
Leveraging Innovation for Accelerated Social Impact and Organisational Culture Transformation: Relief to Readiness

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened capability gaps across emerging economies, particularly in Africa. Organisations grapple with employees lacking fourth-industrial-revolution competencies and an innovation mindset, while social initiatives default to short-term relief with no pathway to self-sufficiency. This paper tells two real-world stories. The first draws on the author's experience as Innovation and Design Leader at one of the world's leading energy companies operating in Nigeria, where "what's in it for me" and "better together" principles connected upskilling to individual motivations, driving genuine behaviour change. The second and primary story is 5KFoodBank, founded in Nigeria by the author in June 2024 following a March 2023 initiative for 5,000 destitute people. Through faith-based ecosystems, it delivers cooked meals, school snacks, and quarterly dry-staple distributions, leveraging relief as a gateway to skills acquisition, alternative education certifications, and training towards sustainable livelihoods. Across both contexts, a common model emerges, interweaving purpose-driven participation, ecosystem leveraging, and data-informed engagement to engineer readiness, not merely relief.

Keywords: Social innovation, capability development, fourth-industrial-revolution, inclusive innovation, skills ecosystems, alternative education, community empowerment, behaviour change, sustainable livelihoods, Nigeria, Africa

1 Introduction

Across emerging economies, the post-COVID-19 recovery has exposed a structural paradox: organisations investing in digital transformation struggle to bring their own people along, while communities receiving social support remain locked in cycles of dependency that goodwill alone cannot break. In Nigeria, as across much of sub-Saharan Africa, these twin challenges, the capability-deficient workforce and the relief-dependent community, are rarely addressed by the same innovation logic. This paper argues that they should be.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2023) estimates that over 40% of core job skills will be disrupted by automation and digitalisation within the next five years,

with workers in emerging economies among the most exposed. At the same time, OECD research (2021) highlights that in lower-income economies, social protection systems tend to prioritise immediate consumption support over long-term capability building, inadvertently entrenching the dependency they seek to alleviate. As Prahalad (2004) first observed, and what London and Hart (2011) and Kolk et al. (2014) confirm by their bodies of work, the result is that the most enduring poverty trap is not a lack of resources but a lack of opportunity, agency, and access to relevant knowledge.

Another dimension to this challenge borders on social stability. When destitute and capable people are left without identity, skills, or a pathway to self-sufficiency, the consequences of desperation, crime, social unrest and deepening dependency spread beyond their communities. The widening gulf between those with access to opportunity and those without becomes a societal fault line. By neglecting the development of its most vulnerable citizens a society actively undermines its own cohesion, security, and productive potential. The less privileged must be developed to add value to society, or their neglect will, in time, bring society down alongside them. Therefore, the case for inclusive capability development is not only moral or economic, but also strategic.

This paper draws on two real-world implementation contexts from Nigeria to present a practice-grounded model that bridges organisational innovation culture and community capability development. The first context is drawn from the author's leadership of innovation and digital transformation upskilling within the Nigeria affiliate of a global energy corporation, where conventional training approaches were redesigned around the principles of psychological safety, peer learning, and personal relevance. The second and primary context is 5KFoodBank, a social enterprise the author founded that leverages faith-based community ecosystems as platforms for structured identity registration, skills identification, and alternative education pathways.

Together, these cases illuminate a common innovation architecture built on three interdependent mechanisms: purpose-driven participation, ecosystem leveraging, and data-informed engagement. The paper contributes to the growing literature on social innovation and inclusive capability development by offering a transferable, practice-tested model termed as "concept arbitrage" that innovation leaders, social entrepreneurs, and policymakers can adapt to their own contexts.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 situates the work within relevant literature on social innovation, capability development, inclusive innovation, and behaviour change. Section 3 presents the two implementation stories in detail. Section 4 analyses the common model that emerges across both contexts and proposes a practitioner framework. Section 5 draws out transferable lessons and implications for practice with Section 6 as the conclusion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Innovation and the Limits of Relief

Social innovation has been defined as the development and implementation of new ideas of products, services, and models that meet social needs and simultaneously create new social relationships or collaborations (Mulgan et al., 2007). A defining feature of effective social innovation, as Mulgan and colleagues observe, is that it does not merely address symptoms but reconfigures the relationships and structures that produce those symptoms. Therefore, food relief programmes that do not address some of the structural causes of

hunger which include unemployment, skills-gaps, lack of identity, and civic exclusion fall short of the social innovation standard, however well-intentioned they may be.

