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The Function of Social Entrepreneurship in Tackling Social Development Issues in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the function of social entrepreneurship in addressing social development issues in South Africa. It underscores the increasing importance of social entrepreneurs in utilising business tactics to develop innovative, sustainable solutions to urgent community challenges such as environmental degradation, youth unemployment, educational disparities, health care inequalities and poverty. By combining business mechanisms with a social mission, these entities make significant contributions to inclusive development and the overarching goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) technique was used in this paper, investigating an extensive array of peer-reviewed journal publications, pertinent case studies, and policy document reports about the South African setting. The SLR methodology facilitated a thorough and organised integration of current knowledge, enabling the recognition of prevalent themes, research deficiencies and practical approaches in social entrepreneurship. The findings revealed the necessity to improve public awareness of social entrepreneurship, establish supportive institutional and policy frameworks, increase access to funding and promoting community engagement. The study underscored the need for capacity-building activities and educational programs to equip aspiring social entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and knowledge. The study concluded that social entrepreneurship has revolutionary potential in South Africa by empowering marginalised people and promoting sustainable development. Mitigating institutional challenges and fostering a supportive environment for social entrepreneurs can accelerate social innovation and enhance sustained socio-economic advancements.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, South Africa, Social Development, Systematic Literature Review, Education Inequality, Youth Unemployment

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INTRODUCTION

According to Chinyamurindi et al. and Bega et al. , social entrepreneurship is crucial in addressing complex societal problems by combining traditional business practices with mission-driven, non-profit goals.[1] The intersection of social purpose and commerce creates a model where financial sustainability and social impact reinforce each other.[2] Globally, populations continue to face pressing challenges, such

[1] Willie Chinyamurindi, Motshedisi Mathibe, and Progress Hove-Sibanda, "Social Enterprise Performance in South Africa: The Role of Strategic Planning and Networking Capability," *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 2023, 1–18; Edoardo Bega et al., "Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation between Global North and Global South: The Ashoka Case," in *Rethinking Clusters: Place-Based Value Creation in Sustainability Transitions* (Springer, 2021), 159–73.

[2] J. Gregory Dees, "The Meaning of Social Entrepreneurship 1 , 2," in *Case Studies in Social Entrepreneurship and Sustainability* (Routledge, 2018), 22–30, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351278560-5; R. L. Martin and S. Osberg, " Social Entrepreneurship: The Case for Definition," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 5, no. 2 (2007): 28–39.

as poverty, educational inequality, healthcare disparities, and environmental degradation, which demand long-term sustainable solutions.[3] Traditional charity and aid efforts have often failed to create lasting change, prompting a shift toward innovative approaches that address root causes rather than symptoms. In the South African context, the enduring legacy of apartheid has deepened socio-economic disparities, manifesting in persistent unemployment, unequal access to education, and inadequate healthcare services.[4] Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful mechanism to address these issues. South African social entrepreneurs strategically use business tools, including market analysis, planning, and resource management, to create social value.[5] They identify unmet societal needs and develop scalable, sustainable solutions.[6] For instance, social enterprises have leveraged mobile technology to deliver educational content to learners in remote and underserved communities, effectively narrowing the education gap.

Chinyamurindi et al. emphasise that sustainability lies at the heart of social entrepreneurship.[7] By generating revenue through market-based strategies, social enterprises can reduce dependence on donor funding and reinvest profits into their missions. For example, enterprises offering clean energy solutions often use profits to extend services to underserved areas, amplifying both environmental and economic impact. Recognising this potential, the South African government has implemented initiatives like the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) to support youth-led enterprises with funding, training, and mentorship.[8] Moreover, integrating entrepreneurship education into formal curricula has improved employment outcomes and supported the development of impactful social initiatives.[9] Studies conducted by Spigel and Harrison and Diaz Gonzalez and Dentchev demonstrate that entrepreneurial ecosystems, especially those bolstered by collaborations among government entities, academic institutions, private businesses, and non-governmental organisations, can markedly improve the success and sustainability of social enterprises.[10] Institutions like the University of Cape Town's Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship illustrate the role of academic entities in fostering social entrepreneurship through education, research, and ecosystem support.[11] Although existing literature underscores the importance of social entrepreneurship in addressing socio-economic challenges, limited research explores the specific mechanisms and support structures that enable social enterprises in South Africa to achieve long-term sustainability and scale. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the drivers, barriers, and enabling environments for social entrepreneurship in South Africa. The study employs a qualitative, exploratory methodology, utilising secondary data, policy documents, and existing empirical research.

