The Landscape of Entrepreneurship Support in Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa

Challenges, opportunities, and a path forward

BridgeforBillions
connecting growth

ASPEN NETWORK OF DEVELOPMENT ENTREPRENEURS
aspen institute

Bridge for Billions and ANDE

This report is a collaborative effort between **Bridge for Billions** and the **Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE)**, two organizations committed to strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem in emerging economies.

Bridge for Billions is a social enterprise founded in 2015 with the mission to democratize access to entrepreneurship. It provides entrepreneurs with the tools and guidance needed to transform their ideas into sustainable businesses, having supported thousands of founders in over 100 countries through one of the world's largest online entrepreneurship program networks. This report is part of a new strategic research initiative developed within its flagship program, **Conecta**, which supports both entrepreneurs and the support organizations that accompany them.

The **Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE)** is a global network of over 230 organizations that promotes entrepreneurship in emerging economies. As an initiative of the Aspen Institute, ANDE's mission is to strengthen organizations that support Small and Growing Businesses (SGBs) as a strategy to solve social and environmental problems and improve quality of life. With a proven track record in mapping and analyzing investment and entrepreneurship ecosystems in Latin America since 2013, ANDE is a leading voice in the sector, providing knowledge, training, and policy advocacy to support SGBs.

Letter from the CEO of Bridge for Billions.

Pablo Santaeufemia

Dear allies,

The paradox is clear: while Africa's entrepreneurs continue to rise, the organizations that sustain them remain structurally fragile. This report on the entrepreneurial support ecosystem across Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa—developed with **ANDE** and grounded in survey and roundtable insights—highlights both the remarkable contributions of **Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs)** and the instability of the foundations on which they operate.

ESOs across these four countries are driving extraordinary impact. **Many of these organizations reach activation rates above 70%, and their entrepreneurs generate income, create jobs, and contribute meaningfully to local economies.** Their work is deeply inclusive—serving populations often neglected by traditional institutions—and increasingly essential in navigating today's economic uncertainty.

Yet behind these achievements lies a structural challenge that cannot be ignored: the system enabling this impact is precarious. Financial sustainability is the most pressing weakness. Most ESOs depend on short-term project funding with limited access to multi-year or unrestricted support. At the same time, collaboration remains fragmented, despite 91% of ESOs expressing readiness to join national or regional associations. Early-stage capital gaps persist: only 29% of supported entrepreneurs access external funding, and investors identify the absence of early-stage finance as the ecosystem's single biggest barrier. Impact measurement systems remain short-horizon—nearly half track results at program completion, but only 10% follow up after two years. This undermines the sector's visibility and leaves ESOs undervalued in policy debates and investment agendas.

At Bridge for Billions, we see this paradox across many entrepreneurship ecosystems: the organizations that enable others to thrive are themselves struggling to survive. Our **purpose** is clear—to make entrepreneurship accessible to all, by empowering ESOs to deliver high-quality, inclusive support and to build the ecosystems that allow early-stage ventures to grow. The future of entrepreneurship in Africa depends on strong, sustainable ESOs. Without them, inclusive innovation cannot scale.

The path forward is also clear. This report calls for:

- The creation of national and regional ESO associations to strengthen advocacy, coordination, legitimacy, and shared standards across countries.
- A shift from short-term projects to long-term, flexible financing that allows ESOs to build resilient institutions, retain talent, and innovate.
- Focused investment in early-stage finance, including blended instruments, guarantees, and seed funding models tailored to youth, women, and informal-sector entrepreneurs.
- The development of shared metrics and collective learning systems capable of tracking long-term outcomes and elevating the sector's visibility among funders and policymakers.

These recommendations echo the pillars of our **Conecta strategy**, which partners with ESOs to strengthen their operational and financial sustainability, co-create programs adapted to local contexts, and activate cross-country alliances that transform fragile ecosystems into cohesive, collaborative networks.

Our **2033 vision** is ambitious: to support over 100,000 entrepreneurs, generate more than 1 million jobs, and positively impact the lives of millions across the continent. Africa has the talent, creativity, and entrepreneurial drive to lead this transformation. But achieving it requires urgent action to ensure ESOs are no longer operating in survival mode, but recognized, funded, and empowered as central actors in the region's development.

This report is more than an analysis. It is a call to act differently. To funders, policymakers, and ecosystem leaders: the future of entrepreneurship in Africa will be determined by how you support the organizations that make it possible.

With commitment and urgency,

Pablo Santaeufemia
CEO & Co-founder
Bridge for Billions

Letter from the Africa Regional Director of ANDE

Grace Wachori

Entrepreneurship is a key and powerful pathway for Africa's evolution to inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Across the continent, Small and Growing Businesses (SGBs) create jobs, expand access to goods and services, drive economic stimulation and anchor resilience in local economies. These outcomes do not occur in isolation, they depend on a network of organizations that build entrepreneurial capability, reduce risk, and connect founders to markets, capital, and knowledge as essential infrastructure. This report places those organizations, Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs), at the centre of the conversation.

Across Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa, ESOs play a vital role in inclusive economic development by supporting entrepreneurs and bridging gaps where markets and public systems fall short. Despite delivering measurable impact, ESOs operate under persistent financial and coordination constraints, revealing a system that depends more on their resilience than on deliberate, sustainable design.

From ANDE's perspective, this evidence reinforces a core strategic priority: strong entrepreneurial ecosystems require strong institutions. Supporting entrepreneurs at scale demands sustained investment in the organizations that serve them. That means shifting from project-based approaches toward ecosystem building; from short-term to long-term interventions; strengthening organizational sustainability, improving coordination and shared standards, expanding access to appropriate early-stage and growth finance, and investing in data systems that demonstrate systemic impact.

This report contributes to ANDE's mission to generate and elevate evidence, convene ecosystem actors, and influence policy and practice in ways that enable SGBs to thrive. By grounding analysis in African contexts and amplifying the collective voice of ESOs, it provides a platform for more informed decision-making by funders, policymakers, and ecosystem leaders alike.

Africa's entrepreneurs are ready. The question is whether we are ready to fund, coordinate, and recognize the organizations that make their success possible. As you move into the report, I invite you to engage with the data, reflect on the structural challenges it reveals, and consider the role you can play in strengthening the organizations that underpin Africa's entrepreneurial future.

Grace Wachori | Africa Regional Director
Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs (ANDE)
The Aspen Institute

Executive Summary

Africa's entrepreneurship support ecosystem tells a story of determination in the face of structural strain. Across Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa, ESOs are training entrepreneurs, supporting women- and youth-led ventures, and driving innovation in underserved communities. Yet beneath this dynamism lies a fragile institutional foundation: persistent financial precarity, fragmented collaboration, and limited access to early-stage capital for entrepreneurs. The result is an ecosystem capable of activating thousands of new ventures but unable to consistently support them through the long, uneven path to growth.

> *"We are doing big things with small money and a lean team. The ambition is there—what's missing is stability."*
>
> – **ESO Leader**, survey response

This report is a situational analysis with an advocacy purpose: to give African ESOs a collective voice and offer a shared roadmap for strengthening the continent's entrepreneurial infrastructure.

By reading this report, you will get:

- A data-driven portrait of how ESOs operate, fund themselves, and support entrepreneurs across the four countries.
- A diagnosis of the ecosystem's structural bottlenecks: financial fragility, inconsistent coordination, limited access to early-stage financing, and weak long-term impact measurement.
- A continental action agenda, informed by survey responses and roundtable discussions, outlining what ESOs, funders, and policymakers must do to build a stronger, more equitable environment for entrepreneurial growth.

A resilient ecosystem under pressure

The ESO landscape across the four countries is vibrant and mission-driven, with strong representation from non-profit organizations committed to inclusion and grassroots development. Many work with entrepreneurs in informal sectors, rural areas, and low-connectivity environments, spaces often neglected by traditional financial and business-development institutions. Yet the system that supports them is structurally fragile. Financial sustainability emerges as the top challenge, far above most other internal concerns. Most ESOs depend heavily on short-term donor grants and have limited access to unrestricted or multi-year funding. Currency devaluations, shrinking development budgets, and shifting donor priorities have intensified this uncertainty. As a result, ESOs spend disproportionate time fundraising, rather than investing in their teams, systems, or long-term strategy.

Beneath the surface, the ecosystem faces four interconnected weaknesses:

1. **A cycle of funding fragility:** with ESOs relying on short-term, project-based funding, many operate in survival mode. The lack of multi-year support restricts their ability to build internal systems, retain talent, or innovate. Most core costs remain unfunded, undermining institutional resilience.

2. **Fragmentation and weak coordination:** collaboration is common but largely informal and dependent on personal networks. Despite 91% of ESOs expressing interest in joining a formal association, cross-country coordination remains limited. Without unified representation, the sector struggles to influence policy, negotiate funding conditions, or build shared standards for professional practice.

3. **An early-stage capital gap**: access to funding is the most significant barrier for entrepreneurs. Only 29% secure external capital after program completion, often in small amounts insufficient for growth. Investors confirm this gap: 54% identify the lack of early-stage investment as the ecosystem's biggest challenge. Traditional finance remains risk-averse, collateral-based, and ill-suited to early-stage or informal-economy ventures.

4. **Weak impact measurement and limited shared learning:** monitoring practices remain short-term: while nearly half track entrepreneurs at program completion, only 10% follow up after two years. The absence of shared indicators or joint data platforms limits the sector's ability to demonstrate collective impact, advocate for resources, or learn from long-term venture trajectories.

An agenda for collective action

African ESOs have demonstrated resilience and commitment. The next step is to convert this resilience into structural strength supported by funders and policymakers who understand their pivotal role in inclusive economic development. The data and dialogues point to four priorities:

1. **From fragmentation to coordination:** Establish national and regional ESO associations to unify advocacy, standardize practices, and foster cross-country collaboration.

2. **From project dependence to sustainability:** Shift from short-term, activity-based grants to multi-year, flexible financing that strengthens ESO institutions and enables innovation, staff development, and organizational maturity.

3. **From capital scarcity to inclusive finance:** Develop blended finance instruments, guarantees, and early-stage seed mechanisms that de-risk investments, expand access for women and youth, and align public and private investment around shared goals.

4. **From disconnected data to shared evidence:** Build collective monitoring and learning systems that track long-term outcomes, strengthen accountability, and provide the sector with a unified narrative of its contribution to inclusive growth.

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Definitions and acronyms

- **ESO (Entrepreneurship Support Organization)**: A general term for any organization, such as an incubator, accelerator, university center, or innovation hub, that provides entrepreneurs with critical resources like training, mentorship, networks, and funding to help them start, grow, and sustain their businesses.

- **SGB (Small and Growing Business):** A commercially viable business with 5 to 250 employees that has significant potential, and ambition, for growth. ESOs often focus on supporting SGBs due to their high potential for job creation and economic impact.

- **M&E (Monitoring and Evaluation):** The process by which organizations track and assess the performance and impact of their programs over time. In the context of this report, it refers to how ESOs measure the success of their interventions and the progress of the entrepreneurs they support.

Stages of the entrepreneurial journey

The following stages, based on the provided framework, describe the typical path a venture follows from concept to growth. ESOs design their programs to support entrepreneurs at one or more of these specific stages.

- **Pre-ideation / Entrepreneurial Mindset:** This is the foundational stage that occurs before a concrete business idea is formed. Support activities focus on the promotion of an entrepreneurial culture and mindset, helping potential founders develop the basic skills and orientation needed to identify opportunities.

- **Ideation:** The earliest stage, where an entrepreneur develops an initial idea. Support activities focus on design thinking, prototyping, and customer discovery to test the concept's viability.

- **Incubation:** The stage focused on building a solid foundation for the business. ESOs help entrepreneurs search for and validate market fit and develop a minimum viable product (MVP) or service.

- **Acceleration:** The growth phase where a business has an established product and begins to acquire its first customers and employees. Support is geared towards refining the business model and preparing for growth.

- **Scaling / Growth:** The most mature stage, where a validated business focuses on expanding its reach and impact. For some ventures, this means scaling in the traditional sense, rapidly increasing operations and internationalizing to capture a large market share.

For others, it means pursuing sustainable growth by deepening their market presence, diversifying services, or strengthening their financial stability without necessarily aiming for exponential expansion. Support at this stage is tailored to the specific goals of the venture, whether it be market expansion, operational efficiency, or securing strategic investment.

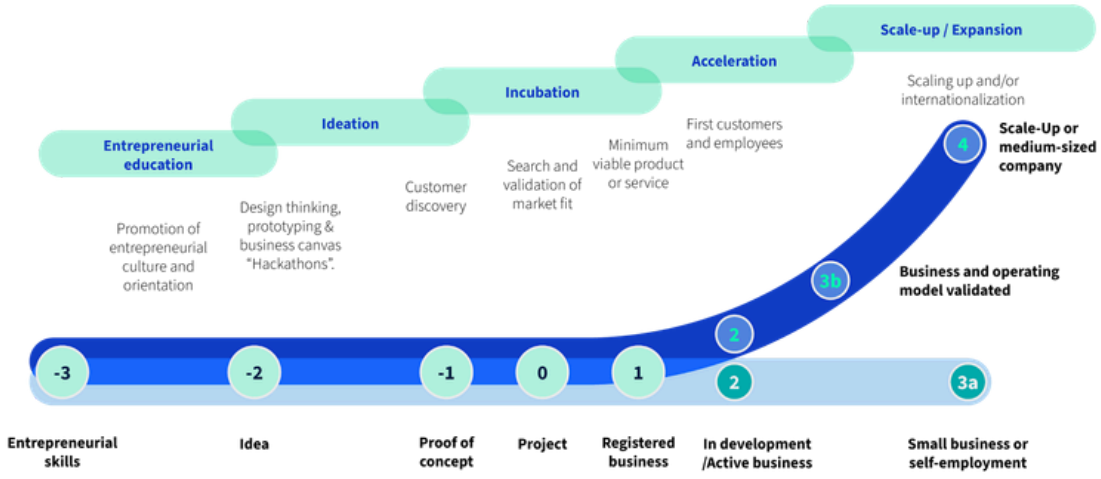

Figure 1: Stages of entrepreneurial journey

1. Introduction & methodology

1.1 Context, purpose and objectives

The Sub-Saharan African entrepreneurial landscape is currently undergoing a profound transformation, characterized by a rapid maturation of markets and a surging demand for innovation-led growth. While the region has long been viewed through the lens of potential, recent years have crystallized distinct ecosystem archetypes that offer divergent models for development. This report focuses on four nations that epitomize this diversity: **Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Rwanda** so to provide a situational analysis of the ESOs that form the backbone of these economies. The choice of these four markets is strategic rather than merely geographic, as they represent four strategic Sub-Saharan African entrepreneurial archetypes. While these four countries offer important contrasts, they do not represent the full diversity of the African continent. They constitute a strategic four-country sample selected for their ecosystem maturity, diversity, and influence within Sub-Saharan Africa

Kenya, often heralded as the "Silicon Savannah," represents a mature ecosystem deeply integrated with global development finance. It has successfully positioned itself as a hub for impact-driven ventures, particularly in agriculture and green energy, yet it grapples with the challenge of translating high startup entry rates into sustainable scale-up success (World Bank, 2022). In contrast, Nigeria serves as the region's volume engine,

driven by a high-energy, private-capital-led market that is increasingly decentralized. The Nigerian ecosystem is expanding beyond the commercial capital of Lagos to secondary cities like Abuja and Ibadan, creating a federalized network of innovation that relies heavily on local resilience and bootstrapping (Impact Investors Foundation, 2024).

South Africa presents a sophisticated but starkly dualistic economy. Its ecosystem is marked by a divide between world-class, corporate-backed incubators in urban centers and a vast, informal "township economy" that requires entirely different support mechanisms. Here, the challenge is not a lack of resources, but rather the equitable distribution of support to bridge the gap between the formal and informal sectors (ANDE, 2021). Finally, Rwanda offers a distinct counter-narrative to its larger neighbors. It stands as a testbed for policy-engineered ecosystem building, where top-down government strategy has created a conducive regulatory environment intended to attract pan-African innovation, despite the constraints of a smaller domestic market (ANDE, 2018).

However, beneath these high-level national narratives lies a structural paradox: while the number of startups and support organizations has surged, **the business models underpinning the ESOs themselves remain fragile.** As noted in recent systemic reviews, many intermediaries are trapped in a "grant dependency" cycle, forced to prioritize short-term donor metrics over long-term founder value (Snowmelt, 2023). The prevailing "cohort model" of training is increasingly scrutinized for its inefficiency in delivering tangible business outcomes, promoting a "frenzy of programming" that often leaves entrepreneurs unsupported once the initial intervention ends (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025).

Therefore, the primary purpose of this report is to move beyond a simple census of who is where to a diagnostic analysis of how ESO work. This report dissects the profiles, service portfolios, and financial sustainability models of ESOs across these four diverse contexts by bringing forward a comparative, evidence-based perspective from ESOs across four pivotal Sub-Saharan African markets. It provides a data-driven **situational analysis of the ESO landscape** across Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa. It consolidates a multi-country view of who the ESOs are, who they support, how they operate, and the fragile financial models they navigate, while acknowledging the distinct archetypes of each national ecosystem. This is a report with an **advocacy purpose:** it positions ESOs not merely as program implementers, but as essential infrastructure for inclusive economic development: actors whose organizational health, financial sustainability, and capacity to influence policy are critical for unlocking the region’s entrepreneurial potential. By elevating the structural challenges of grant dependency and the opportunities of specialized support, the report aims to strengthen their collective voice and support a more coherent and enabling environment, one that leverages the unique lessons of both policy-led and market-driven ecosystems.

A tool for strategic action

This report is designed as a practical resource for ESOs, funders, policymakers, and ecosystem stakeholders who share a commitment to fostering entrepreneurship as a driver of opportunity in the region. Through the evidence presented, the report encourages reflection, collaboration, and strategic alignment among those shaping the region's entrepreneurial future, recognizing that progress will be most sustainable when stakeholders look beyond vanity metrics to build long-term institutional resilience

This report is intended for three key audiences:

- **For ESOs**, this report is a source of evidence and a call for strategic adaptation. Use this data to benchmark your operational models against regional peers, validate your systemic challenges, and build a unified voice to advocate for the core funding and infrastructure support you need to move beyond survival to sustainability.

- **For funders** and policymakers, this report is an urgent call to shift the paradigm of support. Use these insights to understand the limitations of short-term, program-based funding and the risks of a "one-size-fits-all" policy approach. They serve as a basis to co-design more stable financial mechanisms and regulatory frameworks that invest in the organizational development of intermediaries, enabling them to drive real economic transformation.

- **For the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem**, this report provides a shared understanding of where the structural bottlenecks lie. It enables better alignment of resources and a more coordinated effort to bridge the gap between high-growth tech hubs and the real economy, ensuring entrepreneurs receive consistent, high-quality support regardless of their sector or location.

1.2 Conceptual framework

The analysis is organized around two complementary pillars. The **first pillar (**sections 2, 3, and 4) examines the internal *working recipe* of ESOs in the four-country sample. It describes *what they do*, *what they achieve*, and *whom they serve*. Using the survey as the primary source of data, it documents ESO service models, the types of entrepreneurs and ventures they support, and the results they generate. Immediate outputs, such as program reach, participation, and service delivery, are distinguished from longer-term outcomes that capture entrepreneurial progress after program completion, including business survival, revenue generation, investment raised, and

employment created. This pillar provides a detailed, evidence-based account of the functions, performance, and beneficiary profiles of ESOs across the four countries.

The **second pillar** (sections 5 and 6) explores the broader system in which ESOs operate. It captures the enablers and constraints that shape their effectiveness and sustainability. The survey provides comparable data on the barriers ESOs face, while qualitative insights from a roundtable with ESO leaders and ecosystem stakeholders add contextual depth across the four markets. These perspectives highlight systemic issues and collective requests to policymakers, funders, and peer organizations, complementing quantitative findings and pointing to priority areas for coordinated action at both national and regional levels.

Together, these two pillars provide a structured approach to understand how ESOs function internally and how external conditions influence their capacity to deliver outcomes. By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, this framework supports a practical and nuanced assessment of the ESO landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa and informs actionable recommendations to strengthen the ecosystem.

1.3 Methodology

This analysis combines two sequential surveys with a regional roundtable discussion, conducted between March and November 2025. The design ensures that findings are grounded in validated quantitative data while enriched by qualitative insights from ecosystem stakeholders across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Survey 1: Mapping the landscape

The first survey was a short questionnaire designed to identify and map active ESOs in the target Sub-Saharan African countries. It collected basic information on each organization's legal form, services offered, target populations, and geographic reach. In addition, Survey 1 included two questions directed at financial investors, with the aim of capturing their perception of market conditions in the region. Survey 1 was deployed between March and August 2025. Invitations were distributed via email to known organizations and through partner networks to broaden coverage. The responses established the baseline dataset of active ESOs and provided an initial picture of their role and services within the regional ecosystem.

Survey 2: Deepening the analysis

The second survey was sent exclusively to organizations that had completed Survey 1. Conducted between September and November 2025, it gathered more detailed information on ESO capacities, funding models, service delivery, and results. This allowed for an assessment not only of program reach but also of the effectiveness and sustainability of ESO interventions. By collecting a more comprehensive dataset from a smaller group, Survey 2 enabled a deeper analysis of ESO operational models and outcomes.

Regional roundtable: Capturing systemic perspectives

In parallel, Bridge for Billions and ANDE convened a regional roundtable at the end of May 2025 in Nairobi, Kenya to present the first insights emerging from Survey 1. The session brought together ESO representatives, ecosystem leaders, investors, and broader regional stakeholders. After sharing the preliminary findings, particularly on the challenges most frequently reported by ESOs, participants were divided into thematic roundtables to discuss key systemic issues in depth. The discussions generated qualitative insights on barriers, ecosystem dynamics, and requests to public and private actors. These perspectives complement the quantitative data by explaining why certain challenges persist and how ESOs and stakeholders interpret their role within the wider regional ecosystem.

Data quality and interpretation

Responses from both surveys were reviewed for consistency and plausibility and were complemented where possible with publicly available information. Roundtable notes were systematized and used to contextualize and interpret the survey findings. In presenting results, the report distinguishes between measured facts, directly supported by survey indicators, and perceptions or claims arising from the roundtable discussions.

Respondents

A total of 101 organizations participated in Survey 1, providing a broad initial mapping of the entrepreneurial support landscape across the four-country sample. 87% of Survey 1 participants self-identified as Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs), while 7% were development finance institutions or donor agencies, 4% investors, and 2% banks or financial institutions (Figure 2).

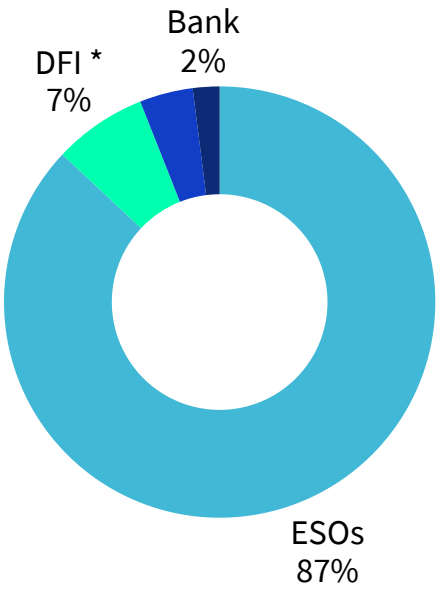

Figure 2: Organizations participating in Survey 1 (N=101)

*Development Financial Institutions

Country participation in Survey 1 shows a clear concentration in Kenya (25%), Nigeria (31%), and South Africa (22%), with a smaller share from Rwanda (6%) (Figure 3). This pattern aligns with the relative size, visibility, and maturity of national support ecosystems in the region: Kenya and Nigeria exhibit dense, long-standing ESO networks, while South Africa's ecosystem is shaped by a blend of corporate-backed incubators and public-sector initiatives. Rwanda's modest representation reflects its smaller institutional base, though its policy-driven ecosystem remains influential despite its scale.

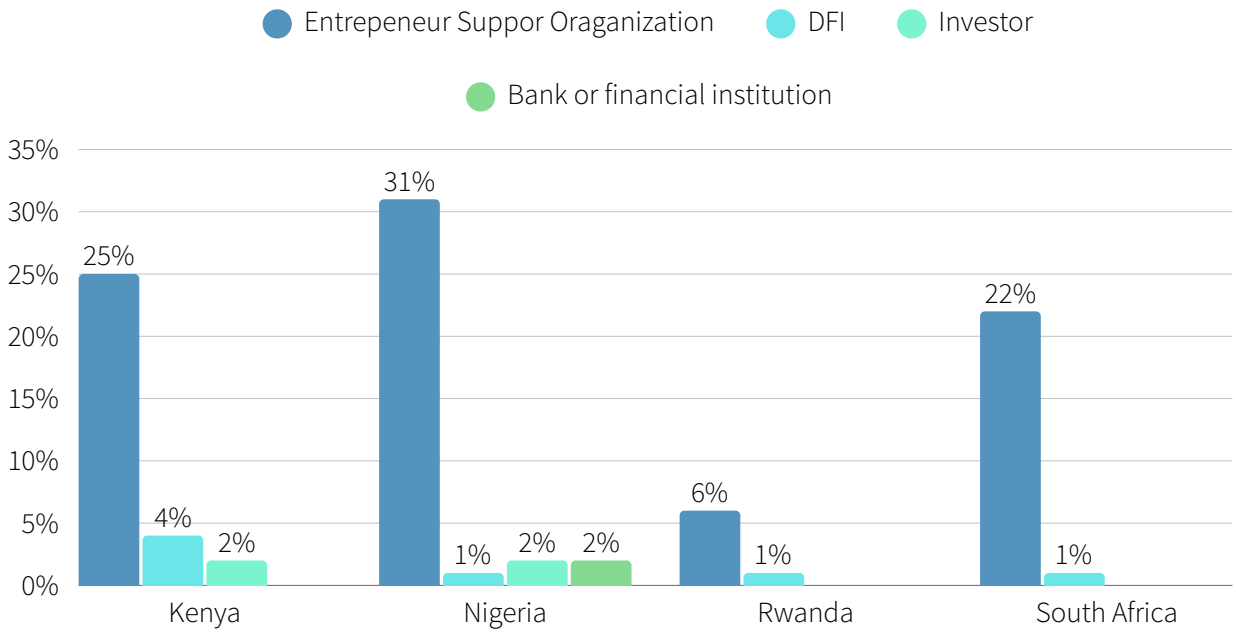

Figure 3: survey 1 respondents by country (N=101)

Survey 2, designed to deepen the analysis of ESO capacities, sustainability, and outcomes, received 24 valid responses. The composition of the Survey 2 sample is consistent with regional patterns: 48% of respondents are for-profit ESOs, 43% non-profit organizations, and 10% academic institutions, with no public-sector ESOs represented (Figure 4). Country distribution again reflects ecosystem maturity: Kenya (48%) and Nigeria (43%) dominate the sample, while Rwanda (4%) and South Africa (4%) appear less prominently (Annex, Table 1). Findings related to operational models and outcomes are driven primarily by ESOs in Kenya and Nigeria, with fewer insights from the other two markets.

