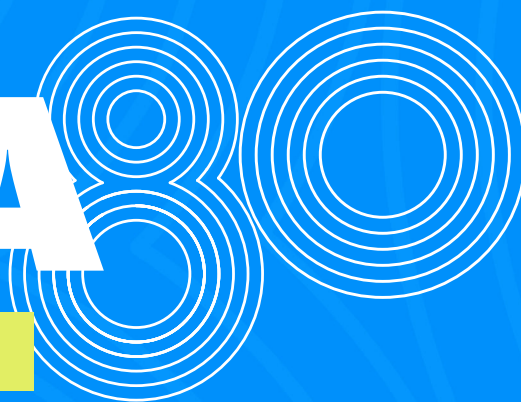


United Nations General
Assembly Week

UNGA



HIGH-LEVEL SIDE EVENT



Report & Learning Brief:

African-led Innovation: Shaping
Sustainable Futures with or without Aid

Wednesday,
24th September 2025

Venue: One Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza,
New York, NY 10017
(with live virtual participation via Zoom)

Co-hosted by





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At UNGA80, themed “Better Together: 80 Years and More for Peace, Development and Human Rights,” eHealth Africa, PSI, Population Council, and Reach Digital Health convened a high-level side event. Ministers, innovators, and civil society leaders spotlighted Africa’s ingenuity—from solarized health facilities and scaled digital platforms to youth-led accountability and country-driven research—while challenging donor dependency.

Speakers called for sovereignty, equity, and co-investment as the foundations for sustainable futures. The dialogue affirmed: Africa is not waiting for aid. It is already innovating and leading. The charge ahead is scaling inclusive models of resilience for lasting, equitable impact.



UNGA80 SIDE EVENT AT A GLANCE

Attendance:

75

in-person

83

Virtual

158

Total
participants

Top Countries Represented:

**Nigeria, Sierra Leone,
United States**



Sectors Represented:

**Government, Civil Society/
NGOs, Private Sector,
Multilateral Agencies**

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES



Global Context

2025 brought unprecedented strain to the global aid architecture: the United States withdrew almost entirely from Official Development Assistance (ODA), global ODA declined by 17% (the steepest annual drop in decades), and public debt reached \$104 trillion. Over 61 low and middle-income countries now spend more than 10% of revenue servicing debt, leaving little room for health or education investment. Together, these shifts underscored the fragility of the aid model and the urgency of Africa driving its own solutions.

Africa's Response

Africa has consistently demonstrated resilience and ingenuity—from pioneering mobile banking solutions like M-PESA, to scaling solarized clinics, agri-tech platforms, and youth-led accountability campaigns. Innovation is not a luxury; it is a necessity. The UNGA80 side event spotlighted these realities and positioned African sovereignty and innovation at the heart of the global development agenda.

Today, African innovators are shaping the future across multiple sectors:

- Health: Community health workers, solarized clinics, and mobile health platforms are expanding access to essential care.
- Finance: Fintech solutions are widening financial inclusion by unlocking credit, savings, and insurance for underserved populations.
- Agriculture: Agri-tech platforms are boosting yields, improving climate resilience, and supporting food security.
- Digital Governance: Youth and feminist movements are deploying technology to demand transparency, accountability, and inclusion.

The UNGA80 side event was designed to spotlight these realities and firmly position African sovereignty and innovation at the heart of the global development agenda.

OBJECTIVES

The convening aimed to:

1. Celebrate Africa-led solutions to urgent health, social, and economic challenges.
2. Reframe the aid narrative toward sovereignty and co-investment.
3. Create a platform for multi-sector dialogue and amplify African voices at UNGA80.



EVENT OVERVIEW

Welcome Remarks

– **Ota Akhigbe**,
Director, Partnerships & Programs, eHealth Africa

Ota Akhigbe opened the session with a warm welcome, setting a collaborative and forward-looking tone. Celebrating the shared spirit of African innovation, symbolized by the jollof rice tasting competition, she underscored that true progress lies in partnership and the power of local ideas to shape global systems.



Opening Remarks

– **Hon. Chernor Bah**,
Minister of Information & Civic Education, Sierra Leone

Hon. Chernor Bah opened with a historical critique of aid dependency and a call for self-reliance. He framed the session around designing Africa's destiny through trade, investment, and domestic resource mobilization.