Fostering social entrepreneurship in South Africa necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach. Collaboration among public institutions, private sector entities, academic institutions, and communities is crucial to creating supportive environments that foster innovation, facilitate resource-sharing, and drive sustainable social change. Recognising and scaling social entrepreneurship in South Africa can accelerate progress towards inclusive development and attaining the United Nations SDGs.[12] The subsequent sections of the paper are organised as follows: The following section delineates the conceptual framework and key theoretical foundations of social entrepreneurship. This is succeeded by examining pertinent

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[3] Bob Doherty, Helen Haugh, and Fergus Lyon, "Social Enterprises as Hybrid Organizations: A Review and Research Agenda," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 16, no. 4 (2014): 417–36; UNESCO GEM Report, *Concept Note for Global Education Monitoring Report on Leadership and Education.*, 2023.

[4] David Littlewood and Diane Holt, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment," *Business & Society* 57, no. 3 (March 30, 2018): 525–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650315613293.

[5] Olu Oludele Akinloye Akinboade et al., "How the Social Entrepreneurship Business Model Designs in South Africa Create Value: A Complex Adaptive Systems Approach," *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies* 15, no. 1 (2023): 70–95.

[6] Kobus Visser, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Context, Relevance and Extent," *Industry and Higher Education* 25, no. 4 (August 1, 2011): 233–47, https://doi.org/10.5367/ihe.2011.0050.

[7] W. T. Chinyamurindi and P. Hove-Sibanda, " Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring Perceived Enablers and Barriers," *Journal of Contemporary Management* 18, no. 2 (2021): 55–72.

[8] E. I. Akoh and L. M. Lekhanya, " Social Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Sustainable Development in South Africa: A Literature Review," *International Journal of Entrepreneurship* 26, no. 5 (2022): 1–15.

[9] Boris Urban, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 14, no. 5 (August 1, 2008): 346–64, https://doi.org/10.1108/13552550810897696; Ben Spigel and Richard Harrison, "Toward a Process Theory of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems," *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* 12, no. 1 (March 21, 2018): 151–68, https://doi.org/10.1002/sej.1268.

[10] Spigel and Harrison, "Toward a Process Theory of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems"; Abel Diaz Gonzalez and Nikolay A. Dentchev, "Ecosystems in Support of Social Entrepreneurs: A Literature Review," *Social Enterprise Journal* 17, no. 3 (August 9, 2021): 329–60, https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-08-2020-0064.

[11] Littlewood and Holt, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment."

[12] Akoh and Lekhanya, " Social Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Sustainable Development in South Africa: A Literature Review."

literature, encompassing policy initiatives and institutional support frameworks. The concluding parts address principal results, implications for practice and policy, and final recommendations to promote social entrepreneurship in South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Innovation Theory

The concept of social innovation dates back to the early 20th century, with sociologist Lester Frank Ward being one of the earliest to discuss the idea in 1903. However, the theory gained prominence through the works of scholars like Jürgen Howaldt and Michael Schwarz, who emphasised the role of social innovation in societal transformation.[13] In summary, the theory has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the significant advantages of the theory is that it encourages innovative solutions to complex social problems. It also promotes community engagement and participatory approaches. Furthermore, it facilitates systemic change by addressing root causes rather than symptoms. Nevertheless, it lacks a unified definition, leading to conceptual ambiguity. Measurement of social impact can be challenging. Potential for co-optation by market-driven agendas, diluting social objectives. Scholars like Mulgan, Arocena and Sutz and Kalkanci et al. have highlighted the importance of social innovation in addressing global challenges, emphasising its role in fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development.[14] In South Africa, social innovation has been instrumental in addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Researchers have observed the emergence of grassroots innovations that leverage local knowledge and resources to create social value.[15]

New Institutional Theory

The other theory that underpins the study is the new institutional theory. New Institutional Theory emerged in the late 20th century, building upon the foundational work of scholars like John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, who examined how institutional environments influence organisational structures and practices. [16] The theory has both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage is that it provides insights into how institutions shape organisational behaviour. It highlights the role of legitimacy and conformity in organisational success. It also emphasises the influence of cultural norms and values on institutional dynamics. Consequently, the significant disadvantage is that it may underplay the role of agency and innovation within institutions. It can be overly deterministic, assuming organisations passively conform to institutional pressures. Challenges in accounting for institutional change and diversity in contexts.

DiMaggio and Powell expanded on the theory by introducing the concept of institutional isomorphism, explaining how organisations within a field tend to become similar over time due to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures.[17] In South Africa, a New Institutional Theory has been applied to understand how historical legacies and institutional frameworks impact social enterprises.[18] Studies have shown that social entrepreneurs often navigate complex regulatory environments and societal expectations, influencing their strategies and operations.[19] By integrating Social Innovation Theory and

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[13] Jürgen Howaldt and Michael Schwarz, *Social Innovation: Concepts, Research Fields and International Trends* (Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, 2010).

