



**Big Reach Isn't Always Big Impact:
Four Ways to Build Social Innovations That Actually Change Lives**

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For decades, social innovators have chased the holy grail: technology that can solve poverty, healthcare, and education at massive scale. The promise is seductive—build an app, reach millions, change the world. It's a vision that has drawn in countless innovators and investors—and for good reason. Digital platforms are “asset-light,” avoiding the overhead of physical infrastructure, employing fewer people, and scaling cheaply. For resource-constrained ventures trying to reach low-income populations, these models seem like the most viable path. A mobile app costs little to distribute. An AI chatbot doesn't need a salary. And the more intangible the product, say, a digital financial tool or a self-paced course, the easier it is to deliver at scale, instantly, and without boots on the ground. But while asset-light solutions are efficient, they're not always sufficient, especially when it comes to solving deeply rooted social challenges. Many of the solutions that truly improve lives still require physical infrastructure, local relationships, and skilled workers. You can't vaccinate a child through an app. Neither can you provide a village in Northern Nigeria clean water using a digital platform alone. These are “asset-heavy” realities that require what we call the heavy lifting of global development.

So, what's the right path?

Our study of 30 digital social ventures shows that there's no one-size-fits-all answer. But we've identified four models that social innovators are using to balance digital reach with grounded impact. Each reflects a distinct blend of tech, people, and purpose.

Digital Drivers

In this model, digital platforms don't just deliver services—they enable users to actively contribute and shape the experience. Whether through peer support, shared content, or user feedback, value is co-produced by the community. This fosters a sense of cocreation, ownership and mutual trust.

***Example:** Together for Her supports expectant mothers with guidance and an online peer community throughout pregnancy. Expectant mothers are able generate content that helps others navigate similar challenges, share personal experiences, engage in discussions and help shape the platform's offeringsⁱ*

This model works well for challenges where the product can be largely digital—like mental health advice/support. But where physical goods or in-person delivery are essential, it may struggle to move from engagement to tangible outcomes.

Digital Architects

Here, technology is the main interface. Self-service platforms deliver consistent, automated services with minimal human involvement—making them ideal for high-volume delivery.

Example: uLesson, an edtech venture in Nigeria, provides curriculum-aligned lessons through data-light videos and adaptive quizzes—reaching millions of students efficiently. Learners follow adaptive pathways based on their performance data, progressing through content without needing direct contact with facilitators. The platform is designed to function independently, providing consistent learning outcomes at scale, regardless of local context or individual engagement.ⁱⁱ

This model scales fast, but often miss opportunities for deeper user engagement or local adaptation. The solution is designed for communities, not with them—limiting a sense of ownership or co-creation by users.

Digital Integrators

Digital Integrators combine online platforms with physical infrastructure and deep community involvement. While digital tools may streamline operations, delivery depends on local actors, trust, and in-person presence.

Example: Ecobarter, waste-to-recycling platform, coordinates household waste pickup via a mobile app while employing local workers to sort and recycle waste. Technology supports scheduling and payments, but the real impact stems from training, logistics, and physical hubs.ⁱⁱⁱ

This model is powerful for systemic change—but it's resource-intensive and often harder to scale across geographies quickly.

Digital Enablers

Rather than reinventing the wheel, this model layers digital tools onto traditional service delivery—improving efficiency without displacing people or systems.

Example: Medic Mobile equips rural health workers with mobile tools to manage patient care more effectively. Patients still receive care from trusted community providers—but now with better data, protocols, and reporting tools.^{iv}

Digital Enablers enhance system performance in contexts where consistency and trust matter most. They offer clear operational gains, though rarely deliver disruptive change.

Implications for Social Innovators and Funders

1. Don't chase scale at the expense of substance.

Technology can multiply your reach dramatically, especially with AI advances, but don't avoid physical operations just because they're harder to scale. In resource-constrained

environments, tangible presence often drives real change.

2. Start with the problem, not the platform.

Before selecting a digital approach, ask: what kind of change does this issue require?

Empowerment? Automation? Embedded trust? Each model points to different strategies—and different resource commitments.

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APPENDIX

		Technological Integration	
		Native Technological Integration	Blended Technological Integration
Stakeholder Engagement	Participatory Engagement	Digital Drivers Value creation through technology amplified beneficiary involvement	Digital Integrators Value creation by complementing physical infrastructure and through input from beneficiaries.
	Receptive Engagement	Digital Architects Scalable solutions through standardized mechanisms with minimal beneficiary input.	Digital Enablers Scalable solutions through digitally augmented infrastructure with minimal beneficiary input.

ⁱ <https://www.togetherforher.com/providers/>

ⁱⁱ <https://ulesson.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ecobarter.africa/>

^{iv} <https://medic.org/>