REFLECTIONS FROM HOSTS & PANELISTS – CALL TO ACTION

Atef Fawaz

Executive Director, eHealth Africa

Highlighted the solarization of 238 Primary Health Care centers in Nigeria as a powerful example of Africa-led innovation. By linking health to renewable energy, Atef emphasized that cross-sectoral models multiply impact: “When energy powers health, when data powers governance, we multiply impact. Let us prove that again and again.”



Michael Holscher

President, Population Services International

Emphasized that innovation is an ongoing investment, not a quick fix. People must remain at the center, not donors.



James Sailer

Co-President, Population Council

Called for country-led evidence and research: “Solutions without data are guesses, not policies.”



Debbie Rogers

CEO, Reach Digital Health

Highlighted the power of scale through partnership: "Governments, NGOs, and private firms must share risks if innovation is to grow sustainably."



Dr. Kemi DaSilva-Ibru

Founder, WARIF

Declared gender equity non-negotiable, stressing that if women and girls are excluded, innovation cannot be sustainable.



Seune Fara Ndiaye

Deputy Executive Director, Speak Up Africa

Insisted that accountability mechanisms must be central, or innovation risks reproducing old inequities under new models.



Jean Philbert Nsengimana

Chief Digital Health Advisor, Africa CDC

Framed digital as a double-edged tool, urging designs that include the most vulnerable.



Dr. Ola Brown

Founder, HealthCap Africa

Challenged governments and private investors to co-invest in inclusive innovation rather than treat one another with suspicion.



Closing Remarks

Her Excellency Haja Salima Monorma Bah (Minister of Communication Technology & Innovation, Sierra Leone): In her closing reflections, Hon. Salima Bah issued a clear call to action: Africa must co-design and co-create its own destiny. True sovereignty, she emphasized, will only come from investing in people, innovations, and partnerships.



She outlined the roles for each sector:

- Governments must prioritize sustainable financing.
- Private sector must scale technologies responsibly.
- Philanthropy must shift toward flexible, long-term investments.
- NGOs must pool resources rather than duplicate.
- Youth must be given a rightful seat at the table of governance.

"Africa is a young continent," she concluded, "and our leadership must reflect this reality."

Audience Dialogue

Audience engagement deepened the conversation, raising critical questions:

- How can African innovations be shielded from political instability?
- How can regional integration prevent fragmentation?
- What accountability frameworks will keep CSOs remain strong amid shrinking aid?

KEY LEARNINGS

1. **Redefining Aid:** Africa must no longer be framed as dependent but as sovereign.
2. **Cross-sector models:** Innovation thrives where governments, private actors, NGOs, and philanthropy intersect.
3. **Accountability:** Civil society must safeguard transparency and inclusivity.
4. **Equity:** Women, girls, and marginalized groups must be central.
5. **Digital transformation:** A powerful enabler, but must be inclusive by design.
6. **Youth leadership:** Young Africans must shape policies and innovation today.

NOTABLE QUOTES

This section captures standout quotes and themes from the UNGA80 side event:



- “At eHealth Africa, we believe in linking health to other sectors. For example, our partnership with UNICEF solarized 238 Primary Health Care centers in Nigeria. This improved health services and proved that cross-sector models, health plus renewable energy, are powerful drivers of sustainability.”
- **Atef Fawaz (Executive Director, eHealth Africa)**
- “Innovation is not a one-off product; it is a strategic investment in systems. At PSI, we have learned that consumer-centered models only work when people, not donors, are at the center of the design.”
- **Michael Holscher (President, Population Services International)**
- “Data matters. We must ensure that evidence is gathered in Africa, for Africa, by Africans. Without country-led research, we risk pursuing solutions that do not align with real needs.”
- **Jim Sailer (Co-President, Population Council)**
- “Scaling mobile health is not just about technology, it’s about partnerships and adaptation. We have learned that data-driven approaches help us sustain and expand digital health programs across diverse African markets.”
- **Debbie Rogers (CEO, Reach Digital Health)**
- “Aid historically crippled local ownership. Innovation is in our blood, born from the inequities we’ve experienced.”
- **Hon. Cherner Bah**
- “If women and girls are not at the heart of our solutions, we are not building sustainable futures. When women are excluded, markets shrink and economies stagnate. Innovation must recognize that equality is not a luxury; it is a prerequisite for prosperity.”
- **Dr. Kemi DaSilva-Ibru**
- “Digital is the future, but we also know not everyone is there yet. We must design technology that includes, not excludes.”
- **Jean Philbert Nsengimana (Chief Digital Health Advisor, Africa CDC)**
- “The private sector often sees the government as inefficient, and the government often mistrusts the private sector. This dynamic limits our potential. We must change the narrative. Governments, investors, and civil society should not be competitors; they should be co-investors in Africa’s innovation ecosystem.”
- **Dr. Ola Brown (Founder, HealthCap Africa)**
- “Civil society organizations must remain central to this new era of development. Donor models may be shrinking, but the need for accountability is growing. Communities deserve a voice in how innovations are designed and rolled out. If we exclude them, we risk replacing one broken system with another.”
- **Seune Fara Ndiaye (Deputy Executive Director, Speak Up Africa)**