[14] Geoff Mulgan, "The Process of Social Innovation," *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 1, no. 2 (April 2006): 145–62, https://doi.org/10.1162/itgg.2006.1.2.145; Rodrigo Arocena and Judith Sutz, "Universities and Social Innovation for Global Sustainable Development as Seen from the South," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 162 (January 2021): 120399, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120399; Başak Kalkanci, Morvarid Rahmani, and L. Beril Toktay, "The Role of Inclusive Innovation in Promoting Social Sustainability," *Production and Operations Management* 28, no. 12 (December 1, 2019): 2960–82, https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.13112.

[15] Wendy Phillips et al., "Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship," *Group & Organization Management* 40, no. 3 (June 8, 2015): 428–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601114560063.

[16] John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (September 1977): 340–63, https://doi.org/10.1086/226550.

[17] Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (April 1983): 147, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101.

[18] Kerryn Krige, Filip De Beule, and Alex Antonites, "Legitimation in Institutional Complexity: A Study of Social Enterprises in a Multi-Dimensional, Emerging Market Context," 2023.

[19] Urban, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa"; Janelle A Kerlin, "The Macro-Institutional Social Enterprise Framework: Introduction and Theoretical Underpinnings," in *Shaping Social Enterprise* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 1–26; Janelle A Kerlin, "Defining Social Enterprise across Different Contexts: A Conceptual Framework Based on Institutional Factors," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2013): 84–108.

New Institutional Theory, this study aims to comprehensively understand the dynamics that influence social entrepreneurship in South Africa. These frameworks provide valuable insights to examine how innovative practices emerge and evolve within institutional contexts, shaping the potential for social change and development.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a systematic literature review (SLR) within a qualitative, thematic framework to investigate social entrepreneurship's operational landscape, challenges and prospects in South Africa and similar global contexts. The review integrated findings from seventy (70) academic sources, encompassing empirical research articles, case studies, and policy documents. The objective was to enhance comprehension of social entrepreneurship's function in tackling social development challenges, managing resource limitations, overcoming regulatory obstacles and improving market accessibility. A meticulous and transparent review process directed literature identification, selection and analysis. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, and Web of Science were methodically searched using meticulously chosen keywords. The inclusion criteria restricted the evaluation to papers published in English during the past 15 to 20 years, concentrating on social entrepreneurship in South Africa and other developing nations with analogous socio-economic conditions.

The assessment included significant case studies, such as The Clothing Bank and TSIBA Education in South Africa, along with international examples like the Grameen Bank and the Ashoka Foundation, to demonstrate beneficial approaches and pinpoint systemic obstacles. Studies that did not specifically investigate social entrepreneurship's role or function were not included. The study used thematic content analysis to examine the data, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns, validation of findings, and interpretation of the overarching function of social entrepreneurship in promoting sustainable development.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section emphasises the principal themes and trends identified from the seventy (70) selected scholarly sources on social entrepreneurship, with particular attention to South Africa and comparative global contexts. Thematic analysis was used to assemble insights on the contributions, challenges, operational models, and support settings for social entrepreneurship.

Concept of Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship has received considerable focus in academic literature; however, its definition differs among researchers and practitioners. Social entrepreneurship fundamentally entails generating social value through innovative approaches to societal challenges.[20] Social enterprises differ from traditional for-profit organisations in that they seek to balance social impact with economic sustainability rather than focusing solely on financial gain.[21] This dual objective differentiates social entrepreneurship from traditional non-profit organisations and corporations. Dees defines social entrepreneurs as individuals who act as change agents within the social sector, committed to creating and sustaining social value.[22] This definition emphasises the innovative elements of social entrepreneurship, illustrating how social entrepreneurs recognise service or product gaps and create solutions that address community needs. It is crucial to distinguish social entrepreneurship from similar concepts. Although all social entrepreneurs emphasise social impact, not every non-profit organisation meets the criteria of a social enterprise. Traditional non-profits depend on donations and grants, while social enterprises use market-oriented strategies to attain financial sustainability. This operational distinction significantly affects the scale of impact and the address of social enterprises challenges.[23]

[20] Chinyamurindi and Hove-Sibanda, " Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring Perceived Enablers and Barriers."
[21] Johan Bruneel et al., "Balancing Competing Logics in For-Profit Social Enterprises: A Need for Hybrid Governance," *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* 7, no. 3 (September 20, 2016): 263–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2016.1166147.
[22] Dees, "The Meaning of Social Entrepreneurship 1 , 2."
[23] Yenchun Jim Wu, Tienhua Wu, and Jeremiah Arno Sharpe, "Consensus on the Definition of Social Entrepreneurship: A Content Analysis Approach," *Management Decision* 58, no. 12 (December 12, 2020): 2593–2619, https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-11-2016-0791.