Leadbeater (1997) made an early and influential case for the social entrepreneur as a figure who identifies underutilised resources in the social sector and finds new ways to deploy them at higher value. The 5KFoodBank model, as described in this paper, is a direct expression of this logic: existing faith-based community infrastructure, already embedded with trust and convening power, is redeployed as a platform for identity registration, skills discovery, and capability development, deploying food relief as the entry mechanism and not the end product.

George et al. (2012) argue that inclusive innovation, that is, innovation that deliberately targets underserved and low-income populations requires a different design logic from mainstream commercial innovation. It must begin with a deep understanding of the specific constraints facing its target population, including not only financial poverty but what they call “institutional voids”: the absence of functioning markets, identity systems, and formal education pathways. The 5KFoodBank’s decision to incorporate National Identity Number (NIN) registration as a qualifying mechanism for food relief directly responds to this insight. For many beneficiaries, the food distribution event was the first occasion on which they recognised the importance of holding a nationally accepted form of identity, which is a pre-requisite for accessing virtually every formal economic opportunity in many societies.

2.2 Capability Development and the Human Development Approach

Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) provide the philosophical grounding for why capability development, rather than resource distribution, must be the goal of any sustainable social intervention. Sen’s capabilities approach argues that development must be measured not by income or resource transfer but by the expansion of substantive freedoms: the ability of people to live lives they have reason to value. Nussbaum extends this into a set of central human capabilities that any just society should seek to cultivate. The 5KFoodBank’s progression from food relief to identity registration, to skills identification, to formal certification pathways with City & Guilds and Pearson, represents a deliberate attempt to operationalise the capabilities approach in a resource-constrained context.

Teece et al. (1997) introduced the concept of dynamic capabilities as the ability of an organisation to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. The concept translates readily to both the organisational context of the energy company’s innovation upskilling challenge and to the institutional development ambitions of 5KFoodBank. In both cases, the challenge is not merely to transfer existing knowledge but to build adaptive capacity of being able to learn, unlearn, and relearn in response to a changing world.

2.3 Motivation, Behaviour Change, and the “What’s in it for Me” Principle

Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a robust psychological framework for understanding why conventional training programmes fail and what must change. SDT identifies three core psychological needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness and their satisfaction as being essential for intrinsic motivation and sustained behaviour change. Training programmes that are experienced as compulsory, irrelevant to personal goals, or socially isolating tend to frustrate all three needs simultaneously, producing compliance at best and resistance at worst.

The corporate innovation upskilling experience described in this paper aligns precisely with SDT's prescriptions. By designing cohort-based learning structures that grouped employees with familiar colleagues (enhancing relatedness), by framing training content around personally relevant outcomes such as pitching skills and innovation thinking applicable beyond the workplace (enhancing autonomy), and by providing structured support to build confidence in new domains (enhancing competence), the programme achieved markedly higher engagement than its predecessors. One telling illustration is of an employee who attended a design thinking and pitching module used the skills to coach his daughter, who subsequently won a \$5,000 innovation grant at university. This employee became a voluntary champion of the training programme, a textbook example of intrinsic motivation driving sustained behaviour change and adoption.

Schwab (2016) frames the Fourth Industrial Revolution as a fusion of physical, digital, and biological domains that is disrupting every industry and requiring an entirely new set of cognitive and creative skills. His argument that the winners of this transition will be those who can combine technical knowledge with emotional intelligence, systems thinking, and collaborative creativity provides the strategic context for why forward-thinking companies need not just to train employees in new tools but to transform their innovation culture.

