



Social Entrepreneurship as a Catalyst for Achieving Seven of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has placed unprecedented pressure on governments, corporations, and civil society to close persistent gaps in poverty, inequality, health, and environmental stewardship. Public budgets and conventional market mechanisms have repeatedly proven insufficient to meet the scale of this ambition on their own. Social entrepreneurship, understood as the deliberate combination of entrepreneurial methods with a primary orientation toward social value creation, has emerged as one of the more promising instruments for closing this gap. This study examined how social entrepreneurship functions as a catalytic mechanism for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to establish the institutional and financial conditions that either enable or constrain this catalytic role. The central problem motivating the study is that existing scholarship on social entrepreneurship and the SDGs remained fragmented into isolated, single-country case accounts, leaving the cross-context mechanisms through which social enterprises translate innovation into measurable SDG progress under-theorized. Anchored on Social Entrepreneurship Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the study adopted a qualitative systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol, drawing on secondary data from peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and policy documents published between 2015 and 2025. The reviewed evidence converges on seven of the seventeen SDGs, namely SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 7, SDG 8, and SDG 10, with a major finding that social enterprises consistently and most strongly advance SDG 1, SDG 5, SDG 8, and SDG 10 through hybrid business models that convert social problems into investable opportunities, while this catalytic contribution remains concentrated among a narrow band of well-networked ventures rather than diffused across the wider social enterprise population.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development Goals, Social Innovation, Impact Measurement, Blended Finance.

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Introduction

Since 2015, the 193 member states of the United Nations have organised their

development agenda around 17 Sustainable Development Goals, a framework that consolidates the world's

ambitions on poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, clean energy, decent work, and environmental protection into a single, interlinked roadmap for 2030 (United Nations 2015). The scale of that ambition, however, has consistently outpaced the capacity of national treasuries and multilateral aid budgets to fund it, and this financing and delivery gap has forced policymakers to look beyond the state for partners capable of generating social value at speed and at scale. It is against this backdrop that non-state, market-oriented actors have been drawn into the centre of the sustainable development conversation, not as peripheral contributors but as co-architects of how the goals might realistically be achieved within the remaining implementation window.

Social entrepreneurship has become one of the most closely watched of these market-oriented interventions. Dees (1998) frames the social entrepreneur as a distinct species within the entrepreneurial family, one who pursues a social mission with the same discipline, innovation, and determination that a conventional entrepreneur applies to profit. Building on this foundation, Mair and Marti (2006) define social entrepreneurship as a process that innovatively combines resources to pursue opportunities that catalyse social change or address unmet social needs, a definition that deliberately widens the field beyond the personality of the founder to the process of value creation itself. What distinguishes social

entrepreneurship from conventional charity or corporate social responsibility is precisely this hybridity: social enterprises are structured to generate revenue, yet that revenue is instrumental to, rather than the purpose of, the social mission (Zahra *et al.*, 2009).

The relevance of this hybrid model to the SDGs lies in its capacity to reach populations and problems that both government programmes and purely commercial enterprises tend to under-serve. In Uganda, social entrepreneurs have been found to support vulnerable populations and to address social, environmental, and economic problems simultaneously, contributing directly to the realisation of specific SDGs even where formal state capacity is weak (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025). Comparable evidence from India and South Africa shows social entrepreneurial activity advancing multiple SDGs at once by working at the base of the economic pyramid, where conventional markets rarely reach (Kaur *et al.*, 2023). In Kenya, ventures such as mobile-money platforms and agricultural market linkages illustrate how social enterprises weave together poverty reduction, food security, and decent work into a single commercial proposition (Kithae & Munge, 2025).

The World Economic Forum (2023) notes that even as African social entrepreneurs increasingly align their missions with specific SDGs, they continue to face acute constraints in funding and philanthropic access, with local organisations receiving

only a small share of the large gifts disbursed by donors. This tension, between social entrepreneurship's demonstrated potential and the structural barriers that blunt it, sits at the heart of the present inquiry.