Social innovation is fundamentally connected to social entrepreneurship. Social innovations represent new concepts to resolve social challenges and generate social value, frequently from social enterprises. This connection highlights the function of social entrepreneurs as agents of change, fostering innovation to address urgent social issues.[24] As the field progresses, it is essential to establish a clear and consistent definition of social entrepreneurship that encompasses its various forms. This clarity will improve research, policy development, and social entrepreneurship practices. Researchers contend that establishing a unified framework will facilitate practitioners in articulating their goals and securing backing from investors and stakeholders.[25]

South African and International Obstacles to Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship presents viable solutions to issues in social development, notwithstanding substantial operational and systemic obstacles. The growth and effectiveness of social enterprises in South Africa and globally are hampered by a lack of resources, ambiguous regulations, and barriers to market entry. Determining these obstacles is essential to create support networks that allow the impact of social enterprises to grow sustainably.

1. Resource Limitations

The availability of financial capital is a significant obstacle. In South Africa, many social enterprises operate on tight budgets and struggle to secure long-term funding. This constraint hinders their ability to grow their business, make creative investments and recruit skilled personnel. The frequent use of volunteer labour or unpaid staff by these companies may jeopardise the continuity and quality of service delivery.[26] Due to the lack of institutional support, venture capital, and visibility among mainstream investors, social entrepreneurs in other developing countries encounter comparable difficulties.[27] This highlights the significance of developing hybrid financing models integrating government grants, private investments, and philanthropic contributions.

2. Regulatory Barriers

Due to their lack of a clear legal identity, social enterprises in South Africa are not allowed to register, be categorised as tax entities, or receive funding. Social entrepreneurs frequently encounter frameworks designed for non-profits or traditional businesses, neither of which can adequately support hybrid models that aim for social and financial gains.[28] Uncertain regulations increase operational risks and discourage institutional investment. Although the UK and other nations have established legal frameworks for Community Interest Companies (CICS), many African contexts still lack supportive structures for CICS, leaving social entrepreneurs in a legal indeterminate state.[29]

3. Access to the Market

One of the biggest challenges is getting to lucrative markets. Many social businesses in South Africa are based in disadvantaged communities characterised by low consumer spending power and inadequate infrastructure. In these circumstances, it is challenging to achieve impact scalability while preserving affordability.[30] Furthermore, it could be challenging for social entrepreneurs to compete with established private sector businesses that put market penetration above social outcomes. Developing innovative distribution plans and partnerships that can increase reach without sacrificing mission integrity is necessary to overcome these challenges.

[24] Tina Saebi, Nicolai J. Foss, and Stefan Linder, "Social Entrepreneurship Research: Past Achievements and Future Promises," *Journal of Management* 45, no. 1 (January 14, 2019): 70–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206318793196.
[25] Samer Abu-Saifan, "Social Entrepreneurship: Definition and Boundaries," *Technology Innovation Management Review* 2, no. 2 (February 1, 2012): 22–27, https://doi.org/10.22215/timreview/523.
[26] Littlewood and Holt, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment"; Urban, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa."
[27] Saebi, Foss, and Linder, "Social Entrepreneurship Research: Past Achievements and Future Promises."
[28] S. De Villiers, "Policy Gaps for Social Enterprises in South Africa," *South African Journal of Business Management* 53, no. 1 (2022).
[29] A. Nicholls and A. Murdock, *Social Innovation: Blurring Boundaries to Reconfigure Markets* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[30] Visser, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Context, Relevance and Extent."

4. Information and Illusions

The lack of understanding and knowledge of social entrepreneurship hinders progress among financiers and the public. In South Africa, the concept is frequently misinterpreted as unofficial community activism or charitable work, making it more challenging to secure funding or establish credibility.[31] Global trends are evident, especially in areas where the social entrepreneurship ecosystem is still evolving. This highlights the necessity of advocacy, instruction, and stories that effectively convey the dual value proposition of social enterprises' financial and social benefits.

Case Studies and Best Practices

The Clothing Bank of South Africa

The Cape Town-based social organisation empowers unemployed women by granting them access to surplus apparel inventory from prominent shops and training in life and business skills. According to Raniga, women establish enterprises utilising these products, achieving financial autonomy and refining their entrepreneurial skills.[32] The Clothing Bank exemplifies an accessible, impact-oriented initiative in South Africa.[33]

TSIBA Education in South Africa

Scholarships are accessible to deserving, although financially constrained, students at TSIBA, a non-profit business institution in South Africa. TSIBA fosters a new generation of social leaders by investing in entrepreneurial education and human capital.[34]

Grameen Bank in Bangladesh

Grameen Bank, established by Muhammad Yunus, pioneered microfinance by providing small loans to low-income clients without collateral requirements. Despite its origins in Bangladesh, the model has proliferated across Africa, establishing informal lending circles and savings organisations within South Africa's slums.[35]

The Ashoka Foundation

Ashoka assists social entrepreneurs in more than 90 nations, including South Africa.[36] It offers guidance, financial support, and an international network of innovators. Investment in individuals can catalyse significant social transformation, as per its ecosystem model.[37]

Global Perspectives on Social Entrepreneurship

Societal entrepreneurship has emerged as essential to address complex social challenges worldwide. Its expressions vary significantly in different geographic and economic contexts due to local requirements, institutional structures, and resource availability.

