

Enabling Social Innovation in Namibia

Country Snapshot


Social innovation: "the processes and outcomes of developing novel approaches to address societal challenges facing people and planet." ¹⁵

This snapshot represents a descriptive, non-exhaustive overview of key highlights from Namibia's social innovation ecosystem. It was developed with the use of AI for the Government Council for Social Innovation by One Family Foundation, and was reviewed by a representative of the Namibian government.


 Direct focus on social innovation  Connected but indirect focus on social innovation  No focus on social innovation

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK


Official Definition of Social Innovation

 Social innovation is broadly defined in Namibia under the categories of "Civil Society" and "Not-for-Gain Private Sector Initiatives." Innovation policy frameworks, including the National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (2020–2030), mention social innovation as part of broader innovation efforts ¹. Additional policy instruments that formalise the space include the Social Contracting Policy by the Ministry of Health and Social Services and the Draft GRN–CSO Partnership and Engagement Framework Policy (August 2024). Namibia also has a National Volunteerism Policy, reflecting formal government recognition of civil society-led social innovation. ^{1 3}

Government Body for Social Innovation

 The National Planning Commission (NPC) serves as the host institution for the GRN–CSO Partnership and Engagement Framework and has a dedicated help desk and National Development Advisor for Civil Society. Namibia's governance structure, across its Government Offices, Ministries and Agencies (OMAs), provides layered support for social innovation. The Ministry of Health and Social Services supports the Social Contracting for Health Policy, which is itself a form of social innovation in service delivery. The Environmental Investment Fund (EIF) supports climate and community-based innovation. At the technical level, the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology and Innovation (MHETI) and the National Commission on Research, Science and Technology (NCRST) coordinate science, technology and innovation policy ². In 2020, the Public Sector Innovation Policy was introduced to promote innovation in service delivery across government. ³

Government Strategy for Social Innovation

 Namibia's Sixth National Development Plan (NDP6) 2025–2030 provides the current overarching framework for social innovation. NDP6 prioritises innovation, sustainability, inclusion, and digital transformation across four pillars: economic growth, human development, environmental sustainability, and governance. It promotes increased investment in research and innovation, climate-smart development, renewable energy expansion, improved water management, and stronger digital systems, all of which create an enabling environment for socially impactful solutions to national challenges such as youth unemployment, climate change, and service delivery gaps. The earlier Harambee Prosperity Plans (HPP I and II) have been phased out, with NDP6 now serving as the definitive planning framework. ^{2 3}

Policies, Laws & Regulations

Directly or closely linked:

- **Social Contracting for Health Services Policy** (approved by Cabinet 2023): A 10-year framework enabling the government to formally contract CSOs and NGOs to deliver essential health and social services, with performance-based financing and monitoring mechanisms. Defines social contracting as formal government–CSO agreements covering HIV/AIDS prevention, community outreach and other services aligned with Universal Health Coverage.³
- **Revised National Policy on Disability (2025–2035)**: Recently gazetted and launched; shifts from a welfare model to a rights-based, development-oriented approach promoting full inclusion, participation, and equality of persons with disabilities across all sectors. Supported by the National Disability Council Act, Affirmative Action (Employment) Act, and Namibia's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.⁴
- **National ICT Policy (2025–2030)**: Enables digital inclusion, e-government, broadband expansion, ICT skills development and innovation ecosystems — reducing barriers for tech-led social innovation.⁴

Broader enabling:

- **Income Tax Act**: Provides deductions and exemptions for certain public benefit organisations and charitable activities, indirectly supporting social enterprises and NGOs.⁴
- **Public Procurement Act**: Creates a policy mechanism that shifts government purchasing toward inclusion, local enterprise development, and climate resilience, embedding social innovation into public contracting.⁴
- **SME Development Policy and Informal Economy Policy**: Promote inclusive entrepreneurship and indirectly support social innovation.⁴

Official Statistics

Namibia currently lacks an official statistical framework or dedicated national indicators to measure the prevalence, outcomes, or impact of social innovation initiatives. The Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), mandated under the Statistics Act No. 9 of 2011, collects comprehensive socio-economic data but has no formal category for social innovation or social enterprise activity in its published datasets.