This study therefore interrogates social entrepreneurship not as an isolated national phenomenon but as a cross-context catalytic mechanism for the SDGs, examining both the pathways through which social enterprises generate development outcomes and the institutional conditions that determine whether that catalytic potential is realised or dissipated. Rather than claiming a diffuse contribution across the entire 2030 Agenda, this study restricts its focus to the seven SDGs for which the reviewed literature provides direct, named empirical evidence: SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The sections that follow set out the study's objectives and questions, situate the problem within the existing literature, present the theoretical lenses guiding the analysis, describe the qualitative systematic review methodology adopted, report the major findings, and close with a conclusion and a targeted recommendation for policymakers and development finance institutions.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. Examine how social entrepreneurship functions as a catalytic mechanism for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals across diverse economic contexts.
- ii. Analyse the institutional and financial factors that mediate social entrepreneurship's capacity to translate social innovation into measurable SDG outcomes.
- iii. Identify the challenges and enabling conditions that determine the scale and sustainability of social entrepreneurship's contribution to the 2030 Agenda.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of the study, the research asks:

- i. In what ways does social entrepreneurship function as a catalytic mechanism for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals across diverse economic contexts?
- ii. How do institutional and financial factors mediate social entrepreneurship's capacity to translate social innovation into measurable SDG outcomes?
- iii. What challenges and enabling conditions determine the scale and sustainability of social entrepreneurship's contribution to the 2030 Agenda?

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Statement of the Problem

The last decade has produced a steadily growing body of scholarship linking social entrepreneurship to the Sustainable Development Goals, yet a closer reading of this literature reveals gaps that justify further inquiry. Much of the existing evidence is organised around single-country case studies, examining social enterprise activity in Uganda (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025), Kenya (Kithae & Munge, 2025), or a paired comparison of India and South Africa (Kaur *et al.*, 2023), without a cross-context synthesis of the mechanisms through which social enterprises actually convert innovation into SDG progress. Each study confirms that social entrepreneurship contributes to specific goals, most consistently SDG 1, SDG 5, SDG 8, and SDG 10, but few explicitly theorise why the contribution is uneven across goals or why environmental SDGs in particular receive comparatively less attention than poverty- and livelihood-focused goals (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025).

A second, related gap concerns the institutional and financial conditions that mediate this catalytic capacity. The literature is consistent in noting that social entrepreneurs operate under significant financial and managerial constraints that undermine their ability to fulfil their social mission at scale (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2023). These constraints are typically documented descriptively rather than analysed as structural mediators that

determine whether social innovation reaches investable, fundable, and measurable form. Without a framework capable of explaining how financing gaps and weak impact-measurement systems intervene between social entrepreneurial activity and SDG outcomes, policy recommendations risk remaining generic calls for more support rather than targeted interventions. This absence of an integrated, cross-context, and mechanism-focused perspective constitutes the core problem that the present study seeks to address.

Literature Review

Scholarly interest in social entrepreneurship has grown substantially since the concept was first popularised in the late 1990s, evolving from a preoccupation with the personal traits of individual social entrepreneurs toward a broader concern with the processes, resources, and institutional environments that shape social value creation. Dees (1998) was among the earliest to argue that social entrepreneurs constitute a distinct class of change agents who apply market discipline to social missions, a foundational claim that subsequent scholars have both built upon and complicated. Mair and Marti (2006) reframed the field around process rather than personality, defining social entrepreneurship as the innovative combination of resources to pursue opportunities that catalyse social change, a definition still widely cited in contemporary empirical work. Zahra *et al.*

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(2009) extended this process view by developing a typology of social entrepreneurs based on the scope of the social problems they target, distinguishing local, regional, and global orientations and highlighting the ethical tensions that accompany each.

Empirical studies applying these foundational ideas to the SDG agenda have proliferated since 2015, generally converging on the finding that social entrepreneurship contributes most visibly to poverty-focused and livelihood-focused goals. Turyakira *et al.* (2025), drawing on interviews with social entrepreneurs in Uganda, found that these actors support vulnerable populations and address social, environmental, and economic problems concurrently, with the clearest documented contributions falling under SDG 1, SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 8, and SDG 10. Notably, the same study observed that environmental sustainability receives comparatively less attention from social entrepreneurs than social and economic outcomes, and that financial constraints alongside limited managerial capacity restrict the scale of their impact. This pattern of concentrated but unevenly distributed contribution recurs across other national contexts.

In Kenya, Kithae and Munge (2025) documented how entrepreneurial ventures spanning mobile financial services, solar energy access, and agricultural market linkages have measurably advanced SDG 1, SDG 2,

SDG 5, SDG 7, and SDG 8, while simultaneously identifying access to finance, regulatory bureaucracy, and market competition as the three most significant barriers constraining further scale. Their descriptive research approach, based on desk analysis of secondary data and real-world case comparisons, illustrates how individual ventures can be mapped onto specific SDGs, but stops short of generalising the conditions under which such mapping becomes replicable across different ventures and sectors. A comparative study of India and South Africa similarly found that social entrepreneurial activity at the base of the economic pyramid advances multiple SDGs simultaneously, reinforcing the view that social enterprises are particularly effective where formal markets and state services under-serve low-income populations (Kaur *et al.*, 2023).

