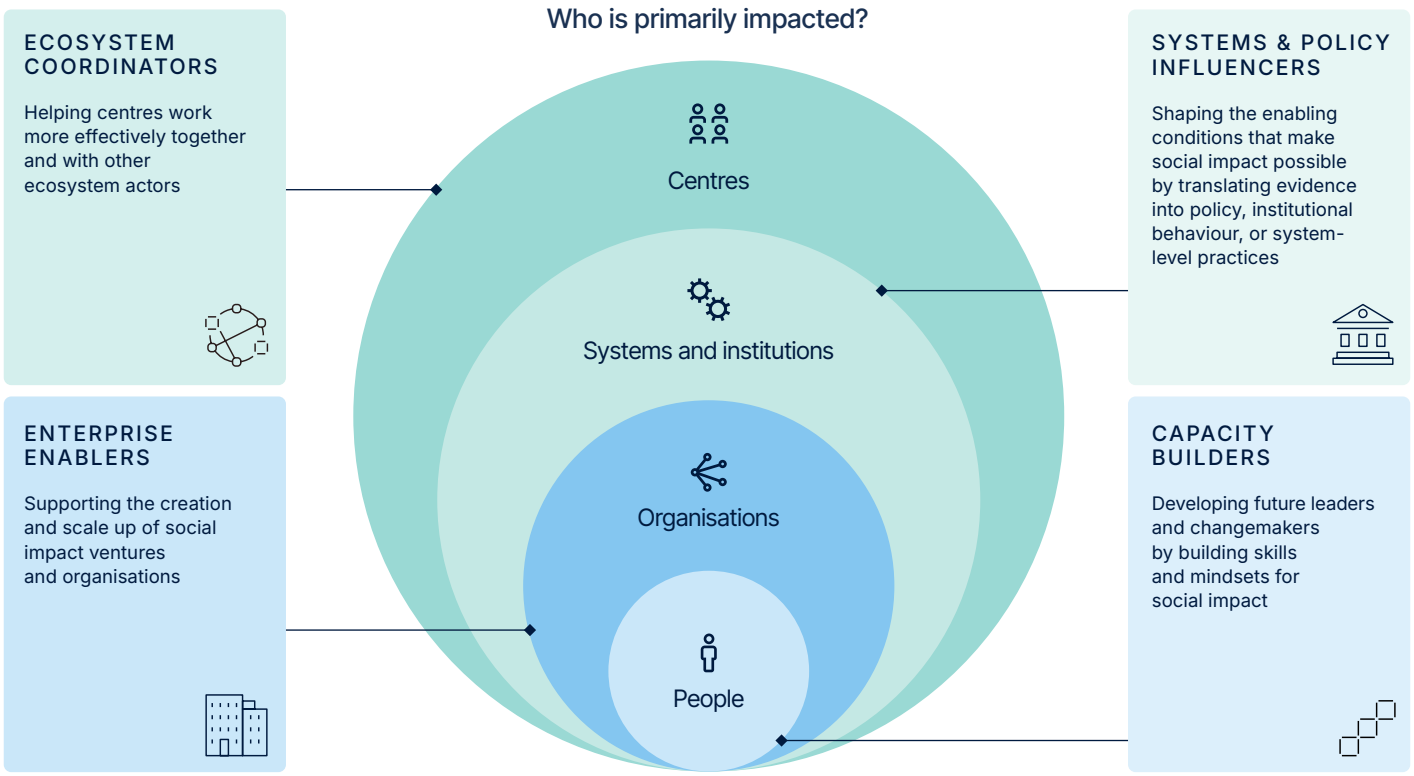
Four Roles Social Impact Centres Play

Social impact centres are similar not only in how they view social impact – strengthening the conditions through which others can create change more effectively – but also across whom they primarily serve and how they approach their work. Centres reported serving a range of overlapping groups, with young people, students, and entrepreneurs featured most prominently. In addition, several offer programmes specifically designed for women. This is particularly important in Africa, which continues to have a rising youth population – projected to grow by a record 132 million between 2020 and 2030 – and where lack of formal employment and working poverty continue to be major challenges.[3]

Across the 82 centres we studied, we saw four recurring roles that form the underlying structure of the sector. These represent some of the primary ways in which centres add value, or contribute to the sector, although, in practice, most centres actually take on multiple activities spanning these four roles.

FIGURE 2

Roles of Social Impact Centres



Note: These roles represent the primary ways in which centres contribute to the sector. In practice, most centres take on multiple activities across roles.
Source: Based on an analysis of Bridgespan's social impact centre database and secondary research.

