

Enabling Social Innovation in United Arab Emirates

Country Snapshot

Social innovation: "the processes and outcomes of developing novel approaches to address societal challenges facing people and planet." ¹

This snapshot represents a descriptive, non-exhaustive overview of key highlights from UAE's social innovation ecosystem.

✓ Direct focus on social innovation 🔗 Connected but indirect focus on social innovation ✗ No focus on social innovation

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Official Definition of Social Innovation 🔗

While the UAE does not yet have a formal legal definition of social innovation. In practice, government actors use a broad working understanding aligned with international definitions, without codification in policy ¹.

Government Body for Social Innovation ✓

Rather than a single federal body, responsibility is distributed across ministries and emirate-level entities, reflecting a collaborative, multi-level approach.

- **Ministry of Community Empowerment** (est. 2023) oversees the non-profit sector and explicitly references social innovation in its mandate ².
- **Authority of Social Contribution – Ma'an (Abu Dhabi)** (est. 2019) is the most explicit public actor supporting social innovation through funding and incubation ³.

Government Strategy for Social Innovation ✓

Although the UAE does not yet have a dedicated national social innovation strategy, social innovation is increasingly integrated into national frameworks such as:

- Social innovation is addressed indirectly through national frameworks such as **UAE Vision 2021** and **We the UAE 2031**, which promote innovation in social development sectors ⁴.
- Emirate-level strategies, particularly in Abu Dhabi, place stronger emphasis on innovative social solutions ⁵.

Policies, Laws & Regulations ✓ 🔗

Directly enabling frameworks

- **Social Enterprise Certification Policy (Abu Dhabi, 2022; updated 2025)**: Introduced official recognition and incentives for social enterprises, including visa facilitation and procurement advantages ⁶.

Broader enabling frameworks

- **CSR Framework (Cabinet Resolution No. 2 of 2018)**: Established a national CSR platform to channel voluntary corporate contributions ⁷.
- **Federal Law No. 13 of 2018 on Volunteering**: Created a unified legal framework for volunteer engagement nationwide ⁸.
- **Non-Profit and Public Benefit Organisation Regulations (2022)**: Simplified procedures for establishing and operating non-profits ⁹.

Official Statistics

While a national social innovation index is not yet in place,

- Abu Dhabi reports **1.7 million volunteer hours in 2024**, valued at approximately AED 123 million ².
- As of 2025, **156 social enterprises** are certified under Abu Dhabi's social enterprise policy ⁶.

Government Programs

- **Ma'an Social Incubator & Accelerator (since 2019)**: Provides incubation, mentorship and seed funding for social ventures ¹⁰.
- **ATMAH Social Impact Bond (launched 2020)**: The GCC's first SIB, focused on employment outcomes for People of Determination ¹¹.
- **Arab Hope Makers Initiative**: Annual prize-based program supporting grassroots social initiatives across the Arab region ¹².

ECOSYSTEM

Stakeholders

Key ecosystem actors include:

- **Emirates Foundation**: National foundation supporting volunteering, youth empowerment and social innovation ¹³.
- **Emirates Red Crescent**: Major humanitarian actor increasingly integrating digital and partnership-based approaches ¹⁴.
- **Social enterprises and startups** emerging from Ma'an, Sheraa (Sharjah) and university-linked hubs ³.

Support Initiatives

- **startAD (NYU Abu Dhabi)**: Accelerator supporting impact-oriented ventures in partnership with Ma'an ¹⁵.
- **Sheraa (Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center)**: Provides incubation and challenge-based programs, including social impact themes ¹⁶.
- **Impact Hub Dubai**: Part of a global network offering co-working and community support for social innovators ¹⁷.

Collaboration

- Public-private partnerships are common, particularly through Ma'an-led initiatives ³.
- National campaigns (e.g. **Year of Giving**, **COVID-19 relief coalitions**) demonstrate cross-sector collaboration at scale ⁴.

Events & Awards

- **Arab Hope Makers**: Flagship regional recognition platform ¹².
- **Third Sector Awards (Abu Dhabi)**: Introduced in 2024 to recognise innovation in non-profits and volunteering ¹⁸.
- **Zayed Sustainability Prize**: Global award supporting innovative solutions with social and environmental impact ¹⁹.

FINANCE

Financing Schemes

- **Public funding**: Primarily channelled through Ma'an in Abu Dhabi (~AED 6 million disbursed to date) ¹⁰.
- **Outcome-based finance**: Piloted through social impact bonds ¹¹.
- **Philanthropy & CSR**: Significant funding from foundations and corporate programs, supported by national CSR infrastructure ⁷.



Financing Inclusivity

- Strong support exists for **women entrepreneurs and People of Determination** [11 20](#).
- Access to public funding is more limited for non-citizens and initiatives outside Abu Dhabi [6](#).

SOCIETY



Public Awareness of Social Innovation

The term “social innovation” is gradually gaining visibility in public discourse, volunteerism, philanthropy and social entrepreneurship are culturally embedded and highly visible [21](#).



Research

- Academic research is emerging, led by institutions such as **NYU Abu Dhabi and Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government** [22](#).
- Practitioner research remains limited and data availability is a constraint.



Education & Human Capital

- Social innovation appears mainly through electives, competitions and informal programs.
- Youth bootcamps, university incubators and volunteering requirements support skill development [15 23](#).



Entrepreneurship



EIU Business Environment Ranking

UAE ranked among the top 20 globally [24](#)



Innovation Capacity

UAE ranked 32nd worldwide and 1st in the Arab region [25](#).

Global Innovation Index 2023



Social entrepreneurship prevalence

GEM data: indicate exceptionally strong entrepreneurial conditions, indirectly benefiting social ventures [26](#).



Social & Environmental Consciousness



Solidarity



Political participation



Volunteering

UAE ranks among the world's most generous countries (CAF World Giving Index) [21](#).



Sustainability

UAE ranks 53rd globally on the Environmental Performance Index, with strong recent momentum [27](#).