Despite these asymmetries, the combined dataset offers a robust foundation for understanding how ESOs operate across diverse Sub-Saharan African contexts. The survey design enables both regional-level analysis and meaningful cross-country comparison, ensuring that shared patterns and national distinctions can be interpreted accurately across the four-country sample.

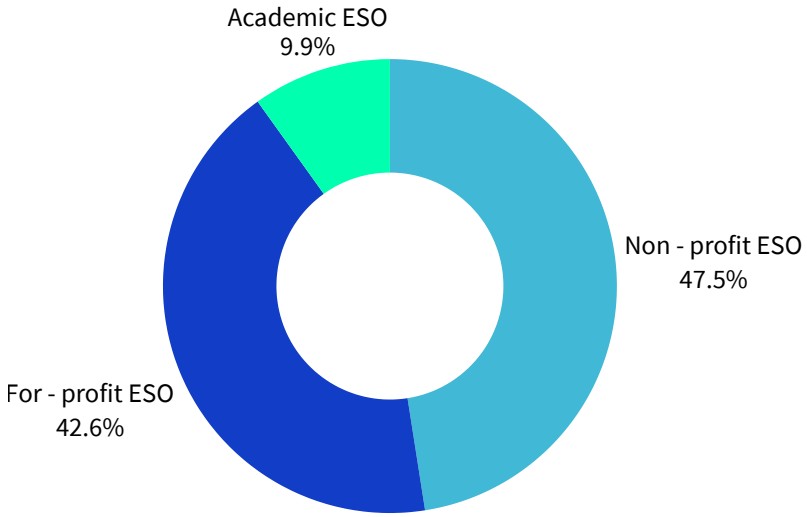

Figure 4: Survey 2 respondents, disaggregated by ESO structure (N=24)

In addition, around 80 participants attended the regional roundtable, including ESO leaders, investors, development partners, and ecosystem stakeholders. Their contributions generated qualitative insights that further complement the quantitative evidence.

Limitations

The findings presented in this report are based on self-reported data from survey respondents and the discussions held during the regional roundtable. While **101 organizations** responded to Survey 1 and **24 ESOs** to Survey 2, this represents only part of the wider ESO community across the four Sub-Saharan African markets studied and **should not be interpreted as a full census.** This difference in sample size reflects the deliberate two-phase survey design: Survey 1 served as a broad mapping tool, while Survey 2 required a higher level of detail and operational transparency, resulting in a smaller, self-selected group for the second phase

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As with any multi-country ecosystem study, several methodological and contextual limitations shape how the results should be interpreted. First, the r**egional aggregation of data masks important differences in ecosystem maturity, institutional density, and resource availability** across Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa. Kenya and Nigeria host large, historically consolidated networks of ESOs, while Rwanda and South Africa present smaller or more segmented institutional landscapes. Aggregated insights therefore reflect shared regional patterns, but some nuances are best understood within national contexts. Country-specific distinctions are highlighted throughout the report when they materially influence interpretation.

Second, the distribution of Survey 2 respondents introduces an imbalance in the depth of analysis possible across countries. The majority of detailed operational data comes from ESOs based in Kenya (48%) and Nigeria (43%), while Rwanda (4%) and South Africa (4%) are underrepresented. As a result, the sections that examine sustainability models, human capital, and outcomes are more reflective of ecosystem dynamics in Kenya and Nigeria. Insights relating to Rwanda and South Africa should therefore be interpreted with caution and viewed as indicative rather than comprehensive.

Third, the data relies on self-reporting by organizations that differ significantly in their internal monitoring systems. Variations in how ESOs track participation, funding, outcomes, and long-term impact may influence the precision of indicators. Although the research team undertook consistency checks and used external sources where possible, some metrics reflect differences in internal practices rather than true structural divergence. The qualitative insights from the roundtable, while valuable, represent the perspectives of participating stakeholders and may not capture the full diversity of views within each national ecosystem. Despite these limitations, the methodological design provides a solid and balanced foundation for understanding the entrepreneurial support landscape across the four Sub-Saharan African markets studied.

2. Landscape of ESOs in Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa

At a glance:

The four-country sample shows an entrepreneurial support landscape that is diverse in structure but uneven in its territorial reach. **ESOs are heavily concentrated in major urban centers** such as Nairobi, Lagos, Kigali, Cape Town, and Johannesburg while large secondary regions register limited institutional presence. The organizational makeup is almost evenly divided between for-profit and non-profit entities, complemented by small numbers of academic and public-sector ESOs. National patterns differ: Kenya and Nigeria exhibit the widest mix of models, Rwanda operates a compact and policy-coordinated ecosystem, and South Africa combines long-standing formal organizations with newer grassroots intermediaries.

Institutional maturity is relatively strong, with most ESOs falling into the established or consolidated categories (6–20 years of activity), although each country shows its own blend of legacy organizations and recent entrants. **Support across the entrepreneurial journey is broad but concentrated around incubation and early-stage development**, while acceleration and scaling receive comparatively less attention. Program entry remains shaped by a mix of rolling admissions and cohort-based calls, with the latter still the dominant model. Selection processes prioritize social impact, team capacity, and the scalability of the business model, defining the core filters through which entrepreneurs access support.

2.1 Geographic distribution, legal typology and age of ESOs

The geographic footprint of ESOs across the four-country sample reveals a landscape that is **dynamic yet unevenly distributed**, shaped by significant concentration in major urban centers and thinner institutional presence in secondary regions. Survey 1 data shows that Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa together account for the overwhelming majority of identifiable ESOs in the sample, reflecting their historical role as regional entrepreneurship hubs. This aligns with broader ecosystem tracking which identifies these nations, along with Egypt, as the "Big Four" powerhouses that consistently attract the vast majority of the continent's investment and support infrastructure (Disrupt Africa, 2022). Rwanda, while smaller in institutional density, shows a targeted and policy-driven ecosystem anchored around Kigali, illustrating a distinct model of government-engineered centralization (ANDE, 2018).

Across countries, ESOs remain heavily concentrated in a limited number of metropolitan regions. The territorial maps of entrepreneurial support illustrate this pattern clearly. In Kenya, the Nairobi metropolitan area alone accounts for 56% of ESO activities, while most counties record presence levels of 20–36%, and several peripheral regions remain at 12% (Figure 5). Nigeria displays a similar configuration: Lagos and neighboring southern states register rates as high as 52%, while northern and eastern regions remain significantly less served, often in the 10–16% range (Figure 6). Rwanda shows an even sharper concentration, with 33% of ESO activity centered in Kigali and near-zero presence across many western and southern districts (Figure 7). In South Africa, support is distributed across a wider geography, but strong clusters persist in Western Cape (59%) and Gauteng (55%), compared to significantly lower engagement (5–14%) in central and northern provinces (Figure 8).

These patterns confirm that **geographic access to support continues to depend heavily on proximity to major cities:** Nairobi, Lagos, Kigali, Cape Town, Johannesburg, where infrastructure, talent, and funding are more concentrated. While some ESOs operate in hybrid or remote models, the physical presence of organizations in underserved territories remains limited, constraining the ability of entrepreneurs outside major hubs to access programs, networks, and market linkages (Village Capital, 2024).

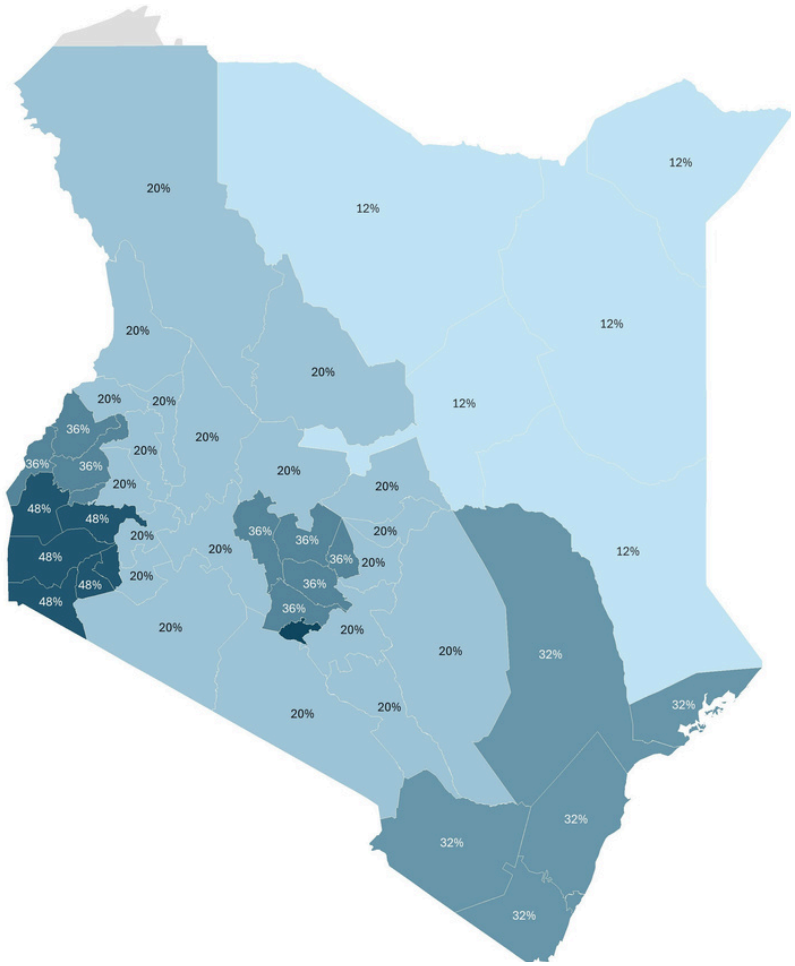

Figure 5: Areas of entrepreneurial support by ESOs in Kenya (N=25)

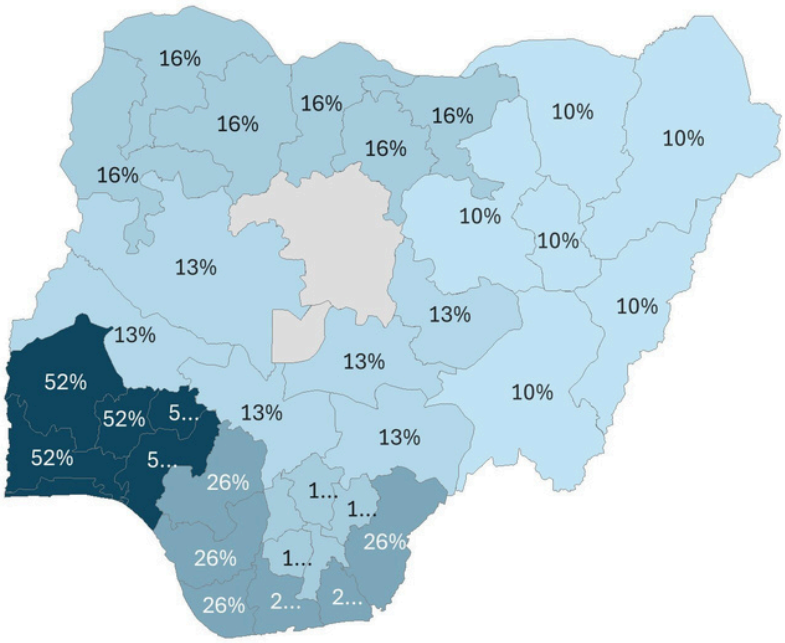

Figure 6: Areas of entrepreneurial support by ESOs in Nigeria (N=31)

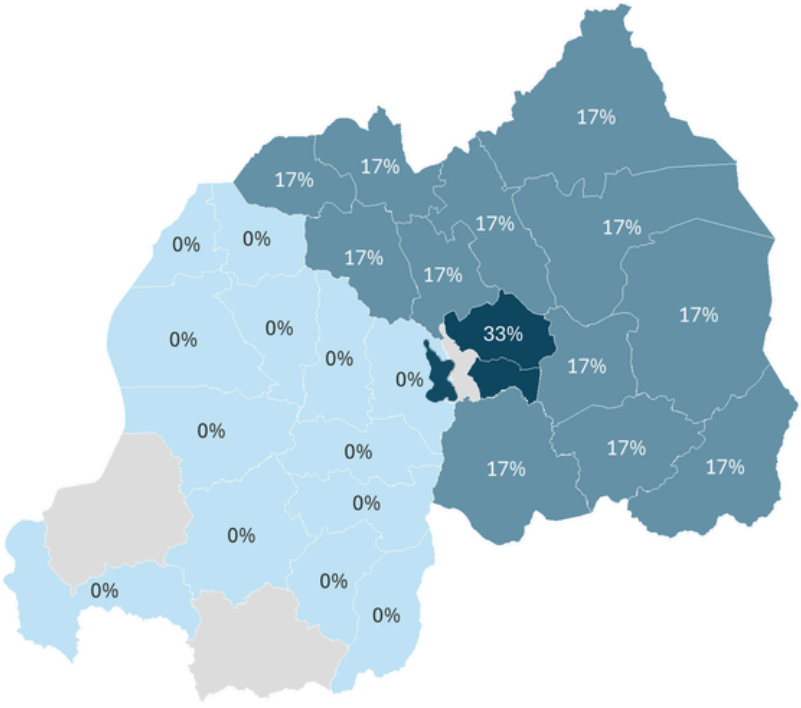

Figure 7: Areas of entrepreneurial support provided by ESOs in Rwanda (N=22)

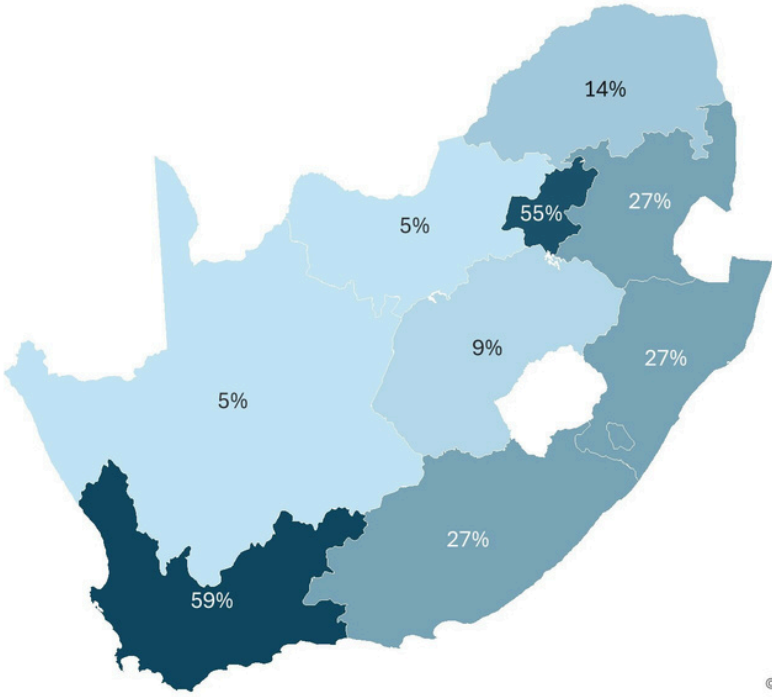

Figure 8: Areas of entrepreneurial support provided by ESOs in South Africa (N=22)

The institutional composition of ESOs in the four-country sample reveals a landscape that is diverse in structure yet marked by clear national patterns. At the aggregate level, the survey shows a balanced split between **for-profit (48%) and non-profit (47%) organizations, with smaller contributions from academic ESOs (2%) and public-sector organizations (2%)** (Figure 9). This profile suggests an ecosystem shaped by both commercially oriented support models and socially driven "intermediaries", reflecting the hybrid evolution of entrepreneurship support in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike other regions where non-profits typically dominate, the stronger presence of for-profit ESOs points to the growing role of market-based approaches, particularly in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. This mirrors findings from the Global Accelerator Learning Initiative, which notes that accelerators in emerging markets often adopt hybrid models to balance impact objectives with the need for financial sustainability (GALI, 2017).

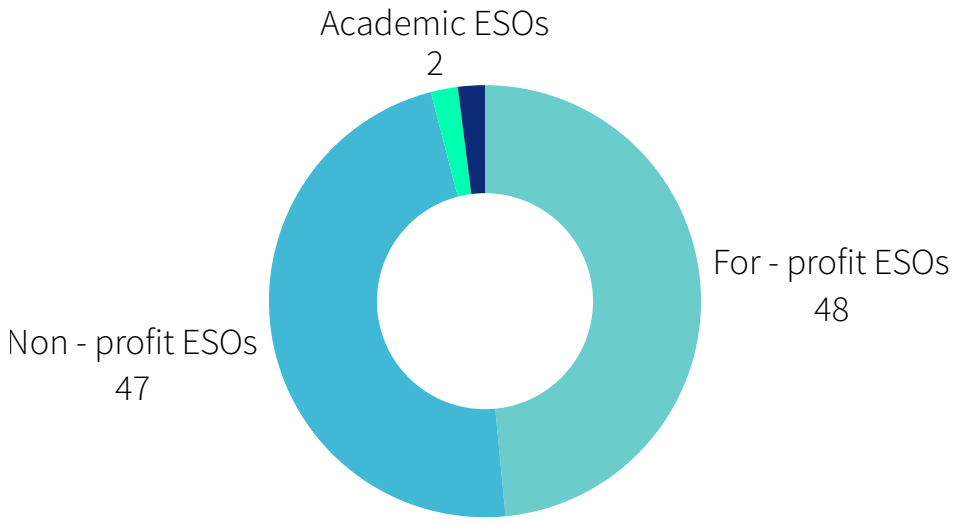

Figure 9: Typology of surveyed ESOs (N=88)

A country-level breakdown highlights distinct ecosystem identities (Annex, Figure 1). Kenya exhibits the highest diversity of models, with notable shares of academic ESOs and a small presence of public-sector intermediaries, alongside a balanced mix of for-profit and non-profit organizations. Nigeria, by contrast, is driven overwhelmingly by non-profit and for-profit actors, with no academic or public-sector ESOs represented in the sample, a pattern consistent with its privately led, donor-influenced support landscape. Rwanda presents a compact but structured system, centered around a few non-profit ESOs complemented by a small for-profit segment, reflecting its policy-coordinated but still maturing support architecture. South Africa combines a significant proportion of non-profits with a comparatively smaller for-profit representation, mirroring its dual ecosystem of formal, corporate-linked incubators driven by B-BBEE compliance and community-oriented support entities (Disrupt Africa, 2022).

The longevity of ESOs in the sample further illustrates the **varied maturity of the regional support landscape.** Overall, 40% of ESOs are “established” (6–10 years of activity), 27% are “consolidated” (11–20 years), and 12% are “recent” (3–5 years), while only 10% are very recent (≤2 years) and 11% qualify as “historic” organizations operating for more than two decades (Figure 10). These proportions indicate a relatively mature institutional core complemented by ongoing waves of new entrants, especially in Kenya and Nigeria. This survivorship is notable given the "valley of death" that ESOs themselves face; recent studies suggest that many intermediaries struggle to move beyond short-term program delivery to build resilient and long-term organizations (Snowmelt, 2023).

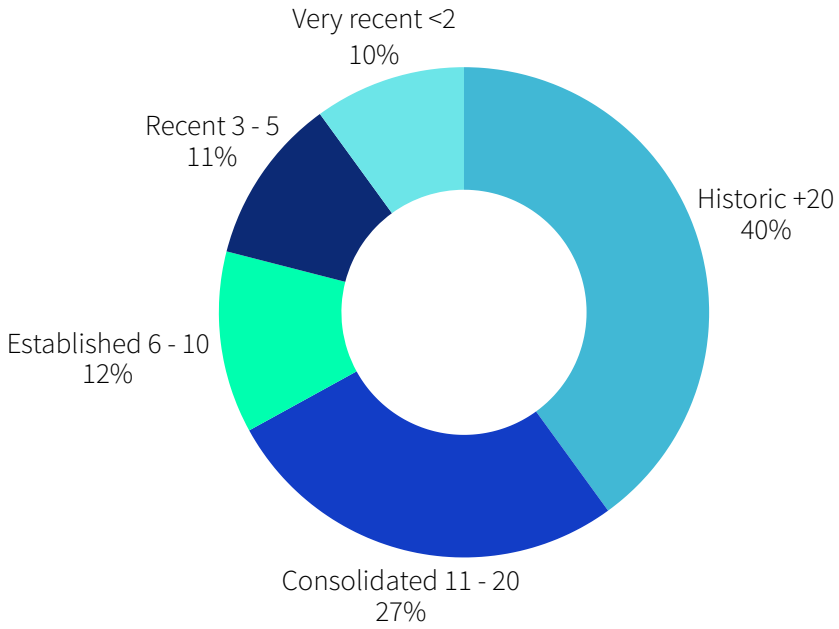

Figure 10: Years of activity of ESOs (N=88)

When disaggregating years of activity by organizational type, additional patterns emerge (Figure 11). For-profit ESOs show a balanced age distribution, with sizeable shares in both the established and consolidated categories, suggesting sustained private-sector engagement over the past decade. Non-profit ESOs exhibit a similarly broad age profile but with a higher share of consolidated organizations, reflecting their historical role in donor-funded entrepreneurship programs. Academic ESOs, while rare in the sample, fall almost entirely within the established category, indicating that university-linked initiatives tend to emerge in more mature ecosystems. Public-sector ESOs, although minimal in number, appear mostly in the recent category, reflecting their emerging role as ecosystem catalysts rather than long-standing program implementers.

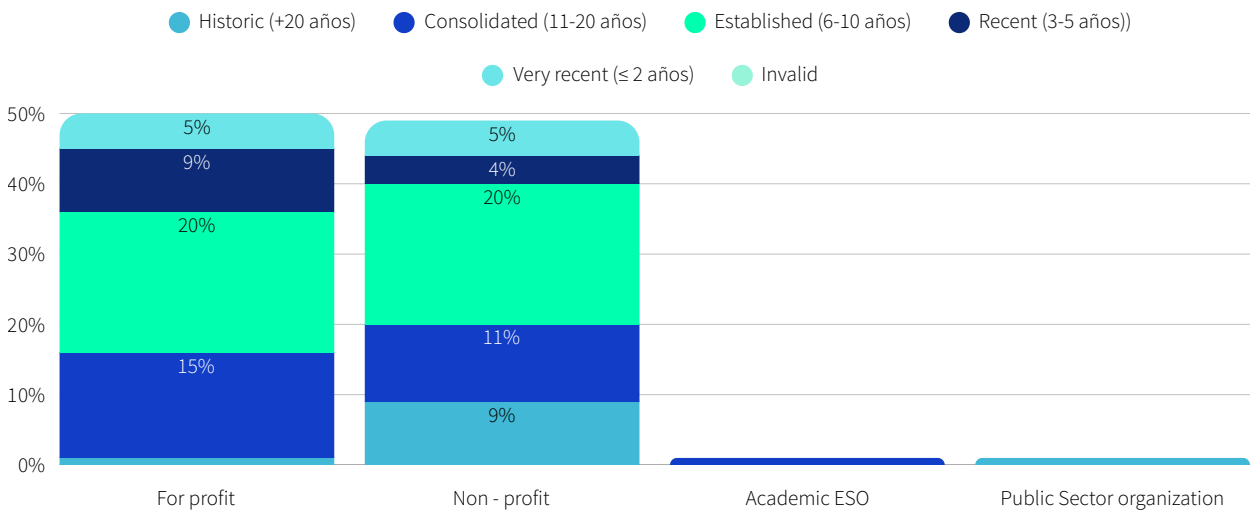

Figure 11: Age profile of ESOs by organizational type (N=80)

Country-level differences are notable (Annex, Figure 2). Kenya shows a balanced mix of established and consolidated ESOs alongside younger organizations emerging in the last five years, reflecting both institutional depth and continued ecosystem expansion. Nigeria has the highest share of established ESOs, indicating a long-term presence of support organizations with sustained donor or market engagement, but it also hosts a visible segment of newer actors. Rwanda, despite its smaller sample, shows a younger profile overall, consistent with the country's post-2015 emphasis on entrepreneur-led growth. South Africa displays the most pronounced dual pattern: a strong cohort of consolidated and historic ESOs coexisting with very recent initiatives, particularly those serving township and peri-urban communities.

Together, the typology and longevity analysis reveal **ecosystems anchored by experienced organizations but characterized by different national trajectories**: Kenya and Nigeria with blended, fast-evolving mixes; Rwanda with a compact and younger institutional base; and South Africa with a polarized structure reflecting both legacy institutions and emergent grassroots actors.

