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The Bridgespan Group

The Case for Funding Africa's Social Impact Centres

Three investments can help the emerging field of social impact centres grow and deliver the impact funders seek.

By Jan Schwier, Mark McKeag, Rossina Naidoo, Lihle Ngcobozi, Matthew Bain, and Sohini Pal

As multilateral and foreign aid shrinks around the world, funders increasingly face an important question: which investments lead to truly resilient social change? Across our conversations with philanthropists in Africa, one emerging answer is that funding programmes only goes so far and that there is a critical need to strengthen the infrastructure that helps make social impact more lasting and locally led.

African social impact centres present a real opportunity in this context. These organisations go by many names – "hubs," "platforms," and "networks." They also have diverse operating models: some are university- or government-linked, while others function independently. At first glance, they appear disparate in their approaches to social change. But regardless of how they are set up or operate, these centres are all working towards a similar goal: strengthening the conditions – mindsets, practices, capabilities, networks – that enable others to shape lasting change. In short, they are doing the kind of work many funders are looking to invest in.

Research by The Bridgespan Group spanning 33 interviews with centre leaders, experts, and funders across Africa found that social impact centres support and shape the work of individuals, organisations, and systems. They develop leaders and changemakers; support impact-driven entrepreneurship and community-led innovation; and help shape the institutions and systems on which social impact depends. They also connect the dots between actors across sectors to effect change at a systemic level. The centres share other similarities. Most centres serve a range of overlapping groups, with young people and entrepreneurs featuring most prominently. They play four recurring roles:

Capacity builders that work to build future leaders and changemakers



Enterprise enablers that support social impact ventures and organisations to build and scale their operations



Systems and policy influencers that work to inform policy, institutional behaviour, or system-level practices



Ecosystem coordinators that enable centres to work more effectively with one another, and with actors across government, the private sector, and the social sector by convening, connecting, and building capacity



For more on the roles social impact centres play and their impact see *Africa's Social Impact Centres: The Development Opportunity Hiding in Plain Sight*.

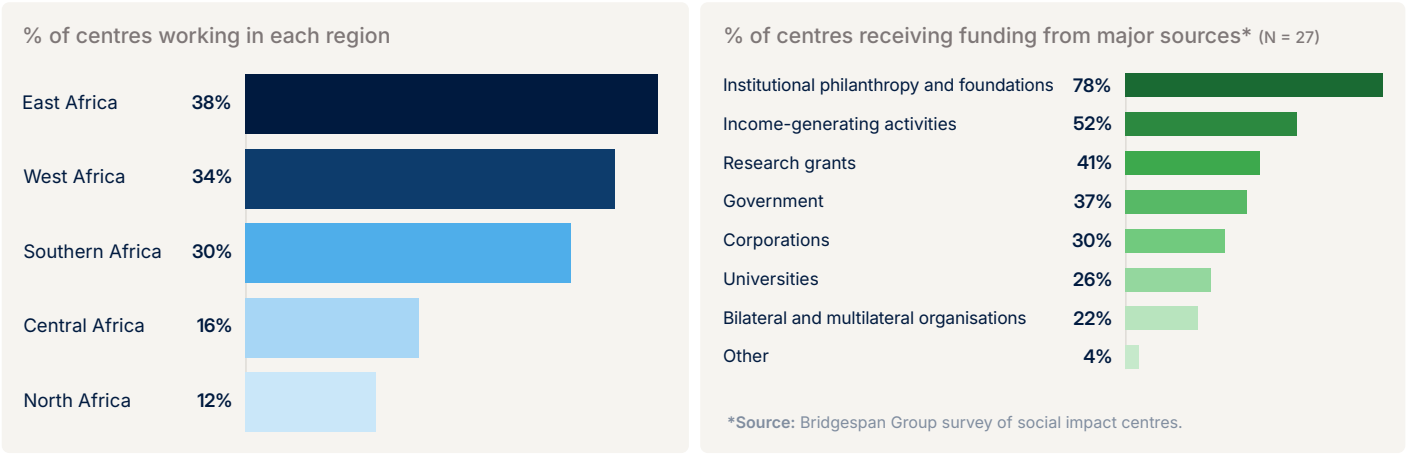
These core similarities – both in how centres view social impact and in the complementary ways they approach it – signal that, in practice, social impact centres serve as "connective tissue" for the African development sector. They help build a cohesive social infrastructure that fosters local leadership and innovation, translates knowledge into practice, and influences how social impact is viewed on the continent. Their unique position at the intersection of academia, government, civil society, communities, and the private sector enables them to do this work in a way that's distinct from many other nonprofits or intermediary organisations.