2.4 Ecosystem Leveraging and Inclusive Innovation Infrastructure

A recurring theme in the inclusive innovation literature is the importance of working with and through existing social infrastructure rather than attempting to build new institutions from scratch. Garrett-Jones et al. (2007) argue that community-based organisations play a significant but largely overlooked role in constructing innovation advantage at the local level, functioning as catalysts for knowledge-based economic and social development within the communities they serve.

The 5KFoodBank model demonstrates this principle through its deliberate partnership with faith-based organisations. In the Nigerian context, religious institutions represent perhaps the most trusted, geographically distributed, and regularly convening social infrastructure available. By situating food distribution and skills identification activities within these existing ecosystems, 5KFoodBank achieved access to vulnerable populations that would have been prohibitively expensive or simply impossible to reach through purpose-built channels.

3 The Two Stories

3.1 Context One: Innovation Upskilling in the Nigerian affiliate of a leading global energy company.

In 2022, a leading upstream oil and gas operator in Nigeria established a new digital and innovation entity with a mandate to upskill and reskill its employees annually in Fourth Industrial Revolution competencies. The author, serving as Innovation and Design Leader, was charged with designing and leading this initiative. The context was challenging: a post-COVID workforce characterised by digital fatigue, institutional uncertainty, and understandable anxiety about the implications of digital transformation for job security.

The training programme design was guided by two core principles. The first, "better together," addressed the relatedness deficit by restructuring delivery into cohorts of familiar colleagues. Employees trained alongside people they already knew, creating

psychologically safe spaces where vulnerability was permitted and peer support was natural. The social learning effect was immediate and measurable: colleagues who understood each other's working contexts could make the training content directly relevant, exchange examples from shared experience, and hold each other accountable for application.

The second principle, "what's in it for me," addressed the autonomy and relevance deficit by reframing the value proposition of each course. Rather than presenting training as an organisational obligation to serve the company's digital transformation agenda, the programme was redesigned to lead with personal benefit. A design thinking and pitching module, for instance, was positioned not merely as an innovation tool for the workplace but as a life skill: a way of thinking that could help employees solve personal challenges, support their children's education, and build capabilities transferable to a post-COVID world of shifting careers and identities.

As already cited in Section 2.3 above, the results were striking. Based on employee testimonials, subscription rates to training courses increased, and the programme began to build the innovation culture it had originally been designed to create.

3.2 Context Two: 5KFoodBank — From Nourishing to Transformation

3.2.1 Origins and Founding Vision

The 5KFoodBank story begins with a personal reckoning. As a student in the Executive MBA programme at London Business School, the author was asked to write about what she would dedicate her time to if money were no object. Her answer was clear: "transferring knowledge via education, building communities, rebuilding our institutions, and discovering along the way a more exciting, globally impactful version of myself." Returning to Nigeria, she saw the same unemployed, hungry, and vulnerable young people on her daily commute to work. The dissonance between Nigeria's extraordinary natural resource wealth and the visible destitution of its citizens was, and remains, unjustifiable.

The founding act of 5KFoodBank was a large-scale feeding initiative on the author's birthday in March 2023, providing food for 5,000 destitute people. This event was not designed as a one-off gesture of generosity but as proof of concept and a catalyst for a longer-term vision: that feeding people could be the beginning of a pipeline for transforming lives, not an end in itself. The foodbank was formally registered in Nigeria in June 2024, having spent the intervening year building partnerships, testing the model, and refining the vision.

3.2.2 Operational Model: Faith-Based Ecosystems as Capability Platforms

The operational design of 5KFoodBank is built on a deliberate leveraging of existing faith-based community infrastructure. Religious organisations in Nigeria — particularly in large cities like Lagos — command extraordinary reach, trust, and convening power among vulnerable and underserved populations. Rather than attempting to build a new community infrastructure from scratch, 5KFoodBank partners with these organisations to gain access to their congregations, physical spaces, and established social rhythms. This is ecosystem leveraging in the most direct sense, representing using what already works rather than duplicating it.