Capacity builders work to develop future leaders and changemakers who can advance the social issues they are passionate about. Centres that play this role focus on building the mindsets and technical and leadership skills needed to create change, typically through educational programmes or hands-on training. They are often embedded in universities, like AGCLE, which helps train future leaders to apply ethical decision making to their work. But they can also be community-led, beyond the scope of formal educational institutions – like RLabs, a social enterprise in South Africa that began as a community initiative in Cape Town to equip young people in underserved communities with digital skills and entrepreneurial training, and has now grown into a replicable, community-led model across 24 countries.

"We focus on developing people," says Rene Parker, director of RLabs, "[because] scale is not achieved through projects and research papers. It really gets driven through people."

For capacity builders, impact is typically indirect and long term and is assessed through alumni trajectories or institutional influence, although centre leaders acknowledge that this can be difficult. As Ali Awni, director at the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, Civic Engagement, and Responsible Business in Cairo, puts it, "We run youth leadership programmes as part of our civic engagement work. [When we're assessing progress], we try to measure [impact] right after the case, after the project, after the intervention, but we also try to look at it eight, 10 years later. But it's much harder [because it] usually takes a long time. There are [also] lots of externalities that you don't expect."

Enterprise enablers support social impact ventures and organisations, both for-profit and nonprofit, to build and scale their operations through a mix of incubation, technical assistance, market or industry access, and mentorship. Enterprise enablers are typically connected to communities and the localised contexts in which they function. Take, for instance, The Innovation Hub in South Africa's Gauteng province, which works to drive innovation and entrepreneurship. Set up in close collaboration with the provincial government, the hub was created to move the local economy into new technology-driven sectors. Mpho Mbonani, partnerships manager at the Hub, describes it as "taking intellectual property coming out of university research and from communities … incubating it, linking it to technical expertise, and helping commercialise and bring innovation to the market."

Its incubation programmes support enterprises across sectors like information and communications technology (ICT), smart agriculture, water and waste management, and clean energy solutions, amongst others. It provides entrepreneurs with technical training and assists them with business modalities like financial modelling to help these ideas become viable and profitable businesses. It also provides access to markets and works with the government to help adapt innovations into public systems.

Impact for enterprise enablers is typically measured through markers like the success of the venture, increased income, or improved livelihoods. "In our skills development programme, we have metrics in place to track impact 12 months post the completion of the programme. For [the businesses we incubate], we track [impact] over the next three years, how much are you making, how many markets were you able to secure, and how many people have you employed," says Mbonani.

Systems and policy influencers shape the enabling environments that make social impact possible, typically by influencing policy, institutional behaviour, or system-level practices, or by strengthening the foundations of how social impact is viewed or practised. For example, CAPSI in South Africa has helped establish philanthropy and social investment as a recognised field of study in Africa.

"[We realised] other regions already had schools, centres, departments, or programmes [on philanthropy], and Africa did not have any," says Bhekinkosi Moyo, director at CAPSI. "You had practitioners, yes, but not researchers or academics whose training could be traced back to philanthropic studies." Today, CAPSI plays the role of a system influencer, working with other universities, philanthropic organisations, networks, governments, and practitioners to strengthen the institutions and systems that shape social investment across the continent.

Jasiri, a venture creation and acceleration engine, is another example. Headquartered in Rwanda, it helps the sector take what Aline Kabanda, regional director for East Africa, describes as "a long-term view of entrepreneurship development." Alongside supporting African founders to build and grow effective ventures, Jasiri also helps strengthen ecosystems in the specific geographies in which it operates.

For instance, in Rwanda, Jasiri works closely with the Ministry of ICT and Innovation as its "data pillar lead" to strengthen the Innovate Rwanda platform, a central tool for tracking what's happening across the sector. It does this while also helping bring the ecosystem together to collectively shape how data is collected and shared. As Kabanda puts it, "We believe strong ventures need a supportive ecosystem around them to thrive."

For systems and policy influencers, impact is usually long term and often indirect, marked by changes in governance, policy, or organisational practice.



Ecosystem coordinators operate at a different level than the other roles, focusing primarily on helping other social impact centres work better together and with other actors by convening, connecting, and building capacity across organisations. The Ghana Hubs Network is one of the clearest examples of this role. Established in 2017, at a time when innovation hubs were emerging across Africa to support entrepreneurs, the network recognised a gap in the sector early on.