Other institutions provide partial or indirect data: the Business and Intellectual Property Authority (BIPA) registers companies, cooperatives and associations including some social enterprises; the Namibia Revenue Agency (NAMRA) tracks tax incentives that may indirectly indicate socially oriented enterprises; and the Development Bank of Namibia (DBN) maintains a portfolio that includes social innovation projects. The National Commission on Research, Science and Technology (NCRST) collects R&D data largely focused on science and technology, with minimal coverage of social innovation.⁵

GII 2025 Namibia enters the GII 2025 for the first time, ranked 91st/139, one of the GII's newest entrants from Sub-Saharan Africa.⁵

Government Programs

- **National Youth Credit Scheme (NYCS)**: Offers training and microloans of up to N\$100,000 for youth entrepreneurs.⁶
- **National Youth Development Fund / National Youth Fund (NYF/NYDF, launched 2025)**: N\$257 million (approximately US\$27 million) allocated to youth-led enterprises, with 15% for marginalised youth and 25% for women-led businesses. Implemented through the Development Bank of Namibia and Agribank, providing low-interest, collateral-free loans ranging from approximately US\$3,000–US\$55,000+.⁷
- **Environmental Investment Fund (EIF)**: Supports climate resilience and community-based innovation through environmental grants and climate finance.⁸
- **Start-Up Namibia (2019–2024)**: GIZ-supported incubator programme providing grants, mentorship and maker space access through the Slingshot Fund (microgrants of approximately €5,000) and the Basecamp co-working space.⁹
- **Global Cleantech Innovation Programme (2025)**: Combines EIF, UN agencies and private mentors to scale clean technology innovation — a flagship cross-sector programme.⁸

ECOSYSTEM

Stakeholders

Namibia's social innovation and civil society ecosystem is broad and represented by multiple actors across sectors:

- Umbrella and coordination bodies: NAMNET broadly represents NGOs; NACSO coordinates actors in the environmental sector. The National Planning Commission (NPC) hosts the GRN–CSO partnership framework. ²
- Community-based organisations (CBOs) and networks: Deliver community-driven services and locally led social innovations. ¹³
- Academic institutions: NUST (Namibia University of Science and Technology) and UNAM (University of Namibia) host innovation hubs, the NUST ImpactLab, and research initiatives supporting community-led innovation. ¹⁰
- Youth and leadership initiatives: African Pathfinder Leaders Initiative (APLI) and Omaheke O-Space foster youth leadership, social entrepreneurship and rural innovation. ¹⁰
- Information hubs: Civic+264 serves as a national resource and knowledge platform for social innovation and CSO activities. ¹⁰
- One Economy Foundation: Provides training and microfinance to underserved entrepreneurs through the One Nation Fund (N\$2.4 million disbursed to 46 underserved entrepreneurs) and the BeFree youth platform. ¹⁰

Support Initiatives

Support programmes are led by government, EU/international partners, and private sector/NGO actors:

- Government: UNDP Accelerator Lab supports grassroots innovation and prototyping for public services. National Youth Fund partners with state and private financial institutions, with AfDB and UN support. ⁷
- EU and international partners: Global Cleantech Innovation Programme (2025) combines EIF, UN agencies and private mentorship for clean technology and social innovation. European Union structured dialogue grants (NAD 42 million / ~USD 2.3 million) support CSOs for equitable growth initiatives. ⁸
- Private sector and NGO: UPSHIFT Namibia (UNICEF & B2Gold) incubates youth-led social innovation. Start-Up Namibia Basecamp provides co-working space, mentorship and seed grants. SEED programmes promote eco-inclusive entrepreneurship with international recognition. ^{9 11 12}

Collaboration

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are increasingly common:

- Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM): Demonstrates effective collaboration across communities, government and private actors in conservation and rural development — Namibia's most replicable social innovation model. ¹³
- National Youth Fund: Implemented in collaboration with state and private financial institutions, with support from AfDB and UN agencies. ⁷
- Global Cleantech Innovation Programme: Unites EIF, UN agencies and private mentors to scale innovation impact. ⁸
- GRN–CSO Partnership and Engagement Framework (draft): Aims to formalise structured collaboration between government and civil society — pending Cabinet approval. ²

