THE CHALLENGE
Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a vital source of jobs, wealth creation and entrepreneurship opportunities in Africa. These businesses form the bedrock of economic activity but continue to face a multitude of challenges. Despite a thriving entrepreneurial spirit, SMEs often lack the skills needed to leverage the benefits of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Access to quality hardware and software tailored to their needs remains expensive and difficult to obtain. This is hindering the growth and competitiveness of SMEs and, in turn affecting productivity, employment generation and economic growth.

THE RESPONSE
Since July 2006, UNIDO and Microsoft have been pooling expertise to promote innovative uses of ICT that foster entrepreneurship, help create new business opportunities, unleash future innovators and improve the competitiveness of SMEs in Africa. The partnership continues to evolve and has resulted in several collaborative initiatives including:

Business Information Centres
UNIDO establishes Business Information Centres (BICs) in rural areas that provide integrated solutions for SMEs on a demand-driven and self-sustaining basis. The centres offer tailored entrepreneurial advisory services, ICT training and provide a fast and reliable internet connection, enabling rural entrepreneurs to access relevant information on markets, customers and technology, in order to improve their efficiency and day-to-day business. Microsoft supports the centres by developing relevant ICT related services and training for the rural business community and awareness building on the benefits of ICT tools via its Digital Literacy program and SME relevant training curriculum.

Computer Refurbishment and E-Waste Initiative
The partners created a joint initiative to make affordable hardware and relevant software available to SMEs in Africa. The programme is built on a sustainable business model that addresses the lifetime of the hardware including its environmentally sound disposal. UNIDO and Microsoft support the establishment of local computer refurbishment centres, based on international best practices. Rather than relying on donations, the secondary computers are sold at reduced rates and are delivered with genuine Microsoft Windows software, a warranty, after-sales support and a means to return the computers at the end of their useful lifetime to ensure their responsible recycle and disposal.

www.unido.org/businesspartnerships
Microsoft Innovation Centres
UNIDO and Microsoft are cooperating to promote a sustainable local software economy in Africa. In 2011, the partners jointly launched the first Microsoft Innovation Centre in Uganda. Hosted at the College of Computing and Information Sciences at Makere University, the Centre is an extension of the global Microsoft Innovation Centre Network and aims to accelerate the development of innovation and growth of the Ugandan software economy. The state of the art technology facility focuses on skills development and enhancing employability by offering training to local students to help them improve their professional IT knowledge and gain real project experience before graduating. Resources and assistance is provided to startups, Independent Software Vendors (ISVs) and SMEs to create new and innovative products and services, and to bring those products to the market, spurring their business competitiveness. In addition, the Centre helps software developers, entrepreneurs and IT professionals learn about the latest technologies, stimulating technology innovation and driving the local software economy to boost national competitiveness.

THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERING
The dynamic partnership between UNIDO and Microsoft is helping SMEs in Africa to harness the power of ICT to enhance their profitability and labor productivity. As SMEs become more skilled in using ICT, they multiply their chances of attracting investment and increase their exposure to, and even integration into, regional and global value chains. The collaboration serves both partners’ objectives alike. Through this partnership, UNIDO is able to leverage Microsoft’s industry knowledge and technology to ensure the replicability and scalability of its programmes, building local capacities and increasing job opportunities. At the same time, the partnership helps Microsoft fulfill its corporate social commitment of making a real impact toward improving employability and entrepreneurship, education, digital inclusion, and unleashing creativity and innovation - creating new opportunities through technology, programs and partnerships. It also allows the company to gain a deeper knowledge of the conditions and particular needs of the ICT markets in recipient countries.

BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTRES SUPPORT SMALL BUSINESSES AND IMPROVE LIVELIHOODS
Charles Tulimulugendo is an aloe vera farmer in Uganda who was struggling to find the right market for his products. When Charles learned there was a Business Information Centre located in the Municipality of Jinja he went there to access information concerning micro-finance services and was also provided with advice on how to process aloe vera leaves. He quickly realized the Centre offered a wide range of business information. Charles was able to access information on machinery and equipment, and research the number of farmers in the area with whom he could form a cooperative to sell aloe vera plants and products.

“The Business Information Centre allowed me to add value to my business and enhance my income opportunities.”
Charles Tulimulugendo, aloe vera farmer in Uganda