Social Innovation:
An Untapped Resource for Inclusive Growth in Africa

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The African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS) is a multi-disciplinary network of researchers, private sector actors and policy makers promoting the generation, dissemination, use and mastery of science, technology and innovation (ST&I) for African development, environmental sustainability and global inclusion. ATPS intends to achieve its mandate through research, capacity building and training, science communication/dissemination and sensitization, participatory multi-stakeholder dialogue, knowledge brokerage, and policy advocacy.

Introduction

Our planet earth is facing a convergence of crisis: climate change induced extreme events, global financial crisis, deepening poverty and unemployment, energy and food insecurity, social inequities and political instability, and fast depleting natural assets. These exacerbate the challenge of sustainable development at all scales.

Addressing these complex challenges requires unprecedented systemic transformations in knowledge, technologies and innovation at all levels to deliver required innovations that address the needs of the masses at the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP)[1]. Innovation has become a ubiquitous buzzword meaning different things to different people, from the smart phone in the pocket to a new financial service for the poor. Whichever way it is defined, *"innovation succeeds only when it creates new pathways for solving entrenched social problems, resulting in lasting transformation of the systems that most affect vulnerable populations and leave stronger social relations in their wake"*[2]

During the past decade, *social innovation* has witnessed a phenomenal surge, in all countries including Africa. New initiatives such as President Obama's Social Innovation Fund in 2009[3], the European Commission's European Social Agenda[4]; the United Kingdom's policy on the Big Society[5], were all designed to find and up-scale the best social innovations for development. Recent studies and field experiences show that social innovations lead to prosperous societies[6], and constitute good local development policies[7]

Globally, social innovation is addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges confronting society today – from fair trade, agribusiness, distance learning, mobile money transfer, youth employment[8], and waste reduction, to restorative justice and zero-carbon housing, and resilience capacity building[9]. It is a new wave in innovation studies and practices that is profoundly changing beliefs, basic practices, resource flows and power relations within societies, and strengthening resilience, cooperation and collaboration amongst diverse stakeholders. Social innovation has unleashed a complete re-thinking of the meaning and practice of social enterprises, business engagement and philanthropy, and recognizes the interconnectedness of various factors and stakeholders within innovation systems.

2. The African Experience

In Africa, considerable advances in social and economic growth were recorded over the past decade, irrespective of the massive downturn in the global economy during the period. Africa maintained an average annual growth rate of 5.5% between 2005 and 2008. This declined to 2.4% in 2009 due mainly to the global economic recession, but unlike most continents, Africa made a

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[1] *Hultman, N.E. and Shapiro, A. (2012). Green growth innovation in developing countries. The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., USA*

[2] *Rodin, J. (2013). Innovations for the Next 100 years. In Unleashing Breakthrough Innovation in Government. Stanford Social Innovation review, Vol. 11, No. 3, p.2.*

[3] *http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/sicp/initiatives/social-innovation-fund*

[4] *http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=737*

[5] *http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2336913/David-Cameron-relaunches-Big-Society-250m-fund-let-locals-rescue-bars-shops-swimming-pools.html*

[6] *Urama, K. C., and Acheampong, E (2013): Social innovation Creates Prosperous Societies, In: Unleashing Breakthrough Innovation in Government. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Volume 11, No. 2, Summer 2013, pp. 9 - 11.*

[7] *Moseley M. J., Cherrett, T. and Cawley, M. (2001) Local partnerships for rural development: Ireland's experience in context. Irish Geography , Volume 34(2), pp 176-193*

[8] *Gupta. A. K. (2013). Tapping the entrepreneurial potential of grassroots innovation. In: Unleashing Breakthrough Innovation in Government. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Volume 11, No. 2, Summer 2013, pp 6 - 8.*

[9] *Westley, F. (2013). Social innovation and Resilience: How one enhances the other. In: Unleashing Breakthrough Innovation in Government. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Volume 11,*

rather rapid recovery with average GDP growth rate reaching 5.2% between 2011 and 2012[10]. Africa is now regarded as the second-fastest-growing continent globally after Asia. This acceleration in Africa's growth reflects fundamental improvements in the macroeconomic policies, the business environment and growing political stability in many African countries[11]. On the other hand, the untold story of the African growth success is the significantly increased attention to science, technology and innovation (STI) as the driver of economic growth on the continent, on the one part; and the large informal sector of the economy with blossoming social innovations amongst youths and women, undocumented in formal innovation statistics. The rising African economies and improving democracies on the continent has led to increased demand for multiple transitions: from research and development (R&D) to research for development (R4D); from technology transfers to increasing endogenous scientific and technical skills and knowledge that drives social change, especially in the area of information and communication technologies, and from democracies defined by elite capture to participatory democracies where differences are settled in social media sites and in mass action on the streets. Increasingly, organisational, technological and social innovations are becoming the norm amongst African youths and women, driving social change and economic development from the grassroots.