Takeaway

Concentrated support architectures, uneven access, and divergent institutional trajectories

The four-country sample reveals **entrepreneurial support ecosystems that are anchored in experience yet marked by uneven territorial reach and highly divergent national paths.** ESOs cluster overwhelmingly around major urban centers such as Nairobi, Lagos, Kigali, Cape Town, and Johannesburg while large secondary regions remain underserved. These geographic imbalances risk entrenching inequalities across the four ecosystems, where an entrepreneur's likelihood of accessing mentorship, networks, or investment readiness depends more on location than on potential.

Institutionally, the composition of ESOs varies significantly across ecosystems. Kenya and Nigeria host diverse and expanding mixes of for-profit and non-profit organizations; Rwanda's ecosystem is smaller and younger but coordinated through policy-led infrastructure; and South Africa's ecosystem shows a pronounced dual structure, combining long-established organizations with newer grassroots actors emerging in township and peri-urban areas. These divergences shape not only the availability of support but also each ecosystem's capacity to influence policy, absorb funding, and sustain long-term programming.

For ESOs, **the data underscores the need to act collectively to address territorial gaps and institutional asymmetries.** Strengthening partnerships across regions, sharing methodologies with younger or emerging organizations, and building coalitions for policy influence can help level the playing field within and across national ecosystems. Deepening collaboration between established and newer ESOs would help distribute capacities more evenly and reduce institutional fragility.

For funders and policymakers, strengthening entrepreneurial opportunity across the region requires **ecosystem-specific strategies.** Targeted investment beyond major hubs, long-term financing for ESO professionalization, and tailored support for younger or polarized ecosystems are essential. Without deliberate action, existing divides across the four national ecosystems will continue to determine who receives support and who is left behind.

2.2 Entrepreneurial journey stages covered

ESOs in the four-country sample provide support across all stages of the entrepreneurial journey, but **the distribution of effort is uneven and reflects both the maturity of national ecosystems and the operational models of the organizations themselves.** At the aggregate level, the data reveals a clear concentration of activity around the incubation stage, which represents 33% of all support efforts reported (Figure 12). Early-stage support is also significant. Pre-ideation and entrepreneurial mindset programs account for 26%, reflecting a continued need to cultivate foundational skills and broaden the pipeline of potential entrepreneurs. Ideation support represents 23%, showing that substantial effort goes into helping individuals refine ideas, validate assumptions, and begin early prototyping. More advanced stages, however, receive on average less attention: acceleration accounts for 19%, and scaling or growth programs just 12%, indicating persistent structural bottlenecks in later-stage support across the four ecosystems. This finding aligns closely with recent critiques of the African support landscape, which describe a "frenzy of programming" where ESOs often fail to provide the services required for scaling (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025). Consequently, while the "top of the funnel" is wide, the support infrastructure thins dramatically as enterprises mature, creating a "support gap" for post-revenue ventures.

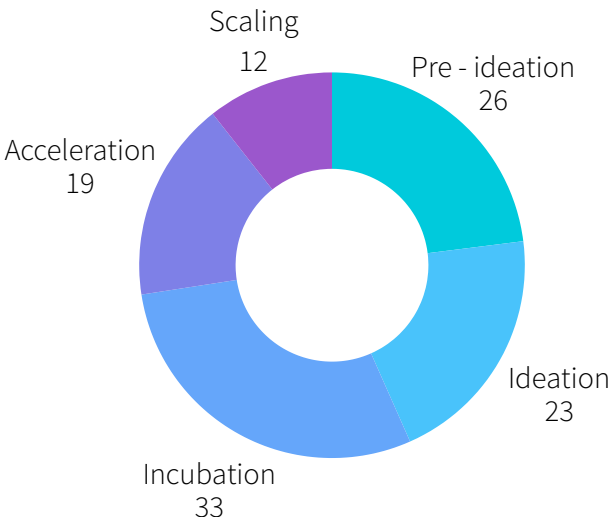

Figure 12: Average distribution (%) of ESO support by stage of the entrepreneurial journey (N=88)

The operational intensity behind these stages becomes clearer when examining the average number of entrepreneurs supported per ESO in 2024 (Table 1). Incubation emerges as the most resource-demanding stage, with ESOs supporting an average of 128 entrepreneurs. This **reinforces incubation's centrality not only as the most common programmatic focus but also as the stage with the largest volume of beneficiaries.**

Country-level data reveals distinct ecosystem dynamics. Kenya maintains one of the most balanced pipelines, with high volumes at ideation (176 entrepreneurs per ESO) and strong presence at incubation (112) and acceleration (105). Nigeria mirrors this pattern but emphasizes incubation even more strongly (126), suggesting a robust validation culture even as later-stage numbers decline. Rwanda, by contrast, presents a unique profile: it supports relatively few entrepreneurs at pre-ideation (8) and ideation (11), but reports high volumes at acceleration (95) and particularly at growth (193). This reflects the country's policy-driven focus on scaling and export-oriented entrepreneurship rather than broad early-stage funnel development; a strategy consistent with the government's objective to position Kigali as a pan-African proof-of-concept hub (ANDE, 2018). South Africa shows a dual structure: very high engagement at pre-ideation (158) and incubation (165), but low ideation (7) and relatively modest support at later stages. This distribution aligns with the country's "dual economy," where established incubators serve formal enterprises while a separate tier of community-based intermediaries focuses on basic skills training for survivalist entrepreneurs in township environments (ANDE, 2021).

Country	Pre-ideation	Ideation	Incubation	Acceleration	Scaling/Growth
Kenya	56	176	112	105	53
Nigeria	59	127	126	53	22
Rwanda	8	11	30	95	193
South Africa	158	7	165	40	27
Average	**84**	**100**	**128**	**66**	**41**

Table 1: Inferred average number of entrepreneurs supported in 2024 per ESO by stage (N=88)

A complementary perspective emerges when examining the predominant stage of focus claimed by ESOs (Figure 10). While incubation remains the most frequently cited primary focus (31%), followed by pre-ideation (26%) and ideation (20%), acceleration (15%) and growth (8%) remain marginal. This suggests that even where some organizations support entrepreneurs at later stages, few consider these stages their organizational "core". Country differences again stand out (Table 2). Kenyan ESOs show a relatively even distribution across early and mid-stages, while Nigerian ESOs place more emphasis on pre-ideation and incubation. Rwanda's ESOs overwhelmingly prioritize incubation, consistent with its small and concentrated ecosystem. South Africa shows slightly higher emphasis on acceleration, reflecting the presence of formalized accelerator structures linked to corporates and universities.

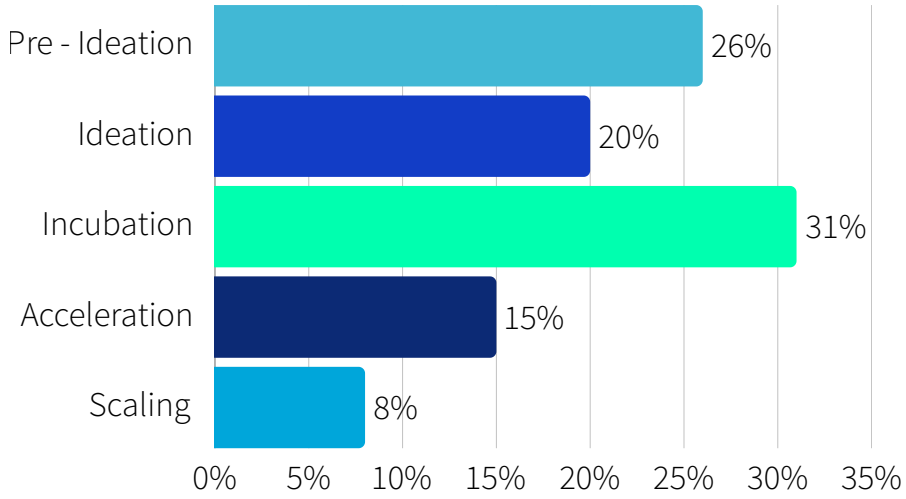

Figure 13: Inferred predominant stage of focus among ESOs (N=80)

Country	Pre-Ideation/ Entrepreneurial Mindset	Ideation	Incubation	Acceleration	Scaling/Growth
Kenya	5%	9%	9%	1%	1%
Nigeria	11%	7%	12%	5%	4%
Rwanda	3%	0%	1%	0%	1%
South Africa	7%	4%	8%	8%	1%
Average	**26%**	**20%**	**31%**	**15%**	**8%**

Table 2: Inferred predominant stage by country (% of ESOs) (N=88)

Differences by organizational type reinforce these patterns (Table 3). For-profit ESOs concentrate their predominant focus on incubation (16%) and acceleration (8%), while allocating 12% to pre-ideation and 7% to ideation and growth. Non-profit ESOs display a broader distribution, with 12% of their primary focus in both pre-ideation and ideation, and 15% in incubation. This distinction mirrors global trends which note that non-profit programs are often grant-mandated to focus on inclusivity and early-stage pipeline building, while for-profit entities are incentivized to engage at stages where "investability" becomes a viable metric (GALI, 2017). Academic ESOs, though few, focus primarily on ideation (1%), whereas public-sector organizations engage mainly in pre-ideation (1%), with no reported predominant activity in later stages.

Longevity also shapes stage specialization (Annex, Table 2). Established and consolidated ESOs (6–20 years) have the broadest distribution across stages, with noticeable emphasis on incubation and acceleration, reflecting institutional maturity and resource depth. Very recent ESOs (≤2 years) show a strong concentration around incubation, likely due to lower entry barriers and the availability of donor-funded cohort models. Historic ESOs (+20 years) are rare but tend to concentrate on acceleration, a pattern consistent with their deeper networks and greater operational capacity.

Row Labels	Pre-Ideation/ Entrepreneurial Mindset	Ideation	Incubation	Acceleration	Scaling/Growth
Academic ESO	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
For-profit	12%	7%	16%	8%	7%
Non-profit	12%	12%	15%	7%	1%
Public Sector Organization	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Average	**26%**	**20%**	**31%**	**15%**	**8%**

Table 3: Inferred predominant stage by ESO type (% of ESOs) (N=88)

Taken together, the data paints a picture of entrepreneurial support ecosystems that offer broad but uneven coverage across the venture journey. **Incubation is the dominant anchor, early-stage pipeline development remains substantial, and later-stage support continues to be structurally underdeveloped.** Cross-country differences underscore the need for differentiated strategies: **Kenya and Nigeria operate more balanced and maturing pipelines; Rwanda demonstrates a top-heavy structure oriented toward scaling; and South Africa manages a dual system with strong early-stage activity but limited ideation pathways.** These distinctions are essential for designing targeted interventions that respond to the specific gaps and strengths of each national ecosystem.

Takeaway

Early- and mid-stage concentration leaves structural gaps in later-stage support

The data shows that the four national ecosystems devote substantial effort to early and mid-stages of entrepreneurial development, with incubation absorbing the largest share of both programmatic focus and beneficiary volume. Pre-ideation and ideation also remain central pillars of the support landscape, reflecting the continued need to cultivate entrepreneurial pipelines in contexts where opportunity-driven entrepreneurship is unevenly distributed.

Yet across the sample, later stages (acceleration and scaling) receive considerably less attention, both in terms of organizational prioritization and the number of entrepreneurs supported. Even ecosystems that show strong early-stage engagement, such as Kenya and South Africa, struggle to sustain support beyond initial validation, while **Rwanda presents a reverse imbalance: a strong emphasis on scaling without a commensurate base of early-stage funnel development.** These mismatches create fragile pipelines where promising ventures risk stalling before reaching investable maturity.

For ESOs, the findings underscore the importance of coordinating more intentionally across stages. Strengthening referral mechanisms, sharing diagnostic tools, and co-developing stage-specific methodologies would help ensure that entrepreneurs do not fall through gaps in the pipeline. Organizations with strong pre-ideation and ideation capacity could play a pivotal role in widening the funnel, while those specializing in incubation and acceleration can support ventures through the more technical phases of validation and early growth.

Strategic Investment Shift: To bridge the identified "support gap," ecosystem investment must pivot from a "frenzy of programming" at the top of the funnel toward long-term funding instruments for the later stages. Prioritizing capital for acceleration and scale-ready schemes will allow ecosystems to convert early-stage volume into sustained commercial maturity and investable ventures.

For funders and policymakers, the data suggests that incentives and financing remain heavily oriented toward early-stage programming, leaving the later stages underdeveloped. Creating long-term funding instruments for acceleration, designing scale-ready support schemes, and backing ESOs that bridge stages would help ecosystems convert early entrepreneurial interest into sustained business growth. Without deliberate action to rebalance the distribution of support, structural gaps between early promise and commercial maturity will persist thus limiting the potential of ventures across all four national ecosystems.

2.3 Calls and selection models

Entry into ESO programs across the four-country sample is structured through a combination of rolling admissions and cohort-based application cycles. At the aggregate level, 39% of programs operate with rolling or ongoing admissions, enabling entrepreneurs to join at any point during the year, while the remaining 61% rely on cohort-based recruitment, opening calls for applications at specific moments tied to program calendars or funding cycles. Among programs that use cohort-based entry, **ESOs run an average of 1.6 calls for applications per year,** indicating that intake cycles are relatively infrequent, and that program onboarding is concentrated around one or two key recruitment periods. Other research suggests that the dominance of cohort-based models is often driven by donor reporting cycles and the "accelerator" business model, which necessitates batch processing of startups to maximize efficiency often at the expense of continuous and on-demand support for founders (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025).

These models differ substantially across countries (Table 4). Kenya and Nigeria each show a mixed approach, with 17% of programs using rolling admissions and 30% and 26% respectively relying on scheduled calls for applications. Rwanda, although represented by a small sample, shows only rolling admissions and no cohort-based programs. South Africa stands in contrast to Rwanda, with its reported programs relying exclusively on cohort-based entry and no use of rolling admissions.

Admissions model	Kenya	Nigeria	Rwanda	South Africa	Total
Cohort-based	30%	26%	0%	4%	**61%**
Rolling admissions	17%	17%	4%	0%	**39%**

Table 4. Share of ESOs using rolling admissions vs. cohort-based calls, by country (N=24)

The selection models applied by ESOs reveal a consistent emphasis on mission alignment and team capacity as primary filters in the admissions process (Figure 14). Across the sample, ESOs give the highest weight to the purpose or social impact of the project and to the entrepreneurial team's talent and previous experience, closely followed by the scalability potential of the business model and the novelty or innovativeness of the idea. These priorities indicate that ESOs value ventures capable of generating social or economic impact led by motivated and competent teams. However, the moderate weight given to "traction" suggests that ESOs remain willing to take risks on early-stage ventures that lack revenue, provided the team is credible. Notably, criteria such as the "degree of exclusion" of the business within the ecosystem play a relatively minor role in decisions. This presents a potential friction point with the findings from Village Capital (2024), which argues that unless ESOs explicitly prioritize exclusion in their selection criteria, they risk perpetuating a bias toward urban, well-educated founders while leaving rural and marginalized entrepreneurs behind.

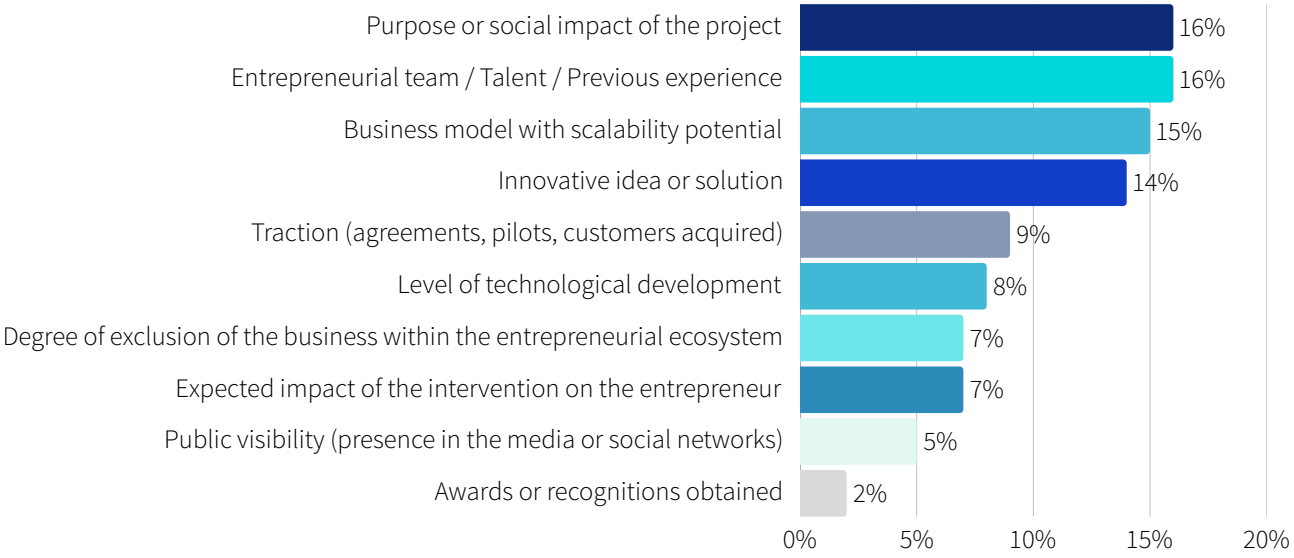

Figure 14: Average weight (%) of selection criteria assigned by ESOs (N=24)

Patterns differ across ESO types (Table 3). Academic ESOs assign a disproportionate emphasis to the innovativeness of the idea, with little weight given to team strength, scalability, or traction, reflecting their institutional role in facilitating idea emergence rather than market readiness. For-profit ESOs place greater importance on team capacity, social impact, scalability, and early traction, consistent with more commercially oriented or investment-linked models. Non-profit ESOs apply a more balanced approach, distributing weight across innovation, impact, team characteristics, and the degree of exclusion, aligning with their broader social mission.

Overall, the combination of rolling and cohort-based admissions and the structure of selection criteria reveal a system designed to balance inclusivity with strategic filtering. However, reliance on cohorts, often driven by the "project-based" nature of donor funding identified in the Snowmelt (2023) report, may be creating artificial bottlenecks for entrepreneurs who need support outside of rigid application windows. While the selection criteria reinforce a pipeline model centered on purposeful ventures with credible teams, the limited emphasis on "exclusion" as a primary filter suggests that despite the rhetoric of inclusivity, the selection mechanics of many ESOs still favor the "most likely to succeed" over the "most in need."

Takeaway

Admission bottlenecks and selective filters shape who gets supported

The data reveals that **admissions into ESO programs across the four-country sample remain unevenly structured**, with most programs still relying on cohort-based calls that open only once or twice a year. While rolling admissions offer greater flexibility, they

are used by just under two-fifths of programs, and their distribution varies sharply across national ecosystems. These differences have direct implications for equity of access. Entrepreneurs operating outside major hubs or lacking visibility into funding cycles may struggle to enter programs whose calls are infrequent and tightly scheduled. At the same time, the selection criteria applied by ESOs privilege ventures with strong teams, credible social impact, and scalable models, which can unintentionally favor more resourced or networked entrepreneurs.

For ESOs, this underscores the need to balance rigor with inclusion by strengthening outreach, refining criteria that overlook context-specific constraints, and experimenting with hybrid admission models.

For funders and policymakers, the patterns highlight the importance of sustained, multi-cycle financing that allows ESOs to diversify their intake mechanisms and reduce barriers imposed by rigid application windows. Unless admissions and selection systems become more accessible and better aligned with the realities of emerging entrepreneurial communities, significant segments of potential founders across the four ecosystems will remain excluded from critical early support.

3. Organizational capacity and models of intervention

At a glance:

The operational backbone of Africa's ESO ecosystem reveals a landscape marked by high demand, strong inclusion commitments, and significant programmatic breadth, yet constrained by structural imbalance and uneven institutional maturity. Financially, ESOs operate with lean budgets and high dependency on short-term, project-based funding —particularly among non-profits, which shoulder most inclusion-oriented work. Earned income remains limited, leaving organizations vulnerable to funding cycles and inhibiting long-term planning. For-profit ESOs show comparatively stronger revenue diversification, while academic and public-sector ESOs operate within restricted institutional mandates that limit financial autonomy and program scale.

Programmatically, African ESOs offer a wide range of services, but depth varies. Mentorship and entrepreneurship training are nearly universal, while more advanced offerings such as investment readiness, R&D support, or technology acceleration remain

concentrated in a small subset of organizations. Sectorally, ESOs span a broad set of domains, yet activity clusters around a few strategic areas: agriculture, technology, and education. Technological sophistication similarly skews toward low- and moderate-tech ventures, reflecting broader economic structures and resource constraints. Human resource models remain small and often overextended, with non-profits relying heavily on temporary or donor-funded staffing while for-profit ESOs operate lean teams aimed at efficiency and sustainability.

In terms of reach, the ecosystem combines high throughput with stark disparities in scale. A handful of historic and consolidated ESOs serve hundreds of entrepreneurs annually, driving regional averages upward, while most early- and mid-stage ESOs operate with modest cohort sizes and limited delivery capacity. High application volumes (over 300 per call on average) demonstrate strong entrepreneurial demand, yet only a fraction of applicants are accepted, reflecting capacity constraints across the system. Inclusivity is a standout feature: youth, women, and rural entrepreneurs constitute the core of supported populations. However, engagement with migrants, older adults, people with disabilities, and base-of-the-pyramid populations remains limited and is driven almost exclusively by non-profit ESOs, highlighting a structural dependence on donor-funded actors to sustain equity-focused programming.

Altogether, **Africa's ESO ecosystem is dynamic, socially driven, and rich in mission diversity, but remains hindered by funding precarity, uneven scale, and limited institutional consolidation.** It is an ecosystem that has broadened access to entrepreneurship support at impressive scale, yet continues to search for the organizational stability, specialized capabilities, and long-term investment needed to advance technological sophistication, expand inclusion, and sustain impact at continent-wide scale.

3.1 Human Capital

The human capital structures of ESOs in the four-country sample reveal significant variation in staffing models, operational capacity, and the intensity with which organizations support entrepreneurs. Survey 2 data shows that t**eam configurations differ sharply by ESO type.** For-profit ESOs report the largest number of full-time employees dedicated to entrepreneurship support (23), compared with 11 in non-profit ESOs and 3 in academic ESOs (Figure 15). However, when considering volunteer involvement, the pattern reverses: non-profit ESOs rely heavily on volunteer networks, reporting an average of 44 volunteers compared to 8 in for-profit ESOs and none in academic institutions. This duality reflects the distinct operational logics of the two dominant models. For-profit ESOs tend to build lean but professionalized teams oriented toward structured program delivery, whereas non-profits often bridge internal resource gaps by leveraging external mentors and alumni networks to expand reach and maintain community-oriented programming (GALI, 2020).

Figure 15: Aaverage number of full-time employees and volunteers in ESO by type of organization (N=24)

A more nuanced picture emerges when examining the ratio of entrepreneurs supported per employee (E/E), an indicator that helps **gauge organizational productivity, capacity, and potential trade-offs between scale and depth. Across the sample, the average E/E is 98 entrepreneurs per staff member**, though the distribution varies widely by organizational type and maturity. For-profit ESOs demonstrate exceptionally high efficiency, with an average of 209 entrepreneurs supported per employee suggesting scalable program models, reliance on digital tools, or highly standardized intervention formats. Non-profit ESOs, in contrast, report an average E/E of 8, consistent with support models that emphasize direct engagement, deeper coaching, and longer program cycles. Academic ESOs show very limited scale (E/E of 6), reflecting their focus on ideation and internal student populations (Table 4).

Differences by ESO maturity reinforce these patterns. Consolidated ESOs (11–20 years old) report the highest E/E by a considerable margin: 222 entrepreneurs per staff member indicating that data-driven learning systems and codified knowledge to scale their impact efficiently without proportionally increasing costs (Snowmelt, 2023). Established ESOs (6–10 years) show moderate scale with an E/E of 82, while recent and very recent organizations (≤5 years) report much lower ratios, consistent with the early operational fragility documented in ecosystem studies. Historic organizations (+20 years), although few in number, show surprisingly low E/E levels (4), which may reflect specialization in deep support programs or the presence of larger administrative structures relative to program delivery (Table 5).

The human capital data illustrates a landscape defined by heterogeneous operating models and differing philosophies of scale. For-profit ESOs leverage compact, professional teams to support large entrepreneur cohorts, while non-profit ESOs anchor their work in community-driven structures supported by substantial volunteer engagement. Experienced ESOs demonstrate significantly higher capacity to operate at scale, whereas younger organizations remain more constrained but may offer deeper support. These dynamics shape not only program delivery but also the sustainability, inclusivity, and long-term evolution of the entrepreneurial support architecture across the four-country sample.

Takeaway

Human capital gaps are constraining the depth and scalability of support

The human capital data reveals s**tructural imbalances that shape how effectively ESOs can serve entrepreneurs across the four ecosystems.** For-profit organizations operate with small teams supporting disproportionately large entrepreneur portfolios, while non-profits depend heavily on volunteers and provide more intensive and lower-scale support. These divergent models create a fragmented landscape where the type of ESO an entrepreneur encounters can determine not only the depth of assistance received but also the likelihood of sustained follow-up. Mature ESOs demonstrate far greater operational capacity, yet newer organizations, which are often closest to underserved communities, struggle with extremely low staffing ratios that limit their reach and resilience.

For ESOs, these patterns underscore the need to strengthen team capacity, professionalize volunteer structures, and adopt tools that relieve pressure on overstretched staff. Without better resource allocation and workforce development, many ESOs will continue to face trade-offs between scale and quality.

For funders and policymakers, the findings point to a critical operational gap: support organizations cannot expand pipelines or deliver high-quality programming without predictable and long-term investment in human capital. Funding cycles that prioritize program delivery over institutional strengthening leave ESOs understaffed and vulnerable, particularly those working in rural areas or with marginalized entrepreneurs. Addressing these human capital constraints is essential for building ecosystems that can scale equitably and sustainably across the four-country sample.