An emerging field with untapped potential

Our research found that there are currently at least 82 social impact centres in Africa, and their number has grown fivefold since 2010. Together, they fit our definition of an emerging field.[1]

FIGURE 1

Eighty-two centres in Africa work across a range of thematic areas and regions



Centres are headquartered mainly in **South Africa** (22%), **Kenya,** and **Nigeria** (15% each), with the remainder spread across **19 other countries.** Thirty-five percent operate in more than one country.

Number of centres

82

identified across Africa

Growth

5x

increase in number of centres since 2010

Years in existence

15

years on average, ranging from two to more than 60

Annual budget* (N = 24)

75%

of centres reported annual revenue **less than US$1Mn (FY2023)**

Areas of focus



Source: Landscape data is based on Bridgespan Group research and analysis of the space.

[1] We define a field as "a set of individuals and organizations working to address a common social issue or problem." For more details, refer to our resources on field building: *Field Building for Population-Level Change*, https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/field-building-for-population-level-change.

Centres need tailored investments that strengthen the work they are already doing while building linkages between their diverse approaches to make the vision an achievable, and sustainable, reality.

They also share an increasing desire to do more. Leaders from the centres we spoke to note that many of them started with a local problem – for example, helping young people develop ethical leadership skills, or incubating social enterprises to grow and scale. But today, they are increasingly thinking about how to work together to inform the policies and systems that shape social impact in Africa, and to respond to the challenges that the continent faces.

This ambition is bolstered by the fact that centres have, for years, been making a real difference on the ground, even though they operate with modest budgets and lean teams. Even with the large-scale cuts in development assistance over the past few years, this field has shown surprising resilience and adaptability. Many centres today have diverse sources of funding, including smaller donors and commercial and nonprofit arms.