"[We realised that the hubs] were fragmented and not collaborating. In their individual capacities, it became difficult for such innovation, tech, enterprise hubs, and makerspaces to be able to make an impact on the prevailing policies from government, or [get support] from the private sector or academic institutions," says Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, chairperson of the Ghana Hubs Network. "So, in 2017, about 15 of such hubs came together to be able to set up a coordinating network. Until 2018, it was the Ghana Technology and Business Hubs Network." It was renamed to reflect the broad umbrella of hubs it served beyond technology and business, including community or social innovation hubs, makerspaces, and digital skills centres.

"Our core mandate is to work as an intermediary and coordinator for innovation hubs in Ghana to effectively work with the private, government, and academic sectors," says Adu-Gyamfi. "The network helps hubs advocate for an enabling environment, streamline the work that they are doing, standardise processes, and most importantly, drive investments towards market-oriented innovations and services."

For ecosystem coordinators, impact is typically framed in terms of collaboration. "For us," says Adu-Gyamfi, "the most important part of our work is to ensure standardisation and impact tracking. We're able to track programmes developed for members of the ecosystem or trainings conducted for hub managers." A change in policy can also signal progress towards shared goals. "In the last 10 years, we've been able to position ourselves well to influence policy. [Our work has helped support] the Ghana Innovation and Startup Bill, which is in the process of being reviewed in cabinet and will be passed in parliament soon."

Thematic focus cuts across all four roles, with some centres focusing more on specific issue areas like climate, digital inclusion, health, or governance. For example, the Kenya Climate Innovation Centre (KCIC) supports enterprises addressing climate challenges across key mitigation and adaptation sectors, while Villgro Africa, headquartered in Nairobi, focuses on health care and life sciences. While this influences the kinds of problems these centres work on, or the types of partners and funders they work with, it doesn't change the core nature of their role, which is still focused on one or more of these four roles. For instance, both KCIC and Villgro Africa are, at their core, enterprise enablers.

Across all these roles, there's also immense complementarity, as centres move from people to organisations and, eventually, systems to shape the conditions for lasting change.

The Bertha Centre's Evolution as a Social Impact Centre

Centres may begin with one role but take on others over time. Take the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Founded in Cape Town through a collaboration between the UCT Graduate School of Business, the Bertha Foundation, and social entrepreneurship leaders, the original aim of the centre was to infuse concepts of social justice and innovation into traditional business education, translating into student-facing programmes embedded in the MBA curricula. This also included hands-on support for individual innovators on a small set of issues, namely finance, health, and education.

Over time, the centre expanded its focus from direct support to include programme development and research, and moved into issue areas like climate and youth development. Today, the centre has consciously shifted from capacity building and enterprise enablement to more of a systems influencer role through applied research, executive education, and connections with other practitioners to consolidate learnings.

"We were interested in finding out what social innovation [especially in health] looked like across the Global South," explains Katusha de Villiers, senior project manager. "Collaboration was central to this approach. We wanted to answer, 'what are people doing around it within [the Global South]? What can we learn and how can we collaborate together?'"

This is the role that the centre wants to strengthen going forward – becoming a platform for orchestrating collaboration and learning, across Africa and beyond. "[In 2023] we were able to bring together a whole community of people for the first African Impact Summit in Cape Town," says Solange Rosa, director of the Bertha Centre. "While we continue to nurture those relationships, [we know] there's a whole world out there where people are tackling the same problems. [Our] hope is to become a better bridge – learn from others and share our strengths back with those partners, both in Africa and beyond."

SECTION 3

Evidence of an Emerging Field

Despite their diversity, social impact centres display recurrent patterns that lead us to believe they constitute an emerging field. We define a field as "a set of individuals and organisations working to address a common social issue or problem." Social impact centres in Africa display many of the observable characteristics of an emerging field. (See "Six observable characteristics of a field.")

They have a shared vision for social change, complemented by approaches that work together as a whole; there's a growing body of local knowledge developed specifically for Africa; and there are early forms of connective infrastructure, including national and pan-African research and hub networks. The structure is there, but the field has yet to fully form.

Six observable characteristics of a field

KNOWLEDGE BASE

An evolving body of academic and practical research that helps actors better understand the magnitude of the issues at hand and identifies and analyses shared barriers and solutions



ACTORS

Individuals and organisations that together help the field develop the shared identity and vision that are required to achieve impact at scale



FIELD-LEVEL AGENDA

The collective approaches that field actors will pursue to address barriers and develop adaptive solutions



INFRASTRUCTURE

The "connective tissue" that strengthens each of the other five field characteristics as well as the complementarity between them



RESOURCES

Financial capital or nonfinancial support



PUBLIC-SECTOR SYSTEMS

A distinct value proposition for and intersection with government and public systems



Source: Adapted from The Bridgespan Group's *Field Diagnostic Tool: Assessing a Field's Progress.*

3.1 Challenges to building the field

As with other emerging fields, there are challenges. The first is around recognition and collaboration. Our conversations showed that many centres still think of themselves in isolation or are not fully aware of how their work connects to others in the sector.

