



Case Study: Innojo

DOT's Supportive Platform for Young Social Entrepreneurs

Principle(s) Addressed
Design with the User



Overview

Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) is a youth-led movement of daring social innovators who have the tools, knowledge, and networks to transform their own communities and create opportunities. The organization supports young people to become innovators and leaders, and to create and apply digital solutions that have a positive impact in their communities.

Founded in 2001, DOT works with youth, the private sector, governments, and community-based organizations towards a collaborative vision of communities shaped by daring social innovators.

As a learning organization that is continually innovating, DOT is highly responsive to what it observes through its programming, its youth network, and its engagements with external experts and international networks. Seventeen years of work with global youth has made it clear to DOT that young people see social entrepreneurship as a desired livelihood pathway, and that governments, global bodies, and economic strategies increasingly indicate the economic and social potential in empowering youth as social entrepreneurs.

DOT also saw, however, that despite growing global programmatic and political emphasis on social innovation and entrepreneurship, no youth-focused support, platforms, or networks for young social entrepreneurs existed at scale. Young people in the DOT network shared their need for such a tool, and young women indicated that no safe and trusted platforms existed that served their needs as innovators.



Youth social entrepreneurs workshop journey mapping their innovation experiences.

PHOTO CREDIT: HILARY DUFF



Youth social entrepreneurs workshop the support they need on their unique innovation journey.

PHOTO CREDIT: HILARY DUFF



DOT's solution is *Innojo*, a platform that enables emerging social innovators to build a network of support by matching with peers and mentors, and accessing curated learning on their social innovation journey.

Established in response to the needs voiced by young leaders in Africa and the Middle East, DOT approached Innojo as an opportunity to invest in youth-led, inclusive, and localized innovation: the platform is designed by youth, for youth.

DOT is currently incubating a team of youth based in Cape Town, South Africa, alongside an international virtual user experience (UX) design team of youth in Kenya, Jordan, and Lebanon, to design and develop Innojo.

DOT sees itself as a catalyst and incubator for youth innovation as the Innojo team creates one of the first user-designed and user-developed tools in the ICT for Development (ICT4D) space.



Youth social entrepreneurs co-designing digital tool to support their innovation journeys at DOT's 2017 Youth Unconference in Kigali, Rwanda.

PHOTO CREDIT: HILARY DUFF

Objectives

Innojo starts with the question: what happens to a young social innovator when a skills development or training program ends, or when a young person graduates from an innovation accelerator or incubator? DOT's research into the needs of young people embarking on a social innovation journey showed that at the end of face-to-face programming is when an innovator is most likely to give up on their idea.

DOT's vision for Innojo is that it will grow in the hands and minds of youth, and become the platform of choice for young social entrepreneurs around the world - providing them with the connections, support, and skills they need to continue on their social innovation journey even after a training program ends.

Designed to meet the needs of young people emerging from any social innovation program in the world, Innojo will connect hundreds of thousands of early-stage innovators across programs, organizations,



and geographies, and help them take the next steps with their social innovations so that they can build the systems that work for them – benefitting millions of people in local communities.

Applying the Principles for Digital Development

In 2016, DOT launched a two-year research initiative to better understand the digital needs of young innovators in Africa and the Middle East. The goal of the research was to inform DOT’s innovation strategy, and to ensure that youth emerging from its programs were equipped to overcome challenges and increase their community impact.

This research initiative led to DOT’s commitment to the [Principles for Digital Development](#) in its work, and, in particular, its commitment to [designing with the user](#) as the organization developed a digital solution for young social innovators.

Designing with the user has long been a core tenet of DOT’s approach to programming and youth engagement. DOT believes in youth as an untapped resource that can generate and drive growth and development, and that catalyzing a youth-led movement of leaders and innovators is key to unlocking this potential and power and, in turn, building systemic change.

This case study outlines key activities and lessons learned throughout the design and development process as DOT learned from youth, co-designed with youth, and ultimately structured to incubate youth-led innovation. The goal of this case study is to provide practitioners in the development space high-level recommendations and inspiration for new ways to approach designing with the user.

Designing with the User

1. Learning from users

DOT began its journey of designing Innojo with its users — youth in Africa and the Middle East — early in the research phase.