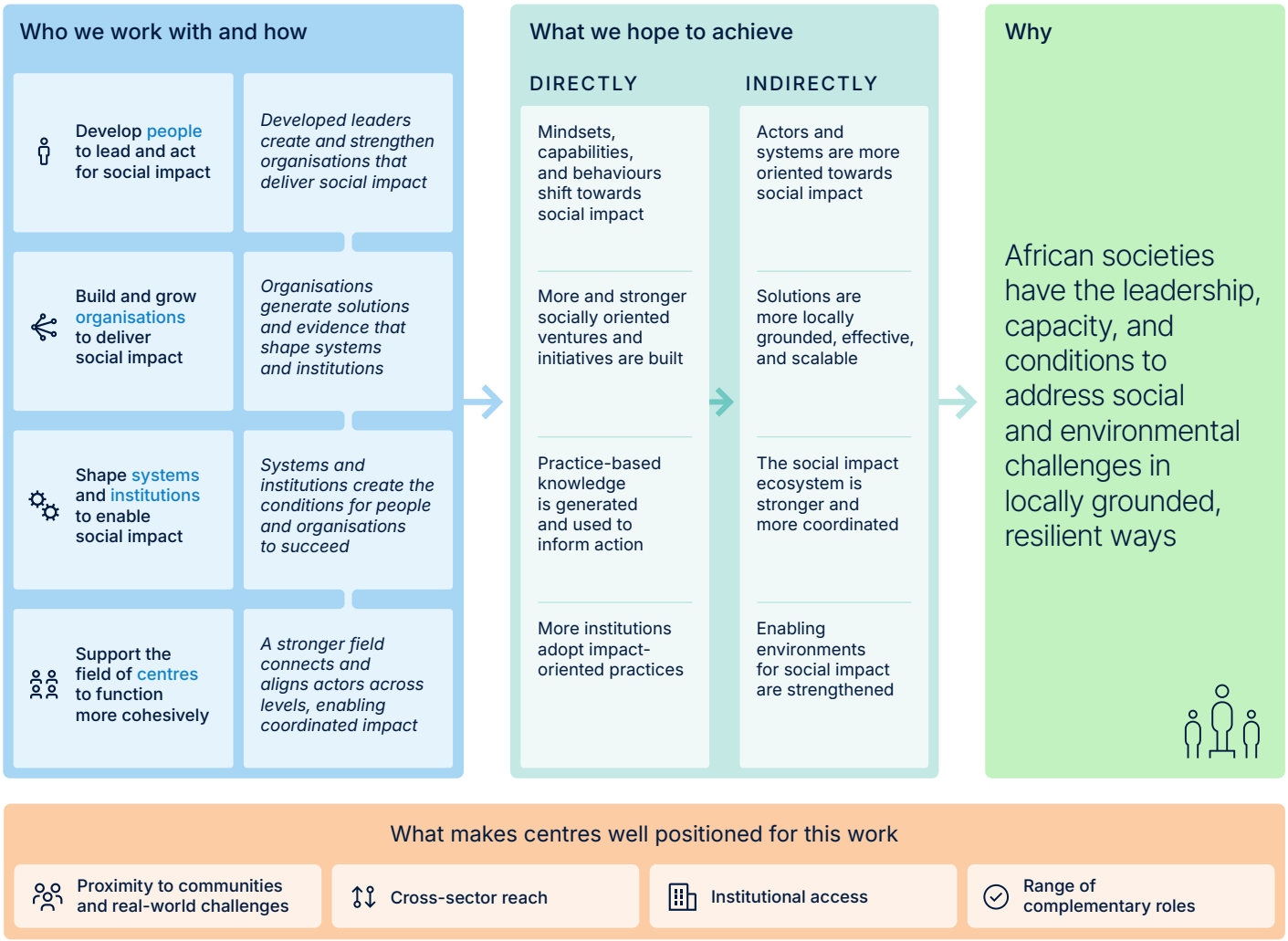
Despite constraints in both funding and operational structures, the work that centres do remains grounded and sustainable – whether it's training future leaders, as the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics in South Africa does; building community-led models to equip young people with digital and entrepreneurial skills, as RLabs in South Africa and Twende Innovation Hub in Tanzania do; or working with governments to inform policy, convene actors, and bridge academia and industry, as Jasiri, the Makerere Innovation and Incubation Center (MIIC), and the Ghana Hubs Network have done in Rwanda, Uganda, and Ghana, respectively.

The challenge is that the support the field currently receives doesn't align with centres' ambitions or the field's potential. This is where there's untapped opportunity for philanthropy. Centres have put in the work for years – and this emerging field is ready to advance. With adequate and timely support, including both financial resources and expertise, the field has the potential to progress into a powerful lever for driving social impact in Africa.

The figure on the following page illustrates what a working theory of change (ToC) could look like for this field. We know that social impact centres are already coalescing around a common strategic vision – the "why" in the ToC. Currently, they take distinct yet complementary approaches to contribute, directly or indirectly, to that vision. But centres need tailored investments that strengthen the work they are already doing while building linkages between their diverse approaches to make the vision an achievable and sustainable reality.

FIGURE 2

Working theory of change for social impact centres



When this is realised, centres can focus on their distinct strengths while building on each other's work, creating a virtuous cycle of trained and ethical leaders creating stronger social enterprises[2] that can help build the evidence for adopting practice-based knowledge across institutions and public systems. In turn, this creates a stronger, more coordinated ecosystem for social impact that addresses pressing challenges across the continent in locally grounded, resilient ways.

