



The Social Enterprise Business Plan as a Master's Thesis Format

Turning research insights into evidence-based, social innovation

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Overview

- 1** **Intro & Background (~5min)**
- 2** **Key Elements of a Social Enterprise Business Plan (~20min)**
- 3** **Individual Exercise & Peer Feedback (~30min)**
- 4** **Review of Real-Life Examples (~20min)**
- 5** **Wrap up & References (~10min)**

Introduction

- Drawing on 20+ years of working on Financial Inclusion
- Various roles
 - International Monetary Fund
 - McKinsey & Company
 - CGAP at World Bank
 - Flourish Ventures



Alternative master thesis formats/sessions:

1. Policy brief
2. Consulting project report

3. Social enterprise business plan

Progress in Financial Inclusion over Past 15 Years

Emerging markets (~2010)

- Half of working-age adults completely outside of formal financial system
- Small, costly & ineffective banking system; branch & cash-based
- Mobile money and microcredit as important proof points

Some results since then

- Share of working-age adults with account: **51%** (2011) → **79%** (2024)
- Gender gap: **9 %**-points (2011) → **4 %**-points (2024)
- Share of adults with digital payments: **60%+** (2024)
- Formal savings participation in emerging markets: **40%+** (2024)

Apollo Agriculture in Kenya

CASE STUDY

Problem & opportunity

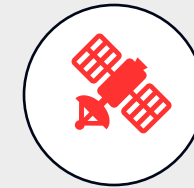
- Africa has 1/4 of global ag. land but produces <1/10 of food
- 65mio small-scale farmers lack credit & insurance, hurting productivity

Solution

- Apollo Agriculture bundles instant credit and insurance with quality farm inputs and training, leveraging satellite data and AI

Outcomes to date

- Apollo's 350k+ farmers increase yields by 2.5x, addressing two of Africa's biggest challenges – climate change and food security – through more efficient resource & land use.
- Farmers gain average 2x profit increase; 84% report increased quality of life.



**Improved
satellite data**



**Agronomic
machine
learning**



**Mobile phones
& money**

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What is a Social Enterprise?

A mission-driven business that applies market-based strategies to achieve social or environmental goals.

Key features:

- Innovation in products or services, typically for a specific target segment
- Explicit and measurable social and/or environmental impact goals
- Financial sustainability through earned income
- Typically, reinvestment of profits into mission

Why a Social Enterprise Business Plan Thesis?

- Connects theory and practice through applied innovation.
- Demonstrates evidence-based problem-solving.
- Builds competencies in research translation, impact evaluation, and business modeling.
- Produces a tangible, perhaps employable project portfolio.

Mapping Traditional Thesis to Business Plan Equivalent

Academic Thesis Section

- Research Question & Objectives
- Literature Review
- Methodology
- Results & Analysis
- Discussion
- Conclusion

Business Plan Equivalent

- Social Problem & Opportunity
- Theory of Change & Impact Framework
- Field Data Collection & Validation
- Findings & Prototype Testing
- Reflection & Feasibility
- Implementation Plan

Typical Structure of a Social Enterprise Business Plan

- Mission & Vision
- Problem & Opportunity
- Solution / Product
- Market Analysis – Research Methodology
- Business Model and Plan
- Impact (Theory of Change, Metrics)
- Implementation strategy
- Feasibility and risks
- References / Appendices

Theory of Change: From Research to Impact



Example:

- Skill gaps identified
- Vocational training
- Youth Employment
- Higher Incomes
- Societal benefits

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Individual Exercise: Brainstorm Your Social Business

Goal: Brainstorm your idea using the Lean Canvas.

Steps:

- Identify a social or development problem you care about.
- Flesh out social business idea using the 9 key boxes as a guide:
 - Problem
 - Customer Segments
 - Unique Value Proposition
 - Product/solution
 - Channels
 - Revenue Streams
 - Cost Structure
 - Key Metrics
 - Social Impact

Time: 15–20 minutes.

Abbreviated Example: Lean Canvas

Affordable clean cookstoves in rural Kenya

- Problem: Indoor air pollution causes 20,000 deaths yearly.
- Solution: Locally produced, low-cost cookstoves using micro-distribution networks.
- Customers: Low-income households, women's groups.
- Revenue: Stove sales + carbon credit subsidies.
- Impact Metric: Reduced respiratory illness, CO₂ reduction.

Pair-wise Peer Feedback (~5min each)

Possible feedback questions

- Is the problem well defined?
- Is the solution / value proposition clear?
- Is the model financially sustainable?
- How is the social impact measured?

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Business Plan Summary Example: NiADA Diagnostic App

NiADA (Non-invasive Anemia Detection App), MIT SOLVE 2024 Global Health Challenge

Business Plan Summary

- **Mission & vision:** Enable regular, affordable, non-invasive screening and monitoring of anemia globally—especially among women and children—so that treatment/intervention can occur earlier and effectively.
- **Problem:** Over 2 billion people globally suffer from anemia; conventional diagnostics (lab-based hemoglobin tests) are invasive, costly, require labs/technicians, and are not readily available in low-resource settings.
- **Solution / Product:** A smartphone application (“NiADA”) that uses AI (deep learning) to detect and monitor anemia by analyzing a photo (e.g., of the inner eyelid) and giving a real-time hemoglobin estimate, with history tracking.
- **Target market / beneficiaries:**
 - Primary: Women of reproductive age, children under-5, populations in low- /middle-income countries where diagnostics are weak.
 - Secondary: Healthcare providers, NGOs, public-health programs that need low-cost screening tools.
- **Business model:** For-profit entity. Revenue from licensing the app to healthcare providers, subscription-based usage, and partnering with public-health programs.
- **Impact & metrics:** Enables scalable screening/monitoring of anemia; reduces cost & barriers; supports data collection/trends; aims to improve health outcomes, reduce complications from untreated anemia.
- **Risks / challenges:** Regulatory/medical-device approvals; ensuring accuracy & reliability in diverse populations; collecting sufficient validated training data; user adoption and trust; monetization in low-income settings.