Events & Awards

- Mega Hackathon (2025): Government-led national innovation challenge for youth-led technological solutions. ¹⁴
- NECCSO Bi-Annual Awards (inception stage): Announced by the Namibian Education Coalition for Civil Society Organisations to recognise exemplary CSOs; currently seeking funding and formal launch mechanisms. ¹⁴
- SEED Awards: International recognition for Namibian eco-social enterprises. ¹²
- Youth Enterprise Awards and NUST ImpactLab: University innovation labs and national awards highlighting initiatives with measurable social impact. ¹⁰

Financing Schemes

Namibia has a growing policy environment and range of financing options that support social innovation, though the ecosystem is still maturing compared with traditional enterprise financing.

1. Government and Parastatal Funds

- National Youth Development Fund (NYDF): ~US\$27 million / N\$500 million; accessible to social enterprises and impact-oriented ventures owned by young innovators tackling employment, inclusion and community services. Implemented through the Development Bank of Namibia and Agribank. ¹
- Development Bank of Namibia (DBN): Financing windows for social enterprises with strong business models, NGOs delivering sustainable community services, and job-creating, impact-driven SMEs — sometimes with concessions for high-impact ventures. ¹
- Environmental Investment Fund (EIF): Climate finance for community and environmental enterprises; a primary vehicle for green social innovation financing. ⁸
- Line-ministry grant programmes: Ministry of Sport, Youth & National Service (youth innovation hubs), Ministry of Environment (climate/social innovation), Ministry of Gender (ECD enterprises). ⁶

2. Public-Private Partnerships (PPP Act 2017)

- The Public-Private Partnership Act 2017 provides a formal legal framework for long-term partnerships between government and private/civil society actors, enabling collaboration on service delivery, infrastructure and community projects. Key features include risk-sharing, co-financing and the ability for CSOs and social enterprises to participate as service providers or equity partners. Relevant models include education and skills development hubs, health and community services co-management, and digital inclusion and ICT incubation spaces.

3. Corporate Social Investment (CSI) & CSR

While Namibia does not have a mandatory CSR tax incentive system like South Africa's Section 18A, corporate social investment from banking, mining, telecoms and insurance sectors supports education enrichment, youth skills/coding hubs, health outreach and environmental restoration. Donations for public benefit activities may qualify as deductible business expenses under corporate income tax rules. CSR is primarily incentivised through reputational value and investor ESG expectations rather than dedicated tax credits.

4. Social Contracting for Health Services (Cabinet-approved 2023)

The Namibia Social Contracting for Health Services Policy, approved by Cabinet in 2023, provides a 10-year framework for the government to contract CSOs to deliver essential health and social services, with performance-based financing. This represents a significant milestone in formalising CSO financing for social innovation in Namibia. ³

5. Development Partner and Donor Finance

- European Union: Structured dialogue grants (NAD 42 million / ~USD 2.3 million) to CSOs for equitable and inclusive growth. ⁸
- UNDP, UNICEF, UNV: Support youth volunteering, innovation challenges, incubators and NGO capacity building. ¹¹
- African Development Bank: Innovation financing and blended finance instruments supporting the NYF and climate innovation. ¹

6. Ecosystem Support Platforms

- Startup Namibia organisations/hubs: Mentorship, networking, seed funding access (~€5,000 Slingshot Fund). ²
- Business incubators (Basecamp, DBN Incubator): Workspace, coaching, investor linkages. ²
- Challenge prizes and hackathons: Non-equity seed awards including the 2025 Mega Hackathon. ¹⁴





Financing Inclusivity

- The NYF mandates inclusive allocations: 15% to marginalised youth and 25% to women-led businesses.⁷
- NGO-led microfinance programmes and SAIS grants target disadvantaged and rural communities.^{10 12}
- Start-Up Namibia reports gender-balanced participation and regional outreach.²
- The Social Contracting for Health Services Policy specifically targets underserved communities, directing CSO delivery to populations with limited access.³