"There are so many centres that are doing meaningful and relevant work, and many

of them do not talk to each other regularly, even within the same institution," says Patel of NextBridge Impact.

It's not that centres don't want to collaborate. In our survey, more than half of the centres we surveyed wanted to prioritise "stronger collaboration and coordination among centres." Yet the intent has not always translated into practice. Only 32 percent of centres in our survey said they currently partner with other social impact centres.

Even when collaborations do happen, they are often piecemeal or driven by personal relationships, rather than strategic partnerships. As Tabensky of AGCLE puts it, "Everyone's busy and doing their thing, so it's very hard to get something really consistent happening. [When it happens], it's not rich and deep."

A similar sentiment is echoed by The Innovation Hub's Mbonani. "[It's not about] just increasing partnerships because we sign a lot of contracts that have no impact. It's about securing meaningful partnerships that actually have impact."

Meaningful partnerships, however, take time, trust, and intention. "Partnership is like courting," says Awni of the John D. Gerhart Center. "It takes time, persistence, understanding, and compromise, but the benefits and rewards are fantastic."
But for some centres, gaps in capacity or resources mean they are often constrained, even when they want to engage meaningfully with others.

Additionally, impact measurement can be a challenge. While social impact centres largely work towards the same goal, there is still little shared language around impact measurement, which makes it difficult to identify high-potential partnerships and measure progress. Lule of MIIC puts it this way, "Most of the partners we work with have their own impact definitions, much as we have ours."

Other centres also name the elephant in the room – funding – as a key constraint. "Building and sustaining institutional partnerships takes time and resources," points out Vincent Ogaya, research and policy lead at the Kenya Climate Innovation Centre. "Programme budgets do not always provide for this work. More flexible institutional funding would allow organisations to invest in long-term partnerships and pursue priorities beyond individual programmes."

The flipside of limited collaboration is that centres are often stretched thin, trying to do many things at once. In fact, our analysis of the 82 centres reveals that most play several roles, although the bulk of them concentrate on the first two: capacity builders and enterprise enablers. (See Figure 3.)

As with collaboration, part of this involves funding. Adu-Gyamfi of Ghana Hubs Network points out, "Hubs sometimes stretch themselves too thin because of funding ... instead of focusing on specific roles."

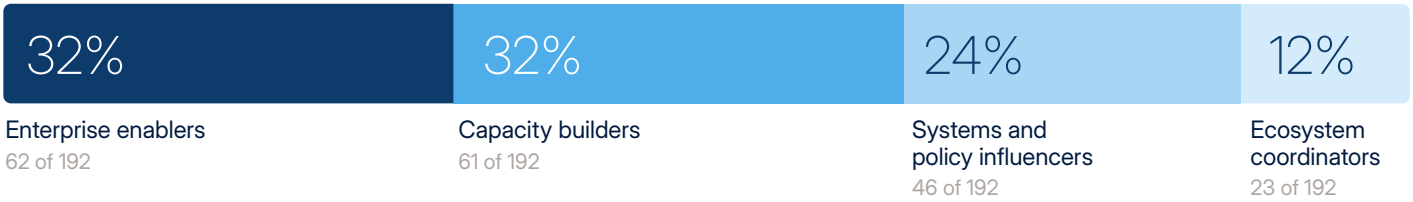
This echoes what Parker of RLabs says: "Many times, we see organisations having to change and pivot their core programmes in order to get the funding, [which] takes you away from the original plan, goal, and commitment to your community that you set out with."