RECOMMENDATIONS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

The discussions during the side event generated clear calls to action across different sectors. To translate the momentum into sustainable outcomes, the following recommendations are proposed

1. **Governments** should adopt innovative financing mechanisms such as social impact bonds, dedicated health/education levies, and blended finance to reduce aid dependency and secure sustainable funding streams.
2. **The Private Sector** should co-invest with governments in scalable technologies that meet public needs, demonstrating shared ownership and accountability in Africa's innovation ecosystem.
3. **Philanthropy & Donors** should shift from short-term project cycles to flexible, long-term investments that center African sovereignty and build resilience.
4. **Civil Society** should strengthen collaboration, watchdog roles, and accountability frameworks to ensure that innovation models remain inclusive, equitable, and community-driven.
5. **Regional Bodies** (AU, RECs) should drive integration of innovations across borders (e.g., pooled procurement, cross-border health tech platforms) to reduce duplication and accelerate regional scalability.
6. **Youth** should be institutionalized in policymaking and innovation ecosystems, recognizing Africa's demographic dividend as central to sustainable development.

Action	Responsible Parties	Rationale / Expected Outcome
Adopt innovative financing mechanisms (e.g., dedicated tax levies, social impact bonds, blended finance) to fund health, education, and infrastructure.	Governments, Ministries of Finance, and Regional Economic Communities	Reduce reliance on shrinking aid flows and ensure sustainable, nationally-owned funding streams.
Co-invest in scalable technologies aligned with public sector priorities (health, energy, agriculture, education).	Private Sector (investors, banks, tech firms) in partnership with governments	Drive innovation through public-private partnerships that are financially viable and socially impactful.
Shift from short-term projects to long-term, flexible investment models that center African leadership and sovereignty.	Philanthropy & Donors	Ensure programs remain resilient despite funding volatility and enable locally led solutions to grow.
Strengthen accountability mechanisms by embedding civil society and community-based organizations into all levels of innovation design and monitoring.	Civil Society Organizations (CSOs); Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)	Ensure transparency, equity, and inclusivity in new models; safeguard against elite capture.
Foster cross-sector collaboration platforms that bring together governments, NGOs, the private sector, and researchers to co-create solutions.	Multi-stakeholder coalitions; Host organizations (eHealth Africa, PSI, Population Council, Reach Digital Health)	Create shared ownership of innovation ecosystems and reduce duplication of efforts.
Promote regional integration of innovations (e.g., cross-border digital health platforms, pooled procurement for health products).	African Union; Regional Economic Communities (ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, etc.)	Maximize efficiency, reduce fragmentation, and expand the reach of successful local models.
Scale digital inclusion initiatives to ensure equitable access to technology and connectivity in underserved areas.	Africa CDC; Ministries of ICT; Telecom providers	Bridge digital divides and enable wider participation in the innovation economy.
Embed gender equity as a non-negotiable principle in all innovation strategies.	Governments; NGOs; Private sector; Philanthropy	Guarantee that women and girls benefit fully from innovation and are included in leadership roles.
Institutionalize youth participation in decision-making processes at national and regional levels.	Governments; Regional Bodies; Civil Society	Harness the demographic dividend by engaging young leaders as co-creators of policies and innovations.



CONCLUSION

The UNGA80 side event affirmed that Africa is not a passive recipient of global aid, but an active architect of its own future. With 158 participants (75 in-person and 83 virtual), the convening showcased Africa's innovation ecosystem: solarized health facilities reaching 238 PHCs (eHA), consumer-centered health models (PSI), country-led research (Population Council), and scaled digital health platforms (Reach Digital Health).