Grassroots Innovation in Emerging Economies

Social entrepreneurs often establish ventures in developing nations, such as South Africa, Kenya, and India, to address critical service delivery deficiencies in clean energy, healthcare, and education. These organisations typically employ bottom-up techniques that leverage local solutions and community engagement to address unmet needs. Seelos and Mair illustrate how social entrepreneurs in these regions design innovative business models that assist the disadvantaged, effectively addressing sectors overlooked

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[31] Chinyamurindi and Hove-Sibanda, " Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring Perceived Enablers and Barriers."

[32] Tanusha Raniga, "Sustainable Livelihoods and Value Chain Development with Women Entrepreneurs: Evidence and Lessons from the Clothing Bank, South Africa," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 59, no. 4 (2023): 324–37.

[33] Lerato Boitumelo Mabeleng, "An Assessment of the Role of the Textile and Clothing Industry in the South Africa Economy" (North-West University (South Africa), 2021).

[34] Urban, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa."

[35] Muhammad Yunus, *Creating a World without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism* (Public affairs, 2007).

[36] Pritha Sen, "Ashoka's Big Idea: Transforming the World through Social Entrepreneurship," *Futures* 39, no. 5 (2007): 534–53; Bega et al., "Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation between Global North and Global South: The Ashoka Case."

[37] D. Bornstein and S. Davis, *Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Cecile Nieuwenhuizen, "Female Social Entrepreneurs in Africa Creating Social Value through Innovation," *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues* 9, no. 4 (2022): 225–42.

by governmental and market entities.[38]The legacy of apartheid and ongoing socioeconomic disparities have fostered a robust environment for social entrepreneurship in South Africa. Local enterprises can empower underprivileged communities through education and skill enhancement, as seen by the TSIBA Education and the Clothing Bank initiatives. Littlewood and Holt emphasise the role of environmental factors in social entrepreneurship in South Africa, noting that indigenous traditions and global forces change local definitions and practices.[39]

Develop Economies: Diverse Concentration Areas and Structured Ecosystems

Conversely, social companies often operate inside more structured support ecosystems in industrialised countries such as the UK, Canada, and Germany. These comprise established networks that facilitate growth and effect, provide financing accessibility, and have favourable legal frameworks. In these circumstances, mental health, refugee assimilation, and environmental sustainability are often the primary areas of emphasis. Austin et al. and Alabi discuss how social entrepreneurs in wealthy countries reconcile their dual objectives: financial viability and social impact.[40] Azmat indicates that many organisations struggle to achieve profitability despite enabling infrastructures and demonstrating measurable impact.[41]

Convergence Trends and Collaborative Opportunities

The capacity of social entrepreneurship to foster systemic change is gaining recognition, notwithstanding the differences between developing and developed societies. Seelos and Mair and Goyal et al. assert that creating innovative service delivery models, which are flexible and scalable across many contexts, enables social entrepreneurs to advance sustainable development goals directly.[42] Social entrepreneurship is being integrated into national development strategies in South Africa.[43] Nevertheless, challenges persist, including limited investor access and inadequate policy support.[44] To overcome these challenges, public entities, private sector collaborators, and social entrepreneurs must collaborate to create conducive conditions that can allow entrepreneurs to grow and innovate.

The Role of Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship is crucial to transforming societal approaches to persistent development challenges. As change agents, social entrepreneurs deliver services and introduce innovative strategies that bridge the divide between creating social value and achieving sustainable financial success. Their contributions incorporate different domains explained below.

1. Innovation and creativity

Socioeconomic entrepreneurs often spearhead innovation by developing specific solutions for regional socioeconomic issues. Telemedicine and mobile clinics exemplify cost-effective healthcare advances, allowing underserved and rural South African areas to access medical care.[45] Social entrepreneurs worldwide have pioneered creative methods integrating technology with community requirements, exemplified by East Africa's Pay-As-You-Go solar energy systems.[46] As social entrepreneurs reevaluate

[38] Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair, "Social Entrepreneurship: Creating New Business Models to Serve the Poor," *Business Horizons* 48, no. 3 (May 2005): 241–46, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2004.11.006.

[39] Littlewood and Holt, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment."

[40] James Austin, Howard Stevenson, and Jane Wei–Skillern, "Social and Commercial Entrepreneurship: Same, Different, or Both?," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2006.00107.x; Moses Alabi, "Social Entrepreneurship: Balancing Social Impact and Financial Sustainability," 2024.

[41] Fara Azmat, "Sustainable Development in Developing Countries: The Role of Social Entrepreneurs," *International Journal of Public Administration* 36, no. 5 (2013): 293–304.

[42] Seelos and Mair, "Social Entrepreneurship: Creating New Business Models to Serve the Poor"; Sandeep Goyal, Anirudh Agrawal, and Bruno S Sergi, "Social Entrepreneurship for Scalable Solutions Addressing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at BoP in India," *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 16, no. 3/4 (2021): 509–29.

