

---

# Bridging the digital divide

AEEI's people-centric philosophy drives everything the company does.

By Feroza Petersen

---

One of the largest B-BBEE companies in its sector, the award-winning JSE-listed company African Equity Empowerment Investments Limited (AEEI), has its eagle eye firmly on the future.

What that future looks like will be largely determined by the group's investment in technologies that help drive it to lead people and business into 4IR and beyond. With this in mind, AEEI has already embarked on a strategic investment drive to ensure the sustainability of its varied businesses, unlocking stakeholder value in the process.

Khalid Abdulla, the group's CEO, is a visionary, multi-award-winning business leader who has been honoured as top CEO in South Africa in the *CEO Today* Africa Awards. Abdulla has led the group

for the past decade, setting the scene to integrate with the technology era head on.

## FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS TO TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN POWERHOUSE

Founded in 1996, the AEEI group quickly grew, listing on the JSE in 1999. It has since become the largest multi-sectoral, diversified and empowered listed entity in South Africa, boasting more than 6 000 direct and indirect employees – a success story that continues to write new chapters.

AEEI's diverse portfolio encompasses five distinct pillars: a fishing and brands division, a biotherapeutics R&D company, a health and beauty division, an internationally recognised events

and tourism division, and technology encompassing the full spectrum of ICT services. This diversification gives the group a substantial basket of opportunities for growth and profitability. It also allows it to support the advancement of B-BBEE and small, medium and micro-enterprises. It has racked up some impressive awards for its business philosophy in its time. Adding further value, AEEI also holds strategic investments with local and international blue-chip brands and partners.

While AEEI's primary market remains South Africa, the group has interests and a strong presence in parts of Asia; Italy; Greece; Spain; the United States; Saudi Arabia; and several African countries, including

“The prospect for technology to change people’s lives for the better is extraordinary. Equally so for doing better business.”

Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Tanzania, Ghana, Zambia, Mauritius, Kenya, Nigeria, Botswana, Swaziland, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Madagascar, and Malawi.

Although 4IR is a hot topic, Abdulla does not consider it to be the panacea for Africa’s problems. “4IR is being heralded as the answer to many of the continent’s socio-economic woes, but just what 4IR actually is and the positive and negative impacts it will have on the future have not yet been fully considered. I don’t believe that we can say it is the answer to everything.”

Abdulla, who is a stickler for sound corporate governance throughout the various organisations under his control, recognises that – although 4IR promises exciting potential for the continent – this potential should be seen through a responsible lens. “I do see that technology – when conscientiously applied – can alleviate a broad range of our current everyday problems, such as predicting extreme weather patterns; better informing the agricultural sector; implementing and controlling the flow of increasing

traffic; gathering and interpreting data to observe, engage and market to citizens; and so on.

“However, we are on the brink of some pretty radical shifts in our social and economic systems that will shape our future micro- and macro-environments. As exciting as it is, due consideration needs to be given to the impact 4IR may have on our group well into the next millennia. What we do now will have everlasting consequences.”

Indeed, 4IR does have the power to raise global income levels and improve the quality of life for everyone. But how does it translate into business wins for AEEI and other companies adopting 4IR principles?

Abdulla, like every responsible forward-thinking leader, knows that now is the time to further invest in skills development, innovative ideas, and idea generators in order to provide AEEI with the best long-term returns. Consequently, the group has started to roll out an aggressive acquisitions programme to supplement its existing offering, which is strengthened by its access to sophisticated IT that helps guide its investment decisions.

#### THE DIGITAL DAWN

“Technology” is a broad term. Simply, it describes how scientific knowledge is practically applied to advance industries, and the methods and equipment that use scientific means to solve problems.

A core belief at AEEI, which contributes to the group’s enduring commercial sustainability, is the “digital dawn”, as Abdulla calls it. It is the beginning of a true digital democracy for Africa, where science is made available to all. It’s what propels AEEI to do good for people, ensuring that technology can be used to better the lives of ordinary

citizens in South Africa and beyond.

As far as he is concerned, it’s an exhilarating time to be in business. “The potential for technology to change people’s lives for the better is extraordinary.” There is equal potential for it to improve the way we do business. Better business for Abdulla and AEEI looks to better efficiencies and minimising negative effects on environments and communities.

