

Enabling Social Innovation in Democratic Republic of the Congo

Country Snapshot



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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 the DRC's social innovation ecosystem.

Note: This snapshot is developed within the context of the DRC's ongoing security challenges in the east, governance fragility and massive scale — the second largest country in Africa by area and the fourth most populous.

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

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Official Definition of Social Innovation



No formal legal definition of "social innovation" is established in Congolese primary law. Innovation is referenced through the National Development Strategy Plan (PNSD) 2022–2026 and a rapidly growing digital economy and startup ecosystem discourse in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. The DRC is notable for its patent activity growth rate (68% annually since 2004 — among Africa's highest) and a fast-expanding mobile money ecosystem, signalling genuine grassroots innovation culture below the governance surface. ^{2 3}

Government Body for Social Innovation



Social innovation is not assigned to a single agency; multiple institutions address it through broader mandates:

- Ministry of Digital Economy and New Technologies (MENTEN): Leads digital transformation, ICT policy and the digital economy ecosystem; oversees Startups Act implementation. ²
- Ministry of Entrepreneurship and SMEs: Supports MSME formalisation, enterprise development and social enterprise growth. ²
- National Agency for Investment Promotion (ANAPI): Promotes FDI and private sector development, including innovative enterprise. ²
- Ministry of Social Affairs: Oversees social protection, community development and welfare programmes. ³
- UNDP DRC Accelerator Lab: Supports community-driven innovation, foresight, solution portfolio development and SDG experimentation — the primary social innovation enabler at the ecosystem level. ³

Government Strategy for Social Innovation



- National Development Strategy Plan (PNSD) 2022–2026: The DRC's primary development framework; targets economic diversification, infrastructure, human capital and governance; innovation is a cross-cutting enabler. ²
- Congo Digital 2025 Strategy: National digital transformation strategy targeting e-government, digital skills, digital economy and ICT infrastructure across the DRC's vast territory. ²
- Startups Act (DRC): The DRC enacted a Startups Act creating a legal framework for startups and innovative enterprises; enables social enterprise registration and provides tax incentives for innovation-driven businesses. ²

Policies, Laws & Regulations



Directly or closely linked:

- DRC Startups Act: Establishes legal recognition and financial incentives for startups and social innovators; a landmark enabling policy for the formal innovation ecosystem. ²
- Revised Investment Code: Governs business registration and FDI; includes incentives for innovation-intensive sectors. ²

Broader enabling:

- EU / GCCA DRC Climate Programme: EU-supported training and community-based reforestation programme driving environmental and social innovation in the Congo Basin. ⁷
- National Social Protection Policy: Governs social assistance and community welfare; increasingly critical in conflict-affected eastern DRC. ³

Official Statistics



The DRC is not included in the GII 2024 due to insufficient data coverage. Key available development indicators include:

~73% of the DRC's population lives below the international poverty line — the world's largest absolute population in extreme poverty in a single country, creating massive demand for social innovation. ⁴

~100 million population (2024) — the fourth most populous country in Africa and the most populous Francophone country in the world; the scale of social innovation need and opportunity is unmatched. ⁴

68% annual patent activity growth rate since 2004 — among Africa's highest, signalling rapidly expanding domestic innovation capacity. ⁵

Mobile money scale The DRC has one of Africa's fastest-growing mobile money ecosystems; Vodacom M-Pesa, Airtel Money and Orange Money are transforming financial inclusion for millions of unbanked citizens. ⁴

Government Programs



- Social Protection and Safety Net Programmes: World Bank-supported cash transfers and community-based safety nets targeting the most vulnerable — a social innovation in state service delivery at massive scale. ⁴
- Congo Digital / E-Government Programmes: Digital literacy, e-government services and ICT infrastructure rollout across the DRC's vast territory. ²
- EU GCCA+ Climate and Reforestation Programme: Community-based environmental innovation through training and large-scale reforestation in the Congo Basin. ⁷
- UNDP Peace and Governance Programming: Conflict-sensitive social protection, community reconciliation and livelihood innovation in conflict-affected areas of eastern DRC. ³
- Startups Act Implementation: Enabling legal and fiscal framework supporting the growing Kinshasa and Lubumbashi startup ecosystems. ²