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

What funders can do: Three investments to help the field progress



Build organisational capability

Building organisational capability is key for centres to progress and scale their work, yet funding for this remains one of the biggest gaps. Repeatedly, centres note the need for flexible funding that covers core costs beyond programmes, so they can invest in institutional growth and sustainability. Think strategy, talent development, fundraising, technology, or operations, for example – the organisational capabilities that keep an organisation thriving over time. But this type of funding is increasingly hard to come by. "[Most often] you get funding, typically CSR funds, tied to programmes, and that leaves nothing [for] overhead, training of employees, or for the development of the centre," says Ali Awni, director at the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, Civic Engagement, and Responsible Business in Cairo.

Without core funding that accounts for centres' true costs, the field misses the opportunity to reach its full potential. Some funders implored their peers to support general operations, so that centres can meet their core needs.

Daniel Hampton, group head of programme effectiveness at Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies, underscores that this flexibility is what helps long-term sustainability. "Our ethos is to connect with the people, not just the goal. We give [centres] funding and allow them to develop their centre into what they [are looking to] do."

Two specific areas where centres said they needed support were strategic planning and measurement, evaluation, and learning.

Strategic planning: We repeatedly heard that centres are "stretching themselves too thin," as Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, chairperson of the Ghana Hubs Network, puts it, because of funding. Centres often feel pressure to do a little bit of everything to access different kinds of funding, sometimes even having to pivot away from their core expertise, which strains their operational resources and often results in duplication of effort across the field. Some amount of overlap is inevitable, but guidance from funders and tailored investments in strategic planning can play an important role in helping centres clarify their dominant roles and deepen their expertise.

Some funders, like the DG Murray Trust (DGMT), a public innovator that aims to develop South Africa's potential through strategic investments, are already doing this. Smangaliso Mbili, innovation manager at DGMT, says DGMT applies this lens to all its implementation partners. "In our work with implementing partners, we recognise that organisations often play multiple roles. Some deliver programmes while also fulfilling an impact centre role within their communities. The question is: what are you particularly good at, and what can you deliver at a consistently high quality? Being clear about those strengths helps an organisation focus its resources, develop a clear theory of change, and identify where partnerships can bring in complementary capabilities."

Measurement, evaluation, and learning: Another challenging area is impact measurement. A centre's work is often indirect, long term, and difficult to measure, especially when tracking large-scale outcomes. As Allan Lule, startups management and operations lead at MIIC in Uganda, puts it, "Our impact measurement metrics are mainly focused on business outcomes, not so much on translating our work into large-scale economic impact at the national level."

This is not a problem specific to social impact centres – field-level progress is hard to measure across geographies

Two specific areas where centres said they needed support were strategic planning and measurement, evaluation, and learning.

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>
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> CO-FOUNDER, RELATIV GROUP

because the systems change this work aims to achieve doesn't fit into typical grant cycles. But addressing this requires a mindset shift among funders, one that recognises the unique role centres play in the ecosystem and asks funders to calibrate their measurement expectations accordingly. Colin Habberton, co-founder of Relativ Group, which works with funders, organisations, and centres around impact measurement, says, "[There is a] need to shift thinking in how you design and apply impact indicators. Just because something can be measured does not mean it is worth measuring."

Apart from rethinking how field-level progress can be measured, there are also practical investments funders can make to help create shared resources and tools for impact measurement. Currently, shared language in the field is emerging but not consistently applied, which makes it difficult for centres to collaborate. This is further compounded by the fact that funders often have very different reporting mechanisms.

"Funders and organisations need to continue to invest in co-created impact performance systems so that [centres] have the tools, training, and technology in place to measure and verify impact. This will support decision-makers to track what makes a difference and decide where to invest from there," says Habberton.

2 Fund collaboration costs

In our interviews with both funders and centres, we found that there is ambition for, and interest in, increasing collaboration across the field. This is vital for the field to progress. When centres can have a holistic view of one another's work, and how it fits within the larger ecosystem of government and industry actors, they can collectively work towards shared goals and contribute to the field at large.