[43] K S Ngema and T C Adetiba, "Social Entrepreneurship as a Strategic Tool in Implementing and Sustaining Local Economic Development: South Africa's Experience," *Public Administration And Development Alternatives (IPADA)*, 2020, 14.

[44] Akinboade et al., "How the Social Entrepreneurship Business Model Designs in South Africa Create Value: A Complex Adaptive Systems Approach."

[45] Toritsemogba Tosanbami Omaghomi et al., "Telemedicine in Rural Africa: A Review of Accessibility and Impact," *World J. Adv. Res. Rev.* 21, no. 2 (2024): 421–31.

[46] Mulgan, "The Process of Social Innovation"; Whitney Lisa Pailman, "An Explorative Study of the Synergy between Social Enterprises and Local Micro-Entrepreneurs in the Provision of off-Grid Clean Energy Access," 2016.

the design and provision of services, these innovations encompass technological and institutional dimensions.[47] Social innovation theory posits that innovation arises in response to institutional deficiencies.[48]

2. Sustainability in Financial and Operational Practices

Social enterprises, in contrast to traditional NGOs, integrate social objectives with profit-generating frameworks. Roy and Heuty stated that reinvesting surplus money reduces dependence on donor funds and facilitates a sustainable effect.[49] Instances from South Africa, exemplified as The Clothing Bank, illustrate methods to tackle issues such as unemployment and poverty while developing sustainable income patterns.[50] These enterprises often use integrated value techniques, generating measurable social and economic advantages.[51] This sustainability fosters the longevity of the institution and enables resilience against changes in donor preferences.

3. Community Empowerment

The participatory aspect of social entrepreneurship is a defining characteristic. Local stakeholders are actively engaged in the formulation and execution of solutions by social entrepreneurs. This bottom-up strategy fosters independence by enabling communities to manage development projects autonomously, rather than depending on external assistance.[52] Vocational training, microenterprise development, and educational programs exemplify capacity-building initiatives that empower individuals to improve their lives. Social entrepreneurs in rural KwaZulu-Natal have imparted business and agro-processing skills to youth, fostering social and economic progress.[53]

4. Collaboration and Strategic Partnerships

Social entrepreneurs often employ collaborative strategies to enhance their impact. Effective partnerships have been formed in South Africa among corporate sponsors, academic institutions (such as the UCT Bertha Centre), government bodies (such as NYDA), and social entrepreneurs. These multi-sector alliances facilitate resource sharing, innovation, and policy alignment.[54] Global patterns reveal that cross-sector cooperation enhances social ecosystems, such as Ashoka's worldwide fellowship network and the European Union's "Social Economy" strategy.

5. Assessment of Social Impact

Social entrepreneurship's emphasis on accountability and impact assessment is a paramount contribution. Social entrepreneurs use metrics and performance indicators to evaluate outcomes, justify funding, and improve strategies. The regional use of instruments like Impact Measurement Frameworks (IMFs) and Social Return on Investment (SROI) is increasing.[55] Organisations in South Africa sponsored by the Bertha Centre and Impact Investing South Africa (IISA) prioritise comprehensive monitoring and evaluation to guide strategic decision-making and expand effective models.

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47 James A Phills, Kriss Deiglmeier, and Dale T Miller, "Rediscovering Social Innovation" (Stanford social innovation review Stanford., 2008).

48 Jakomijn Van Wijk et al., "Social Innovation: Integrating Micro, Meso, and Macro Level Insights from Institutional Theory," *Business & Society* 58, no. 5 (2019): 887–918.

49 Rathin Roy and Antoine Heuty, "Investing in Development: The Millennium Development Goals, Aid and Sustainable Capital Accumulation," in *Fiscal Space* (Routledge, 2012), 15–29.

50 Urban, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa"; Keegan Naidoo, "Social Impact Assessment: A Case Study of the Durban-Based Clothing Bank" (2022); Geoffrey Wood and Christine Bischoff, "Challenges and Progress in Integrating Knowledge: Cases from Clothing and Textiles in South Africa," *Journal of Knowledge Management* 24, no. 1 (July 29, 2019): 32–55, https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-10-2018-0608.

51 Jed Emerson, "The Blended Value Proposition: Integrating Social and Financial Returns," *California Management Review* 45, no. 4 (July 1, 2003): 35–51, https://doi.org/10.2307/41166187; Wood and Bischoff, "Challenges and Progress in Integrating Knowledge: Cases from Clothing and Textiles in South Africa."

52 Littlewood and Holt, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment."

53 Ongama Giwu and Lelethu Mdoda, "Perceptions, Willingness, Opportunities, and Effects of Youth Participation in Agricultural Enterprises," *Published MSc Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg*, 2024.