3. Mainstreaming social innovation in Africa's Development Agenda
During the past decade, African countries have witnessed new patterns of social behaviour emerging from technological and social innovations. For example *Skype, Facebook, twitter* and other social electronic platforms have changed the rate and style of social interactions as well as ways of working. Social innovation is also driving technological innovation – societal demands and needs influence the direction of research and development, and the design and production of an innovative product or service, e.g. improved drugs, food quality, e-health, e-medicine, e-banking, etc. Through interventions such as the African Youth Forum for Science and Technology (AYFST)[12] and the African Women Forum for Science and Technology (AWFST)[13], youths and women are harnessing their social entrepreneurship skills, creating employment and solving social problems in rural communities and in urban slum dwellings. There is now a growing recognition that social innovation presents a rich yet unexploited potential to fostering STI-led development in Africa. Most of the current social innovation initiatives in Africa have been established at the grass root level, with minimal capacity to influence decisions at the higher level.

However, public policy is yet to explicitly support social innovation, despite the plethora of its positive development and social outcomes.

4. Policy Recommendations
There are many ways that governments can improve the policy climate for social innovation:
- ***Creating more awareness on Social Innovation:*** Social innovations remain largely unknown amongst investors and policymakers on the continent as attention remain focused on high end technological innovations for development. Awareness creation programs are very much needed to mainstream social innovations in public policy dialogues on matters of science, technology and innovations for development.

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[10] *African Development Bank (2013). African Development Report, 2012*
http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/African%20Development%20Report%202012%20-%20Overview.pdf
[11] *Economic Report on Africa 2012 Unleashing Africa's Potential as a Pole of Global Growth*
[12] *http://www.atpsnet.org/programmes/YGP/AYFST/about/index.php*
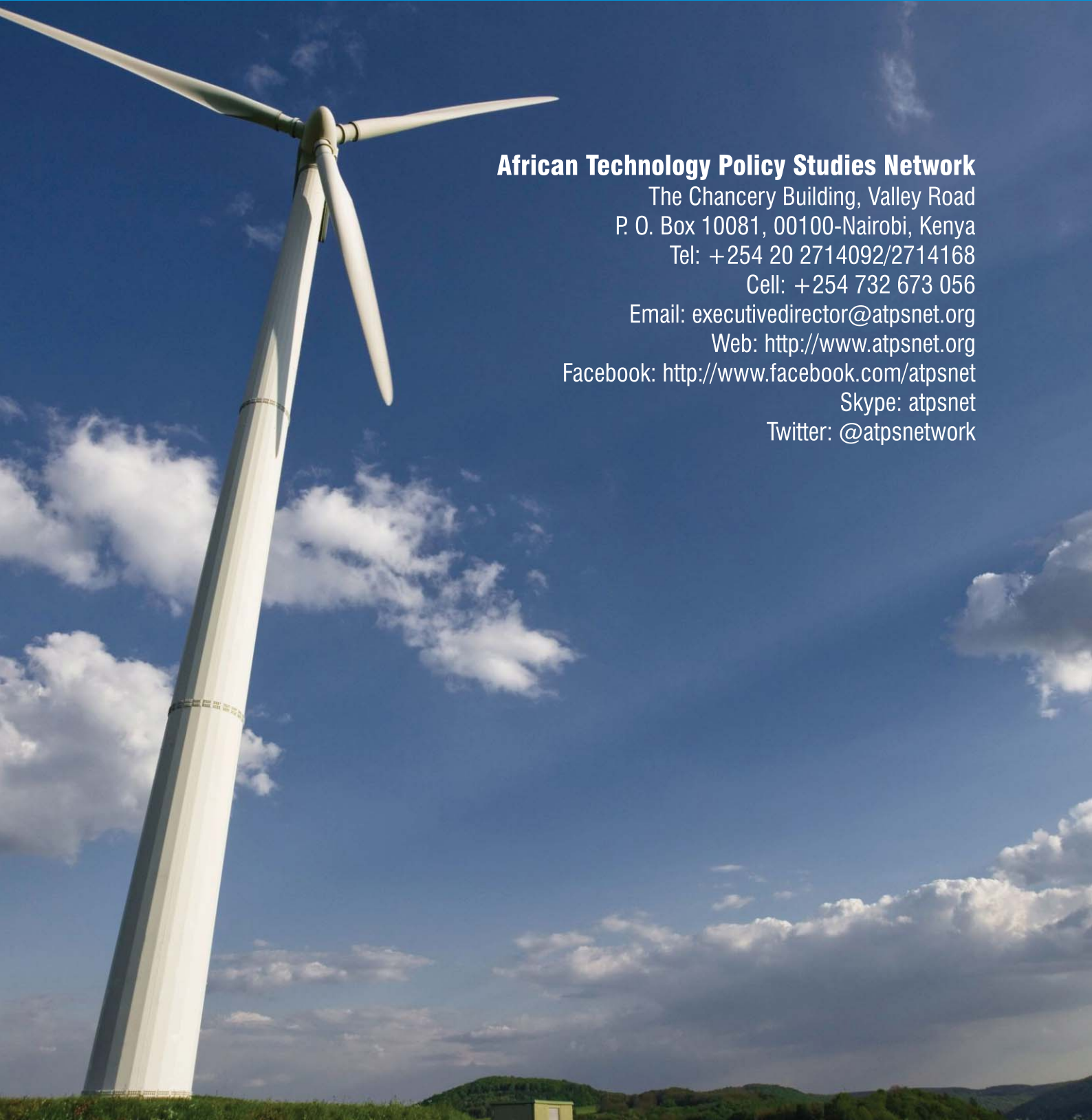[13] *http://awfst.atpsnet.org/*