But collaboration is not free. As Gabrielle Habberton, co-founder of Relativ Group, puts it, "Collaboration takes time and resources – [centres often have to ask]: 'Do [we] have the luxury of real collaboration? Can [we] afford it?'" She also names competition for funding as one of the "driving factors" that often poses a barrier to collaboration. "Competition is a big driver limiting the willingness to share between impact practitioners, making sharing and learning difficult to navigate."

This sentiment is also echoed by Matthew Nash, director of the Center for Social Innovation at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. "We want to share and build the field, but there is also a competition around funding and attention. In general, the field wants to share, and there are some examples of this, but there has not been a wide enough scope and effort to play that role."

This is where investments that specifically cover collaboration and convening costs can be particularly useful. Mbili of DGMT says the foundation treats convening and networking, and funding those costs, as a critical part of its grantmaking. "From our experience of funding civil society organisations, there is value in supporting collaboration and convening so that shared learning can inform practice. We are interested in understanding what this makes possible: how organisations bring others together, what they learn from one another and what outcomes emerge from that engagement."

Mbili also underscores the proactive role funders can play in facilitating more collaboration amongst centres. "Funders can help implementing partners connect with one another, compare models, and identify shared gaps. This can support organisations to contribute beyond their own programmes and recognise where working together could strengthen the wider ecosystem."

Without dedicated investments in relationship-building, shared learning,

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coordination, and trust-building, the components of the ToC will continue to operate in silos rather than mutually reinforcing one another.

Erin Worsham, executive director of the Center for Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, sees this as a global opportunity, not just a pan-African one. "I would love to see a funded shared space for centre leaders [across the United States and Africa] to come together and plan these convenings."

Of course, the goal is not to collaborate for its own sake, but to focus on problem-solving. As Anita Shankar, associate scientist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who works closely with centres like MIIC, puts it, "[Collaboration] should not just say, 'This is what we are doing.' It should be targeted towards, 'Here is the specific problem we would like to solve. How can we work together, with our shared experiences, to address it?' You can't get to innovation without different perspectives coming together around hard problems."



Invest in ecosystem coordinators

Closely tied to the point of collaboration is the need to invest in ecosystem coordinators. Ecosystem coordinators can act as "field catalysts" – organisations that "enhance a field's alignment, collaboration, and efficiency, resulting in collective impact that is greater than the sum of its parts,"[3] as we've described in previous research. Field catalysts can be a powerful, if often overlooked, lever in strengthening the field. In the context of social impact centres, the ecosystem coordinators help centres coordinate better with one another and with other actors across the ecosystem. But currently, only 12 percent of centres play this role.

Therein lies the gap. Some funders we spoke to noted that while more centres are thinking in this direction, this role is still quite nascent and often informal. In their view, the field needs more trusted convenors who can bring both centres and other actors together and play an ecosystem-building role. In turn, this can also help funders understand where more resources are needed. Consistent investments in strengthening this ecosystem coordinator role – an ambition that many centres have, as our interviews found – can help the field progress in a more structured way.

In parallel, funders can support coordinators to create shared knowledge and practices. Codifying those experiences would benefit others in the field and create opportunities for funders to leverage their investments in one organisation into learnings for other organisations and fields.

Of course, field building takes time. But in today's constrained funding environment, strengthening and supporting an emerging field like social impact centres can go a long way towards creating the infrastructure for resilient change. When philanthropy invests in the "less visible" aspects of the work – funding core capacity, creating opportunities for collaboration and ecosystem building, and bridging gaps in measurement – it helps centres sustain and build upon the work they have already been doing, and unlocks the potential of the field. As one funder says, "Ultimately, it's about building more awareness and demand for this kind of field-building work, which may not even be on [funders'] radar."

[3] "Field catalysts: Behind the scenes of systems change," The Bridgespan Group, https://www.bridgespan.org/getmedia/61cb867b-2bd3-489e-ba70-f41861e51788/field-catalysts-behind-the-scenes-of-systems-change-sern-bridgespan.pdf.

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