54 Nicholls and Murdock, *Social Innovation: Blurring Boundaries to Reconfigure Markets*.

55 Alnoor Ebrahim and V. Kasturi Rangan, "What Impact? A Framework for Measuring the Scale and Scope of Social Performance," *California Management Review* 56, no. 3 (May 1, 2014): 118–41, https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2014.56.3.118.

Social entrepreneurship integrates innovation, sustainability, and inclusive development to deliver diverse advantages in South Africa and globally. These enterprises provide robust institutions and frameworks that foster enduring transformation while addressing immediate social needs. Consequently, social entrepreneurship is a powerful tool for achieving the SDGs and reimagining societal approaches to complex issues that foster innovation and growth.

Emerging Themes

1. The Emergence of Hybrid Business Models

Developing hybrid organisational models that integrate corporate strategies with social objectives is a prevalent topic in South African and global literature. These approaches allow social companies to generate revenue while addressing systemic social issues such as poverty, educational inequity, and youth unemployment .[56] Organisations such as TSIBA Education and The Clothing Bank in South Africa exemplify the coexistence of social impact and financial sustainability. These enterprises often reinvest their revenues into service expansion to reduce their reliance on donor financing.

2. Innovation as a Core Competence

Innovation is often identified in the literature as a vital attribute that distinguishes social enterprises. Research indicates that social entrepreneurs utilise limited resources to provide innovative, contextually pertinent solutions to pressing problems.[57] In South Africa, innovation often emerges as a response to institutional deficiencies, especially in disadvantaged or rural areas without basic public services. Examples encompass inclusive financial technology solutions for low-income demographics, affordable renewable energy systems, and mobile educational platforms.

3. Policy and Institutional Constraints

Multiple studies have identified institutional and regulatory challenges as persistent impediments. South African social businesses sometimes operate in a legal vacuum without a clear regulatory framework. Expansion and formal acknowledgement are hindered by inadequate tax legislation, legal categorisations, and targeted funding avenues.[58] Countries with more advanced ecosystems, such as the UK and Canada, were found to provide more substantial support through tax incentives, impact investment channels, and legal frameworks for social companies like Community Interest Companies.

4. Evaluation of Impact and Accountability

The literature analysis underscores the growing importance of assessing social effects. Social entrepreneurs increasingly need to demonstrate outcomes to obtain finance and develop a reputation.[59] Custom performance indicators, Theory of Change frameworks, and Social Return on Investment (SROI) exemplify prevalent techniques. Numerous studies indicate that, especially in resource-constrained environments such as South Africa, smaller and nascent social enterprises often lack the capacity or expertise to implement rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems.

5. The Role of Ecosystems and Collaborations

Collaborative networks are crucial to the development and sustainability of social enterprises. Studies demonstrate that partnerships between academic institutions, governmental entities, non-governmental organisations, and business sponsors enhance credibility and resource availability.[60] Organisations such as the NYDA and the University of Cape Town's Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship have facilitated the development of nascent social initiatives in South Africa through funding, mentoring, and training.

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[56] Emerson, “The Blended Value Proposition: Integrating Social and Financial Returns”; Urban, “Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa.”
[57] Mulgan, “The Process of Social Innovation”; Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller, “Rediscovering Social Innovation.”
[58] Littlewood and Holt, “Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment”; De Villiers, “Policy Gaps for Social Enterprises in South Africa.”
[59] Ebrahim and Rangan, “What Impact? A Framework for Measuring the Scale and Scope of Social Performance.”
[60] Nicholls and Murdock, *Social Innovation: Blurring Boundaries to Reconfigure Markets*.

6. Cultural and Sociocultural Influences

The significance of cultural context in influencing social entrepreneurship was also highlighted. Ubuntu, a philosophy that underscores communal ties and community engagement, significantly influences the conceptualisation and execution of social missions in South Africa.[61] Researchers indicated that long-term benefits and community engagement may be affected by cultural legitimacy.[62]

Summary of Themes

Theme	Insights
Hybrid business models	Finance and social goals; reinvestment of profits
Innovation	Locally tailored solutions; implementation of technology at the grassroots level
Institutional constraints	Lack of tax incentives and regulatory uncertainty
Impact measurement	Demand is increasing, although capacity varies
Partnership and ecosystems	Collaborations among academic, public, and corporate sectors are crucial for advancement.
Socio-cultural dynamics	Cultural norms shape engagement and legitimacy

DISCUSSION

This literature analysis emphasises the transformative impact of social entrepreneurship in addressing South Africa's socio-economic issues, as informed by the social innovation theory and new institutional theory. Social Innovation Theory characterises social entrepreneurs as grassroots innovators tackling systemic challenges, such as poverty, health inequities, and educational exclusion via locally implemented solutions, including solar-powered learning hubs and mobile clinics.[63] Nevertheless, insufficient financial and regulatory backing jeopardises the sustainability and scalability of these breakthroughs.[64] New Institutional Theory indicates that South Africa's disjointed regulatory environment fails to adequately acknowledge hybrid firms, compelling social entrepreneurs to function under unsuitable for-profit or non-profit legal structures.[65] Conversely, wealthier nations, including the UK, have established supportive frameworks such as Community Interest Companies.[66]