3.2 Services Offered

The service portfolios offered by ESOs across the four-country sample reveal a support landscape that is broad, multi-layered, and heavily anchored in training and advisory delivery. The most common services are practical and interactive workshops (69%), business coaching (69%), and in-person training (68%). These formats demonstrate that **structured skills development remains the foundational building block of the entrepreneurial support architecture.** Online synchronous training (59%) extends these learning models into hybrid formats, indicating that blended delivery has become a standard operating approach across ESOs. Advisory and relationship-based services constitute the next tier of support. On-demand advisory (59%) and personalized mentoring (58%) reflect the importance ESOs place on responsive, individualized guidance, while organized networking activities (58%) signal a sustained emphasis on building relational capital, peer exchange, and market linkages. These services play an essential role in bridging the gap between training and real-world application, especially in ecosystems where entrepreneurs often rely on informal networks to access partners, clients, and investors.

More specialized or resource-intensive services are present but less widespread. Technical consulting (51%), business development support (49%), and funding for entrepreneurs (49%) illustrate that a significant proportion of ESOs attempt to move beyond training into higher-touch interventions. However, capacity constraints may be financial, technical, or staffing, often limit the breadth of these offerings. This dynamic is frequently attributed to resource limitations, where a lack of resources added to a programmatic approach leads ESOs to favor a one-size fits all approach" rather than highly tailored, resource-intensive consulting (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025). Services such as co-working space (41%), media visibility (37%), demo or investor days (33%), and asynchronous online training (22%) are provided by a narrower subset of organizations (Figure 16).

Disaggregation by ESO type helps explain these variations (Annex, Table 6). For-profit ESOs exhibit the strongest concentration of advisory, coaching, and professionalized services, including higher representation in personalized mentoring, on-demand advisory, technical consulting, and investor-oriented events. Their portfolio suggests operational models designed around commercialization, investment readiness, and outcome-based performance. Non-profit ESOs present a broader and more evenly distributed mix, combining workshops, training, mentoring, networking, and occasional funding mechanisms. Their service patterns reflect mandate-driven inclusion goals, typically underpinned by grants or philanthropic capital that favor accessible, community-oriented programming. Taken together, the data depicts an entrepreneurial support landscape in which training and mentoring form the core of service provision across all ecosystems, while more advanced or resource-intensive services, particularly those linked to investment readiness or business development, are concentrated within a smaller segment of ESOs.

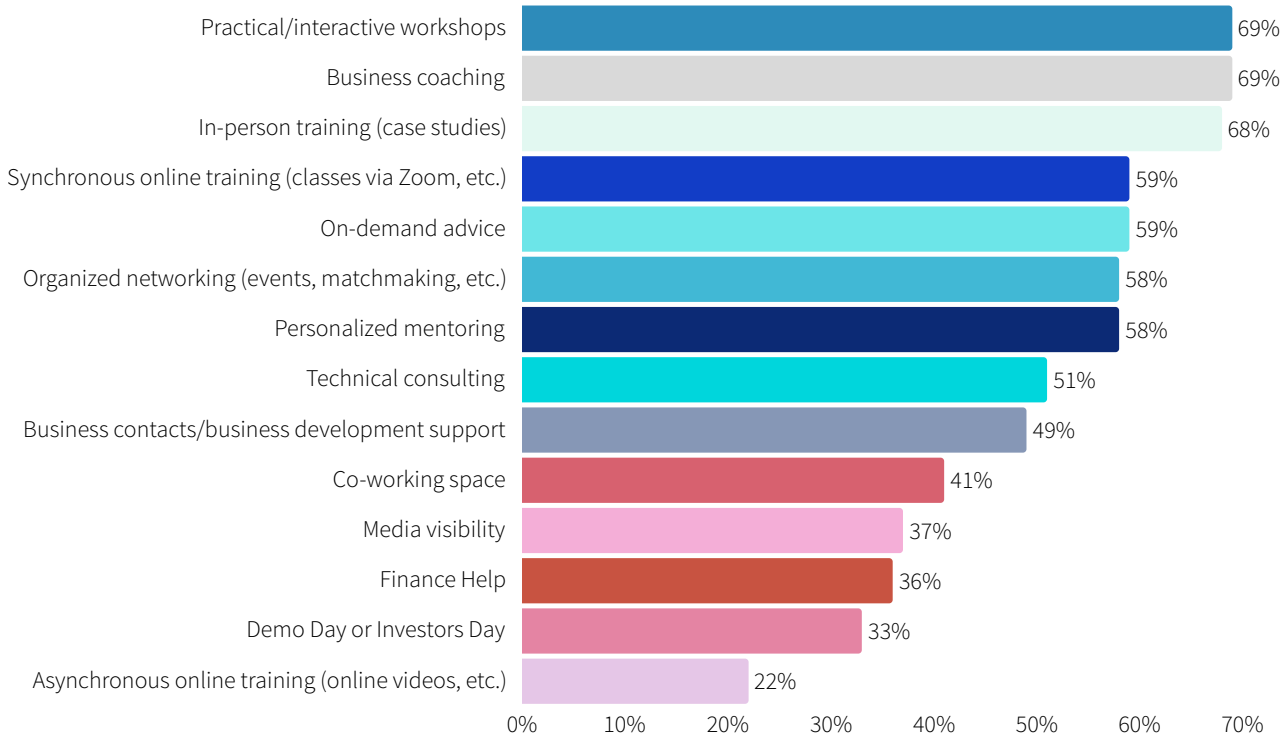

Figure 16: Services most frequently offered by ESOs (N=88)

The structure and intensity of ESO programs in the four-country sample show a clear emphasis on moderately long implementation phases combined with substantial time dedicated to direct entrepreneur support. Across all organizations, the average total program cycle spans 8.8 months (Annex, Table 7), distributed across three main phases: program design and preparation (3.3 months), participant recruitment and selection (3.1 months), and program implementation (5.4 months). This indicates that ESOs invest almost as much time preparing and sourcing entrepreneurs as they do delivering the actual program, reflecting the operational demands associated with maintaining quality cohorts, verifying applicant fit, and coordinating diverse support components.

Within the implementation phase, the intensity of services varies significantly by type of activity. On average, entrepreneurs receive 23 hours of personalized mentorship, 13 hours of online synchronous training, 19 hours of in-person training, and 21 hours of on-demand advisory across the program cycle. This balance suggests that ESOs combine live training formats with flexible advisory structures, allowing entrepreneurs meaningful access to individualized support while maintaining program scalability.

When disaggregated by predominant stage of focus, the time investment profiles reveal distinct programmatic logics (Annex, Table 8). Ideation and incubation programs allocate the highest number of in-person training hours (26 and 17 hours respectively), consistent

with the hands-on, validation-oriented nature of these stages. Pre-ideation programs, by contrast, devote more hours to online synchronous training (25), reflecting their emphasis on foundational learning and mindset development rather than product-focused execution. Acceleration programs show lower training hours overall, with 14 hours of mentorship and limited in-person engagement, which aligns with the expectation that ventures at this stage require targeted guidance rather than structured pedagogy. A notable outlier emerges in scaling and growth, where programs report an average of 300 hours of on-demand advisory. Although the sample for this category is small, the intensity reflects the nature of scale-up challenges: highly individualized, context-specific, and dependent on continuous expert input. This contrasts sharply with early-stage models where training formats can be more standardized.

Taken together, the duration and intensity data highlight **a landscape where ESOs invest heavily in preparation and recruitment, deliver a robust mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning formats, and tailor programmatic depth to the specific demands of each entrepreneurial stage.** Early and mid-stage programs emphasize structured training and mentorship, while later-stage programs rely more heavily on adaptive advisory models that respond to the unique operational and strategic needs of growth-oriented ventures.

Further, the funding mechanisms offered by ESOs in the four-country sample disclose a landscape where **direct financial support is present but modest and highly uneven across organizational models. On average, programs provide USD 7,586 in direct funding to participating entrepreneurs** (Annex, Tables 9 and 10), but this figure masks substantial variation linked to the nature and maturity of the organizations that administer these programs. Differences across ESO types are particularly pronounced. **Academic ESOs offer the highest average amount** (USD 10,000), consistent with their access to university-linked grants and institutional budgets. For-profit ESOs follow with an average of USD 7,830, reflecting models where small seed grants or cash awards complement training and mentorship. Non-profit ESOs provide slightly lower funding (USD 6,778), which aligns with donor-funded designs where financial support is often limited and tied to specific impact-oriented criteria.

A similar heterogeneity appears when disaggregating by years of activity. **Very recent ESOs (≤2 years) report exceptionally high average funding levels (USD 25,000)**, likely due to a small sample and the presence of donor-backed pilot initiatives with substantial initial budgets. In contrast, established and consolidated ESOs (6–20 years) provide more modest amounts. These more mature organizations tend to operate stable but resource-constrained programs that prioritize capacity building over direct financing. No historic ESOs (+20 years) reported offering funding, which may indicate a model centered on mentorship, ecosystem convening, or non-financial services. Overall, the pattern suggests that younger organizations rely more heavily on grant capital to attract participants, while older ESOs deploy diversified support models that do not rely primarily on direct monetary awards.

Equity-based funding models are present but remain limited in scope (Annex, Tables 11 and 12). **The average equity exchanged in programs requiring equity participation is 9%**, though this varies substantially across organizational types. Non-profit ESOs report the highest equity rate (13%), likely tied to revenue-sharing or quasi-equity clauses embedded in donor-backed or impact-linked instruments. For-profit ESOs request an average of 8%, closer to global accelerator norms, while academic ESOs report lighter equity participation (5%). Differences by organizational age reflect similar dynamics: consolidated ESOs show the highest reported equity rate (16%), whereas very recent ESOs average around 10%. These findings indicate that equity-for-support mechanisms exist but remain peripheral, reinforcing the observation that while the majority of ESOs offer some sort of funding to participating ventures, very few use alternative financing structures such as blended financing or quasi-equity (GALI, 2020).

Overall, the data points to an entrepreneurial support landscape where **direct funding complements but does not substitute the broader package of training, mentorship, and networking services** offered by ESOs. While some organizations deploy significant financial support, most operate with limited funding capacity and prioritize non-financial mechanisms to support early-stage entrepreneurs. The heterogeneity across ESO types and maturity suggests that funding practices are shaped more by organizational models and financing structures than by country-level ecosystem characteristics.

Takeaway

Human capital gaps are constraining the depth and scalability of support

The service architecture across the four-country sample reflects ESOs that are highly active, deeply committed to entrepreneur-facing delivery, and consistent in offering a core package of training, mentoring, advisory, and networking. Yet beneath this apparent cohesion lies a landscape marked by disparities in service depth, specialization, and financial support capacity: differences that stem less from country-level dynamics and more from the institutional models and maturity of the ESOs themselves.

Training and coaching form the universal backbone of support, but the intensity and sophistication of services vary substantially across the sector. Early- and mid-stage programs invest heavily in structured pedagogy while later-stage support depends on flexible and expertise-driven advisory that is far more resource-intensive and therefore less accessible. This structural imbalance reinforces a pattern where many entrepreneurs receive substantial early support but encounter shrinking availability of tailored guidance as they advance toward acceleration and scaling.

Funding practices amplify these disparities. W**hile some ESOs deploy sizable financial support, most programs provide modest or no direct funding and rely instead on training and relational services to deliver value.** Equity-based models remain peripheral, used by a minority of organizations and with inconsistent rates that reflect mandate differences more than market logic. As a result, entrepreneurs across **the four ecosystems often depend on non-financial support to progress**, with funding rarely serving as a central pillar of program design.

For ESOs, these findings point to the need for more coordinated approaches to service provision across the entrepreneurial journey. Strengthening interoperability between training-heavy early-stage programs and advisory-heavy growth initiatives would help reduce the friction entrepreneurs face when transitioning between stages. Building shared pools of specialized expertise, particularly for technical consulting, market access, and scale-up support, could help organizations with limited resources to offer more advanced services without overstretching staff.

For funders and policymakers, the data underscores the importance of investing not only in entrepreneur-facing activities but also in the institutional capacity of ESOs to expand beyond foundational training. Flexible funding streams, multi-cycle financing, and support for shared advisory infrastructure would help reduce the current bottlenecks in later-stage support. Without intentional reinforcement of these higher-touch functions, the ecosystems risk maintaining a large early-stage pipeline with insufficient mechanisms to help ventures mature toward growth, resilience, and investability.

3.3 Business models and sustainability

The income structure of ESOs across the four-country sample reveals a financially heterogeneous landscape shaped by a mix of earned revenue and external funding streams. At the aggregate level, revenue from services provided to entrepreneurs represents the single largest income source (26%).

This indicates that a significant share of ESOs, particularly those operating under commercial or hybrid models, rely on fee-based mechanisms to partially sustain their operations. Other findings highlight that 80% of ESOs generate revenues from consulting services to supplement their income, often diverting resources from their core mission of startup support (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025). Corporations, through CSR-driven partnerships, constitute the second largest source of funding (20%),

followed by support from international organizations (16%), suggesting that private-sector and donor-linked channels continue to play a central role in funding entrepreneurial support activities. Other income categories including international foundations (13%), national foundations (4%), government funding and subsidies (5%), universities (2%), and miscellaneous sources (14%) illustrate the wide dispersion of financing strategies across the ecosystem (Figure 17).

Disaggregation by country reveals four clearly differentiated funding profiles. **Kenya combines significant reliance on international support** (36%) with moderate contributions from service revenue (20%), corporate/CSR (4%), and international foundations (18%). **Nigeria is the most service-driven ecosystem in the sample**, with 36% of income derived from entrepreneur payments. Corporate/CSR (15%), international support (15%), and international foundations (7%) each contribute secondary but meaningful shares, resulting in a more diversified commercial–grant mix. **Rwanda stands out for its pronounced dependence on CSR funding** (50%) and international foundations (40%), with almost no revenue from services, government, equity, or university sources. **South Africa presents a mixed model** anchored by CSR (34%), service revenue (27%), and modest levels of government support (11%).

Differences by ESO type further illustrate how funding strategies align with organizational missions and operating models. For-profit ESOs rely overwhelmingly on service revenue (37%), supported by CSR partnerships (21%), while maintaining relatively low dependence on grants or foundations. Their income structures reflect sustainability models rooted in earned revenue and private-sector collaborations. Non-profit ESOs, conversely, draw substantial resources from international organizations (22%), international foundations (18%), CSR contributions (18%), and are complemented by limited service income (15%). This composition reflects the continued centrality of grant-funded program models, a dependency that can lead to persistent instability as ESOs chase short-term contracts rather than building long-term capacity (Snowmelt, 2023). Academic ESOs, though few in number, present a distinctive pattern combining support from international organizations (25%), CSR (25%), service fees (10%), and universities (5%), revealing a hybrid institutional profile. Public-sector ESOs derive most of their income from service revenue (33%) and a substantial “other” category (44%), consistent with ad-hoc government program budgets, special project allocations, or non-standardized public funding streams.

A closer look across countries and organizational types shows that the financial architecture of ESOs is not defined by a single dominant model but by **a mosaic of revenue streams that reflect both strategic positioning and ecosystem constraints.** The mix of entrepreneur fees, corporate sponsorships, donor funding, and foundation support operates less as a unified pattern and more as a set of adaptive responses to the funding environments in which ESOs operate. Differences between for-profit, non-profit, academic, and public-sector ESOs highlight how institutional identity shapes financial strategy, while country-level contrasts reveal the influence of national corporate cultures

donor presence, and government engagement. This diversity underscores a landscape where financial sustainability depends on the ability of ESOs to navigate multiple funding channels rather than rely on a single and stable source of income.

Figure 17: Average revenue sources of ESOs in (N=88)

While donor dependency remains a challenge, the data points to for-profit ESOs and academic institutions as the most successful at reducing reliance on international grants. For-profit ESOs derive 37% of their income from service fees and 21% from CSR partnerships, creating a sustainability model rooted in market-driven earned revenue. Academic ESOs demonstrate a unique "institutional hybrid" model, successfully diversifying across every source category (100%) by leveraging university budgets alongside service fees and international cooperation. Nigeria stands out as the most market-resilient ecosystem in the sample, with ESOs there generating 36% of their income directly from entrepreneur payments, suggesting a robust culture of fee-for-service validation

Looking at the breadth of income sources, defined as the share of ESOs reporting at least some revenue from each category, the data shows that African ESOs draw from a broad but uneven mix of funding channels (Annex, Table 15). The most commonly accessed sources include corporate partneof earned income. Academic ESOs, though few in number, stand out for having income from every source category (100%), reflecting their embeddedness in institutional budgets, grants, and partnerships. Public-sector ESOs show a narrow structure dominated by service revenue and “other” sources. The resulting picture is one of broad exposure but uneven stability. African ESOs diversify across many revenue streams, yet much of this diversification is rooted in CSR and internationally funded projects: sources that tend to be short-term and project-based. In the absence of stronger domestic public funding mechanisms, this mix allows ESOs to remain operational but does not necessarily translate into long-term financial resilience.

A clearer picture of financial dependence emerges when examining depth, defined as the share of ESOs obtaining more than 25% of their revenue from a given source (Annex, Table 16). The most significant pillar is entrepreneur payments for services, where 35% of ESOs derive a substantial share of their income. The next strongest anchors are

corporate/CSR partnerships (24%), international organizations (21%), and other sources (21%), indicating that only a limited set of funding channels constitute major and high-dependency revenue streams for African ESOs. All remaining sources show much lower depth. The sharp drop after the top four sources illustrates that while many ESOs report some level of diversification, very few funding categories play a decisive financial role for most organizations.

Differences across ESO types sharpen these patterns. For-profit ESOs show the broadest depth structure, with half deriving more than 25% of their revenue from services and notable shares reliant on CSR (28%), other sources (22%), and international organizations (16%). Non-profits exhibit more modest concentration, with their deepest dependencies tied to international organizations (29%), CSR (21%), and international foundations (18%). Academic ESOs report no deep reliance on any single category, reflecting more diffuse and institutionally backed budgets. Public-sector ESOs present the most concentrated profiles: all rely deeply on service revenue and “other” sources. Overall, the depth analysis confirms a structural imbalance: a wide variety of income sources exist, but only a handful provide meaningful and stable revenue. African ESOs show breadth across many channels, yet financial resilience rests on a narrow set of high-dependency streams.

The financial profile reveals an ecosystem operating with modest and uneven budgets, reflecting both the nascency of many support organizations and the wider funding constraints present across the four-country sample. On average, ESOs report an annual budget of USD 81,934, with USD 48,219 allocated to entrepreneurship-related activities and USD 22,129 generated as entrepreneurship income (Annex, Table 17). These values confirm the resource-constrained nature of the region’s incubation and acceleration landscape, where program delivery depends heavily on external support rather than self-sustaining revenue streams.

Differences by country illustrate striking disparities in scale. South Africa stands out with significantly larger budgets and program expenditures (USD 190,000 and USD 125,000 respectively), pointing to a more institutionalized support infrastructure. Kenya and Nigeria operate with far leaner resources: total budgets around USD 40,417 and USD 99,564, suggesting smaller organizational footprints and greater vulnerability to funding volatility. Variation by organizational type reinforces these structural patterns. Academic ESOs report unusually high entrepreneurship-related income (USD 100,000), driven by institutional backing and access to university resources. For-profit ESOs manage comparatively lean operations: USD 95,814 in total expenditure with limited income directly tied to entrepreneurship activities (USD 15,714), indicating early-stage or commercially constrained models.

Non-profit ESOs operate at an intermediate scale (USD 73,750), reflecting the mix of donor funding and program spending typical of mission-driven organizations.

Resource allocation also highlights the intensity of recruitment and program delivery. **ESOs dedicate on average the 23% of their annual budget to scouting and selection**, a substantial share for organizations of this size. The average scouting cost per entrepreneur (USD 469) underscores the logistical and outreach challenges ESOs face when identifying entrepreneurs across diverse and often fragmented markets. Program delivery costs follow a similar pattern of intensity. The average cost per entrepreneur (USD 1,887) and particularly the cost per woman entrepreneur (USD 6,028) reveal significant expenditure pressures associated with inclusive programming. **The expenditure data depict a landscape marked by lean budgets, high operational intensity, and limited cost recovery.** African ESOs allocate a disproportionate share of their limited resources to scouting and program delivery, a sign of strong commitment but also a structural constraint that limits growth and long-term sustainability. Strengthening financial resilience through diversified revenue, institutional partnerships, or multi-year funding emerges as a critical enabling condition to support the scaling of quality entrepreneurship programs across the region.

Takeaway

Sustainability built on adaptability but still on shaky ground

The financial picture that emerges across the four-country sample is one of entrepreneurial support organizations that remain deeply committed to their missions despite operating with limited and unstable resources. ESOs blend service revenue, CSR partnerships, and international cooperation to stay afloat, but these streams are fragmented, short-term, and rarely sufficient to secure long-term sustainability. For many organizations budget volatility constrains both operational planning and the ability to scale proven programs.

At the same time, **ESOs devote a disproportionate share of their limited budgets to scouting, selection, and intensive program delivery.** High per-entrepreneur costs signal that inclusive and high-touch support models are financially demanding but essential for addressing persistent gaps in opportunity and access. Organizations with institutional backing, such as academic ESOs, show greater financial stability, while smaller actors face structural fragility that limits their strategic bandwidth.

For ESOs, the findings underscore the need to strengthen internal financial models, build more predictable revenue streams, and explore joint mechanisms such as shared services or pooled advisory functions to reduce cost pressures.

For funders, corporates, and public institutions, the data points to an urgent need for longer-term, flexible financing that enables ESOs to stabilize operations, plan multi-cycle programs, and invest in organizational infrastructure. Without more resilient funding pathways, the ecosystem's capacity to deliver high-quality and inclusive support will remain constrained, regardless of the ingenuity and dedication of its organizations.

3.4 Capacity of reach

The scale at which ESOs in the four-country sample are able to support entrepreneurs varies substantially, reflecting the maturity of each organization and the resources available in their operating environments. Across all respondents, ESOs report an average of 334 ventures completing a program in 2024 (Table 5), indicating a relatively high throughput by international standards. Yet this aggregate figure conceals stark differences between organizational cohorts. Historic ESOs (+20 years) report the highest average number of program completions (502), followed closely by consolidated organizations (438) and established ESOs (381). These organizations benefit from mature delivery processes, large program portfolios, and deeper institutional partnerships that enable them to scale cohorts and run multiple initiatives in parallel. Median values reveal a similar but more modest pattern: historic ESOs support a median of 19 entrepreneurs per year, while consolidated and established ESOs report medians of 23 and 25 respectively. This combination of high averages and lower medians suggests the presence of a few very large long-standing actors driving up the overall mean. By contrast, **newer ESOs operate at a much smaller scale.** Recent ESOs (3–5 years) average 26 program completions with a median of 22, while very recent ESOs (≤2 years) average just 15 completions with a median of 10. These smaller organizations are still building operational capacity and have not yet reached the scale or consistency typical of older institutions. The data illustrate that while early-stage ESOs are entering the ecosystem with energy and experimentation, their contribution to overall pipeline volume remains limited.

Looking at country-level differences (Annex, Table 18), Kenya reports the highest average number of ventures completing programs (503), supported by a dense network of ESOs and a comparatively mature startup ecosystem that regularly channels entrepreneurs into structured support. Nigeria follows with 381 completions, reflecting its large market size and increasingly active support infrastructure. Rwanda (322) shows strong levels of program completion relative to its ecosystem size, aligned with its highly coordinated institutional support environment. South Africa registers the lowest average (148), consistent with the smaller sample size and the more selective and higher-touch models prevalent among many of its ESOs.

These figures indicate that while the overall volume of entrepreneurs supported is sizable, the distribution reveals structural dependencies: **a small group of high-capacity ESOs carry a disproportionate share of the pipeline**, while many younger ESOs have yet to scale their programs to meet growing demand. The pattern underscores the importance of strengthening early- and mid-stage ESOs to prevent overreliance on a few legacy institutions and to diversify the channels through which entrepreneurs enter the support system.

ESO longevity	Average number of supported ventures per year	Median number of supported ventures per year
Very recent (≤2 years)	15	10
Recent (3–5 years)	26	22
Established (6–10 years)	381	25
Consolidated (11–20 years)	438	23
Historic (+20 years)	502	19

Table 5: Organization performance by ESO longevity (N=88)

In terms of inclusivity, African ESOs exhibit a strong and deliberate focus on inclusion, with clear priorities that shape the demographic profile of the entrepreneurs they support. At an aggregated level, three groups dominate the landscape: **youth (70%), women (58%), and rural entrepreneurs (30%)** (Figure 18). These categories define the core of Africa's entrepreneurship support ecosystem. The prominence of youth reflects both the demographic structure of the continent and policy agendas centered on youth employment and economic participation. Similarly, the high representation of women entrepreneurs indicates that gender inclusion has become a mainstream design principle rather than a specialized or peripheral initiative. Rural inclusion, while less prominent, still accounts for nearly one in three supported entrepreneurs, signaling that geographic equity is a meaningful consideration for many organizations thus equipping themselves with distinct support mechanisms (Village Capital, 2024).

Beyond these top priorities, other demographic segments receive more selective but still notable attention. Entrepreneurs with disabilities (23%) and racial or ethnic minorities (19%) appear as secondary but present inclusion priorities, suggesting that ESOs are engaging with broader equity agendas even if these efforts are not yet universal.

In contrast, certain groups remain marginal in current ESO strategies. Only 9% of supported entrepreneurs come from base-of-the-pyramid (BoP) populations, 11% are older adults (+50), and just 3% are migrants, refugees, or internally displaced persons. These figures underscore persistent barriers linked to funding availability, program design, and perceived feasibility of engagement with structurally disadvantaged or highly mobile populations.