> "Partnership is like courting. It takes time, persistence, understanding, and compromise, but the benefits and rewards are fantastic.
>
> ALI AWNI
> DIRECTOR, JOHN D. GERHART CENTER FOR PHILANTHROPY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS

FIGURE 3

Centres Play Multiple Overlapping Roles

SHARE OF ALL ROLES 192 role selections across 82 centres



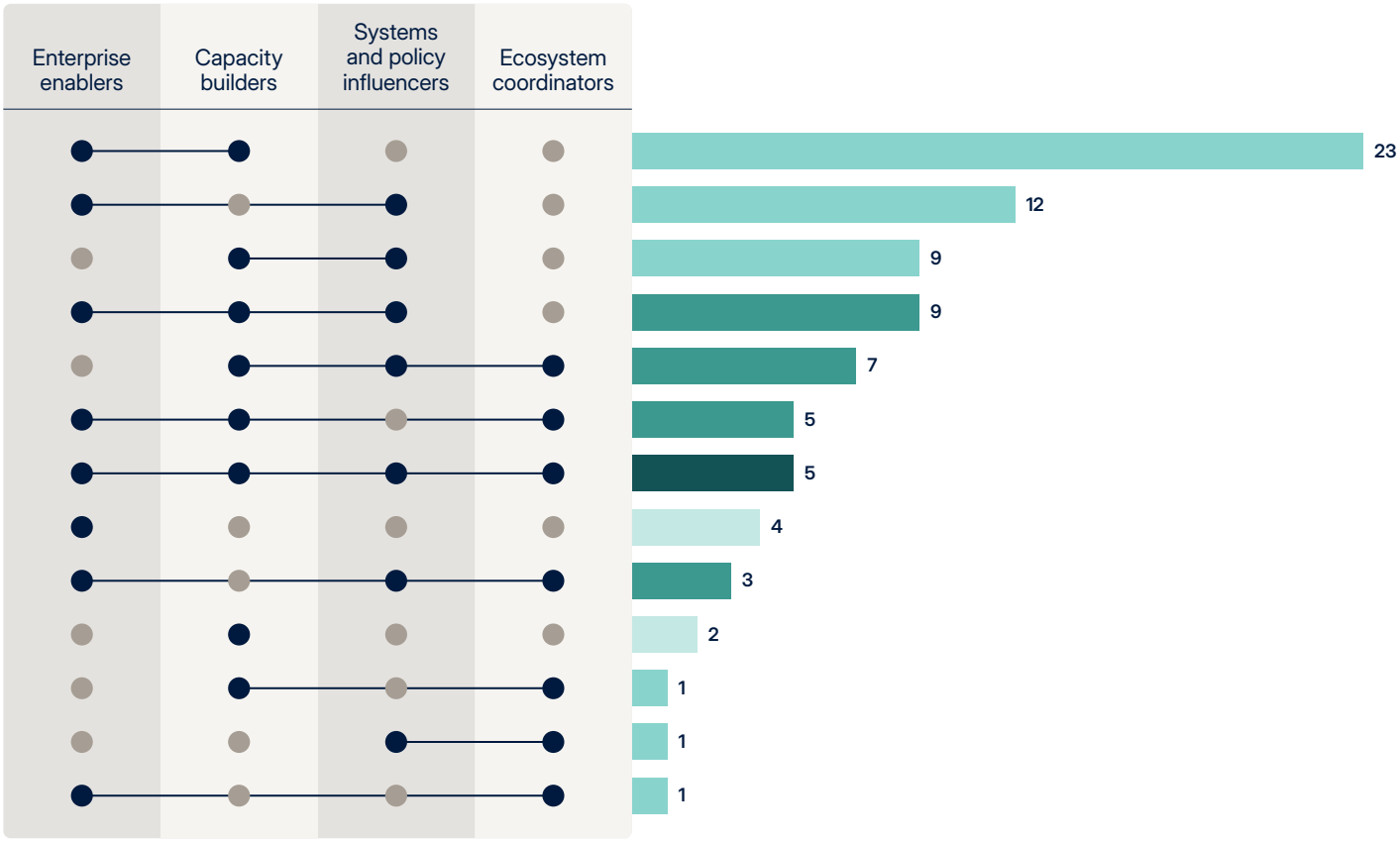
Enterprise enablers
62 of 192

Capacity builders
61 of 192

Systems and policy influencers
46 of 192

Ecosystem coordinators
23 of 192

HOW ROLES ARE DISTRIBUTED ACROSS THE FIELD



Combinations of roles

Centres per combination of roles

Each row represents a distinct combination of roles. Bars show how many centres play each distinct combination of roles.

Note: In the share of all roles chart, percentages are shares of all 192 roles taken on by the 82 social impact centres.
Source: Bridgespan analysis of public sources about each of the 82 social impact centres.

3.2 The need for field infrastructure

> When the field is strengthened, it creates a more coordinated ecosystem in which centres can build on each other's work and develop a more resilient infrastructure for social impact, rooted in local context, that builds leaders, develops social enterprise, and creates practice-driven knowledge that is eventually institutionalised in public systems.