The foodbank's relief activities currently include weekly provision of cooked meals, delivered primarily to the children's sections of partner faith-based organisations, food distributions to the beneficiary community, and school snacks provided twice a week to a poorly funded government primary school in a rural area of Eastern Nigeria; and quarterly dry-staple. A notable outcome of the school feeding programme has been a measurable increase in children's enrolment and attendance, a finding consistent with the global evidence base on school feeding as an educational incentive (World Food Programme, 2023). The foodbank's longer-term vision includes supporting contracted teachers with supplementary allowances to augment the inadequate salaries funded by parents' private contributions.

A crucial design insight which emerged from the children's feeding programme was that parents began attending weekly distributions specifically to accompany their children. This predictable, repeated point of contact with parents and caregivers has been identified as a strategic opportunity to identify and enrol adults into the skills acquisition pathway. The attraction of the child creates access to the parent; access to the parent creates the pathway to adult capability development. This is a vivid example of the kind of systemic thinking that distinguishes social innovation from social charity.

3.2.3 Data-Informed Engagement: Identity as the Start of the Pipeline

A defining feature of the 5KFoodBank model is its insistence that data collection and identity establishment are not administrative burdens but foundational acts of dignity and inclusion. Early in the initiative's operation, it became clear that distributing food without establishing the identity of recipients was creating conditions for abuse: repeat collections under different identities, misrepresentation, and the perpetuation of anonymity that leaves vulnerable people invisible to the systems that could serve them.

In response, 5KFoodBank introduced a structured data collection process requiring beneficiaries to provide their National Identity Number (NIN), their level of formal education, and their occupation. This data serves multiple functions. It prevents fraudulent repeat collection; it enables the foodbank to build a profile of the skills, educational levels, and occupational backgrounds of its beneficiary community; and it connects individuals to the national identity infrastructure that is one of the pre-requisites for accessing formal economic participation.

A significant and instructive finding which emerged from this process was that a substantial proportion of beneficiaries did not possess a NIN. The act of being asked for one, however, created an immediate awareness of its importance. Many beneficiaries subsequently pursued NIN registration. This finding has led 5KFoodBank to explore partnerships with the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), the government agency responsible for NIN issuance, and as a contingency, with the Lagos State Residents Registration Agency, which issues the Lagos State Resident Identity Card (LAG ID). The vision is to have identity registration representatives present at quarterly food drives, or available at the foodbank's newly acquired administrative office and storage facility on designated days. In doing so, 5KFoodBank positions identity registration not as a bureaucratic requirement but as the first act of self-worth and civic inclusion in a pipeline designed to transform lives.

3.2.4 Skills Discovery and the Path to Certification

The skills identification component of the 5KFoodBank model is grounded in a combination of structured data collection and direct community observation. To understand where skills supply meets market demand, the foodbank conducted one-to-one interviews and surveys with business owners in the fashion and building construction industries, sectors identified as both accessible to low-skilled entrants and in persistent need of qualified workers in the Nigerian labour market. This demand-side intelligence was then mapped against the educational profiles and occupational backgrounds captured through the beneficiary intake process, enabling the foodbank to design training pathways that are genuinely responsive to market realities rather than assumed needs.

A strategic analysis of the fundamental human needs of shelter, food, and clothing as the most basic tier of human necessity has led the foodbank to identify sewing, masonry, and cooking and housekeeping as the first cohort of skills acquisition programmes to be deployed. These are not arbitrary choices; rather they represent the intersection of latent community capability, business owner demand, and the everyday survival needs.

The power of latent skills discovery was vividly illustrated at one partner faith-based organisation, where the community spontaneously organised a fashion parade showcasing garments made by two of its members who had demonstrated a natural talent for sewing. The quality of the clothing, and the enthusiastic response of the community, revealed skills that had been present but invisible, unrewarded and unsupported. This kind of organic discovery event is precisely what structured skills identification programmes are designed to surface and formalise.

