How Nordic innovation is accelerating global social impact

When the Covid-19 pandemic shuttered schools around the world, not even Bhutan – a Himalayan kingdom lauded for its effective response to the virus – was spared. Despite efforts to reduce learning loss through virtual classes, the return to in-person schooling revealed significant setbacks, particularly in core subjects such as mathematics.

Recognising the need for swift and targeted action, Bhutanese authorities turned to technology, introducing an AI-powered maths learning platform. The initiative – launched in 2024 – brought together the breakthrough software of Finnish start-up Eduten, the digital-learning expertise of Unicef's learning innovation unit, and the funding and pedagogical support of the Finnish government.

With these partners in place, the pilot moved from concept to classroom. Students engaged with gamified maths exercises – including a car-racing challenge – while teachers tracked individual progress through real-time analytics. Early results have been promising: Grade 5 students using Eduten outperformed their peers by 11.2 percentage points in numeracy skills. Comparable gains are emerging in Laos and Uzbekistan, where similar trials are underway.

These early successes point to a much wider challenge – and opportunity. Globally, nearly two-thirds of 10-year-olds cannot read and understand a simple text. Unicef's digital education strategy aims to reach 4 million teachers and 120 million students in 40 countries by 2026, with government-backed projects like Bhutan's helping to transform education systems.

The most urgent development challenges

Addressing the globe's deepening learning deficit demands resolve and fresh thinking, experts say. "Transformation and change are important in times of crisis," says Thomas Davin, Global Director at the Unicef Office of Innovation (OOI), who leads a team delivering 200 solutions in 136 countries reaching 38mn people.

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> "Aligning with Nordic governments has proven to be both catalytic and strategic, enabling us to activate innovation ecosystems around the world"

Companies such as OpenAI and Arm can be important allies. OpenAI's partnership with Unicef on accessible digital textbooks is an example, using AI to transform standard books into interactive virtual versions that help all children learn better, including those with disabilities. Similarly, Arm's support of the Tinkering with Tech programme, alongside the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, helps students develop creativity and essential skills with microcontrollers like Micro:bits – miniaturised computers designed for beginners – encouraging problem-solving and digital literacy.

"Unicef has decades of experience in working with governments and communities globally. When it comes to using AI to solve tough problems like getting high-quality educational materials to kids, it brings the reach, know-how and relationships to make it happen," says Anna Makanju, VP of Global Impact at OpenAI. This means starting by making accessible digital textbooks available to children with disabilities in Uruguay, who have often been left out of mainstream learning. "The goal is to make it easy for any government or educator to create inclusive learning materials quickly, affordably and in any language, so no child is left behind, no matter where they live," says Makanju.

Education is only one area in which partnerships can amplify diverse expertise. OOI works across sectors on development challenges including women's health, climate change, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). In recent years, Nordic countries have topped the **global innovation index**. "Partnering with the governments of Denmark, Finland and Sweden maximises the value of public and private Nordic innovation to bridge the gap between promising technologies and on-the-ground results for children and their communities," says Patty Alleman, who leads strategic partnerships at OOI. "We leverage this to unlock further alignment with diverse global partners to yield exponential results."

Collaborative strategy for stronger results

This approach is evident in OOI's work with the Swedish government, harnessing the country's social impact investing ecosystem to source and support climate innovations and femtech projects – tech solutions that improve women's lives – in emerging economies. For instance, South African start-up, My Pregnancy Journey, which reaches thousands of African women with a maternal health app that provides localised pregnancy information, was selected in the Gender Responsive Innovation Challenge (**GRIC**), a femtech market-shaping exercise led by the Unicef Venture Fund and GITEX.

Through Unicef's pooled philanthropic **Venture Fund**, equity-free investments and mentorship are provided to a gender-balanced cohort of tech start-ups, focused on **improving health outcomes for young women and girls**. The fund is a unique financing mechanism using both fiat and cryptocurrency investments to stimulate frontier tech start-up ecosystems in emerging economies. From blockchain to generative AI, it applies cutting-edge tech solutions to development and humanitarian challenges.

"Femtech is a growing industry with huge potential. It can deliver personalised health choices and address gender gaps for girls and women globally. I welcome the initiative of Unicef's Office of Innovation," says Diana Janse, Sweden's State Secretary to the Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade.

A similar cooperative model is being applied in Denmark, **recognised** as a leader in sustainable water management. Backed by the Danish government, **Unicef's Copenhagen-based water and sanitation innovation unit** draws on public and private expertise to develop technologies for the world's most water-insecure nations and has led on transformational initiatives with the potential to impact over 100mn people across Africa. These include **More Water More Life**, a scheme that combines satellite data, digital mapping and local knowledge to locate deep groundwater sources in regions affected by water scarcity, such as Somalia and Kenya.

The possibilities of innovation through cutting-edge technologies, such as AI, are attracting a wide range of partners to Unicef's mission. Arm, for example, is not only supporting initiatives such as Tinkering with Tech, but also collaborating with OOI and Unicef Lao to install **air quality sensors in schools.**

This forward-thinking project, launched with support from the Lao ministries of education and environment, uses machine learning and AI to provide real-time pollution estimates, enabling swift action to protect children's health. It's a powerful illustration of how catalytic partnerships with Nordic governments and other leading social impact private partners has enabled the OOI to mobilise frontier technologies to drive sustainable impact – not just in education, but across the spectrum of challenges facing children, young people and families worldwide.

The world needs problem solvers and solution finders agile enough to pivot and adapt to address global challenges. UNICEF continues to innovate – identifying, adapting and scaling the most transformative solutions that deliver global social impact. Find out how the organisation is accelerating results for children and their communities with a dynamic and diverse cadre of partners.

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