SOCIETY



Public Awareness of Social Innovation

Public understanding of "social innovation" as a formal concept remains low. Most initiatives are described using terms like entrepreneurship, community development, or volunteerism. Awareness is growing through hackathons, youth campaigns (e.g., #BeFree), media coverage of social enterprises, and the EU-supported structured dialogue process with CSOs. The NECCSO platform and Civic+264 are emerging as information aggregators for the sector.^{10 14}



Research

- Limited academic work exists specifically on social innovation in Namibia.
- Research clusters around related areas: public sector reform, CBNRM/conservation economy, social economy, and community enterprise.¹³
- Practitioner-led evaluations from UNDP and UNICEF provide the most current practical insights.¹¹
- The NCRST collects R&D and innovation data but lacks dedicated social innovation indicators — a recognised data gap.⁵



Education & Human Capital

- No formal academic degrees exist for social innovation in Namibia.
- Informal training includes: ILO SIYB (Start and Improve Your Business), BeFree Campus, vocational entrepreneurship modules at NUST and UNAM, and NUST hackathons.¹⁰
- APLI (African Pathfinder Leaders Initiative) develops leadership and social entrepreneurship capacity, particularly in rural areas.¹⁰
- The National Policy on Volunteerism (2013–2014, ongoing) provides a framework for institutionalising volunteer contributions to national development.³



Entrepreneurship

Namibia is transitioning from necessity-driven entrepreneurship to opportunity-focused models. Youth entrepreneurship is increasing, with growing government and donor support.⁵

The National Youth Development Fund (NYDF, ~US\$27 million) provides low-interest, collateral-free loans to young entrepreneurs aged 18–35. Start-ups can access approximately US\$3,000–US\$11,000 and established youth businesses up to US\$55,000+. The fund targets sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, ICT, tourism and green industries.⁷

International partners supplement government funding through grants, training and incubation programmes, with donors channelling several million dollars in support of youth-led enterprises — particularly in green economy sectors such as biomass energy, agro-processing and digital innovation.⁸

Social & Environmental Consciousness

Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM): Namibia's CBNRM model exemplifies community-driven sustainability and is globally recognised. Today 86 communal conservancies cover more than 20% of Namibia's land area and involve nearly 190,000–200,000 rural residents. In 2022, conservancies generated approximately N\$140 million (≈US\$7.5 million) in cash income and in-kind benefits — largely from tourism, conservation hunting and natural product enterprises — supporting over 1,000 conservancy staff and hundreds of tourism workers. The programme contributed approximately N\$884 million (≈US\$47 million) to Namibia's national economy in 2018. ¹³

Despite these achievements, the CBNRM model faces structural challenges: heavy dependence on tourism and hunting revenues, variable governance and financial management capacity, and growing environmental pressures from climate change, drought, human-wildlife conflict and poaching risks. Experts emphasise the need to diversify rural income streams, strengthen governance, and expand nature-based tourism markets. ¹³



- National Policy on Volunteerism (adopted 2013–2014, ongoing): Promotes and recognises volunteer contributions toward national development, civic engagement and inclusive community service. ³
- GRN–CSO Partnership and Engagement Framework (draft 2024–2027): Under review at the National Planning Commission; aims to strengthen structured collaboration, communication and accountability between government and civil society. ²
- Commonwealth Youth Dialogue (2025): Brought young leaders into discussions on climate, employment, education, innovation and civic participation, reflecting government commitment to integrating youth voices into policy. ¹⁴
- EU CSO Support: The European Union launched a structured dialogue project strengthening youth and CSO engagement in policymaking, awarding NAD 42 million (≈USD 2.3 million) to local CSOs for equitable and inclusive growth. ⁸
- ESG and Corporate Sustainability: While no mandatory CSR law or ESG reporting regime exists, corporate sustainability practices are increasingly shaped by industry norms, investor expectations and the Environmental and Social Safeguards Community of Practice — which brings government, private sector and civil society together to embed ESG principles into project planning. ⁵