Disaggregating the data by ESO type reveals the organizational dynamics behind these patterns (Annex, Table 19). Non-profit ESOs consistently drive inclusion across all demographic categories, particularly youth (39%), women (28%), rural entrepreneurs (16%), minorities (13%), and people with disabilities (14%). This concentration illustrates a broader structural dependency: the ecosystem relies heavily on donor-funded organizations to reach historically excluded groups. For-profit ESOs also contribute significantly to youth (28%) and women (25%) inclusion, and they play a meaningful role in rural outreach (13%), but their engagement with more vulnerable segments is notably smaller. Academic and public-sector ESOs, meanwhile, show very limited demographic breadth, reflecting institutional constraints, urban-centered operating models, and narrower programmatic mandates.

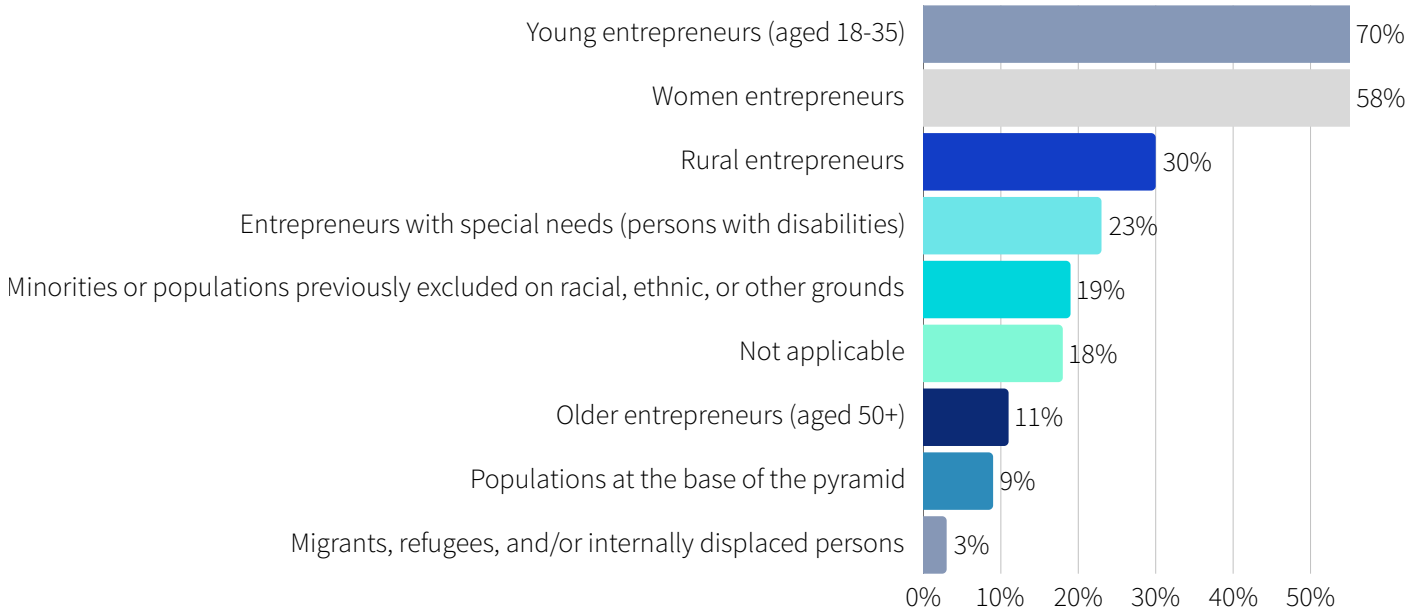

Figure 18: Demographic composition of supported entrepreneurs (N=88)

Further, the sectoral distribution of African ESOs shows a broad but uneven support landscape. **Three sectors clearly stand out as the most frequently served: agriculture and food (43%), technology (41%), and education (38%)**. These form the core of the ecosystem's activity and together account for the bulk of sectoral focus across the sample. Behind them, a second group of sectors such as commerce and services, manufacturing, and health (all at 27%) enjoy similarly strong representation, indicating that ESOs operate across multiple mainstream economic areas rather than specializing narrowly. Below this tier, engagement becomes more moderate. Culture and creative industries and energy and sustainability each appear in 26% of responses, followed by programs without a specific sector focus at 23%. Financial services (20%), craftsmanship (16%), and industrial innovation (15%) occupy a smaller share, suggesting that fewer organizations deliver programming tailored to these more specialized or technical fields (Figure 19).

The sectoral distribution shows an ecosystem that is wide in scope but anchored in a few strategic domains that combine high development relevance, accessible programming models, and strong donor or market incentives. The relatively even spread across mid-tier sectors also suggests that African ESOs seek to keep their offerings flexible and inclusive, rather than concentrating on narrow verticals. Strengthening sector-specific expertise particularly in climate innovation, advanced manufacturing, and creative industries, could enhance the depth and impact of support in areas that are currently underserved but increasingly strategic for Africa's economic transformation.

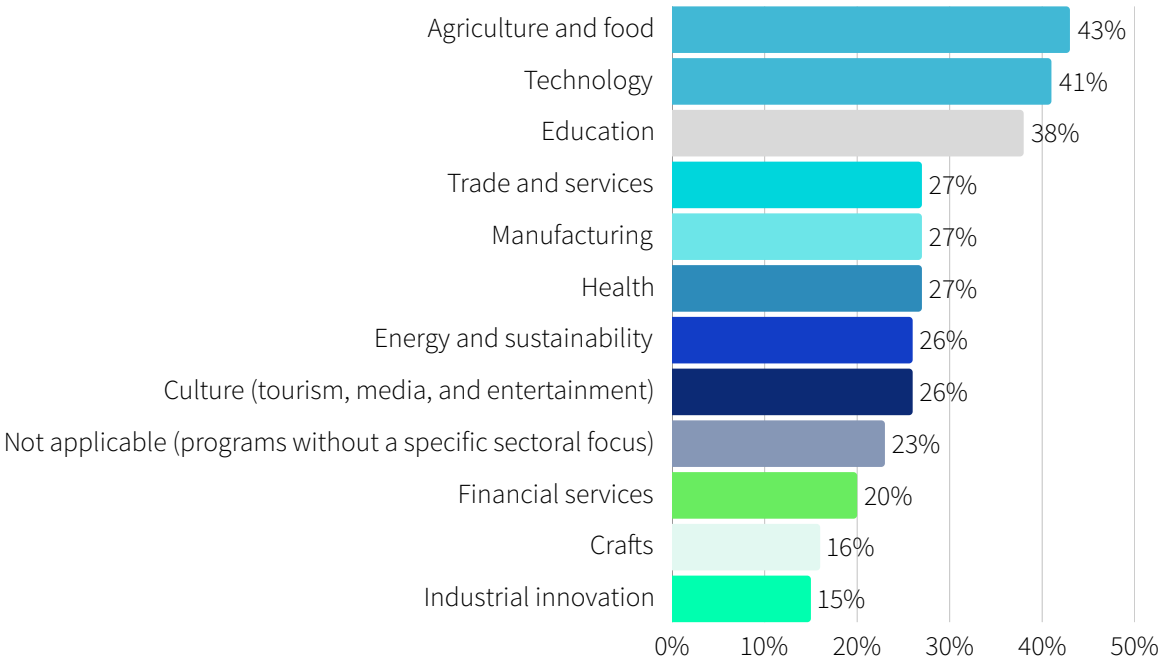

Figure 19: Sectoral distribution of supported entrepreneurs (N=88).

The technological profile of ventures supported by African ESOs reveals a **landscape dominated by low- and medium-technology enterprises.** Across the sample, traditional or low-tech ventures account for 38% of those supported, while moderately digitalized ventures represent 32% (Figure 20). This distribution reflects the structure of African economies, where most early-stage entrepreneurs operate in agriculture, retail, education, and other sectors with modest technological requirements. High-technology ventures remain limited at 13%, and purely manual or non-technological activities represent 17%, underscoring the relatively small share of innovation-driven enterprises within ESO pipelines. This finding resonates with the Digital Africa & Sendemo report, which notes that while "digital startups" attract significant attention, they represent a small fraction of the broader entrepreneurial base, with many businesses operating in more traditional sectors (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025).

Disaggregation by organizational type highlights distinct positioning (Annex, Table 20). Non-profit ESOs support the widest technological range but remain anchored in low-tech and moderate-tech ventures, consistent with their inclusion-oriented mandate and broad sectoral reach. For-profit ESOs display a more diversified profile, engaging proportionally more high-tech ventures than other actors, reflecting their interest in investment-ready, scalable business models. Academic ESOs show a markedly different pattern: 90% of the ventures they support fall within medium-tech categories, with almost no participation in low-tech, high-tech, or manual sectors. The data depict **an ecosystem well positioned to support incremental digitalization but still constrained in nurturing high-technology entrepreneurship.** The predominance of low- and mid-tech ventures signals both the accessibility of these models for early-stage founders and the structural limitations such as financing, R&D infrastructure, and market readiness that continue to restrict the growth of advanced technological ventures across the continent.

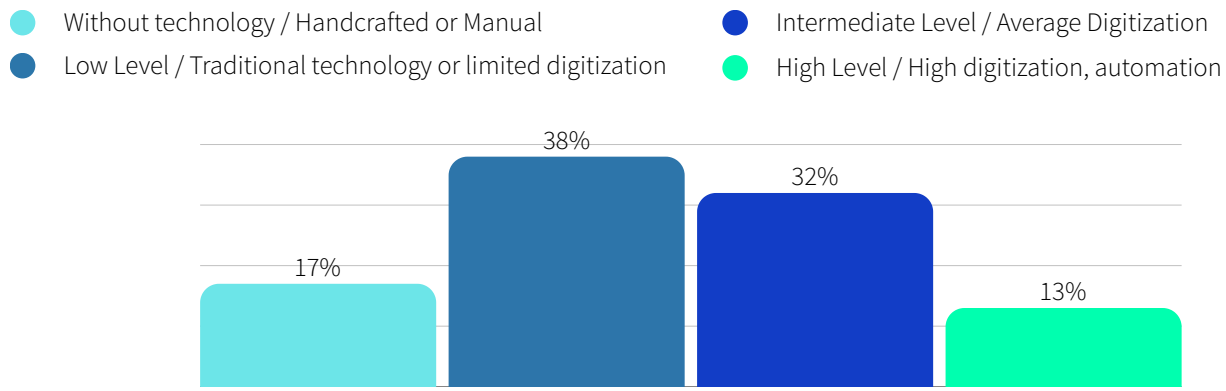

Figure 20: Average technological profile of ventures supported by ESOs (%) (N=24)

Finally, **the recruitment funnel in African ESOs reveals a system characterized by high application volumes, moderate eligibility filtering, and selective final intake**,

reflecting both the strength of demand and the constraints of program capacity. On average, ESOs receive 305 applications per call, of which 97 (32%) meet the eligibility criteria, and 52 are ultimately accepted. This means that only one in six applicants reaches the final selection stage. Differences across ESO types illustrate divergent operational models. Non-profit ESOs handle the largest volumes by a wide margin, receiving 383 applications per call and accepting 70 participants. Their broad outreach and donor-backed mandates likely encourage open recruitment strategies and higher intake capacity. For-profit ESOs receive fewer applications (275) and admit 43, suggesting more targeted outreach and programs calibrated to financial sustainability or client-specific requirements. Academic ESOs operate at a smaller scale, with 105 applications and 13 acceptances, reflecting more institution-bound recruitment pipelines and limited program capacity.

Taken together, the data points to a **high-demand ecosystem** in which ESOs play a central role in absorbing entrepreneurial interest. At the same time, the steep attrition between applications and final acceptance underlines ongoing challenges in program design, eligibility alignment, and resource constraints. Strengthening screening mechanisms, improving applicant–program matching, and expanding delivery capacity could enhance efficiency and reduce friction for aspiring entrepreneurs navigating the support landscape.

ESO Typology	Average Applications Received	Average Eligible Entrepreneurs	Average Accepted Entrepreneurs	Overall Selectivity
Non-profit	383	125	70	**18%**
For-profit	275	83	43	**16%**
Academic ESO	105	45	13	**12%**
Average	**305**	**97**	**52**	**17%**

Table 6: Disaggregated recruitment funnel by ESO type (Average per program) (N=24)

Takeaway

Converting scale and demand into systemic resilience

Africa's entrepreneurship support ecosystem stands at a pivotal moment. **The data reveal immense demand, strong inclusion commitments, and high-volume pipelines, yet these strengths coexist with structural imbalances that threaten long-term resilience**. A handful of mature ESOs absorb a disproportionate share of

entrepreneurs, while early- and mid-stage organizations operate far below the scale required to meet rising demand. Inclusion outcomes, particularly for women, youth, and rural populations, are strong, but heavily dependent on non-profit ESOs, exposing equity goals to funding volatility. Sectoral and technological profiles further show a dual reality: wide thematic coverage, but depth still concentrated in low- and mid-tech ventures, with high-tech sectors struggling to gain foothold.

The next step for the ecosystem is not only expanding coverage but transforming high throughput and demographic diversity into system-wide stability. This means shifting from short-cycle projects toward long-term investment in organizational capacity, funding continuity, and robust operational models across all ESO types. Strengthening mid-sized ESOs, especially those in their early growth stages, is essential to prevent overreliance on a small group of legacy actors and to widen the channels through which entrepreneurs can access quality support.

For policymakers and funders, the imperative is clear: move from supporting individual programs to reinforcing the architecture of the ecosystem itself. Priorities include diversifying who delivers inclusion-oriented programming, equipping ESOs to support more technologically advanced ventures, and expanding recruitment and delivery capacity so that high application volumes translate into opportunity rather than attrition. Embedding inclusivity, digitalization, and organizational development as core performance goals will enable Africa's ESO landscape to grow not just in size, but in coherence, equity, and long-term sustainability.

4. Results and outcomes of supported entrepreneurs

At a glance:

Entrepreneurs supported by African ESOs show strong early outcomes across completion, income generation, and job creation. 71% of participants finish their programs, and 60% of graduates remain active one year later, with non-profit ESOs consistently achieving the highest survival rates. Economic activation is similarly robust: 64% of graduates generate income and 60% create employment beyond themselves, though the scale of job creation varies widely by ESO type. While a small number of for-profit and non-profit ESOs account for most of the employment created, the average cohort still generates 710 jobs, signaling meaningful but uneven economic impact.

Access to external financing remains a key bottleneck. Only 29% of graduates raise capital within one year of program completion, and funding outcomes differ sharply across ESOs and countries. Although the average amount raised per venture reaches USD 22,109, this figure is driven by a handful of high performers operating in investment-ready ecosystems such as Kenya, while most ventures continue to face significant structural constraints.

Entrepreneur satisfaction with ESO programs is high, yet long-term monitoring remains limited. **Most organizations track outcomes only at program completion or within the first six months**, and just 15% monitor entrepreneurs beyond two years. Indicator tracking is strongest for short-term while long-term metrics such as venture survival, exits, or multi-year revenue performance remain underused.

4.1 Program completion and survival

African ESOs demonstrate solid program completion rates, with an overall average of 71% of entrepreneurs successfully graduating from their programs. This level of completion reflects relatively strong participant engagement and program delivery consistency across the sample. Non-profit ESOs lead by a notable margin (74%), consistent with their larger program portfolios and emphasis on accompaniment. For-profit ESOs report slightly lower completion levels (66%), likely reflecting more selective or performance-oriented program structures. Academic ESOs show the highest completion rate on record (88%), though this figure should be interpreted cautiously given the very small underlying sample (Annex, Table 21).

Survival outcomes one year after program completion remain positive yet uneven. **On average, 60% of graduates remain active one year after finishing their program.** Non-profit ESOs again stand out with the strongest survival results (83%), suggesting that their pedagogical depth and long-term support structures translate into more resilient ventures. For-profit ESOs report lower survival (54%), possibly due to their focus on market-driven models, which can expose entrepreneurs to earlier competitive pressures. Academic ESOs report a one-year survival rate of 10%, though this figure is likely an outlier linked to sample size limitations.

Country-level patterns reinforce the overall variability. Kenya shows the strongest results, with 77% completion and 57% one-year survival, followed by South Africa (67% completion) and Nigeria (64% completion, 55% survival). These differences mirror the structural maturity of each entrepreneurial ecosystem and the availability of post-program support (Annex, Table 22).

4.2 Income generation and employment creation

Entrepreneurs supported by African ESOs show solid signs of economic activation after completing programs, though outcomes vary considerably between organizational models. Across the sample, **an average of 64% of graduates generate income after program completion**, indicating that most ventures transition into revenue-producing activities within a relatively short period (Annex, Table 21). Performance differs by ESO type. Non-profit ESOs stand out with 77% of graduates generating income, reflecting both their larger program portfolios and their focus on strengthening early commercial viability among diverse entrepreneur segments. For-profit ESOs, which often work with more targeted cohorts, follow with 59% income generation. Academic ESOs report significantly lower figures, consistent with their focus on ideation, pre-commercial projects, and campus-based initiatives that may take longer to mature.

Job creation shows a similar pattern of differentiated performance. Across the ecosystem, 60% of graduates create employment beyond their own role, demonstrating that most supported ventures contribute directly to local labor markets. As with income generation, non-profit organizations lead the field: 70% of their graduates create jobs, compared to 57% in for-profit programs and negligible levels among academic ESOs. These distinctions suggest that non-profit ESOs, often backed by donor mandates emphasizing livelihood generation, continue to act as key drivers of employment inclusion, while for-profit programs focus more on commercially oriented models with varied job-creation trajectories. Looking at country-level patterns, Kenya and Nigeria, home to the continent's most dynamic startup ecosystems, show the highest proportions of revenue-generating and job-creating graduates, while South Africa exhibits more moderate outcomes, consistent with its more selective and higher-touch support models (Annex, Table 22).

Highlight

Drivers of Funding Access Challenges

Despite high organizational impact—where some ESOs achieve graduate income generation rates above 70%—only 29% of supported entrepreneurs successfully access external funding. This paradox is driven by three structural mismatches:

The Maturity Mismatch
While ESOs excel at the "top of the funnel," with 33% of effort focused on incubation , support thins dramatically as ventures mature. Only 12% of programmatic effort is dedicated to scaling , leaving ventures without the "post-revenue" support infrastructure required to meet investor criteria.

The Resource Vulnerability Driver
Funding access is hindered by the "survival mode" of the ESOs themselves. In Kenya and Nigeria—the most dynamic ecosystems—ESOs operate on lean annual budgets of approximately USD 40,417 and USD 99,564 respectively. This financial fragility limits an ESO's ability to provide the long-term, high-touch "investability" coaching that 26% of ESOs identify as a key request for private capital. * Country-Specific Pipeline Friction: > * Rwanda: Strong policy focus on scaling (95 entrepreneurs at acceleration vs. only 8 at pre-ideation) creates a top-heavy structure that lacks a broad base of "investment-ready" early-stage ventures. * South Africa: A "dual economy" structure channels massive engagement (158 entrepreneurs per ESO) into pre-ideation and basic skills. This focuses on "survivalist" entrepreneurship rather than the scalable, formal-sector models that typically attract the 18% of equity-based or VC-related revenue available in the ecosystem.

Institutional Bias

For-profit ESOs currently drive the highest job creation (1,189 jobs per cohort) and focus on "investability" as a metric. However, because they are often commercially constrained with limited direct income from entrepreneurship activities (USD 15,714), they cannot bridge the funding gap for the broader ecosystem alone.

Looking at absolute figures, the scale of employment generated per ESO cohort differs sharply by organizational type. Across all organizations, ventures that completed programs in 2024 reported an average of 710 jobs created per cohort (median = 60). This average masks significant variation. For-profit ESOs dominate job creation with an impressive 1,189 jobs per cohort, a reflection of their engagement with scalable ventures and investment-ready business models. Non-profit ESOs follow with 258 jobs created, substantial given their larger and more diverse cohorts, many of which include youth, rural, and early-stage entrepreneurs. Academic ESOs, operating smaller and less market-ready programs, report only 10 jobs created per cohort (Table 7).

When viewed from a cost-efficiency perspective, the data reveal significant nuances. The average cost per job created across all ESOs is USD 1,873 (Table 8), but this figure varies notably by typology. Non-profit ESOs demonstrate the most balanced efficiency, with a cost of USD 1,153 per job, reflecting their combination of moderato job creation

and relatively lean operational budgets. For-profit ESOs, despite generating the largest number of jobs, do so at a higher cost largely because their programs require more resource-intensive support to help ventures achieve scale. Academic ESOs report the lowest cost per job (USD 200), but this figure is misleading as the small number of jobs created inflates the apparent efficiency, masking the limited employment impact of academic programs.

ESO Typology	Average total jobs created per cohort
For-profit ESO	1,189
Academic ESO	10
Non-profit ESO	258
Average (All ESOs)	710

Table 7: Average total number of jobs created per ESO cohort of supported ventures in 2024 (N=24)

ESO Typology	Average Cost per Job Created (USD)
For-profit ESO	USD 2,712
Academic ESO	USD 200
Non-profit ESO	USD 1,153
Average (All ESOs)	USD 1,873

Table 8: Cost per job created by ESO type (N=24)

4.3 Financing outcomes

Financing outcomes among African ESO graduates point to a system where access to capital remains limited but not absent. On average, 29% of entrepreneurs secure funding within one year of completing their program (Annex, Table 21), signalling that while a portion of ventures progress toward investment readiness, most still face significant structural barriers in reaching investors. Disaggregating by ESO type shows clear differences in funding access. Non-profit ESOs report the highest share of graduates accessing funding (39%), reflecting their larger cohorts and stronger alignment with donor-backed funding pathways such as grants or blended finance instruments. For-profit ESOs follow with 21%, consistent with their more commercially oriented pipelines but more selective recruitment processes. Academic ESOs show virtually no funding access (0%), underscoring their focus on early-stage, pre-commercial innovation that has not yet reached investable maturity. Kenya shows the highest share of graduates accessing funding (37%), supported by a denser investor community and more mature accelerator networks. Nigeria (18%) and South Africa (15%) follow at much lower levels, reflecting wider financing gaps and more fragmented early-stage capital markets.

Across the full sample, the average amount of capital raised one year after program completion is USD 22,109 (median = USD 10,000). This figure is heavily influenced by

a small group of successful ventures and should not be interpreted as typical; rather, it highlights the presence of strong outliers in otherwise capital-constrained environments.

Taken together, the data reveal an ecosystem where ESOs open important but partial pathways to capital. Strengthening investor pipelines, building due-diligence readiness, and expanding fit-for-purpose financing vehicles especially for youth- and women-led ventures will be essential to ensure a higher proportion of graduates can transform entrepreneurial potential into scalable growth.

4.4 Satisfaction and monitoring

The data suggests high levels of participant satisfaction with African ESOs, with strong performance across most dimensions of the satisfaction scale. Half of all respondents rated their experience a 6 out of 7, and an additional 25% gave the highest score of 7, indicating that three out of four participants report very positive experiences in the programs. Only a small minority (4%) expressed mid-level satisfaction, suggesting that dissatisfaction is rare within the sample.

Beyond satisfaction with the program experience itself, the data also highlights the extent to which ESOs maintain relationships with their alumni over time. **Nearly half of ESOs (48%) report that they continue monitoring outcomes at the moment of program completion,** indicating that real-time tracking remains the primary mechanism for capturing graduate progress. A further 33% conduct follow-up six months after completion, showing that many ESOs attempt to extend their monitoring window beyond the immediate end of the program. Longer-term monitoring, however, is far less common. Only 10% of ESOs track alumni outcomes two years post-program, and just 5% monitor at the one-year mark or three years after completion (Figure 21).

Together, these findings reflect a monitoring system that is strongest at the point of exit and during the first months after participation but weakens significantly thereafter. High satisfaction signals strong program value, yet the limited long-term tracking constrains the ecosystem's ability to understand real impact trajectories, measure sustained entrepreneurial performance, or make evidence-based improvements to program design. Strengthening alumni monitoring frameworks especially beyond the first year would enable African ESOs to demonstrate longer-term outcomes more convincingly and support more adaptive and data-driven ecosystem development.

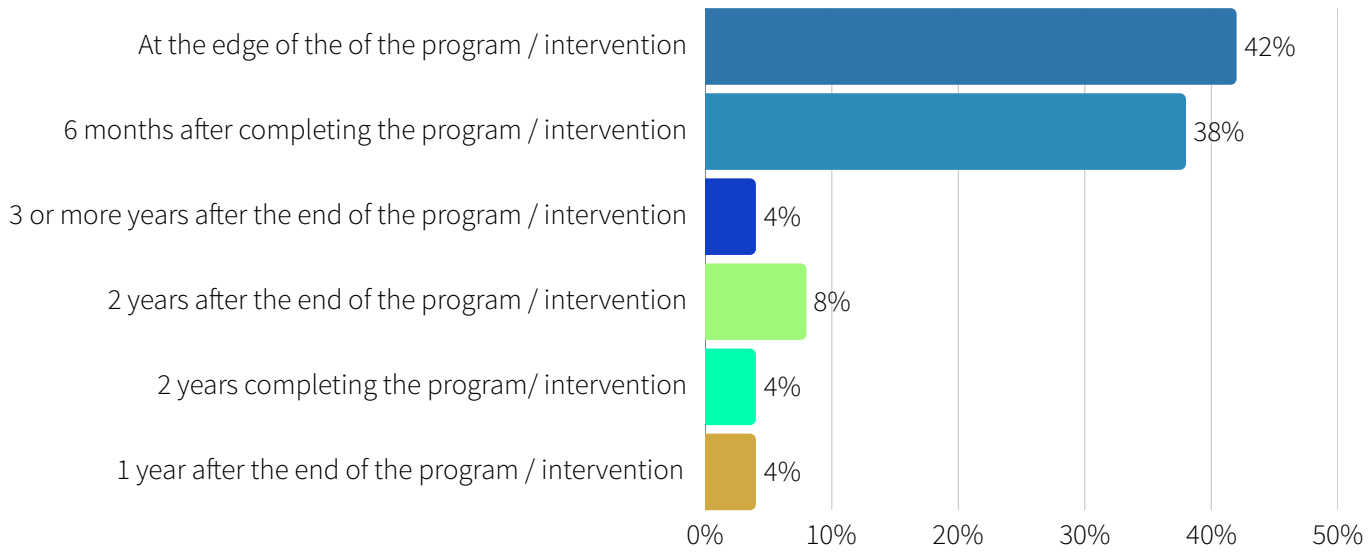

Figure 21: Monitoring timeline after program completion (N=24)

4.5 Indicators tracked by ESOs

African ESOs track a relatively broad set of performance indicators, but the emphasis remains strongest on short-term outputs rather than long-term venture performance. The most monitored metric is job creation, tracked by 72% of organizations, reflecting the centrality of employment outcomes in donor agendas and national development priorities (Figure 22). Close behind are women entrepreneurs supported (69%) and training or mentoring hours delivered (67%) both of which highlight the operational and inclusion-focused priorities that shape program delivery across the continent. Measures of program quality such as intervention satisfaction (63%) and completion rates (52%) are also frequently assessed, suggesting that ESOs invest in understanding the immediate effectiveness of their interventions. However, indicators linked to the socioeconomic characteristics of beneficiaries, or the geographic spread of entrepreneurs (each 47%) receive only moderate attention, despite their relevance for equity-driven policy design.