For example, AEEI has holdings in a large aquaculture farm producing export-quality abalone, which is powered by solar energy. The farm also uses navigation and weather-prediction technology and has done a deep dive into the issue of sustainable fishing, with an acute awareness of the overexploitation and depletion of fish stocks and the increase in poaching of rare marine species. Here, technology plays its part too.

Agri-tech also plays a role in how the group works with the communities and farmers involved in AEEI’s Health and Beauty division, assisting those involved to make better-informed crop decisions for increased crop yields. The company’s R&D sector uses quantum-computing models to solve problems in chemistry, material science, and other areas involved in the development of a patented solution for breast cancer.

Ultimately, says Abdulla, AEEI is incorporating technology into its everyday function to enable not just one person, but communities of people.

#### TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Despite turbulent economic challenges locally and globally, AEEI continues to grow and deliver on its promise of providing value to



**Khalid Abdulla**

its various stakeholders. While much of the emphasis of 4IR is placed on ensuring that the youth of today are the productive and skilled workforce of tomorrow, AEEI has not forgotten the pre-4IR contingent. The group is cognisant of the fact that many of the older generation possess immense experience and expertise but lack the technological know-how to engage in a fully-connected ecosystem. AEEI, thus, focuses on investing in skills upliftment and training to bridge the technological gap between millennials and older generations.

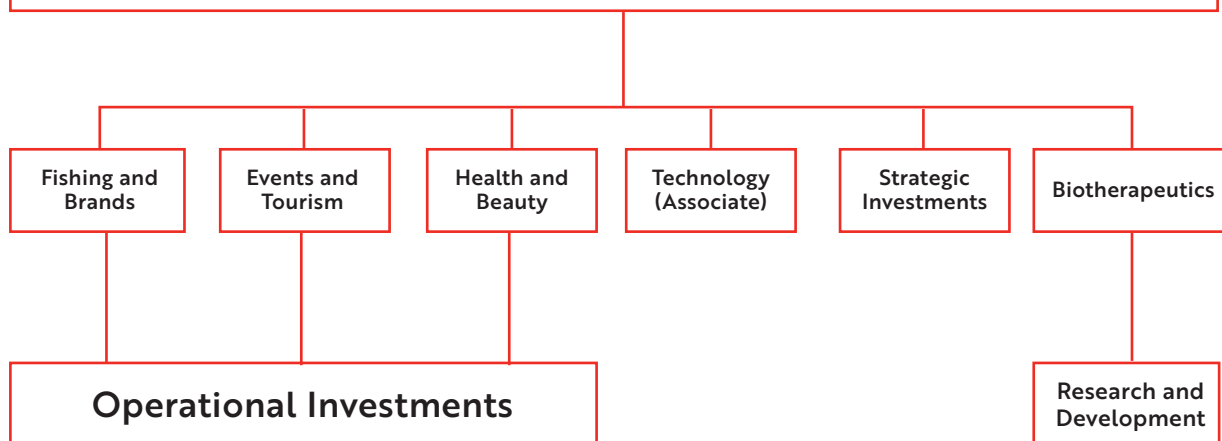
This is reminiscent of the swathes of the African continent where people

remain largely technologically unconnected, with little access to 4IR. Abdulla recognises the importance of bridging this digital divide, explaining that AEEI has adopted a risk-based approach to minimising the challenges of labour volatility. This requires a review of the broader employee-relations landscape and the implementation of a more integrated approach across all stakeholder groups, aimed at creating greater employee engagement, happier employees, and improved business continuity. He believes that the same approach can help progress 4IR across Africa.

“The WEF on Africa summit talks about a shared future facilitated by 4IR. This is entirely possible as technology – by its very nature – is transformative with the power to include everyone in the conversation,” he says. “To realise this, though, we need the will to want to change, coupled with a defined set of principles to create this inclusive society in which everyone benefits. I am looking forward to discovering further ways in which 4IR can usher in a new era for Africa.”

[aeei.co.za](http://aeei.co.za)

## African Equity Empowerment Investments Limited (AEEI)



Photography: Courtesy