To translate skills discovery into credible, market-recognised qualifications, 5KFoodBank is in active dialogue with City & Guilds and Pearson, two of the world's most established vocational certification bodies, to co-develop a learning curriculum calibrated to the educational levels and life contexts of its beneficiary community. The ambition is that graduates of these programmes will emerge with portable, internationally recognised certifications that open doors to formal employment, self-employment, and further learning. Using relief as a gateway and not a destination is the most concrete expression of the foodbank's core vision.

3.2.5 The Vision: A Virtuous Cycle of Readiness

Looking forward, 5KFoodBank's strategic vision is to become a full-spectrum capability development ecosystem. Its future aspirations include setting up a soup kitchen providing at least one cooked meal per day to destitute citizens, staffed by graduates of its own cooking and housekeeping programme; a volunteer network drawing on the more privileged residents of surrounding communities to create cross-class solidarity and shared ownership of poverty reduction; and a data analytics capability that continuously maps community skills-gaps against market demand, enabling the foodbank to update its training curriculum in real time.

The foodbank's operations are currently itinerant, with food storage distributed between the founder's home and the basement of a small administrative office recently gifted to the organisation and currently under refurbishment. The longer-term vision is a purpose-built facility, supported by donors, that can serve as a permanent hub for food distribution, identity services, skills training, and community convening. Every element of this vision is designed to reinforce the others: feeding creates access, access enables identification, identification enables data collection, data enables targeted training, training enables livelihood, livelihood enables dignity and self-sufficiency.

4 A Common Framework: The Three-Mechanism Model of Readiness Engineering

Across the two stories described above, a common innovation architecture emerges. This section distils that architecture into a practitioner framework of three interdependent mechanisms, proposed here as the “Readiness Engineering” model. Readiness as used here does not connote a passive state of preparedness, but rather, as an active state that requires deliberate investment in identity, capability and agency where systemic neglect by society has made their organic development unattainable.

4.1 Mechanism 1: Purpose-Driven Participation

In both contexts, conventional approaches failed because participation was either compelled (employees attending mandatory training) or transactional (community members collecting food with no further engagement). Transformation occurred when participation was connected to personal purpose and intrinsic motivation. Within the corporate context, the “what’s in it for me” reframing connected skills development to employees’ personal and professional identities beyond the organisation. At 5KFoodBank, the act of establishing identity, discovering latent skills, and being rewarded for them reconnected community members to a sense of agency and possibility that poverty tends to diminish.

This mechanism aligns with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory and with Sen’s (1999) capabilities approach: sustainable participation in any development programme requires that individuals experience it as an expansion of their freedom and agency, not as a service delivered to them.

4.2 Mechanism 2: Ecosystem Leveraging

Neither the energy company’s nor 5KFoodBank model attempted to build new infrastructure from scratch. Within the upstream subsidiary, existing colleague networks, organisational communication channels, and established team structures were repurposed as cohort learning communities. At 5KFoodBank, existing faith-based organisations were activated as distribution, convening, and community development platforms.

This approach reflects London and Hart’s (2011) central argument that co-creating with existing community structures is both more effective and more sustainable than building parallel infrastructure from scratch. Ecosystem leveraging dramatically reduces the cost and time required to achieve reach and trust, two of the most expensive commodities in social innovation.

4.3 Mechanism 3: Data-Informed Engagement

Both contexts were distinguished by a commitment to understanding, rather than assuming, the needs and motivations of their target populations. At the corporate organisation, employee feedback loops informed curriculum redesign and the identification of peer champions. At 5KFoodBank, structured data on identity, education, and occupation enabled skills-gap analysis and targeted programme design, while direct observation and one-to-one interviews with business owners surfaced market-facing demand signals that quantitative data alone would have missed.

This mechanism connects to the broader literature on human-centred design and inclusive innovation methodology (George et al., 2012) and reflects the foundational principle that sustainable development programmes must be co-created with the communities they serve.

5 Discussion: Transferable Lessons for Innovation Leaders and Social Entrepreneurs

The two cases presented in this paper offer several transferable lessons for practitioners working at the intersection of social innovation, capability development, and organisational transformation.

