

IDEASCALE CASE STUDY

Pact

IDEASCALE

Empowering Youth Entrepreneurs and COVID Solutions in Four African Nations

Pact is an international development nonprofit that works on the ground in nearly 40 countries to end poverty and marginalization. They partner with local organizations, businesses and governments to build lasting solutions for thriving, resilient communities. Their vision is a world where everyone owns their future.

In 2020, all around the world, people were experiencing the damaging effects of COVID-19. Communities were seeing challenges in delivering essential services such as in the health and education sectors and suffered long-term economic hardships due to wide-spread disruptions in supply chains and loss of employment. In October 2020, Pact launched AfrIdea, a regional innovation program supported by the U.S. Department of State which was geared towards unlocking the potential of West African entrepreneurs, social activists and developers in **uncovering solutions to post-COVID challenges. Through a contest, training, idea-a-thon and follow-on funding, they sought to activate a network of young entrepreneurs and innovators from Guinea, Mali, Senegal and Togo to source and grow innovative solutions.**

The goal was to source business solutions to challenges in the areas of economy, health, and education in the four participating nations, but also to nurture young entrepreneurs in the process. To find participants, Pact partnered with on-the-ground organizations and innovation labs to get the word out and also promoted the program with targeted social media ads.

The program was organized into seven phases.

Proposal sourcing. Anyone in the four nations aged 18-35 could log in to Pact's IdeaScale crowdsourcing platform to submit their solutions to challenges in the areas of the economy, health and education. 750 people signed onto the platform and submitted more than 200 proposals. When they shared their submission they answered a number of questions, including which field of play it addressed, who the problem impacts, and what evidence supports their idea (to name a few).

Feedback and prioritization. Next, participants ranked and discussed the ideas. The 242 proposals were reviewed by 12 volunteers and narrowed down to 150, then to 80.

Selection: Finally, 40 people were selected (10 from each AfrIdea country) to participate in project mentoring and coaching. A panel of multidisciplinary evaluators assessed the ideas based on the ability to address an identified problem, level of innovation, potential for large-scale impact, use of technology and propensity to

empower women. The goal was to ensure that the final candidate pool was at least 50% female and they found that though there were fewer female submissions overall, that their solutions consistently were ranked as the top finalists. They also found that many finalists collaborated and combined their solutions - building community as part of the process.

Coaching: The cohort of 40 were part of a preparatory training course, through Zoom and WhatsApp group discussions, to support innovators and entrepreneurs in developing skills to refine and communicate their ideas. The training covered topics like mindsets of innovation and how to prepare an elevator pitch, design thinking and designing with the customer in mind, and business planning. The WhatsApp group was also a quick and easy way for participants to share questions about what they were learning as well as different ideas or thoughts with each other in real time. It continues to remain active even now.

Prototyping. Next, participants were invited to a 72-hour nonstop hybrid virtual idea-a-thon during which teams raced to build and demonstrate a prototype for their proposed solution. The plan was originally to design a mentoring program for a limit of 36 young people, but pivoting to add virtual component allowed Pact to invite more people to participate in the process, including 120 young innovators and over 50 mentors and volunteers.

Pitching. At the end of the event, only 12 ideas (three from each country) presented their demo to a panel of judges who listened to their pitches and evaluated the prototypes. No prize money is awarded to the shortlisted winners, however, the team who delivered the best pitch, received 1 month follow-on support from the participating innovation centers in the form of co-working space or mentorship.

Funding. After the pitch event, all 40 AfrIdea participants (no matter if they were selected by judges or not) had the opportunity to apply for seed funding up to \$10,000 per country and six months of mentorship to support the pilot, or proof-of-concept, stage.

Apart from nurturing over 40 fledgling businesses and collaborative teams from the four countries, AfrIdea has generated a number of new solutions to better solve post-crisis challenges including:

- An innovative, online and easy-to-access **platform that aims to connect parents and teachers in a virtual market.**
- **A recycling project that aims to recover masks in order to turn them into insulators** for construction companies.
- A web platform and mobile **application that allows the population to create a medical file that can be shared and updated** in real time

- **A project to create and engage virtual science clubs** by the mobile laboratory in order to orient more students in scientific fields of study and celebrate the best female science teachers annually.
- And many, many more.

“We’ve integrated open innovation into a renewed, more inclusive granting mechanism. In the past you would typically find solutions that were a lot of paperwork like submitting a 5-15 page proposal and doing it this way was deterring a lot of people and it wasn’t innovative, “ said Taylor Cruz Mwila, Senior Innovation Officer at Pact, **“By combining mentorship and crowdsourcing - it’s automatically engaging. It’s bringing a community to you and whether you get accepted or not you can actually grow your idea and seek inspiration from a new collaborative community.** You’re able to get feedback automatically from a network of experienced innovators or like minded individuals. Working this way tied us all together to hope and progress in the midst of COVID.”