What could help the field mature over the next decade is what we call "field infrastructure": the underlying mechanisms that strengthen each of the other five field characteristics. And building the field infrastructure means more ecosystem coordinators to act as "field catalysts," entities that work to mobilise and galvanise myriad actors across a field. We've described field catalysts in previous research as performing "a variety of roles, including fortifying the knowledge base with information on scaling best practices, providing technical assistance to fill critical needs for the field's organisations, hosting convenings to build a shared identity and accelerate learning among the field's actors, and creating regranting entities to pool funds for the field."[4]

In our conversations with leaders of social impact centres, we found that many centres are already thinking about building field infrastructure. Centres that might have initially started out with a proximate problem – supporting young people as they begin their social impact journey or incubating community-led social enterprises – are now beginning to consider taking on more of an ecosystem coordinator role.

For instance, Awni from the John D. Gerhart Center clearly articulates that his vision for the centre in the next 10 years is to become more of a "platform." He elaborates, "You need a proper platform that enables smaller entities to aggregate and to do things."

Centres like MIIC, which was initially created to help researchers, students, and entrepreneurs translate ideas into ventures, are now rethinking their positions in the field based on how their work has changed over time. "We are now evolving into a national hub that supports, in essence, other hubs. We are a convener of many partners. In terms of scale, I think we are looking at ourselves as being the one-stop coordinator of all [innovation] initiatives happening nationally within the country. We are also taking on more policy work," says Lule at MIIC. This ambition is also reflected in our survey: 79 percent of social impact centres identify growing network or ecosystem engagement as a key growth approach.

"We are seeing the start of a shift in the ecosystem," says Kabanda of Jasiri. "Different partners are increasingly collaborating around shared data, shared priorities, and follow-on support for ventures within their respective pipelines."

This is an indication that the field is developing, albeit unevenly, and centres are beginning to think collectively. This is important because when the field is strengthened, it creates a more coordinated ecosystem in which centres can build on each other's work and develop a more resilient infrastructure for social impact, rooted in local context, that builds leaders, develops social enterprise, and creates practice-driven knowledge that is eventually institutionalised in public systems. To be sure, several factors need to fall into place for this field to progress – funders, crucially, need to step up to support centres on this field-building journey – but, so far, the direction of travel is clear.

> For more on how funders can help build social impact centres as an emerging field, see Bridgespan's article "The Case for Funding Africa's Social Impact Centres".

SECTION 4

Four Priorities for Social Impact Centre Leaders

> There are a lot of different centres across the continent, all doing sometimes similar, sometimes slightly different things. I'd love to see more collaboration – working together and sharing our insights.

NICOLE SENN
HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PROGRAM COORDINATION, TWENDE SOCIAL INNOVATION CENTER

The field today presents a real opportunity for centres to think more deliberately about collaboration. The idea is not for each centre to do more but instead to lean into its distinctive strengths and partner with other centres with complementary expertise.

Although this field is still nascent, we believe that it is poised to grow and evolve. For centre leaders who are passionate about the promise of this field and are considering what comes next, here are four areas to explore.

1 Think holistically about your work

The biggest takeaway from our research is that centres might appear diverse, but they are, in fact, all building towards a whole. When centres take this approach of thinking holistically about their work, and how they contribute to the larger ecosystem, they can create a stronger narrative around the vital work centres do. And as the emergent field gains recognition, individual centres stand to benefit directly through greater credibility with funders, a stronger case for resources, and the legitimacy that comes from being recognised as part of something larger.

NextBridge Impact's Patel views this work of identifying "the story" as critical. "I think there's work to be done in telling this story and making it more compelling. To make the work centres do be seen not as a nice-to-have but as essential to the fabric of change, because change doesn't happen without the ecosystem work driven by these kinds of bodies."

2 Clarify your dominant roles

Most centres are currently playing a number of roles. While some hybridity is inevitable in the kind of work centres undertake, being clear about one's primary role can help centres become more strategic about the work they undertake, build expertise, and identify a clear value proposition for funders. At the field level, it can help reduce duplication of effort, strengthen specific roles, and foster more collaboration across complementary roles.

"I think it's really important for us to deepen what we're good at doing," says Rosa of the Bertha Centre. "If we are able to be better at what we are 'best in class' to do, and then connect with one another to enhance the overall impact [we're able] to make."