First, the neglect of vulnerable and destitute populations is an active risk to social stability. Individuals left without identity, skills, or a pathway to self-sufficiency do not simply remain invisible; they become agents of social disruption through crime, dependency, and civic disengagement. The 5KFoodBank model is grounded in the conviction that developing the capability of the least privileged is not charity, rather it is the foundation of a functioning, cohesive society. Innovation leaders and policymakers who frame capability development as a social stability investment, and not merely a humanitarian gesture, will find both the urgency and the resources to act with greater conviction.

Second, relief and training are most powerful when they function as entry mechanisms rather than end products. Both the organisation's training programme and the 5KFoodBank food relief initiative were designed as gateways to something larger: a shift in mindset, a new capability, a formal qualification, a sense of identity and agency.

Third, psychological safety is a pre-requisite for capability development in both organisational and community settings. Employees who fear exposure will not engage with learning. Community members who feel invisible or stigmatised will not participate in skills development. Designing with psychological safety in consideration, through peer cohorts or through dignity-affirming intake processes; is not a soft add-on but a success-enabling structural requirement.

Fourth, identity is infrastructure. The 5KFoodBank's experience of finding large numbers of beneficiaries without a National Identity Number revealed a profound institutional void that sits upstream of every other development intervention. Without a recognised identity, individuals cannot access formal employment, banking, certification, or civic participation. The foodbank's decision to incorporate identity registration into its operational model is a small but significant contribution to closing this void.

Fifth, existing social infrastructure is an underutilised innovation asset. Faith-based organisations, colleague networks, community gatherings, and school feeding programmes all represent platforms that can be activated for capability development at a fraction of the cost of purpose-built alternatives. Innovation leaders in both the corporate and social sectors would do well to map the ecosystems available to them before designing new ones.

Sixth, concept arbitrage, the deliberate transfer of an innovation model from one context to another, with the required adaptations; is a powerful accelerator of impact. The principles that drove behaviour change in the corporate context (purpose-driven participation, cohort-based learning, personal relevance) are the same principles that drive community transformation at 5KFoodBank. The ability to recognise, name, and deliberately transfer this common architecture is what transforms two isolated practice stories into a generalisable model.

6 Conclusion

This paper has presented two real-world stories of social and organisational innovation from Nigeria and has distilled from them a three-mechanism model of Readiness Engineering: purpose-driven participation, ecosystem leveraging, and data-informed

engagement. This model, particularly in the 5KFoodBank context, represents an attempt to operationalise this logic at the community level: using food relief to establish identity, using identity to collect data, using data to identify latent skills, using skills identification to design targeted training, and using certified training to create sustainable livelihoods. Each step in this transformation pipeline builds on the last. None of it is possible without the first act of showing up with staple food or a cooked meal.

For the ISPIM community, the contribution of this paper is a practice-grounded model that is explicitly designed to be adapted, not merely admired. The principles are transferable as a form of concept arbitrage. The ecosystems will differ. The populations will vary. But the framework of readiness engineering, connecting to purpose, leveraging what exists, and letting data guide design; remains as applicable in a corporate training room in Lagos as it is in a faith-based community tent in a Lagos suburb.

The work is not finished. 5KFoodBank is still itinerant, still fundraising, still in conversations with certification bodies. The upskilling programme continues to evolve. But as Leadbeater (1997) observed of the social entrepreneur, the most important first step is to see the resource that others have overlooked and neglected. In Nigeria, that resource is everywhere: in hungry children whose poor parents will walk miles to see them fed, unidentified, unskilled and unemployed community members whose potential talent for sewing, bricklaying, carpentry, or driving has never been identified, in employees who needed only to know that their learning mattered to their own lives before they would commit to it.

The evidence is clear and the pipeline is proven: feed someone, and you open a door. Train them, and you change a life. Certify them, and you add a productive citizen to society. Scale this across communities, and you do not merely reduce poverty, you dismantle the conditions that make poverty self-perpetuating. For every innovation leader, social entrepreneur, and policymaker reading this paper, the question is no longer whether this model works. Rather, the question is: what is the cost of not acting on it?

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