

## **SDG Innovation Challenge 2020 - EVENT REPORT**

### **Introduction**



The SDG Innovation Challenge is a virtual ideathon for motivated young people from across Africa to come together in developing practical solution ideas for challenges faced in their local communities at the grassroots level. By engaging in a collaborative ideation space online, participants connect around shared interest relating to the SDGs and, in interdisciplinary teams, work together to generate and prototype novel solution approaches that can transcend into tangible action to advance the SDGs. Designed as an online hackathon-style environment, the SDG Innovation Challenge leverages Design

Thinking, Social Innovation and Global Citizenship as a guiding framework for interaction.

The SDG Innovation Challenge took place from 26–28 October 2020 with a focus on SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). The three winning teams emerging from the event had the opportunity to showcase their solution idea on 5 November 2020 during the 3rd African Youth SDGs Summit.

Embracing SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals), the maiden edition of the SDG Innovation Challenge was a collaborative efforts between GrassRoots Hub, Melton Foundation, TECHFARM Hub and Youth Advocates Ghana. In addition, numerous collaborators - including organizations like Unleash, Global Changemakers, InnoHub, and Civicus Youth - contributed to the success of the event through cross-promotion, pro-bono mentoring, speaking engagement and more.

### **Participants and Teams**

Participants included youth professionals, entrepreneurs and innovators averagely between 18 to 35 years, working on projects, start-ups and community organizations

across diverse industries which are promoting SDGs 3, 4 and 9. Registered participants came from across the African continent including the following countries: Zimbabwe, Botswana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire and Ghana. Almost all participants were new acquaintances who forged to form teams as well as work on completely new ideas of mutual interest and pitch them as their innovative solution.

The following is an overview of the immediate impact numbers of the maiden SDG Innovation Challenge:

- 250 registrations in total (active event marketing only between 20-25 Oct 2020)
- 94 registered candidates were selected to participate in the event (stage one selection criteria)
- Out of 94 participants, 56 managed to form teams and waited for instructions for team task (stage two selection criteria)
- 56 participants were distributed among 11 teams of 3-7 people to work around a mutual interest or cause which became the team's innovative solution idea
- Out of the 11 teams, only 8 teams submitted their solution ideas which were presented to a panel of 5 judges for assessment and recommendations
- Out of the 8 teams who submitted their innovative solutions ideas, 3 teams with the highest assessment scores (comprising 17 participants in total) showcased their solution idea during the African Youth SDGs Summit and received the award packages including Startup Incubation and Mentorship support.

### **Dissemination and Marketing**

The maiden SDG Innovation Challenge had only a brief outreach campaign prior to the event. The event was actively marketed from 20-25 October using the event website as primary promotion and information resource. In addition, various infographics, messaging pitches, as well as a short promotional video were used to promote and engage around the maiden event. The primary digital platforms used in this process were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. In addition, organizing partners reach out to organizational partners in their respective networks directly, inviting them to cross-promote the event.

Event website: <https://meltonfoundation.org/global-events/sdg-innovation-challenge/>

Promo video: <https://youtu.be/MD5OldYOZOo>

## **Innovation Support Material**

To facilitate the process and create a rich learning environment for all participants, we developed a series of support materials, including video impulses introducing participants to key-methodologies and suggested tools to use for each phase of the SDG Innovation Challenge. These videos along with the respective resources provided in the Shared Event Folder on Drive were released throughout the event to help pace the participants' innovation journey during the 50 hours virtual innovation marathon.

*The impulse videos are also made available on YouTube at the beginning of the event and can be viewed [here](#).*

## **Technology**

Encompassed as a virtual event, the use of technology was of paramount importance during the maiden SDG Innovation Challenge. To facilitate virtual collaboration among everyone involved, we used four different platforms:

- **Slack** - a channel-based messaging platform, which allows joint work more effectively. With the Slack, we connect participants, mentors and organizers on a single platform, encouraging the exchange of information and continued collaboration between all. Prior to the event, we equipped the Slack space with the necessary channels and key resources in advance, helping participants to orient themselves and get acquainted to the platform more easily.
- **Zoom** - a video conferencing application that allows users to connect and interact directly and engage in direct conversation. We used Zoom Meetings for the different 'face-to-face' activities scheduled throughout the event. Several of the sessions were recorded and then made available on YouTube for continued access.
- **Google Drive** - an online file storage system with a number of cloud-based applications that drive teamwork. We created a Shared Event Folder on Drive with key-resources, instructions and worksheets and shared the folder with all confirmed participants in order to facilitate easy & continuous access to information, resources and different collaboration tools.
- **Email** - to ensure that everyone can engage actively even though they might not have been able to connect to any of the other technologies, we created a mailing

list containing all participants and cross-posted the most important updates and announcements there (in addition to sharing them on Slack).