The earliest stage of research into the technology needs of young social entrepreneurs was driven by youth-led research, where youth



Innojo youth development team in their agile development daily scrum.

PHOTO CREDIT: TONY VETTER

“It’s about creating a community. It’s about finding like-minded people to say this is my challenge. This is where I’m at right now. Can you please help me? Not being ashamed of that.”

SOUTH AFRICA
Innojo User, DOT



in Kenya, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Lebanon were engaged to survey their peers about the kinds of devices and services they have access to and use for learning, business, and skills development.

This research led to DOT engaging a human-centered design agency to dig deeper into the specific needs of young social entrepreneurs and how DOT could best serve them with a digital tool. The agency tested the viability of a number of ideas that had emerged in the research phase, working with 65 young innovators and business leaders in Jordan, Tanzania, and Ghana.

Activities for testing ideas with the user included:

- Testing paper-based prototypes and interactive scripts with user groups to gather real-time first reactions, perceptions and interest levels;
- Networking events during which young social entrepreneurs participated in planned activities that included designing their ideal peer-to-peer and youth-to-mentor interaction scenarios;
- An impact and engagement lifecycle card game that tested a user's technology, community, and support needs at various stages of their social innovation journey;
- A simple mobile chatbot simulation that social entrepreneurs could interact with so DOT could learn what support might naturally be sought via digital tools;
- A card game that allowed youth to sort and organize their thoughts on the steps they could take to reach their goals;
- Surveys, value sliders, and feature sorting activities (each facilitated virtually and in face-to-face sessions) to evaluate feedback on a standardized scale.

These activities led to a robust and holistic set of user personas, feedback, data, and ideas that allowed DOT to launch the development of a platform for young social entrepreneurs. Critical learning from the process included:

- There is a need for a platform-based approach to purposefully connecting young social entrepreneurs;
- DOT is best positioned to play a coordinating and facilitating role for social innovation initiatives so that it can help youth build ideas more capably;



User experience workshops for Innojo involved testing paper-based prototypes and interactive scripts.

PHOTO CREDIT: HILARY DUFF



- Supporters such as mentors, contributors, and peers are critical to the success of social innovators, and DOT can play an important role in facilitating their meaningful involvement in the innovation journey of a young person;

2. Users co-designing with users

One of DOT's critical takeaways from the research phase was that continuously designing with the user throughout the development process is essential to deeply understanding and addressing the complex user experience needs related to accessibility, inclusivity, language, digital safety and security, and gender.

As it embarked on the detailed design phase, DOT worked with [RLabs](#) in Cape Town, South Africa to establish a virtual user experience (UX) design team of young social entrepreneurs from South Africa, Kenya, Lebanon, and Jordan.

The virtual UX team took the lead in deep user experience research and early-stage platform design. They took a particular interest in making sure that the platform was a safe space for young women, who face a higher opportunity cost to adopting digital solutions and are inordinately affected by safety, security, and accessibility issues.

It was important to DOT to ensure that the virtual UX team members were representative of the young people who would ultimately be using the platform. To that end, the team was gender balanced, with even distribution between the Middle East and East Africa, and included speakers of Arabic, Swahili, French, and English.

As a virtual team, they were able to collaborate across geographies to rapidly develop the early stage platform design and perform continuous UX research to ensure that all design decisions were based on user-focused design principles, research, and immediate feedback.

Activities that the virtual UX team undertook to as they designed with users included:

- Face-to-face group discussions with social entrepreneurs in each of their countries – including combined and separate discussions with young women and young men – to understand gender-based accessibility, privacy, safety, and support needs;

THE PRINCIPLES FOR DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT CORE TENETS OF DESIGNING WITH THE USER:

- Incorporate multiple user types and stakeholders in each phase of the project lifecycle to direct feature needs and revise the design. Here, users are people who will interact directly with the tool or system, and stakeholders are people who will be affected by or have an interest in the tool or system, such as people whose data are being collected, government officials or researchers who may study the data collected.
- Design tools that improve users' current processes, saving time, using fewer resources and improving quality.
- Develop context-appropriate tools informed by users' priorities and needs, considering the ecosystem and accepting that digital tools will not always be the best fit.
- Develop the tool in an incremental and iterative manner, with clear objectives and purpose in mind.
- Ensure that the design is sensitive to and considers the needs of the traditionally underserved.
- Embrace an iterative process that allows for incorporating feedback and adapting your tool after the initial testing and launch.
- Be open about setting expectations, and let people opt out of participating in the design process.