ECOSYSTEM

Stakeholders



- UNDP DRC Accelerator Lab: SDG programming, peace-sensitive social protection, governance reform, solution mapping and enterprise support — the primary social innovation ecosystem enabler. ³
- Kinshasa Digital Innovation Community (KLab and related hubs): Growing ecosystem of tech startups, co-working spaces and social entrepreneurs in the capital. ²
- Lubumbashi Innovation Community: Tech entrepreneurship and social enterprise ecosystem in the DRC's second economic hub; strong mining-to-tech diversification dynamic. ²
- University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) and University of Lubumbashi (UNILU): Lead applied research and human capital development; key drivers of the DRC's patent growth. ⁵
- International NGOs (Mercy Corps, IRC, World Vision, MSF, Oxfam): Deliver large-scale humanitarian social innovation in health, food security, education and protection across conflict zones. ³



Support Initiatives

Support modalities include Startups Act-enabled incubation, UNDP governance and enterprise programming, World Bank social protection, EU GCCA+ environmental innovation, and international NGO humanitarian programming at scale. The mobile money ecosystem — particularly Vodacom M-Pesa — is the DRC's most transformative social innovation, enabling financial inclusion for millions of previously unbanked citizens across an enormous and under-served geography. ^{2 7}



Collaboration

Collaboration is structured through the UN Cooperation Framework, World Bank country programme and bilateral donor frameworks. The Startups Act implementation involves government-private sector collaboration in Kinshasa. In conflict-affected areas, humanitarian cluster coordination systems provide the primary social innovation collaboration framework. UNDP AccLab convenes cross-sector innovators, government and civil society through regular solution mapping activities. ^{3 4}

FINANCE



Financing Schemes

- Government: PNSD sectoral allocations, Congo Digital programmes, Startups Act tax incentives. ²
- World Bank: Social protection, agricultural productivity, digital economy and infrastructure investment. ⁴
- AfDB: Infrastructure, economic diversification and enterprise development financing. ⁶
- EU: GCCA+ climate programme, governance and digital transformation support. ⁷
- Mobile money private investment: Vodacom, Airtel and Orange driving financial inclusion innovation — the most impactful social innovation finance vehicle at scale. ⁴
- International humanitarian finance: OCHA-coordinated humanitarian funding for conflict-affected social protection and community innovation. ³



Inclusiveness of Financing

Mobile money has delivered financial inclusion to large numbers of previously unbanked Congolese. World Bank safety nets target the most vulnerable. The Startups Act creates new formal financing pathways for social innovators. However, significant scale and geographic access barriers remain across the DRC's vast territory — reaching innovators beyond Kinshasa and Lubumbashi remains a major financing inclusivity challenge. ^{4 5}

SOCIETY



Public Awareness of Social Innovation

Awareness of social innovation is growing, particularly in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi where startup ecosystems, mobile money and digital innovation are prominent. The Startups Act has elevated "startup" and "innovation" as key terms in public discourse. In rural and conflict-affected areas, community-level innovation is embedded in survival strategies, informal trade and humanitarian response systems. ^{2 3}



Research

The DRC's 68% annual patent growth rate — among Africa's highest — is driven by UNIKIN, UNILU and partner institutions. Research strengths include mining technology, tropical medicine, agriculture and digital technology. UNDP and World Bank assessments provide the primary social innovation evidence base. The Startups Act and growing digital ecosystem are beginning to attract diaspora researchers and innovators. ^{5 1}



Education

The DRC has one of Africa's largest absolute youth populations (60%+ under 25). Education access has improved but quality and completion remain significant challenges, particularly in conflict-affected areas. Digital skills development is a national priority under Congo Digital 2025. The Startups Act is creating pathways for educated urban youth to innovate formally and access enterprise support.^{2 4}



Entrepreneurship



Business Environment

The DRC's startup ecosystem is growing rapidly in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, anchored by the Startups Act, mobile money ecosystem and expanding digital infrastructure.



Innovation Capacity

Patent activity growth (68% annually) signals genuine innovation capacity.



Social entrepreneurship

Scale remains the primary challenge — the DRC's vast geography and infrastructure gaps limit ecosystem reach beyond major cities. International diaspora capital and skills represent a significant untapped entrepreneurship resource.



Social & Environmental Consciousness



Solidarity

Community solidarity and mutual aid (including faith-based giving through the DRC's large Catholic, Protestant and Kimbanguist communities) are deeply embedded in Congolese culture



Political participation



Volunteering

CAFWorld Giving Index 2024: DRC-specific data not separately reported in the 2024 index.



Sustainability

Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2024: DRC-specific EPI ranking not publicly available at time of publication. The Congo Basin — the world's second largest tropical forest — is the DRC's most significant global environmental asset and a growing platform for conservation economy social innovation.