**Some of the important lessons learned are:**

- Limit the use of new technologies: There are many platforms to incentivize and facilitate virtual collaboration, but it is important to evaluate what technologies are already established and known that can work as well. Excessive use of innovative technologies does not mean that the results at the end of an event like climathons are better, because participants may spend more time understanding how new tools work rather than using time to design and develop solution ideas.  
*The use of Slack has been an example in case: while Slack can help increase productivity and engagement in teams significantly, many participants did not find their way to the platform easily or quickly. Considering the relevant learning and onboarding curve for participants, we expect to (a) inform about the use of not commonly used tools in advance, and (b) invite selected participants to connect and get familiar at least 24hrs prior to the event.*
- Practice makes perfect: Although the team was generally familiar with the technologies in use, we tested, practised and rehearsed different scenarios to ensure that the technology works and further our goal: to convene participants and engage them around developing practicable solution ideas together. Only when organizers and support volunteers are well aware of the tools in use and are familiar with the event-specific settings, can participants be provided continued support throughout the event.
- Reinforce instead of force: Technology should help to facilitate the process rather than standing as an access or engagement barrier. While the platforms and technologies were tested and purposefully chosen prior to the event and we reinforced their active use throughout, participants were free to use or migrate to other tools and platforms based on their needs and communication habits. A Participants Directory, which had key-information of all participants and was available throughout the event, enabled participants to connect directly among each other and carry the conversation forward on a platform of their choice.
- Crosscutting approach: with the maiden SDG Innovation Challenge, we focused on three SDGs as primary ideation areas: SDG 3, 4 and 9. While initially aspiring to support solution development for each of the three areas, we soon acknowledged that the focused approach was too limiting and would not provide participants with the space to converge around issues from diverse perspectives. Thus, we adjusted

the rules of engagement early to encompass solution ideas that cut across SDG areas, sectors and backgrounds. Going forward, we envision to make this a more prominent feature in future events.

### **Incentives and Award Packages**

The participants of the 3 winning teams will be considered for Award Winning Packages, which includes:

1. Business Modelling and Registration.
2. Recommendation to Investment Match-Making Opportunities.
3. Access to Business Incubation and Pro-bono Mentorship.
4. Digital Literacy tools for Startup Upscale.

In addition, all successful participants of the of this maiden SDG Innovation Challenge were given participation certificates.

### **Participant Satisfaction**

A survey was conducted for all event participants. The survey was conducted using Google Forms and a web link was sent to participants immediately after the conclusion of the event with the invitation to provide feedback on their experience in the maiden SDG Innovation Challenge.

Overall, organisers collated 22 responses from participating teams. Data collated from the survey suggested that:

- Over 90% of responses rated the entire implementation approach of the maiden SDG Innovation Challenge as a success. The feedbacks generally confirmed key issues and topics which form the basis for engagement between organiser, participants, judges and mentors as well coordinated.
- An overview of responses from participants to the question of “what (new) skills did you learn during the SDG Innovation Challenge?” highlighted: the application of new engagement and collaboration tools (especially; Slack, Zoom, Google Drive, YouTube), team building, time management, resilience for task performance, adopting and applying design thinking in project ideation development, networking opportunities and building interpersonal relationship skills as new key skills.

- In response to “what did you like most about this SDG Innovation Challenge?” in the survey, participants affirmed the experience is a unique opportunity to think and work with like minds across the world, the proactive use of digital tools, Grand Opening, Roundup and Awards Ceremony, team formation strategies, video and text onboarding resource materials, the insightful inputs of the Judges and mentors, carefully coordinated activities between organisers and participants.
- To the survey question “What did you like least about this SDG Innovation Challenge?” participants responded the following: time zone differences frustrated many team formation and working efforts, unfamiliar use of tools in use (such as Slack) disrupted some active interactions, unreliable internet access from local ISPs.
- Respondents also recommended that; the SDG Innovation Challenge should be made a regular activity which can transform the ideas of SDG Innovators and Startups into reality. More skills empowerment resource be added to training, improve publicity efforts to attract many more participants, adequate financial support as part of award winners package

## **Conclusion**

The maiden event has shown that this is a worthwhile and much needed format to engage young SDG practitioners from across sectors and regions in working together on practicable solution ideas to incorporate sustainable development into mainstream practice and thus further SDG attainment. Connecting local solution ideas to a pan-African platform offered by the African Youth SDGs Summit increases not only the possibilities of making local solutions more visible - and thus replicable if not open to collaborate - at the global level, but also does it create a more compelling incentive for participants who, through their participation in the SDG Innovation Challenge, can showcase their work widely, rallye for wider support and resources, and join a global community of SDG advocates and practitioners.

As we are working with teams providing continued mentoring and support to turn their solution ideas into innovative projects, we are looking forward to taking the SDG Innovation Challenge to the next level, building on the learnings and insights harnessed during the maiden event. We expect to create more opportunities for young people from across Africa to engage with the SDG Innovation Challenge - both in the virtual as well as in the physical space - by developing the concept and approach further plus by pooling resources in the SDG Innovation Fund (to be developed) to also offer financial support for suited solution ideas emerging from the challenge.