- ***Strengthening systems of innovation in the relevant sectors***: Having the necessary framework conditions[14] is a pre-requisite for innovation diffusion and up scaling in societies. Key priority sectors include but are not exclusive to information and communication technologies (ICTS), agriculture, and health delivery, and the environment. Policies for inclusive innovation are best understood as a process rather than a set of policies printed on paper.

- ***Endogenous capacity enhancement programs*** - Transitions in systems of innovation involves multiple transition processes that are interrelated with each other. In each of the transitions new capacity issues will arise and capacity development policies and practices will have to change. Significant investments are therefore required strengthen institutions, networks and programs that build capabilities for social innovations at all scales.

- ***Social Innovation Incubation programs***: One characteristic of social innovation is that it often evolves in collaboration amongst actors in the innovation system[15]. Investing in social innovation incubation programs (especially targeting youths and women) are critical to unleashing and up scaling social innovations in Africa. Incubator activities are known to be very useful especially for start-up companies.

- ***Social Impact Investment for Start-Up finance in the Social Innovation Sector:*** The key recurrent challenge to social innovators is lack of finance required for effective start-up Small Scale and Medium scale Enterprises, due to poor credit worthiness amongst the innovators. Formal finance institutions such as Banks are often out of reach to these innovators. The stories of social innovations in Africa often show new innovations solving critical social problems dying off due to lack of funds to support start-up activities. Social impact investments in this direction will go a long way to mainstream social innovations in development programs and projects.

- ***Policy reforms:*** Current policies on science, technology and innovations in Africa largely focus on high end technologies and technology transfer. A review and reform of these policies are needed to refocus them on building endogenous capacities for all forms of innovation, including social innovations. Such a review should also aim to strengthen intellectual property laws to ensure that benefits of social innovations accrue to the Innovators without limiting public access and use.

- ***Research for Development:*** The underlying theories and principles of social innovations are evolving. Further research into the types of policies and policy portfolios required for unleashing the social innovations potentials of African youths and women will be critical.

Conclusion

Social innovation is remarkably a creative and evolving field that is having significant impacts in securing livelihoods, and building resilience in n societies, globally. In Africa, youths and women are increasingly engaged in social innovation activities, often delivering remarkable impacts in the fields of agriculture, heath delivery, banking and finance, and institutional/national governance. The results, like in all fields of technology and innovation has been mixed: ranging from creating employment, securing livelihoods, and building resilience, and stemming excessive rent seeking and corruption in product value chains, to mobilising mass action and resistance movements. This field of innovation is however largely untapped. Greater investments in capacity strengthening, policy research and policy making as well as awareness creations programs are required to effectively tap social innovations for inclusive growth and sustainable development in Africa, and perhaps, globally.

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[14] *The general conditions and institutions that set the range of opportunities for innovation*

[15] *Urama, K., O. Ogbu, W. Bijker, A. Alfonsi, N. Gomez ,N. Ozor, , (2010) The African Manifesto for Science, Technology and Innovation. Prepared by The African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS) under the auspices of the Science, Ethics and Technological Responsibilities in Developing and Emerging Countries (SETDEV) Project*

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