- Scenario modelling with groups of users, using paper-based prototypes to co-design features such as collaboration and project management tools, connecting with others, and getting feedback on social innovation ideas;
- ‘Secret’ Facebook groups that allowed users to communicate with each other and model the kind of community experience they would expect in Innojo;
- Supporting users to develop personal journey maps using Google Slides for templates and drag-and-drop artefacts.

The virtual UX team developed the Innojo’s Alpha design in this stage, and their findings through user collaboration resulted in a set of design principles that formed the foundation of the platform’s design.

The design principles are four guiding tenets based on the needs expressed by users during the virtual UX design team’s activities:

1. We will respect the time of our users as a finite resource, and support them in creating and receiving value quickly.
2. We will not add to the load that our users are already carrying; we need to accelerate their ability to overcome barriers.
3. We will compliment the apps that our users already use and leverage each users’ existing digital footprint.
4. Our users will feel in control: we will respect personal choice in relation to user identity, projects, connections, forms of support, and impact.

3. Incubating innovation

As the virtual UX team concluded their Alpha design of Innojo, DOT began to turn its efforts to establishing a full development team to move the project forward.

Building on its existing relationship with [RLabs](#), a South Africa-based organization that trains marginalized youth as coders, developers, and user interface designers, DOT made the decision to incubate a team of youth to lead and develop Innojo.

To facilitate this, DOT established an office in a co-working space in Cape Town, and hired a team of RLabs-trained youth that included a UX designer, interface designer, full stack developer, and a project coordinator. The virtual UX team continued to provide essential



Youth social entrepreneurs at DOT’s 2017 Youth Unconference in Kigali, Rwanda

PHOTO CREDIT: HILARY DUFF

RESOURCES

Digital Opportunity Trust
<http://dotrust.org>

Principles for Digital Development
<https://digitalprinciples.org>

Meet the DOT South Africa youth development team:
<https://youtu.be/LOT5WJzIOLg>

From Model to Movement: A Strategic Evolution for DOT:
<https://www.dotrust.org/a-strategic-evolution-for-dot/>

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UX and user research support, representing the needs of users in countries outside of South Africa.

As additional support, DOT assembled an advisory group of experts from the [Praekelt Foundation](#), [How Might We](#), [Nudge](#) and members of DOT's own strategy team to provide guidance and mentorship to the youth developers.

This structure allowed the youth team full control over the design and development of Innojo, truly putting the platform into the hands of its users – young social innovators – to develop a platform that meets their needs.

The youth team is actively developing Innojo, and planning a Beta launch in October 2018 at [innojo.org](#).

To learn more about Innojo and DOT's approach to platform design and implementation, contact Tony Vetter. southafrica@dotrust.org

Lessons Learned and Recommendations from DOT

- **Incubate, don't develop.** If resources allow, incubate a team that is fully representative of your user base to develop your digital initiative rather than outsourcing or developing in-house. Not only will you be investing in truly innovative ICT4D practices, your solution will be better informed, more innovative, and better meet the needs of your user.
- **Put users on your design team.** At all stages of the research, design, and development cycle, making sure that your design team is representative of your user is critical to outcomes that actually reflect the needs and wants of your user base.
- **Collaborate closely and embed stakeholders in agency or consultant-led work.** DOT used the services of a human-centered design agency early on in the process, which led to valuable insights. However, third-party research meant that the findings were abstracted from DOT's own deep knowledge of the youth it works with – knowledge based on more than 15 years of working closely with young people in East Africa and the Middle East – as well as the direct experience of youth. DOT recommends that users and on-the-ground teams are not just consulted, but *meaningfully embedded* with any agencies or consultants during research, scoping, and design work. Users themselves, combined with the wealth of first-hand knowledge you have built within your organization, will strengthen outcomes – and collaboration will build the capacity of your own team.
- **Lead with gender considerations.** Barriers to access, opportunity cost, and safety concerns inordinately affect women – particularly for digital initiatives. Leading your UX research efforts with consideration for women's full participation means that you are designing thoughtfully and inclusively for all of your users.