A notable weakness emerges in the tracking of long-term or growth-oriented metrics. Only 34% of ESOs monitor whether ventures remain active two to five years after program participation, and just 15% track exits or equity sales, which limits the ecosystem's ability to understand venture durability, scale trajectories, or investment readiness. Similarly, indicators related to ethnicity or origin (26%) receive limited attention, reflecting both sensitivity and capacity constraints in collecting demographic

data at scale. Overall, the monitoring landscape shows **an ecosystem that is strongest in tracking immediate outputs and inclusion metrics, but less equipped to systematically capture long-term entrepreneurial outcomes**. Strengthening data systems and standardizing monitoring frameworks particularly for survival, revenue growth, investment, and job quality, would significantly improve the evidence base for ecosystem performance and policy decision-making.

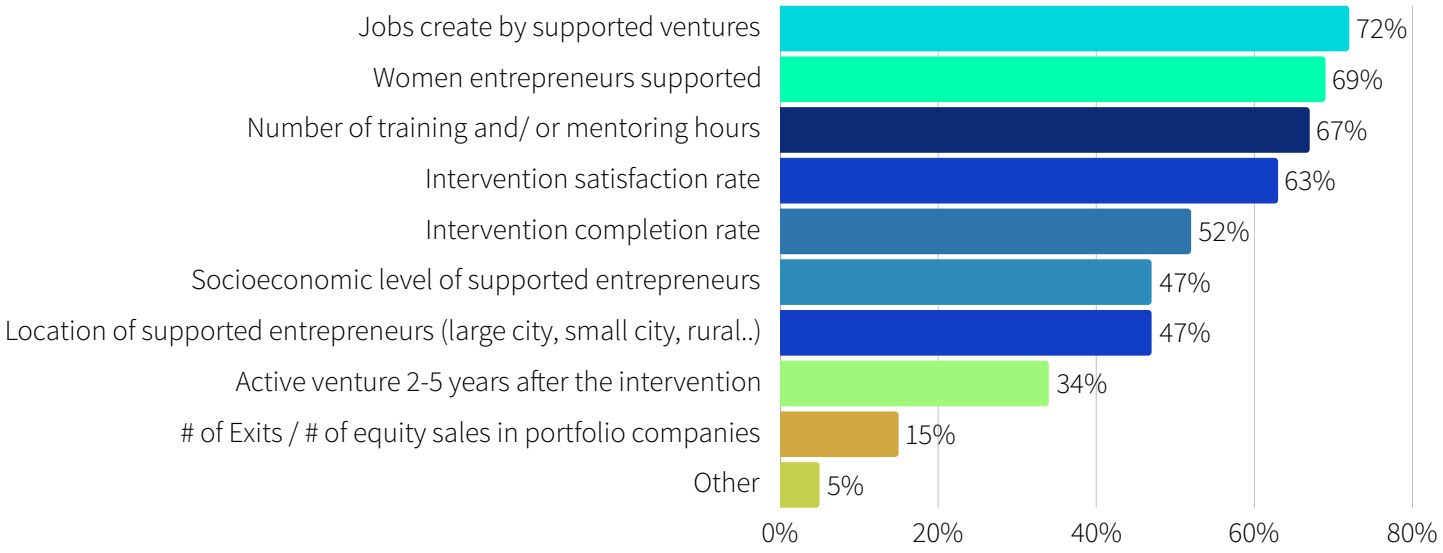

Figure 22: Indicators most frequently monitored by ESOs (N=88)

Takeaway

Solid early outcomes, weak growth trajectories, and short monitoring horizons

African ESOs deliver strong programs: **entrepreneurs graduate, generate income, create jobs, and express high satisfaction**. But most ventures **do not break through to sustained growth**, and the ecosystem still measures early outputs more than long-term

outcomes. Funding access remains limited (only 29% raise capital), job creation is uneven across ESO types, and monitoring drops sharply after the first six months, leaving little visibility into what happens as ventures attempt to scale. The core challenge is what happens after graduation. Ventures show early activation but results taper quickly without continued support. To unlock real economic transformation, ESOs must demonstrate 2–3 years of post-program progress in income, jobs, and financing, and elevate investment readiness from an optional add-on to a core program outcome.

For ESOs, the implication is clear: strengthening alumni pathways, building structured post-program touchpoints, and deepening partnerships with capital providers are essential to ensuring that early program gains translate into real entrepreneurial growth.

For funders and policymakers, the opportunity is to **fund long-term performance, not short-term participation**. Multi-year, flexible funding tied to revenue growth, job creation, and capital raised—not just training outputs—would allow ESOs to evolve from program implementers into **true engines of venture resilience and inclusive economic growth**.

5. Challenges faced by ESOs

At a glance:

ESOs across Africa face a combination of structural, financial, and operational pressures that limit their ability to deliver sustained and high-quality support to entrepreneurs. Financial sustainability remains the most pressing challenge (3.7/5), with ESOs trapped in short-term funding cycles that undermine strategic planning, staff retention, and long-term innovation. Entrepreneurs' own financing prospects mirror this fragility: only 29% secure external funding, with most raising modest amounts that fall short of growth needs, while investors overwhelmingly cite the lack of early-stage capital (54%) as the ecosystem's greatest constraint.

Operational challenges encompassing **digitalization** (2.5/5), scouting and **deal flow** (2.5/5), and **impact measurement** (2.9/5) reflect uneven infrastructure, fragmented processes, and limited capacity for long-term monitoring. ESOs process large volumes of applications but struggle to find program-ready founders; digital adoption is widespread but inconsistent; and monitoring practices remain heavily concentrated in the first 0–6 months, with only 10% tracking outcomes two years post-program.

Challenges related to **inclusion** (2.8/5) and **networking** (2.7/5) reveal the cost and complexity of reaching marginalized entrepreneurs and the fragmentation that still characterizes collaboration across the ecosystem. ESOs want to deepen partnerships, strengthen legitimacy, and reduce geographic inequities but lack the platforms and institutional support to do so effectively. Notably, 91% of ESOs would join an industry association, signaling strong appetite for collective representation.

Across all six areas, the underlying message is clear: **Africa's ESOs are mission-driven and deeply committed but structurally under-resourced**. They need predictable, multi-year funding, coordinated ecosystem support, improved digital and physical infrastructure, and policy frameworks that recognize their role as critical ecosystem builders. Strengthening these foundations is essential for unlocking the full potential of Africa's entrepreneurs and ensuring that early-stage progress translates into sustained, long-term growth.

5.1 Structural and financial sustainability

Financial sustainability stands out as the most pressing internal challenge for African ESOs, with an average rating of 3.7 out of 5 (Figure 23). This perception is consistent with the budget data presented in Section 3.3 and broader regional analyses. For instance, recent studies highlight that "67% of ESOs are not financially profitable" and "70% depend on donors" to survive, creating a precarious operational environment (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025). The picture is of organizations that are mission-driven and operationally intensive, but structurally fragile. By organizational type, worries about sustainability are particularly acute among for-profit and non-profit ESOs (both 3.7), which must simultaneously maintain mission focus and generate revenue in contexts where entrepreneurs have limited ability to pay. Public-sector ESOs report only marginally lower concern (3.5), and even academic ESOs (2.5) are not exempt from constraints when entrepreneurship centers depend on external projects rather than stable university lines (Annex, Table 24). Country-level data show that this concern is widespread rather than concentrated in a single market. Rwanda records the highest perception of financial pressure (4.0), followed closely by Nigeria (3.8), while Kenya and South Africa report slightly lower but still elevated levels (3.6 each). These differences mirror the contrasting ecosystem archetypes described earlier: **from grant-dependent and policy-led environments to more market-driven systems, none has yet translated ecosystem dynamism into predictable and core funding for ESOs themselves.**

Qualitative responses put texture to these numbers. Across the four countries, ESOs describe **a daily struggle to secure consistent and long-term funding for both**

operations and program delivery. Many highlight the mismatch between the ambition of their mandates and the resources available:

> “We are doing big things with small money and a lean team.”

A large share operates almost entirely on short, project-based grants that end after 12–18 months, forcing teams to “chase the next grant” instead of consolidating services or investing in systems. This aligns with the Sustain Impact report, which notes that the "pursuit of short-term, prescriptive contracts for program delivery... creates persistent instability," directing attention away from organizational development (Snowmelt, 2023). Similarly, the WDI report emphasizes that this overreliance on "short-term, prescriptive grants" reduces ESOs' "programmatic autonomy and ability to learn," trapping them in a cycle of execution rather than strategic growth (WDI, 2025). Others stress that in a context of currency devaluation and shrinking development budgets, existing donors are prioritizing current grantees, leaving little space for newer or youth-led ESOs to enter the pipeline. As one respondent put it:

> “Securing consistent, long-term funding to sustain and scale our programs remains our biggest challenge.”

Another recurring theme is the impossibility of passing costs on to entrepreneurs. Many ESOs work with early-stage or marginalized founders who cannot afford market-rate services; in several contexts, entrepreneurs explicitly expect support to be free or heavily subsidized. This creates **a structural tension between inclusion and sustainability: organizations that choose to serve excluded groups are precisely those with the least room to charge fees.** Research on rural-impacting enterprises supports this, finding that while 60% of respondents indicate... a willingness to pay for support, they face significant constraints in their financial capacity, rendering fee-for-service models difficult to scale without subsidy (Village Capital, 2024).

Some respondents describe attempts to build hybrid models such as commercial consulting arms, paid corporate services, or digital tools, but note that these require upfront investment and specialized staff they currently cannot finance.

The roundtables deepen this diagnosis by **highlighting how financial instruments and policy frameworks are not designed with ESOs in mind.** Participants report that banks and investors rarely recognize ESOs as “bankable” entities, seeing them as service providers without tangible collateral.

> “Banks don’t understand our service model—we’re not seen as bankable.”

Attempts to create revolving funds for entrepreneurs often remain illiquid because repayments are irregular or delayed, undermining ESOs’ own cash flow. At the same

time, funders' restrictions and short time horizons push organizations toward short-term outputs rather than long-term ecosystem outcomes; changes in political cycles or corporate CSR strategies can abruptly reorient or cancel support. This reliance on short-term donor funding and limited adoption of alternative revenue models ultimately constrains the ability of ESOs to sustainably operate and invest in long-term capacity (iGravity, 2025). Several participants argued for redirecting local CSR and philanthropic capital towards ESOs as ecosystem infrastructure, experimenting with revenue-sharing or IP-based models, and using tax incentives to encourage domestic funding.

Overall, the evidence points to **an ecosystem where financial and structural fragility is the baseline condition**. African ESOs blend multiple income sources such as service revenue, CSR, international cooperation, but these streams are fragmented, volatile, and rarely cover core costs. Without more predictable, multi-year funding and stronger internal business models, **ESOs will remain trapped in survival mode**.

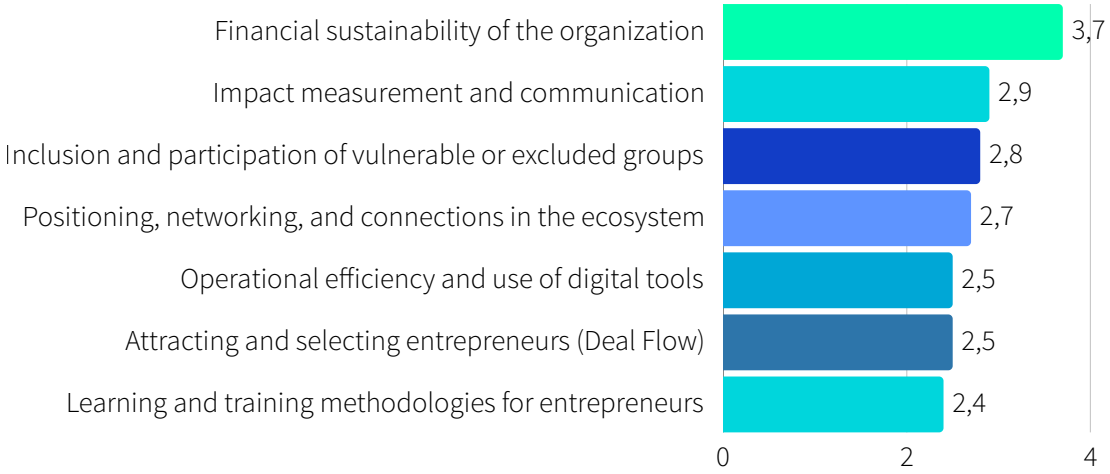

Figure 23: Average ESO challenge ratings (1 not a challenge - 5 major challenge) (N=88)

Takeaway

Breaking the cycle of structural fragility

Financial sustainability is Africa's most persistent internal challenge (average 3.7/5). ESOs across the region operate on thin margins sustained by short-term grants, volatile donor priorities, and beneficiaries who cannot pay for services. This chronic underfunding traps organizations in survival mode — reactive rather than strategic — limiting their ability to invest in systems, retain talent, or evolve their models over time.

For ESOs, long-term viability now depends on reducing dependence on short project cycles. Diversifying revenue through hybrid models, corporate partnerships, and

emerging impact-investment mechanisms is essential to building resilience. At the same time, shared services, pooled infrastructure, and collaboration across ESOs could help lower operational costs and strengthen collective sustainability in a context where most organizations face similar constraints.

For funders and policymakers, it is critical to recognize that the predominance of project-based, restricted funding fuels systemic instability. Shifting toward multi-year, flexible financing and directing domestic capital, CSR contributions, and public instruments toward ESOs as ecosystem infrastructure, would enable organizations to focus on long-term outcomes rather than short-term deliverables. Stable ESOs are not overhead; they are the foundation of a more inclusive, scalable, and resilient entrepreneurship ecosystem across Africa.

5.2 Access to funding for entrepreneurs

Access to capital remains one of the most significant barriers for early-stage entrepreneurs in Africa, and the data across ESOs, entrepreneurs, and investors converge on a consistent diagnosis: **the financing ladder is missing its first rungs.** A meaningful share of ESOs in the four-country sample provide financial support, but the scale is modest. On average, programs offer USD 7,586 in direct funding to entrepreneurs (Annex, Tables 9–10), with variations by organizational type. These amounts help entrepreneurs validate early ideas but fall far short of what is required for growth, equipment purchases, or working capital. On the entrepreneur side, financing outcomes confirm that capital remains scarce. Only 29% of graduates secure any external funding within one year of program completion (Annex, Table 21). The typical amounts raised are also limited. While the average amount raised is USD 22,109, the median is only USD 10,000. Taken together, these figures reveal the gap between program-level funding and the financial runway entrepreneurs realistically need. Early progress is common: 64% generate income and 60% create jobs but the absence of appropriate capital mechanisms prevents these gains from translating into competitive growth.

This is further reinforced by investor and financial institution data. In a survey question for investors, **“lack of early-stage investment funding” ranks overwhelmingly as the top ecosystem barrier (54%)** (Figure 24) .These findings highlight a consensus across stakeholders: early-stage ventures face both a shortage of capital and a shortage of readiness to absorb capital. Recent studies corroborate this, noting that investors consistently report that their main challenge is the insufficient number of truly investment-ready companies, as graduates often lack preparedness for detailed financial management discussions (WDI, 2025). Qualitative evidence from ESOs underscores this structural mismatch. Many organizations describe entrepreneurs who complete programs with strong business models but no feasible pathway to financing. As one ESO noted:

"Our graduates leave with strong business plans, but without capital they cannot grow. The demand for financing far exceeds what our revolving funds can provide."

Others highlight a **persistent "missing middle" in the financing landscape**. This "valley of death" is well-documented, where enterprises are too big for microfinance, too risky for banks and too small for venture capital funds, leaving them stranded between initial seed investments and larger Series A rounds (Village Capital, 2024).

"There is a huge gap between $50k and $2M where almost no capital exists."

The roundtable conversations amplify these concerns. **Participants emphasized that most African financial institutions remain risk-averse and structurally disconnected from early-stage entrepreneurship**, particularly in rural or informal markets. Collateral requirements, credit histories, and traditional underwriting models exclude the vast majority of first-time founders. Meanwhile, ESOs struggle to prepare entrepreneurs for investment because they themselves lack the resources to offer in-depth investment readiness programs beyond the core curriculum. As one leader put it:

"Everyone is doing their part, but the journey is not connected. Entrepreneurs get support, but they can't break through the capital barrier."

Fragmentation compounds the challenge. Entrepreneurs often circulate between multiple ESOs seeking small prizes, stipends, or grants, because no single institution offers a clear, sequenced pathway toward investment. This creates a stalled pipeline: ventures that activate but rarely accelerate.

Overall, the data reveal a financing environment in which supply is limited, risk is mispriced, and pathways are fragmented. ESOs are providing critical but insufficient seed funding. Entrepreneurs demonstrate activation but cannot secure growth capital. Investors see opportunity but lack investment-ready deal flow. The missing element is a set of early-stage, flexible, and blended financial instruments that bridge the gap between pre-seed support and commercial finance.

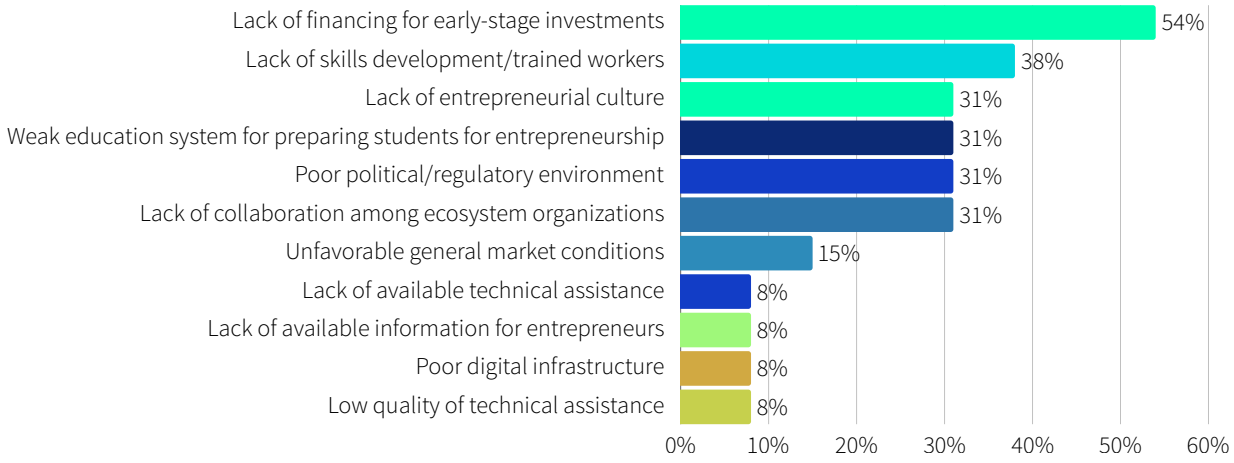

Figure 24: Ecosystem challenges reported by investors (N=13)

Takeaway

The first capital gap is the ecosystem's breaking point

Access to funding is one of Africa's most persistent bottlenecks, with only 29% of graduates securing capital and average amounts heavily skewed by a few outliers. ESOs offer modest support and investors overwhelmingly cite the lack of early-stage funding (54%) as the ecosystem's top constraint. This structural gap prevents many ventures from moving beyond initial activation, trapping founders between program completion and the first infusion of growth capital. **For entrepreneurs, the consequence is a stalled trajectory.** They generate income, create jobs, and build early traction, yet cannot access the flexible financing needed to move from subsistence or early operations to real scale. The "missing middle" between grants and commercial credit, especially financing between USD 10k and USD 100k, is the system's most critical fault line.

For ESOs, the challenge is twofold: their own financial constraints limit the depth of investment-readiness support they can provide, and the broader capital market offers too few fit-for-purpose instruments for early-stage ventures, particularly youth- and women-led businesses in informal or rural economies. Strengthening structured pathways from pre-seed to catalytic capital must become a central pillar of entrepreneurial support.

For funders and policymakers, the implication is clear: the ecosystem cannot rely on training and mentorship alone. Breaking the financing bottleneck requires multi-year, blended instruments, guarantee schemes, and simplified risk-sharing mechanisms that make early-stage investment viable. Public and private stakeholders must jointly build an early-stage capital market that aligns with the realities of African founders.

5.3 Monitoring and communication of impact

Impact measurement and communication represent a moderate but persistent challenge for African ESOs. With an average rating of **2.9 out of 5**, it ranks in the middle of the challenge spectrum (Figure 24). The disaggregated results reveal meaningful variation across both ESO types and countries. Non-profit ESOs report the highest level of difficulty (3.0), reflecting their dependence on donor-driven reporting requirements and the pressure to demonstrate results across large and diverse cohorts. For-profit ESOs follow closely (2.8), while academic and public-sector ESOs report somewhat lower challenges (2.5 each), likely due to more stable institutional reporting structures or narrower program portfolios (Annex, Table 24). Country-level differences also shape the monitoring landscape. Nigeria stands out with the highest perceived challenge

(3.1), mirroring its fragmented support ecosystem and the significant donor and investor interest that increases reporting demands. Rwanda (2.8) and South Africa (2.9) present moderate levels, while Kenya (2.6) reports the lowest difficulty, perhaps reflecting more standardized monitoring practices within its mature support infrastructure (Annex, Table 25). This burden is well-documented; research indicates that ESOs often struggle with inconsistent reporting formats when communicating with funders, which complicates data management and diverts resources from strategic learning (iGravity, 2025).

Beyond perception, the data on actual monitoring practices point to a system that remains heavily concentrated on short-term and easily measurable outcomes. 48% of ESOs monitor entrepreneurs at the moment of program completion, and 33% continue tracking at the six-month mark. After that, monitoring drops sharply: only 10% track outcomes two years post-program, and a minimal 5% monitor at one or three years after completion (Figure 21). These patterns reveal a clear structural gap. While ESOs excel at capturing immediate outputs such as completion, satisfaction, income generation, few track the indicators that truly speak to long-term entrepreneurial performance, such as multi-year survival rates, cumulative revenue growth, job quality, or sustained capital access. This short-termism is often driven by funding cycles: ESOs are caught up in a “frenzy of programming” that prevents them from taking a long-term view of their founders, often failing to track "founder lifetime value" beyond the program's end (Digital Africa & Sendemo, 2025).

Qualitative insights reinforce these findings. **Many ESOs describe the overwhelming administrative burden of donor reporting,** which often prioritizes activity metrics rather than transformative outcomes. As one ESO explained:

“The challenge for us is moving from measuring outputs to demonstrating ROI. The data needed for that level of reporting is simply not available.”

Others highlight the absence of digital tools, standardized templates, or dedicated staff to manage continuous monitoring. Several respondents note that entrepreneurs often disengage from reporting after initial program participation—particularly in rural or informal contexts—making it difficult to obtain reliable data without sustained incentives or personalized follow-up. A recurring theme is the tension between the need for robust evidence and the limited organizational capacity to generate it. Roundtable participants echoed these diagnostics, emphasizing that both ESOs and funders share responsibility for the weak monitoring ecosystem. Many ESOs feel compelled to adapt to donor-driven indicators that do not necessarily capture long-term impact or align with their pedagogical models. Others expressed concern that the focus on short-term metrics creates “perverse incentives,” rewarding

programs that demonstrate quick wins over those that invest in deeper, slow-burn transformation. At the same time, **ecosystem leaders highlighted the lack of shared measurement standards or collaborative data systems across the region**. Without such tools, ESOs duplicate efforts, entrepreneurs face survey fatigue, and impact data remains siloed and inconsistent.

Despite these constraints, **ESOs across all four countries express a strong desire to improve how they measure and communicate their impact**. Many are piloting new digital dashboards, adopting lean data approaches, or exploring partnerships with research institutions. However, these efforts remain fragmented and underfunded. As several roundtable participants stressed, meaningful progress will require not only technical tools but also a shift in the funding logic that governs reporting practices. Strategies such as "standardizing ESO quality frameworks" and investing in "centralized data platforms" could significantly reduce the burden on individual organizations while improving ecosystem-wide transparency (WDI, 2025). Overall, the data point to an ecosystem where ESOs demonstrate commitment to impact but lack the structural capacity to monitor it over the long term. Strengthening monitoring systems and aligning funders around flexible, long-horizon indicators, will be essential to ensuring that Africa's entrepreneurial ecosystem can measure what truly matters: sustained growth, resilience, and real economic transformation.