The dialogue underscored that Africa's path forward must be defined by cross-sector collaboration and shared ownership where governments, civil society, philanthropy, and the private sector all contribute. Together, conveners called for bold financing models, inclusive innovation, and long-term resilience as cornerstones of sustainable development.

As the world marks 80 years of the United Nations, this dialogue sent a clear reminder: Africa's innovation is not the future—it is the present. The task now is to scale it, sustain it, and ensure it delivers equitable impact for generations to come, with Africa in the lead.

MEDIA & VISIBILITY

The UNGA80 side event generated strong visibility across leading media outlets, with coverage highlighting African-led innovation and the call for sovereignty in development. Below is a curated selection of features and broadcast segments; the full media archive is available [HERE](#)

Selected Coverage

1. The Nation – NGOs Push for Increased Funding for Africa-led Innovations: <https://thenationonlineng.net/unga-ngos-push-for-increased-funding-for-african-led-health-innovations/>
2. Premium Times – African-led Organisations to Drive Dialogue on Innovation & Sustainability: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/health/health-news/823203-unga80-african-led-organisations-to-drive-dialogue-on-innovation-sustainability.html>
3. The Guardian – African Leaders Push for Ownership in Innovation Agenda: <https://guardian.ng/news/unga-2025-african-leaders-push-for-ownership-in-innovation-agenda/>
4. ThisDay – How eHealth Africa is Rewriting the Story of Innovation: <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/09/28/unga-2025-how-ehealth-africa-is-rewriting-story-of-innovation/>
5. Business Day – African Leaders Champion Homegrown Innovation at UNGA 2025: <https://businessday.ng/briefs/article/african-leaders-champion-homegrown-innovation-at-unga-2025/>
6. The Cable – Stakeholders Call for Homegrown African Innovations to Reduce Aid Reliance: <https://www.thecable.ng/stakeholders-call-for-homegrown-african-innovations-to-reduce-aid-reliance-at-unga/>
7. Leadership – African Innovators Push for Homegrown Health Solutions: <https://leadership.ng/african-innovators-push-for-homegrown-health-solutions/>

Broadcast Segment

1. AIT Health Digest – Television feature segment on the side event: <https://www.youtube.com/live/UxMw9joxSpg>
2. Arise TV – The World – Interview and coverage feature: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YxuM9iy6hV8JVhIvR2Euuak6aJoIPveA/view?usp=sharing>

Social Media

Pre-event, live, and post-event communications amplified the dialogue across LinkedIn, Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram, driving strong engagement and positioning of convening partners as thought leaders. Below is a summary of reach and engagement.

21,000+

impressions across LinkedIn, Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram

4,400+

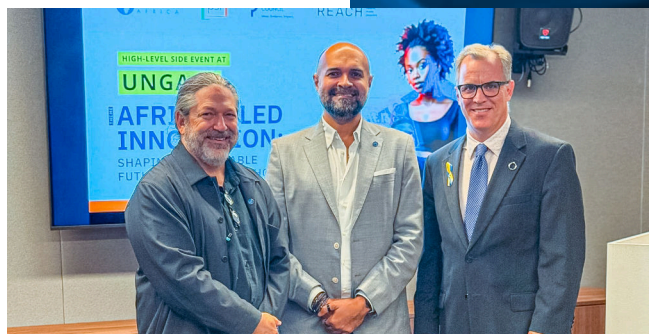
engagements within 48 hours of the event

330+

registrations driven via social media campaigns

Top-performing content:
Speaker spotlights and live quote cards

The full archive of posts, screenshots, and analytics is available [HERE](#).



ACRONYMS:

UNGA	– United Nations General Assembly
UNGA80	– 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
UN	– United Nations
ODA	– Official Development Assistance
SDG	– Sustainable Development Goals
CSO	– Civil Society Organization
CBO	– Community-Based Organization
AU	– African Union
ECOWAS	– Economic Community of West African States
EAC	– East African Community
SADC	– Southern African Development Community
ICT	– Information and Communication Technology
PHC	– Primary Health Centre
Africa CDC	– Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
NGO	– Non-Governmental Organization



APPENDICES:

[Full agenda](#)

[Speaker bios.](#)

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HIGH-LEVEL SIDE EVENT