Business Plan Summary Example: Banofi Leather

Banofi Leather, HULT PRIZE Winner, 2023

Business Plan Summary

- **Mission & vision:** Provide a vegan, cruelty-free, environmentally friendly leather substitute made from banana plant waste, targeting the multi-billion-dollar leather and fashion materials market, while reducing carbon emissions & supporting banana farmers.
- **Problem:** Animal leather production involves high environmental cost (GHG emissions, water use, toxins), and fashion material waste is large.
- **Solution / Product:** A material made from banana crop waste that functions as leather (for handbags, apparel), eliminating much of the toxic waste from traditional leather, and reducing carbon emissions by an estimated ~90% in comparison to animal leather.
- **Target market:** Fashion houses, apparel brands, accessories manufacturers seeking sustainable/vegan materials; possibly luxury or premium segment (given fashion industry context)
- **Business model:** Sell plant-based leather material to fashion and accessories manufacturers; licensing or supply agreements
- **Impact:** Environmental (reduced carbon footprint, reduced animal leather use, waste monetization), Social (new income opportunities for banana farmers)
- **Sustainability & risk:** Need to ensure consistent feedstock, quality of material meets fashion industry standards, convincing brand partners, production scale and cost competitiveness

Business Plan Summary Example: Subconscious AI

Subconscious AI – “Climate Action Simulation,” MIT SOLVE 2025 Climate Change Adaptation Challenge

Business Plan Summary

- **Mission & Vision:** Enable governments, NGOs and urban planners to design climate interventions that will actually be adopted by target populations — thereby increasing effectiveness, reducing waste, and accelerating impact in climate-vulnerable areas.
- **Problem:** Many climate programs (e.g., subsidies, retrofits, energy efficiency, behavior change campaigns) fail or under-deliver because human behavior, trust, habits, local context are poorly predicted.
- **Solution / Product:** The Climate Simulation Lab platform creates synthetic populations built from ~800 million real data points and uses AI + LLMs to simulate how different interventions (messaging strategies, delivery mechanisms, policy design) will perform across geographies/demographics. Prototype shows 90%+ correlation with real human decision-making.
- **Target market / beneficiaries:**
 - Primary: Governments, municipalities, NGOs, international development agencies planning climate-adaptation/mitigation programs.
 - Secondary: Private sector climate investors, climate-finance funds, policy-design firms, large donors.
- **Business model:** SaaS/Platform licensing (governments/NGOs pay for scenario modelling), consulting/advisory services linked to simulation outputs, premium data/insight packages for international donors or agencies.
- **Impact & metrics:** Improved adoption of climate interventions, reduced cost of failed programs, scaled behavior-change success, measurement via simulated vs actual adoption rates, CO₂ or adaptation-impact equivalent.
- **Risks / Challenges:** Data privacy and ethical issues (synthetic populations), ensuring model validity across different cultures/contexts, convincing governments/NGOs to trust simulation results vs traditional pilots, competition from other analytics firms.

Chime Success as a Challenger Bank in the US

Impact thesis: Invest in mobile-first challenger banks to spur innovation and shift incumbents toward personalized, low-cost digital services

What we did: Invested in 9 challenger banks across 7 countries, publishing our perspectives through articles and co-authored report; funded policy engagement via Brookings Institution.

Chime outcomes: Early Flourish investment (2017) offering zero fees, wage advances, and credit build-up over time. “Cracked” interchange revenue model, achieved unicorn status, reached 12 million customers, and contributed to a US incumbent bank industry shift away from overdraft fees.

Sector-level outcomes: CFPB estimates in 2024 that US overdraft fees down to \$5.8bn from \$12bn in 2019 pre-pandemic.

US incumbent bank overdraft changes



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Key Takeaways

- Integrate academic rigor (data, theory, methods) with entrepreneurial design.
- Ensure business logic and measurability of impact.
- Use frameworks like Lean Canvas and Theory of Change as both academic and operational tools.
- Link proposed product/services back to literature and evidence.

References and further resources

References:

- Chang, A. M. (2018). “Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good,” *Wiley Publications*.
- Seelos, C. & J Mair (2005). “Social Entrepreneurship: Creating New Business Models to Serve the Poor,” *Business Horizons*, v.48, pp241–246, *Indiana University*.
- Schwab Foundation (2024). “The State of Social Enterprise,” *World Economic Forum Global Report*.
- Yunus, M., B. Moingeon, and L. Lehmann-Ortega (2010). “Building Social Business Models: Lessons from the Grameen Experience,” *Long Range Planning*, v.43, pp308–325, *Elsevier*.

Examples:

- Hult Prize winners and finalists, www.hultprize.org/competition
- MIT Solve participants, www.solve.mit.edu
- Schwab & Skoll Foundations — Social Enterprise Case Libraries.

Summary Comparison Across Thesis Formats

	 Academic Thesis	 Consulting Report	 Policy Brief	 Social Enterprise Plan
Purpose	Academic advance	Solve client issue	Inform policy	Build venture
Output	Research study	Applied report	Policy memo	Business plan
Audience	Other scholars	Executives	Policymakers	Investors/partners
Evidence	Original data	Client/market data	Synthesized data	Field/impact data
Structure	Lit → Method → Results	Exec summary → Findings → Recs	Problem → Options → Recs	Problem → Solution → Model → Impact
Lens	Knowledge	Decision-support	Policy-oriented	Entrepreneurial