Takeaway

Strong early signals, weak long-term visibility

Impact measurement is a moderate but consequential challenge for African ESOs (average 2.9/5), shaped not by lack of commitment but by structural constraints. While nearly half of organizations (48%) track outcomes at program completion and a third (33%) follow up six months later, long-term visibility collapses: only 10% monitor entrepreneurs two years after graduation, and just 5% track outcomes at the one- or three-year mark. This short horizon limits the ecosystem's ability to understand growth trajectories, assess resilience, or demonstrate the sustained value of entrepreneurial support.

For ESOs, the challenge lies in moving beyond output reporting toward meaningful, long-term impact measurement. Many are ready to adopt deeper monitoring practices but lack the funding, digital tools, and staff capacity to do so. The pressure to comply with donor-driven reporting - often centered on short-term activity metrics - further constrains their ability to measure what truly matters. Strengthening monitoring systems will require flexible resources, standardized frameworks, and incentives that value long-term outcomes over quick wins.

For funders and policymakers, the implication is clear: short-term reporting requirements produce short-term evidence. To build a credible, data-driven ecosystem, funders must invest in multi-year monitoring and support ESOs in developing shared data systems, lean measurement approaches, and long-horizon indicators. Aligning reporting expectations with entrepreneurial reality will enable the ecosystem to capture growth beyond the program period, strengthen accountability, and communicate impact in ways that resonate with investors and public institutions.

5.4 Scouting and deal flow

Scouting and securing high-potential entrepreneurs is a moderate but persistent challenge for African ESOs. With an average score of 2.5 out of 5, it is not perceived as the most acute operational barrier, but the disaggregated data reveal meaningful structural differences across countries and organizational models (Figure 23). Academic and public-sector ESOs report the lowest difficulty (1.0), reflecting smaller, institution-based pipelines with more predictable inflows. By contrast, for-profit ESOs (2.6) and non-profits (2.5) experience greater pressure to attract and filter strong applicants, consistent with their broader outreach mandates and the competitive nature of donor- or market-driven programs (Annex, Table 24). Country-level results show similar variation. Kenya (2.0) reports the least difficulty, consistent with its larger pool of early-stage founders and dense support infrastructure. Nigeria (2.8) faces the highest challenge, reflecting both the volume and heterogeneity of its entrepreneurial landscape. Rwanda (2.3) and South Africa (2.6) fall in the mid-range, shaped by more coordinated but smaller ecosystems where identifying the “right” entrepreneurs can be resource-intensive.

These perceptions align closely with ESOs’ actual recruitment dynamics. On average, organizations receive 305 applications per call, of which 32% are eligible and only 52 are ultimately selected, meaning just one in six applicants advances to a program (Table 6). Qualitative responses across the four countries shed light on the structural roots of these patterns. Many ESOs describe **a fragmented ecosystem in which founders, especially those outside major cities, struggle to access information about opportunities or lack confidence to apply**. This mirrors findings in Nigeria, where ESOs struggle to reach MSMEs in remote and underserved areas, creating a geographical disparity that limits access to essential support services (Impact Investors Foundation, 2024). Others highlight **the high costs of recruitment and outreach in rural or informal economies**, compounded by limited digital connectivity or low awareness of entrepreneurship programs. Several organizations noted that many applicants are too early in their journey, lack basic documentation, or have not yet consolidated their business concepts, creating a widening gap between application volume and program readiness. This echoes regional studies noting that quality

recruitment and selection are fundamental yet the region still has limited pipeline as a result of largely undeveloped entrepreneurial ecosystems outside of the capital cities, forcing ESOs to invest heavily in finding suitable candidates (GALI, 2020).

Roundtable participants reinforced these concerns. Leaders emphasized that deal flow challenges are less about the absence of entrepreneurs and more about **misalignment between program expectations and the actual maturity of the market**. Many programs seek scalable or investment-ready ventures, yet most founders operate in micro or informal sectors with limited exposure to formal business tools. This mismatch leads to recurring "pipeline gaps," where ESOs expend significant resources screening large applicant pools only to identify a very small group that fits the program profile; a dynamic that leaves investors frustrated by the inconsistent quality of companies graduating from ESO programs (WDI, 2025). Others highlighted the systemic issue of founder fatigue: **entrepreneurs often cycle through multiple programs seeking small grants or stipends**, not long-term development, leading to inconsistent commitment levels during recruitment. Startups often join multiple accelerator cohorts primarily to access small amounts of funding as they are cash-strapped, rather than for the strategic value of the curriculum (WDI, 2025). Several ESOs also flagged the issue of saturation in urban centers and limited penetration into underserved regions, noting that external funder pressures often push them toward high-visibility cohorts rather than deeper community-based scouting.

Overall, **the data portray a scouting and deal flow landscape that is rich in entrepreneurial potential but constrained by structural gaps in outreach, readiness, and alignment between programs and market realities**. ESOs face high demand but struggle to identify founders who meet program requirements without extensive resource investment. Strengthening scouting systems, deepening local networks, and adapting program criteria to better match the maturity of the entrepreneurial base will be essential to improving pipeline quality and ensuring that ESOs can effectively channel early-stage talent into long-term growth pathways.

Takeaway

High demand, uneven pipelines, and a widening readiness gap

Scouting is not about finding entrepreneurs: it is about finding entrepreneurs who are ready for structured support. With an average challenge score of 2.5/5, African ESOs face a paradox: **applications are abundant, yet investment-ready or program-ready founders remain scarce**. Large recruitment funnels (305 applications on average with only one in six accepted) signal strong demand, but they also expose the gap between the maturity of programs and the reality of early-stage entrepreneurship across the region.

For ESOs, the challenge is not simply outreach but alignment. Many organizations spend significant time and resources filtering large and heterogeneous applicant pools only to identify small cohorts that meet program requirements. Strengthening deal flow will require deeper community presence, partnerships with local intermediaries, and scouting strategies tailored to the informal and rural markets where much of Africa's entrepreneurial activity occurs. At the same time, programs must recalibrate expectations and invest earlier in pre-incubation, basic business literacy, and confidence-building so that more founders can enter the pipeline prepared.

For funders and policymakers, the message is clear: high-visibility programs alone cannot build a healthy pipeline. Investing in grassroots scouting, local hubs, youth-serving organizations, and digital awareness campaigns is essential to broaden access and reduce geographic and socioeconomic barriers. Dedicated funding for pre-program engagement—often the first line to inclusion—is critical for bringing more diverse, viable entrepreneurs into structured support.

5.5 Digitalizatin and process improvement

Digitalization and operational efficiency present a moderate challenge for African ESOs. With an average rating of 2.5 out of 5 (Figure 23), this area does not rank among the most severe constraints, but the disaggregated data reveal clear structural differences across countries and organizational types. Rwanda reports the highest perceived difficulty (3.2). Kenya (2.5) and Nigeria (2.5) signal moderate challenges, while South Africa (2.4) falls slightly below the regional average (Annex, Table 25). Differences across ESO types mirror these dynamics. Academic ESOs report the lowest perceived challenge (1.5), consistent with their access to university infrastructure and stable internal systems. For-profit and non-profit ESOs both record 2.5, reflecting the need to balance digital delivery with limited budgets and the operational complexity of large, diverse cohorts. Public-sector ESOs stand at 2.5, a midpoint reflecting both administrative strengths and bureaucratic constraints that can slow digital adoption (Annex, Table 24).

Despite moderate perceptions, qualitative data reveal significant underlying barriers. Many ESOs describe uneven digital capacity across their teams and beneficiaries. Rural outreach is often hampered by connectivity gaps, unreliable electricity, and low digital literacy among entrepreneurs. As one ESO explained:

> "We grapple with uneven digital infrastructure—learners in rural areas simply cannot engage with online content consistently."

This echoes findings from the Nigeria ecosystem mapping, which notes that digital infrastructure challenges, particularly poor internet connectivity, significantly hinder the operations of SMEs especially those reliant on digital platforms (Impact Investors Foundation, 2024). For several organizations, digitalization remains more aspiration than reality. While many programs have adopted online tools for selection, training, and monitoring, these systems often operate in silos or require manual workarounds due to limited integration. ESOs note that internal workflows such as follow-up tracking, mentor management, financial reporting, or curriculum delivery, still rely heavily on spreadsheets or fragmented tools. The result is inconsistent data, duplicated effort, and limited real-time visibility into program performance. **Some ESOs emphasize that digital platforms are becoming increasingly central to service delivery, yet their teams are stretched thin**:

> "We lack the skilled personnel and infrastructure to support inclusive and accessible digital programs."

Roundtable discussions reinforced these insights. Participants noted that digitalization is less about software adoption and more about process redesign, which most ESOs do not have the capacity to undertake. As such, efforts in building and implementing systems remains a struggle for many ESOs, because of competing priorities, limited resources, and the variability of donor requirements (Snowmelt, 2023). Several organizations described donor-driven digital requirements that impose complex reporting portals or incompatible systems without additional support. **Others emphasized the need for shared tools across ESOs** such as common CRM systems, standardized application processes, or interoperable M&E dashboards, to reduce duplication and administrative burden. Leaders also highlighted the broader ecosystem challenge: **entrepreneurs themselves operate in environments where digital constraints are daily realities.** Many founders lack devices, stable internet, or access to affordable data. Digital literacy gaps especially among youth, informal entrepreneurs, and women in rural areas, undermine the effectiveness of online learning, finance applications, and digital recordkeeping. These constraints limit the capacity of ESOs to fully transition to hybrid or digital-first models.

Taken together, the evidence shows an ecosystem where digitalization is recognized as essential but remains uneven, underfunded, and constrained by both infrastructural and human-capital gaps. While many ESOs have made significant progress in adopting digital tools, structural limitations such as connectivity, cost, technical skills, and fragmented processes, continue to limit operational efficiency. Strengthening digital capabilities will require coordinated investment in infrastructure, shared systems, and targeted capacity building for both ESO teams and entrepreneurs.

Takeaway

Digital ambition outpaces operational reality

Digitalization is essential for scale, yet most African ESOs operate with uneven tools, fragmented systems, and beneficiaries who face significant connectivity barriers. Although the perceived challenge score is moderate (2.5/5), the underlying issues are structural: weak infrastructure in rural areas, limited staff capacity to manage digital tools, and operational processes still reliant on manual workarounds.

For ESOs, digitalization is about redesigning workflows, strengthening data practices, and building the human capacity to manage digital systems effectively. Many organizations know what they need to improve efficiency but lack the funding, technical expertise, or integrated tools to get there. Investments in shared systems, digital training, and interoperable monitoring platforms would reduce administrative burdens and allow ESOs to focus on delivering higher-quality support.

For funders and policymakers, digitalization cannot be viewed as a software purchase. It is an ecosystem investment. Supporting ESOs in modernizing their operations requires flexible funding for process redesign, data infrastructure, and capacity building alongside efforts to expand connectivity and digital literacy among entrepreneurs themselves. Without addressing these structural gaps, digital solutions risk widening, rather than closing, the divide between urban and rural founders.

5.6 Inclusion, legitimacy, and networking

Inclusion and the participation of marginalized or excluded groups represent a moderate challenge for African ESOs. With an average score of 2.8 out of 5 (Figure 23), it is not among the most acute barriers, but it nevertheless reflects persistent difficulty in reaching and serving underrepresented entrepreneurs. The disaggregated data show that the challenge is unevenly distributed across ESO types. Academic ESOs score 3.5, the highest among all groups, indicating that these institutions face significant obstacles in engaging diverse or marginalized entrepreneurs often due to campus-bound pipelines or rigid institutional structures. Non-profits (2.8) and for-profits (2.9) face a moderate level of challenge, reflecting the practical constraints of outreach, resource limitations, and the additional support needs of underserved groups. Public-sector ESOs report a somewhat lower challenge (2.5), though qualitative data suggest that bureaucratic rules and limited flexibility can still constrain inclusive programming (Annex, Table 24). Country-level differences reinforce this picture. Rwanda (3.0) and Nigeria (3.0) report higher inclusion challenges,

consistent with the difficulty of reaching entrepreneurs in informal markets, rural regions, or underserved youth populations. South Africa (2.9) also reports above-average difficulty, shaped by township–urban divides and persistent structural inequities. Kenya presents the lowest challenge score (2.4), though not negligible, reflecting relatively stronger outreach systems but ongoing barriers for rural, low-income, or women entrepreneurs (Annex, Table 25).

Qualitative insights illuminate the complexity behind these numbers. Many ESOs describe the difficulty of supporting entrepreneurs who face intersecting barriers such as limited education, low digital access, caregiving responsibilities, or physical mobility constraints. As one respondent noted:

> *"We want to reach excluded groups, but the infrastructure and resources to support them consistently just aren't there."*

Several ESOs also point to the financial burden of inclusion. Reaching marginalized groups often requires stipends, transportation support, childcare, or offline delivery models none of which are consistently funded. While rural inclusion is recognized as a priority, ESOs are doing so with limited capital, and the entrepreneurs themselves often lack the financial capacity to pay for support services despite their willingness (Village Capital, 2024). Others highlight that entrepreneurs from excluded communities may require longer engagement periods or more personalized support, stretching already limited staff capacity. Roundtable participants echoed these dynamics, emphasizing that **inclusive entrepreneurship is structurally underfunded**. They noted that many donors emphasize inclusion rhetorically but allocate budgets based on short-term outputs rather than the real costs of reaching and equipping vulnerable populations. There was widespread agreement that **the ecosystem lacks coordinated referral pathways**, meaning that marginalized entrepreneurs often fall between organizations without receiving continuous support. Overall, the data show an ecosystem committed to inclusion but struggling against the structural realities of geography, inequality, and resource constraints. Inclusion efforts are happening, but they are costly, complex, and often under-supported.

Networking and ecosystem positioning constitute a moderate challenge for African ESOs, reflected in an average score of 2.7 out of 5 (Figure 23). This level suggests that while networking is not the most severe constraint, ESOs do face ongoing frictions that limit their ability to build strong, strategic, and sustained relationships. Disaggregated data reveal notable differences across organizational types. Non-profit ESOs report a slightly higher degree of difficulty (2.8), shaped by a competitive funding landscape where organizations must simultaneously cooperate with and differentiate themselves from peers. For-profit and academic ESOs report moderate levels of challenge (2.5 each), though for different reasons: the former must continually cultivate visibility in market-driven environments, while the latter operate within institutional boundaries that naturally limit external engagement. Public-sector

ESOs report the lowest challenge score (1.5), likely reflecting their embeddedness in government networks, though qualitative data suggest that these connections may offer limited flexibility or strategic depth (Annex, Table 24). Country-level figures echo these differences. Rwanda reports the highest perceived challenge (3.2), a reflection of a rapidly expanding entrepreneurial landscape in which multiple ESOs compete for attention, legitimacy, and partnerships. Nigeria's score (2.8) also points to a complex environment where density does not necessarily translate into coherence or access. South Africa (2.7) aligns with the regional average, while Kenya reports the lowest challenge (2.2), consistent with its comparatively mature and connected ecosystem (Annex, Table 25).

Despite these moderate levels of perceived difficulty, collaboration itself is widespread across the ecosystem. ESOs frequently work together, with collaborations most commonly taking the form of co-delivered programs and events, the identification of new strategic partners, and the exchange of knowledge or best practices. Joint dissemination of initiatives is less common but still meaningful (Annex, Figure 3). These patterns indicate that collaboration is embedded in how ESOs operate, yet **it remains primarily project-based** rather than part of an integrated and long-term strategy for ecosystem coordination. Particularly, the competitive funding environment prevents resource sharing, collective impact measurement, and experimentation among ESOs (Snowmelt, 2023). The same dynamic is visible in how ESOs help entrepreneurs connect to opportunities. Most organizations facilitate access to specific platforms or networks and provide connections to mentors and investors. They also organize networking events to expose entrepreneurs to broader communities of practice (Annex, Figure 4). When asked what would help strengthen collaboration, ESOs overwhelmingly pointed to the need for greater institutional support, more targeted networking opportunities, and improved digital platforms to connect ecosystem actors (Figure 25). These responses reveal a system where collaboration is valued but insufficiently supported by infrastructure, convening mechanisms, or shared tools. **Many ESOs want to collaborate more effectively but lack the scaffolding needed to do so,** as noted in a recent systemic review, "ESO system actors operate in silos," often lacking the incentives to share data or coordinate efforts effectively (iGravity, 2025).

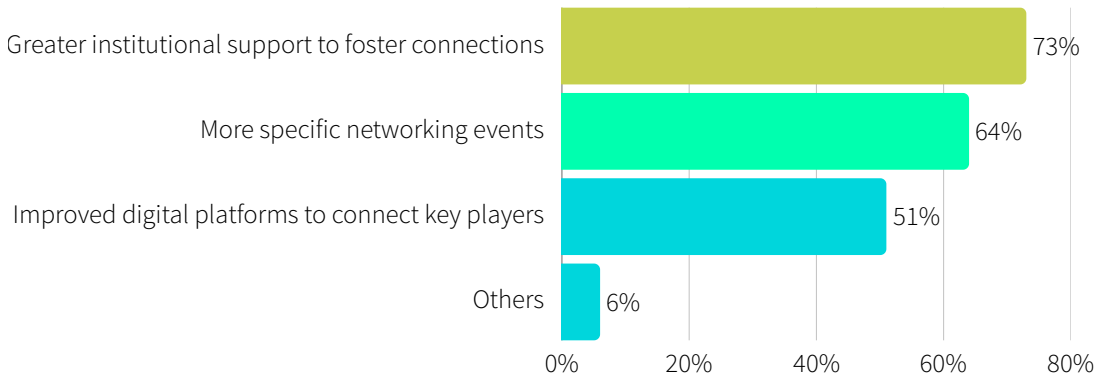

Figure 25: Suggestions to improve collaboration efforts (N=88)

Investors provide an important complementary perspective. When evaluating ecosystem progress over the past three years, nearly half of them identified improved connectivity among organizations as the second most significant advancement, behind only digital infrastructure (Figure 26). **This recognition suggests that the ecosystem is becoming more connected**, but it also highlights that networking remains a work in progress: still fragile, still uneven, and still dependent on individual relationships rather than system-wide structures.

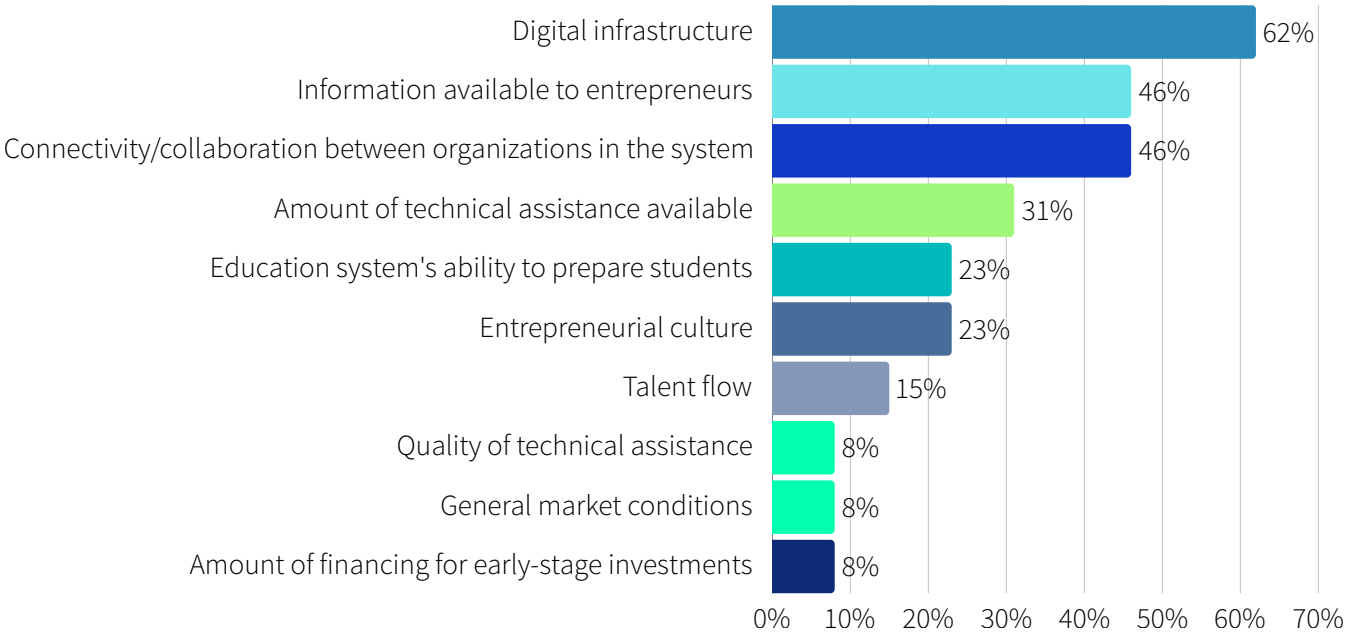

Figure 26: Ecosystem improvements according to investors (N=13)

These quantitative patterns are reflected in qualitative narratives. **Many ESOs describe partnership building as labor-intensive and often complicated by misaligned incentives or donor-driven priorities**. Several note that competition for funding can undermine collaboration, while others point to structural power imbalances that allow a small number of highly visible ESOs to shape narratives and attract resources. Smaller organizations, particularly those located outside capital cities, report limited access to influential platforms and networks. As one participant noted during the roundtables:

> *"We all want to collaborate, but the system rewards visibility, not coordination."*

Despite these challenges, **the appetite for deeper collective action is exceptionally strong**. Ninety-one percent of ESOs expressed interest in joining an industry association or guild to strengthen coordination, learn collectively, and influence policy. Only 9 percent said they could join but it was not a priority, and no respondent dismissed the idea (Figure 27). Altogether, the evidence portrays an ecosystem that is collaborative by nature but fragmented in practice. ESOs recognize the value of

coordinated action, yet structural obstacles such as competition, uneven legitimacy, limited convening infrastructure, and weak digital connectivity, continue to hinder cohesive networking. Strengthening ecosystem legitimacy and connectivity will require not only collaborative intent but also the institutional mechanisms, platforms, and investments needed to transform a collection of individual organizations into a coordinated system.

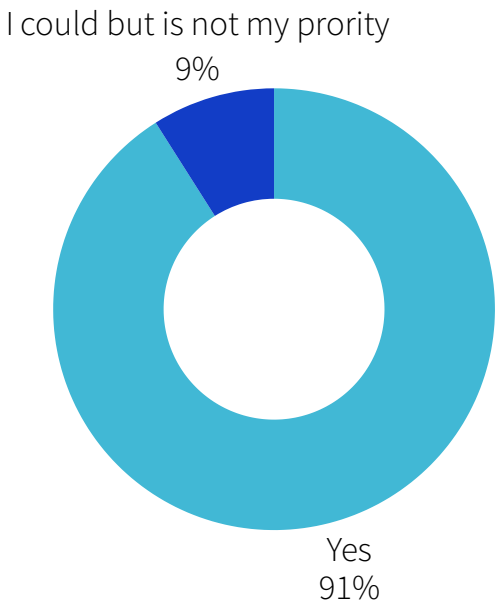

Figure 27: Interest in joining a sectoral guild (N=88)

Takeaway

Inclusion requires investment, and collaboration needs structure

Inclusion and networking are not marginal issues: they determine who gets to participate in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and who benefits most from it. With moderate challenge scores for inclusion (2.8/5) and networking (2.7/5), ESOs are making genuine efforts, yet structural barriers continue to limit their reach. Supporting marginalized entrepreneurs requires time, specialized staff, stipends, and flexible delivery models, costs that most ESOs cannot sustain under short-term and output-driven funding. Without dedicated investment, the entrepreneurs who need support the most risk remaining out of view. Networking shows a similar pattern. Collaboration is widespread but primarily project-based, shaped by donor cycles and personal relationships rather than long-term, system-level coordination. Although many ESOs have strong collaborative instincts, they lack the platforms, shared tools, and institutional anchoring needed to transform isolated partnerships into a cohesive ecosystem. The fact that 91% of ESOs would join an industry association speaks to a collective desire for stronger representation, shared legitimacy, and coordinated action.

For ESOs, advancing inclusion and strengthening legitimacy will require deeper community partnerships, better-designed outreach strategies, and active participation in collective platforms that redistribute visibility across the ecosystem. Building shared infrastructure and coordinated referral systems will help them reach excluded groups more effectively and engage in higher-quality collaboration.

For funders and policymakers, the message is clear: inclusion and collaboration cannot depend on isolated organizational efforts. They require structured investment into ecosystem convening, digital platforms, shared monitoring systems, and long-term funding that covers the real cost of equitable outreach. When legitimacy is shared and collaboration is supported structurally rather than improvised, entrepreneurial ecosystems become more resilient, more diverse, and far better positioned to drive lasting economic transformation.

5.7 Policy and funding demands

Across the four countries, ESOs send a clear and coherent message to public authorities and private funders: **if entrepreneurship is to deliver on its promise, the ecosystem's "enablers" need more predictable support, simpler rules, and instruments that de-risk early-stage innovation**. The survey question on proposals to public administration and private stakeholders shows that direct financial support to ESOs is the top priority: 51% of respondents ask for subsidies or financial backing for their own organizations. This is followed by strengthening of networks and networking (41%), and better agreements between ESOs and the public sector (36%), which together underline the demand for more structured, long-term collaboration rather than ad hoc program contracts (Figure 28). Requests aimed at investors appear next. One in three ESOs (33%) call for subsidies, funding, or tax incentives for entrepreneurs, and 26% ask for incentives or subsidies for investors and private capital, pointing to a strong appetite for blended finance and risk-sharing mechanisms. Overall, the pattern is consistent: **ESOs require resources, rules, and relationships that recognize their role as ecosystem infrastructure rather than disposable project implementers**.

The qualitative responses deepen and nuance these demands. **Many ESOs call for dedicated funding mechanisms for ESOs**, including multi-year grants, operating subsidies, or youth- and inclusion-focused funds that cover core costs, not just activities. As one respondent put it:

"There is an enormous need for capacity-building support for entrepreneurs, as well as more 'fit-for-purpose' innovative finance mechanisms… both of these require grants and subsidies from public and private funders."