3 Connect before expanding

Closely tied to the point around role clarity is connection. The field today presents a real opportunity for centres to think more deliberately about collaboration. The idea is not for each centre to do more but instead to lean into its distinctive strengths and partner with other centres with complementary expertise. Senn at Twende sees collaboration as the future for social impact centres. "I think one of the things that I would like to see across the sector would be more collaboration. There are a lot of different centres across the continent, all doing sometimes similar, sometimes slightly different things. I'd love to see more collaboration – working together and sharing our insights."

Across the world, the sentiment is echoed by Erin Worsham, executive director at CASE at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. "There's no way that our centre can know everything about every aspect of the impact ecosystem as it evolves. We know, at our core, that we have to do our work in partnership and through collaboration. It's table stakes, I think, for this kind of work."

To be clear, this does not mean that every centre needs to become an ecosystem coordinator. But collaborating more intentionally can help reduce the burden on centres to take on multiple roles, improve sustainability, and ultimately strengthen the field.

4 Develop a shared language around impact measurement

A recurring theme in our research has been an emphasis on impact measurement – 81 percent of centres in our survey named stronger impact measurement a priority – coupled with acknowledgement of how challenging it can be, given the indirect, long-term outcomes that centres work towards. But without a shared language around impact, it becomes harder to engage in meaningful collaborations and to share a cohesive story for the field with funders.

Colin Habberton, co-founder of Relativ Group, an impact solutions provider that helps organisations measure, strengthen, and communicate their impact, sees this as a critical gap in the field. "It's fundamental to understand stakeholders' objectives and make sure that contested terms are defined equitably and measured appropriately. In our opinion, alignment on these terms and measures should always be achieved collaboratively."

This also requires a mindset shift. "The traditional view of monitoring and evaluation can be compliance-oriented, as opposed to impact management and measurement that aims to support decision-making, driving adaptation, innovation, insights, and improvement," says Habberton.

For more guidance, refer to Bridgespan's article "Evaluating Field-Level Progress Toward System Change: 10 Tips for Funders."

Conclusion

This is an important moment in the history of the global social sector. Funding pressures and cuts in multilateral and official development assistance funding have posed a serious setback for many nonprofits, especially across Africa. Social impact centres have not been immune to these changes. Funding constraints came up in many of our conversations with centre leaders and have impacted their organisational capacity, scope of work, and ability to collaborate, as we explore in this report.

Funders are also now increasingly thinking about how to innovate and "do more with less,"[5] and where investments will create the most lasting difference. One answer that's emerging globally is to invest in strengthening the conditions that make change more sustainable, scalable, and locally led.

The current moment presents a real opportunity for the emerging field of social impact centres. As conversations across the global development ecosystem move towards investing in the conditions that can nurture locally led social change, a connected, recognised field of social impact centres can help investments go further and make impact more lasting. The framework already exists – shared purpose, shared approaches, and shared ambition. What is needed now is recognition and intent – from the centres themselves, funders, and the broader ecosystem – to help transform social impact centres into the driving force that, like the interstitium, connects the vital dots in Africa's development story.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1 Criteria defining African social impact centres

We have applied six criteria to evaluate the inclusion of social impact centres in our analysis.

Criteria	Description
1 **Africa focus**	The organisation is Africa-based with established core operations, leadership, and impact focused on local contexts.
2 **Operational presence**	The organisation demonstrates sustained activity, organizational continuity, and evidence of ongoing operations.
3 **Social impact mission**	The organisation has an explicit mission to advance social or environmental change.[1]
4 **Ecosystem role**	The organisation plays a connective or enabling role beyond direct service delivery.
5 **Evidence of impact**	The organisation engages in one or more domains of social impact[2] by contributing to outcomes and/or learning at the individual, institutional, and/or ecosystem level.
6 **Organisational identity**	The organisation maintains a strong and recognisable organisational identity, with a formal governance structure, identifiable leadership, and sustained operations over time.

Note: 1. Social change is defined as how institutions, cultural norms, behaviours, ideas and values transform over time.
2. This can include social impact education, leadership, entrepreneurship, policy, or related ecosystem areas.
Source: Emmaline Soken-Huberty, "Social Change 101: Meaning, Examples, Learning Opportunities," Human Rights Careers, 28 August 2024, https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/social-change-101-meaning-examples-learning-opportunities/.

Based on our definition and inclusion criteria, there were a number of platforms that were excluded from the analysis.