South Africa exemplifies reactive and proactive social entrepreneurship by tackling local poverty and participating in global innovation trends, including ethical fashion and renewable energy. This dual nature offers a strategic advantage for global education. Collaborative ecosystems, bolstered by entities such as the NYDA and UCT's Bertha Centre, are essential for the progression of social enterprise.[67] The industry must enhance social impact assessment by creating context-specific, resource-sensitive evaluation techniques.[68] Institutional support, specific policies, and cross-sector collaborations are essential to fully exploit the sector's potential.

[61] Visser, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Context, Relevance and Extent."

[62] Melanie Dare, Jacki Schirmer, and Frank Vanclay, "Community Engagement and Social Licence to Operate," *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* 32, no. 3 (2014): 188–97; Martin Piber et al., "Pursuing Civic Engagement through Participatory Cultural Initiatives: Mapping Value Creation, Outcome, Performance and Legitimacy," in *12th International Forum on Knowledge Asset Dynamics (IFKAD 2017) Proceedings*, 2017, 7–9; Chiara Leardini, Sara Moggi, and Gina Rossi, "The New Era of Stakeholder Engagement: Gaining, Maintaining, and Repairing Legitimacy in Nonprofit Organizations," *International Journal of Public Administration* 42, no. 6 (2019): 520–32.

[63] Hlokoma Mangqalaza, "The Social Innovation Systems Approach for Sustainable Development in an African Urban Informal Settlement" (Stellenbosch University, 2020); Howaldt and Schwarz, *Social Innovation: Concepts, Research Fields and International Trends*; José Alberto Solis-Navarrete, Saray Bucio-Mendoza, and Jaime Paneque-Gálvez, "What Is Not Social Innovation," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 173 (2021): 121190.

[64] Hloniphile Cleopatra Zwane and Sheunesu Zhou, "Entrepreneurial Challenges Facing Female Entrepreneurs in Informal Micro Businesses: A Case Study of UMhlathuze Municipality," *EUREKA: Social and Humanities*, no. 2 (2023): 16–26.

[65] Littlewood and Holt, "Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment"; De Villiers, "Policy Gaps for Social Enterprises in South Africa."

[66] Nicholls and Murdock, *Social Innovation: Blurring Boundaries to Reconfigure Markets*; Oluwaseun Oladeji Olaniyi, Samuel Oladiipo Olabanji, and Anthony Abalaka, "Navigating Risk in the Modern Business Landscape: Strategies and Insights for Enterprise Risk Management Implementation," *Journal of Scientific Research and Reports* 29, no. 9 (2023): 103–9.

[67] Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (University of Cape Town) – Reports and case studies (2021).

[68] Ebrahim and Rangan, "What Impact? A Framework for Measuring the Scale and Scope of Social Performance."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should integrate empirical fieldwork to chronicle the lived experiences of South African social entrepreneurs to test models of effect measurement and institutional adaptation in practical contexts. Comparative research between South African social businesses and those in analogous economies, such as Kenya, Brazil, or India, could be undertaken to identify best practices and insights applicable in other contexts.

Policy Recommendations

The South African government should create a legal framework for social enterprises akin to CICs in the UK, to facilitate transparent operations and customised incentives. This would also grant access to specialised funding sources, including social impact bonds, blended finance instruments, and grants for nascent and expanding social companies. Social entrepreneurship must be incorporated into education and training, with governmental agencies and academic institutions partnering on capacity-building initiatives. Public-private-academic collaborations should be promoted to cultivate a dynamic social entrepreneurship ecosystem. Impact measurement instruments must be created and endorsed, particularly for nascent and small enterprises. National awareness campaigns must be launched to advocate for social entrepreneurship as a legitimate career and developmental avenue, engaging youth, investors, and policymakers.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the role of social entrepreneurship in addressing social development issues, focusing on South Africa. It evaluates 70 peer-reviewed sources over two decades, revealing its significant contributions to social innovation, economic inclusion, and sustainable development. Social enterprises in South Africa are hybrid models that integrate market dynamics with social objectives, using advanced technologies, participatory approaches, and local expertise to empower communities and catalyse systemic change. The study highlights the structural and legal constraints social enterprises face and the innovative capabilities of these enterprises in redefining problem-solving approaches. The research highlights the need for explicit legal acknowledgement and supportive policy frameworks, convenient financing options for hybrid models, enhanced cooperation among public, corporate, and academic sectors, and initiatives for education and capacity-building in impact measurement. This study contributes to the evolving discourse on social entrepreneurship, offering a context-sensitive, theory-informed, and evidence-based perspective.

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