Others emphasize the need to simplify and harmonize regulations ranging from business registration and licensing to public procurement and tax regimes so that small and growing businesses are not overwhelmed by bureaucracy or long payment cycles from government and large corporations.

A second cluster of proposals focuses on inclusive and sector-specific policy frameworks. ESOs working with youth, women, and people with disabilities ask for targeted incentives, procurement quotas, and legal recognition that reflect their realities. Proposals include waivers on licenses for youth-led businesses, quotas in public procurement for SMEs, recognition and tax incentives for social enterprises, and dedicated policies and funds for the creative economy or climate-smart innovation. These demands underscore that "one-size-fits-all" SME policies often miss high-impact, high-potential segments that ESOs are uniquely positioned to support.

Third, **ESOs are explicitly asking to be treated as co-designers of policy**, not just implementers. Several contributions request formal involvement of ESOs in policy formulation, public–private councils, or county-level task forces. Others call for open data platforms and shared intelligence systems co-managed with the government, so that decisions on incentives, funding, and programs can be based on real-time ecosystem evidence rather than isolated consultations. One respondent summed it up as a call for

"policy alignment and inclusion: involve ESOs in the early stages of policy formulation so entrepreneurship support policies are grounded in on-the-ground realities."

Finally, many proposals target funding architecture and intermediation. ESOs ask for blended instruments that combine grants, soft loans, guarantees, and revenue-based finance; for streamlined and transparent grant portals that reduce administrative burden and "middlemen" between funders and entrepreneurs; and for more flexible and multi-year support that allows programs to extend beyond the initial cohort and provide post-program accompaniment. Others call on private stakeholders to align CSR, investment, and supplier development strategies with ecosystem-building goals, including mentorship, technical assistance, and supply-chain inclusion for early-stage ventures.

Taken together, these policy and funding demands reveal a consistent agenda: ESOs want public and private actors to recognize them as critical infrastructure for inclusive growth and to redesign rules, incentives, and financing so that this role can be sustained. Rather than more short-term projects, they are asking for long-term partnerships, simpler and fairer regulatory frameworks, and financial instruments that share risk across the ecosystem and unlock the full potential of African entrepreneurship.

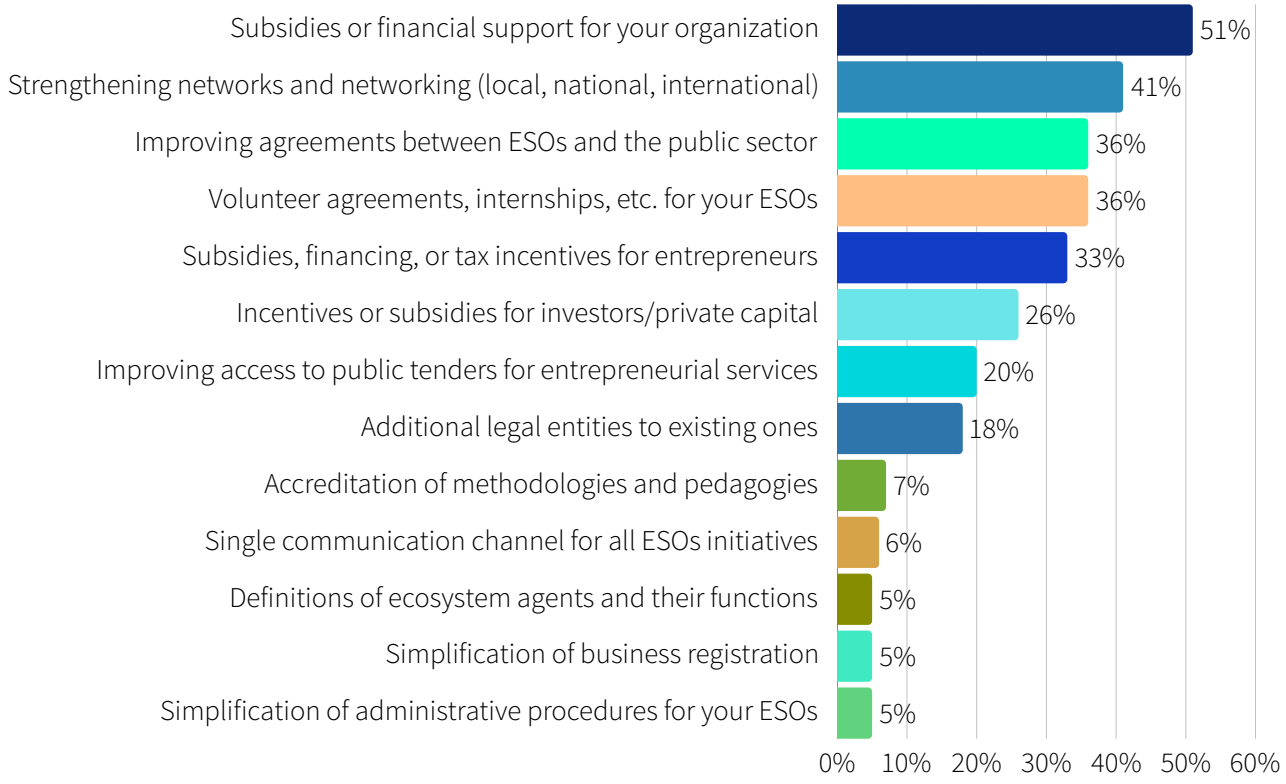

Figure 28: ESOs requests to public and private stakeholders (N=88)

Takeaway

ESOs want partnership, not projects

The policy and funding demands voiced by ESOs across Africa point to a single overarching message: the ecosystem cannot thrive on short-term projects as it needs long-term partnership, predictable financing, and a regulatory environment that actively removes barriers for both ESOs and entrepreneurs. With more than half of ESOs (51%) calling for direct financial support for their organizations, and large shares requesting stronger networks, clearer agreements with the public sector, and incentives for both entrepreneurs and investors, it is evident that the current system places too much risk and administrative burden on the very organizations meant to enable entrepreneurial growth.

For ESOs, sustained impact requires multi-year, flexible funding, simplified public procurement processes, and policies that reflect the realities of early-stage, informal, and marginalized entrepreneurs. Many ESOs want to be treated as strategic partners who help shape policy, not just implement externally designed programs.

They also call for sector-specific incentives, legal recognition for emerging models like social enterprises, and the infrastructure whether digital, physical, and regulatory, to support inclusive and innovative entrepreneurship across regions.

For policymakers and private funders, the path forward is clear: move from fragmented, top-down initiatives toward coordinated and co-created strategies that recognize ESOs as ecosystem infrastructure. This means reducing bureaucratic barriers for entrepreneurs, incentivizing patient and blended capital, improving access to public tenders, and investing in the shared systems such as data platforms, digital portals, collaborative hubs, thus enabling transparency and coordination.

6. An agenda for collective action

6.1 Building a national or regional ESO association

Challenge

Africa's ESO landscape is dynamic but highly fragmented. Collaboration occurs, yet it is mostly driven by personal networks, donor projects, and ad hoc partnerships rather than structured coordination. This limits collective strategy, weakens shared legitimacy, and reduces ESOs' ability to influence public policy, negotiate fair funding conditions, or set professional standards across the region. Smaller, rural, and youth-led ESOs are particularly disadvantaged in this uneven landscape.

Opportunity

A strong mandate for unity is emerging across all four countries. Survey data show that 91% of ESOs would join an association or sectoral network, whether at the national or regional level. In parallel, ESOs call for stronger networking (41%) and better agreements with the public sector (36%), underscoring widespread readiness to move from isolated efforts toward a coordinated structure. Such a body—national in some contexts, regional in others—could consolidate the sector's voice, promote peer learning, and support more coherent engagement with governments, funders, and private-sector allies.

Recommendation for ESOs

Take the lead in establishing a national or regional ESO association to share best practices, build professional standards, improve coordination, and consolidate data for evidence-based advocacy and greater impact visibility.

Recommendation for Policymakers & funders

Formally recognize and engage this new body as a strategic national or regional partner to co-design policy, streamline funding, and strengthen the coordination, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability of entrepreneurial support ecosystems across the four countries.

The ESO sector in these countries plays a central role in advancing inclusive entrepreneurship, yet its potential remains constrained by fragmentation and the absence of a unified institutional voice. While collaborations do take place, they are often short-lived, tied to project cycles, and dependent on personal networks. This makes it difficult to sustain alliances, articulate common priorities, or advocate with coherence in national and regional forums. The lack of formal coordination weakens the sector's legitimacy, fuels duplication, and limits collective learning.

However, the survey signals clear readiness for collective organization. With more than nine in ten ESOs willing to join a formal association, the conditions for building a representative platform already exist. Such a body whether anchored nationally, regionally, or through a hybrid model, could harmonize methodologies, elevate quality standards, and pool data to build a coherent narrative of ESOs' contribution to economic and social development.

For governments, development partners, and private funders, this presents a strategic opportunity. Recognizing and supporting an ESO association offers a mechanism to align incentives, reduce fragmentation, and co-create long-term frameworks for entrepreneurial support. Whether organized at the national or regional level, a unified ESO voice can transform a dispersed field into a coordinated, credible, and more effective ecosystem capable of driving sustainable entrepreneurship across the four countries.

6.2 Strengthening funding models and financial instruments for ESOs

Challenge

Across the four-country sample, ESOs face persistent financial fragility. Funding is overwhelmingly short-term, project-based, and tied to restrictive deliverables, leaving organizations with limited room to invest in staff, systems, or long-term innovation. While ESOs are expected to deliver consistent, high-quality support to entrepreneurs, most operate on modest annual budgets, with core costs rarely covered and donor shifts creating sudden instability. This makes strategic planning difficult and perpetuates a cycle in which ESOs focus on survival rather than organizational development.

Opportunity

The data reveal a growing demand for new funding approaches that recognize ESOs as critical ecosystem infrastructure. Fifty-one percent of ESOs call for direct subsidies or financial support for their organizations, making it the single most requested policy action in the survey. Calls for better public–private agreements (36%), stronger networks (41%), and incentives for private investors (26%) point toward the same conclusion: the ecosystem needs more predictable, flexible, and longer-term financial instruments. The moment is ripe to shift from fragmented project funding toward models that support institutional health, innovation, and sustainability.

Recommendation for funders & policymakers

- Develop hybrid funding models that combine earned revenue with multi-year philanthropic and public funding. This includes experimenting with corporate partnerships, fee-based services for specific segments, and joint bids with peer ESOs to reduce cost burdens.
- ESOs should also advocate collectively through national or regional associations for core funding mechanisms, shared infrastructure investments, and pooled resources that strengthen organizational resilience.

Recommendation for ESOs

- Develop hybrid funding models that combine earned revenue with multi-year philanthropic and public funding. This includes experimenting with corporate partnerships, fee-based services for specific segments, and joint bids with peer ESOs to reduce cost burdens.
- ESOs should also advocate collectively through national or regional associations for core funding mechanisms, shared infrastructure investments, and pooled resources that strengthen organizational resilience.

Recommendation for funders & policymakers

- Move beyond short-term project grants and support ESOs with multi-year and flexible funding that covers core operations, talent retention, and digital and monitoring systems.
- Develop blended public–private instruments that finance ESOs as ecosystem enablers, not just implementers.
- Simplify contracting, accelerate disbursement timelines, and create challenge funds that allow ESOs to pilot new models and reach underserved communities without compromising financial stability.

Africa's ESOs form the backbone of inclusive entrepreneurship, yet their ability to support entrepreneurs is constrained by an outdated funding architecture that does not match the complexity of their role. Short-term grants discourage innovation, reinforce administrative burdens, and prevent the development of professionalized teams. But the survey data and the overwhelming request for operational support signal a clear shift in expectations. ESOs are ready for a more strategic, sustainable financing model that values their contribution to economic transformation.

For governments, development partners, and private funders, this is a timely opportunity to modernize the funding system. By financing ESOs on a multi-year basis, supporting shared infrastructure, and recognizing these organizations as long-term partners, stakeholders can help build a more stable and impactful entrepreneurial ecosystem. Strengthening ESO sustainability is foundational: without resilient ESOs, the broader vision of inclusive entrepreneurial growth cannot be achieved.

6.3 Expanding access to capital for entrepreneurs

Challenge

Across the four countries, entrepreneurs face a persistent and well-documented financing gap. Despite strong early activation only 29% of ESO graduates secure external capital, and most obtain small amounts that are insufficient for growth. Investors confirm this mismatch: 54% identify the lack of early-stage funding as the ecosystem's top constraint. Traditional finance remains risk-averse, collateral-based, and misaligned with early-stage and informal-sector realities. This creates a stalled pipeline in which promising ventures cannot transition from ideation or validation to meaningful scale.

Opportunity

The data reveal broad consensus among ESOs, investors, and ecosystem leaders that new funding mechanisms are needed to bridge the "missing middle" between grants and commercial credit. ESOs already provide modest seed funding (around USD 7,586 on average per program) but these resources are too limited to catalyze growth. Investors express growing openness to blended finance, guarantees, patient capital, and pipeline partnerships with ESOs. By coordinating around shared investment readiness standards and co-designed early-stage instruments, stakeholders can turn scattered efforts into a coherent capital pathway that extends beyond the first six months after program completion.

Recommendation for ESOs

- Strengthen investment readiness support and build structured handoff pathways to investors, banks, and alternative lenders.
- ESOs should formalize partnerships with financial institutions, co-develop pipelines, and share due diligence insights to reduce perceived risk.
- Collaborating through national or regional associations can help set common standards, negotiate more favorable terms, and pool data on firm-level performance to build a stronger business case for early-stage investment.

Recommendation for policymakers & founders

- Develop blended financing instruments such as public-backed guarantees, first-loss facilities, soft loans, and catalytic grants that de-risk early-stage entrepreneurship.
- Streamline procurement and licensing processes to reduce barriers to business formation and growth.
- Expand grant, micro-equity, and revenue-based financing schemes tailored to youth-led, women-led, and rural enterprises.
- Support ESOs with resources to extend post-program accompaniment, strengthening the bridge between validation and investment.

Africa's early-stage entrepreneurs are not lacking ambition or potential; they are constrained by a financing architecture that was not built for their reality. The vast majority start with limited capital, operate in informal or thin markets, and face regulatory and administrative barriers that prevent them from accessing traditional finance. ESOs can strengthen early-stage pipelines, but without a functioning continuum of capital the system will continue to produce activated entrepreneurs who struggle to scale.

For governments, investors, and development partners, this moment offers a chance to reimagine early-stage finance. By investing in blended instruments, risk-sharing schemes, and more inclusive funding mechanisms, stakeholders can unlock growth for thousands of entrepreneurs who are currently stalled at the starting line. Expanding access to capital is not only an economic priority: it is essential for realizing the broader vision of inclusive, resilient, and transformative entrepreneurship across the four countries.

6.4 Building shared monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems (M&E)

Challenge

Across the four-country sample. While 48% of ESOs track outcomes at program completion and 33% at six months, long-term monitoring collapses: only 10% follow up two years post-program, and just 5% track entrepreneurs at one or three years. This short horizon limits the ability to understand venture trajectories, evaluate sustainability, or build the evidence required to influence funders or policymakers. ESOs also face fragmented tools, limited staff capacity, and donor reporting requirements that prioritize short-term outputs over long-term outcomes.

Opportunity

The ecosystem is well-positioned to strengthen M&E through coordinated approaches. ESOs consistently request better data systems, shared frameworks, and intelligence platforms. Funders increasingly expect evidence of long-term impact but often fail to finance the systems required to produce it. A national or regional ESO association offers a natural home for joint data infrastructure with common indicators, pooled dashboards, shared follow-up processes, and collective learning structures, which would reduce duplication, lower administrative burdens, and generate more credible, comparable results.

Recommendation for ESOs

- Work collectively to define shared metrics and co-create standardized monitoring frameworks.
- Pool resources to build joint digital tools for follow-up, data management, and learning.
- Collaborate through the association (national or regional) to conduct periodic ecosystem studies, share insights on venture progression, and build a unified narrative about impact that strengthens legitimacy and attracts long-term investment.

Recommendation for funders

- Invest in multi-year MEL systems that go beyond project cycles.
- Provide flexible resources that enable ESOs to track outcomes over two to three years, not just during program delivery.
- Co-design shared data platforms with ESOs, expand access to government datasets, and streamline reporting requirements across funding partners.
- Support ecosystem-wide research partnerships that generate rigorous evidence on what drives entrepreneurial survival, growth, and resilience.

Across the four countries, ESOs show strong commitment to impact but lack the structural capacity to measure it over time. This creates a paradox: entrepreneurship programs deliver real progress yet much of this value goes undocumented after the first six months. A coordinated M&E system would address this gap by producing long-term visibility, strengthening accountability, and enabling ESOs to demonstrate their contribution to inclusive economic development with far greater credibility.

For governments, donors, and private stakeholders, strengthening M&E is a foundation for better policy, smarter investment, and more resilient entrepreneurship ecosystems. By supporting shared infrastructure and long-horizon learning, stakeholders can help the sector move from measuring activities to understanding impact, and from isolated reporting to collective intelligence capable of guiding the future of entrepreneurship across the four countries.

6.5 Our agenda for action

The central finding of this report is a defining paradox: the entrepreneurial support ecosystem across the four African countries studied is dynamic, mission-driven, and committed to inclusion yet it remains structurally fragile and insufficiently coordinated. Despite the dedication of hundreds of ESOs, the system continues to rely on short-term and project-based funding, lacks mechanisms to support long-term organizational sustainability, and struggles to mobilize early-stage capital for entrepreneurs. Monitoring systems remain short-horizon and fragmented, preventing the ecosystem from learning collectively or demonstrating long-term impact. These challenges all stem from an incomplete institutional architecture that constrains the ecosystem's full potential.

Transforming this landscape requires collective resolve and long-term coordination among ESOs, funders, and policymakers. Based on the evidence in this report, we propose the following agenda for the key actors who can drive meaningful and lasting change.

For Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs):

Unite and represent

Act on the overwhelming mandate for collaboration (91% support) by formally establishing national and/or regional ESO associations to consolidate advocacy, harmonize standards, and strengthen coordination across the four countries.

Diversify and stabilize

Develop hybrid financial strategies that combine earned revenue, corporate partnerships, and multi-year philanthropic or public funding to reduce dependence on short project cycles and strengthen organizational resilience.

Build the capital bridge:

Partner with investors, banks, and public agencies to design early-stage funding instruments including blended finance, guarantees, micro-grants, and revenue-based models that match the realities of local entrepreneurs.

Collaborate on evidence:

Through the emerging associations, adopt shared metrics and digital tools for long-term monitoring, pooled evaluation, and collective learning to articulate the ecosystem's contribution with greater credibility.

For funders, investors, and philanthropy:

Fix the funding logic:

Shift from short-term, activity-based grants to multi-year, flexible core funding that strengthens ESO institutions, retains talent, and enables long-term planning.

Catalyze inclusive finance:

Deploy blended investment vehicles and risk-sharing mechanisms that open capital pathways for women, youth, rural entrepreneurs, and informal-sector ventures that traditional finance overlooks.

Invest in learning infrastructure:

Support the creation of shared data platforms and regional knowledge systems that consolidate evidence, reduce duplication in reporting, and enable smarter, ecosystem-level decision-making.

For policymakers and government agencies:

IRecognize and engage:

Formally acknowledge ESOs as strategic partners in national entrepreneurship strategies and work through the emerging ESO associations as legitimate interlocutors for policy consultation and coordination.

Enable sustainable funding:

Create fiscal incentives, tax benefits, procurement preferences, and matching schemes that encourage private investment in early-stage ventures and strengthen ESO–government partnerships.

Coordinate and simplify:

Reduce bureaucratic barriers, harmonize licensing and procurement processes, accelerate payment cycles, and strengthen inter-agency collaboration to ensure continuity and coherence in public support for entrepreneurship.

For Entrepreneurship Support Organizations (ESOs)	For Funders, Investors, and Philanthropy	For Policymakers and Government Agencies
1. Organize and unite: Act on the strong mandate for collaboration (91% support) by formally establishing national and/or regional ESO associations that consolidate advocacy, set professional standards, and strengthen coordination across countries.	**1. Fix the funding model:** Shift from short-term, project-based grants to multi-year, flexible funding that prioritizes institutional stability, talent retention, and innovation within ESOs.	**1. Recognize the sector:** Formally engage ESO associations as strategic partners in co-designing national and regional entrepreneurship policy.
2. Diversify and stabilize: Develop hybrid financial models that blend earned income, corporate partnerships, and long-term alliances to reduce donor dependence and enhance financial sustainability.	**2. Bridge the capital gap:** Deploy blended finance mechanisms, credit guarantees, first-loss facilities, and co-investment vehicles to de-risk early-stage ventures and attract private investors.	**2. Enable growth and investment:** Introduce fiscal incentives, tax benefits, procurement preferences, and long-term programs that expand access to early-stage finance and support ESO–government collaborations.
3. Collaborate on evidence: Through national or regional associations, define and adopt shared impact metrics and digital tools for monitoring and evaluation, enabling a unified, long-term evidence base.	**3. Invest in knowledge infrastructure:** Support the development of shared data platforms and learning systems that enable evidence-sharing, peer learning, and transparent impact measurement across the ecosystem..	**3. Streamline and coordinate:** Simplify administrative procedures, strengthen inter-agency coordination, and align entrepreneurship initiatives to reduce fragmentation and ensure policy continuity.

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Appendix B: Survey Instrument

1st Survey

1. Name of your organization
2. Full name of the person responsible
3. Position/Title of the person responsible
4. What email should we use to contact you?
5. From which country are you responding to this survey?
6. Please indicate the type of organization that best describes your organization:
7. Current challenges of Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs): Rate each challenge in terms of importance.
8. Tell us about your current challenges as an Entrepreneurial Support Organization (ESO).
9. What requests or demands would you make to public and private ecosystem actors?
10. Tell us about your requests or demands to the public administration and private ecosystem actors.
11. Would you be interested in joining an association or guild in the sector to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem and influence policies and narratives?
12. Legal structure of your organization
13. In what year was your organization legally established?
14. Where does the income or funding for your ESO come from?
15. What indicators do you regularly measure in your initiatives?
16. What is the total number of ventures your organization has supported since its creation?
17. How many ventures completed a program in your ESO in 2024?
18. How many of the ventures from 2024 were led by women?
19. In which sectors were your programs primarily focused during 2024?
20. What type of services or support did you offer during 2024?
21. What percentage of the ventures you supported in 2024 corresponds to each development stage?
22. Were the programs or cohorts executed in 2024 aimed at a specific type of entrepreneur as a target audience?
23. Approximately, what percentage of the ventures you supported in 2024 had a household income below the national threshold?
24. Your initiatives during 2024 mainly supported ventures located in which regions?
25. What type of collaborations and connections do you most frequently engage in to strengthen your ESO?
26. What type of collaborations and connections do you most frequently engage in to support entrepreneurs?
27. What would you need to improve your activities and dynamics of collaboration and connection with other actors and allies in the ecosystem?
28. What do you consider to be the main challenges for the entrepreneurial ecosystem in your country?
29. What aspects have experienced the greatest improvement in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in your country in the last 3 years?

Questions for investors and financial actors

1. What do you consider to be the main challenges for the entrepreneurial ecosystem in your country?
2. Which of the following aspects have experienced the greatest improvement in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in [surveyed country] in the last 3 years?

2nd Survey

1. Name of your Main Program
2. In which development stage(s) are the entrepreneurs participating in the program?
3. What is the approximate duration (in months) of each stage of the program?
    a. Program design and preparation
    b. Search and selection of entrepreneurs
    c. Program implementation
4. Does this program have open calls throughout the year?
5. How many calls per year do you make for this program?
6. How much funding do you offer to the entrepreneurs in this program?
7. In exchange for what percentage of equity?
8. How many hours approximately are dedicated to the entrepreneurs participating in your Main Program?
    a. Individual mentoring
    b. Online training
    c. In-person training
    d. On-demand consulting
9. Thinking about your main program: how many entrepreneurs apply per call, how many meet the criteria, and how many are selected?
    a. Applications received
    b. Applications that meet the criteria
    c. Accepted applications
10. For how long do you monitor the results of entrepreneurs after completing any program?
11. What is the satisfaction level of the participants in your programs?
12. What percentage of your annual budget is dedicated to the recruitment and selection of entrepreneurs?
13. What specific challenges or needs does your organization have regarding the recruitment of entrepreneurs?
14. What recommendations or best practices would you like to share with other ESOs?
15. Total expenses/annual budget for 2024.

15. Expenses in the entrepreneurship area in 2024
16. Total income in 2024
17. Income from the entrepreneurship area in 2024
18. Full-time employees dedicated to entrepreneurship lines
19. Volunteers dedicated to supporting entrepreneurs
20. What is the predominant educational profile of the entrepreneurs you support?
21. Other vulnerability factors present in the entrepreneurs you support
22. Economic performance of the entrepreneurs who complete your programs:
    a. Percentage that completes the programs
    b. Percentage that generates income
    c. Percentage that stays active after one year
    d. Percentage that raises funding
    e. Percentage that creates additional employment

23. What is the average amount of funding obtained one year after completing the program?
24. Profile of the ventures supported by the organization
25. Technology level of the ventures supported
26. Selection criteria for entrepreneurs:
    a. Innovative idea or solution
    b. Entrepreneurial team
    c. Level of technological development
    d. Scalable business model
    e. Purpose or social impact
    f. Traction
    g. Public visibility
    h. Awards or recognitions
    i. Expected impact
    j. Degree of exclusion within the entrepreneurial ecosystem

27. Total jobs created by the ventures that completed your programs in 2024
28. Which ESOs in the ecosystem do you maintain productive and strategic collaborative relationships with?