Criteria	Description
Africa-focused but externally based	Platforms/entities that **have an Africa focus** but are **primarily operated, governed, and managed from outside the continent**
Single scope and function	Platforms whose **primary focus is direct service delivery** or **programme implementation**, without an explicit **mandate to build capacity, convene actors, or strengthen the broader ecosystem**
Research units/centers	Research units whose **activities do not extend beyond academic teaching or research** and **lack engagement with influencing practice, policy, or ecosystems**
Project-based initiatives	Short-term initiatives, pilot programmes, or donor-funded **projects that lack organisational structure or a long-term mandate**
Commercial or for-profit entities	For-profit entities whose primary objective is **financial return rather than social impact**, even where socially oriented activities are conducted

APPENDIX 2

Survey methodology

Building the sample set: We identified 82 organisations that met our inclusion criteria for a social impact centre. This list formed the basis of our survey outreach. We invited nearly all identified organisations to participate in the survey, with the exception of a few organisations for which we could not source any contact information.

Administering the survey: The survey was administered from early April to mid-May 2026. It covered five areas: general organisational information; operating and partnership models; approach to impact measurement; sources of funding; and priorities for the sector's future. Most questions allowed respondents to select multiple applicable options, and several sections included optional open-text questions for additional context.

Survey coverage: Twenty-seven organisations completed the survey in full, while 31 completed the core sections of the survey. We retained partial responses, so the survey sample size ranges from 27 to 31.

Survey limitations:

- **Sample size:** Our survey sample size is small, but it still represents nearly 40 percent of known African social impact centres. Findings should be considered indicative instead of statistically representative.
- **Self-reported data:** All information, including financial figures and budget changes, was self-reported by respondents and not independently verified; respondents were permitted to estimate where exact figures were unavailable.
- **Regional representation:** Survey respondents were disproportionately from East, West, and Southern Africa. By headquarters, South Africa and Nigeria were both modestly over-represented among respondents, while Kenya – one of the three most common headquarters countries in the full landscape – was under-represented among respondents.

APPENDIX 3

List of interviewees

African Social Impact Centres

Adu-Gyamfi, Yaw
Chairperson, Ghana Hubs Network

Annoh, William
Assistant Director, Adei Research Studio, Ashesi University, Ghana

Awni, Ali
Director, The John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, Civic Engagement, and Responsible Business, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

de Villiers, Katusha
Senior Project Manager, Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (UCT), South Africa

Kabanda, Aline
Regional Director, Jasiri, East Africa

Lule, Allan
Startups Management and Operations Lead, Makerere Innovation and Incubation Center (MIIC), Uganda

Marrengane, Ntombini
Senior Manager, Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (UCT), South Africa

Mbonani, Mpho
Partnerships Manager, The Innovation Hub, South Africa

Moyo, Bhekinkosi
Director, Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI), South Africa

Njagi, Wilfred
Co-founder and CEO,
Villgro Africa, Kenya

Nkontwana, Phumlani
Founding Academic Director and Stellenbosch University Faculty, Allan Gray Centre for Africa Entrepreneurship

Ogaya, Vincent
Research and Policy Lead, Kenya Climate Innovation Centre (KCIC), Kenya

Okedusi, Moyinoluwa
Head of Programme Management Unit, Co-creation HUB (CcHUB)

Okpere, Stephanie
Head, Digital Health Innovations, CcHUB, Kenya

Parker, Rene
Director, RLabs, South Africa

Rosa, Solange
Director, Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (UCT), South Africa

Salborn, Etienne
Founder, Social Innovation Academy (SINA), Uganda

Senn, Nicole
Head of Communications and Program Coordination, Twende Social Innovation Center, Tanzania

Tabensky, Pedro
Director, Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE), South Africa

Wentzel, Mareldia
Partnerships Manager, RLabs, South Africa

Wilbard, Epifania
Executive Director, Twende Social Innovation Center, Tanzania

Funders

Hampton, Daniel
Group Head of Program Effectiveness, Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies

Horwitz, Laura
CEO, Bertha Foundation

Kyobe, Victor
Innovations Lead,
Mastercard Foundation

Mbili, Smangaliso
Innovation Manager, DG Murray Trust (DGMT), South Africa

Patel, Shivani Garg
Founder and Principal,
NextBridge Impact

Seidel, Olaf
Head of Project, SPARK, GIZ Kenya

Experts

Habberton, Colin
Co-founder, Relativ Group, South Africa

Habberton, Gabrielle
Co-founder, Relativ Group, South Africa

Nash, Matthew
Director, Center for Social Innovation at Stanford Graduate School of Business

Shankar, Anita
Associate Scientist, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Spurzem, Paul
Program Director – SEE Change Initiative, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Worsham, Erin
Executive Director, CASE at Duke University (Fuqua)

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Endnotes

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