This pattern extends well beyond Africa and South Asia. In China, Zhang *et al.* (2022) traced how social entrepreneurs identify and develop social opportunities in rural communities, converting locally rooted problems, such as under-utilised agricultural assets or weak market access, into viable ventures that function as an alternative to conventional, top-down poverty-reduction programmes. In Indonesia, Pratono *et al.* (2023) found that social enterprises supporting the creative economy advanced SDG-aligned outcomes by helping informal creative workers embrace their cultural identity,

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access customers through social networks, and attract donor support through crowdfunding, illustrating a distinctly digital pathway through which social entrepreneurship can advance the SDGs. Reviewing the field more broadly, Ramya *et al.* (2024) synthesise the literature on how social entrepreneurship aligns business activity with the SDGs and identify funding constraints, difficulty measuring social impact, and the challenge of scaling as the recurring obstacles that cut across virtually every context studied, a conclusion echoed by Lasisi's (2022) review of the broader nexus between social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, which similarly frames entrepreneurship as a corrective to the limited reach of state-led development efforts.

A smaller but important strand of the literature turns the analytical lens onto the field of research itself rather than onto individual ventures. Using bibliometric analysis of the Web of Science database, Vaquero García *et al.* (2024) mapped the intersection of social economy research and the SDGs between 2015 and 2021 and found that, despite a steadily growing volume of publications, the field remains heavily concentrated in Europe and lacks a clearly defined focus on social economy organisations as catalysts for the SDGs, with scholars tending to study specific themes such as governance, labour, or microfinance in isolation rather than the catalytic mechanism as a whole. This finding is significant because it suggests

that the fragmentation observed in country-specific case studies is mirrored at the level of the research field itself. Complementing this, Raman *et al.* (2025) undertook an integrative review of social entrepreneurship and sustainable technologies and argued that the field's fragmented theoretical grounding, drawing on behavioural, institutional, and social capital perspectives without a unifying framework, has itself limited researchers' and practitioners' ability to generalise about how social innovation translates into SDG outcomes across sectors.

Beyond country-specific case evidence and academic self-assessment, broader commentary from development-focused organisations situates social entrepreneurship within the wider architecture of SDG financing and philanthropy. The World Economic Forum (2023) observes that African social entrepreneurs are increasingly and deliberately aligning their ventures with specific SDGs and continue to encounter systemic barriers in accessing philanthropic and investment capital, with the majority of large donor gifts continuing to flow toward international rather than local organisations. This observation echoes a recurring theme across the literature: that the constraint on social entrepreneurship's contribution to the SDGs is less a shortage of innovative capacity than a shortage of mechanisms for recognising, funding,

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and scaling that capacity once demonstrated.

The literature confirms that social entrepreneurship makes a real and measurable contribution to specific SDGs, particularly those concerned with poverty, gender equality, and decent work, across an increasingly wide range of national and sectoral contexts spanning Africa, South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. This contribution is consistently constrained by financial and institutional barriers rather than by any deficit of entrepreneurial innovation, a conclusion reinforced not only by individual case studies but by bibliometric evidence that the research field itself remains fragmented and geographically concentrated. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a synthesis that draws these fragmented, largely single-country and single-sector findings into a coherent account of the catalytic mechanisms at work across contexts, and that explicitly theorises how institutional and financial mediation shapes the translation of social innovation into measurable SDG progress. This is the gap the present study addresses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical lenses: Social Entrepreneurship Theory and Stakeholder Theory. Social Entrepreneurship Theory, as developed by Dees (1998) and later refined by Mair and Marti (2006) and Zahra *et al.* (2009),

conceptualises the social entrepreneur as an agent who identifies social problems as exploitable opportunities and mobilises innovative combinations of financial, human, and social resources to address them, without treating profit as the primary measure of success. This theoretical lens is well suited to the present study because it explains the supply side of the catalytic relationship examined here, namely how and why social enterprises identify SDG-aligned opportunities and structure hybrid ventures around them.

Stakeholder Theory, originally advanced by Freeman (1984), complements this by explaining the demand side of the relationship: the multiple, often competing groups, including beneficiaries, investors, government regulators, and local communities, whose interests a social enterprise must simultaneously satisfy in order to survive and scale. Because the SDGs are themselves an inherently multi-stakeholder agenda, spanning governments, private capital, civil society, and affected communities, Stakeholder Theory offers a useful frame for understanding why social enterprises that successfully balance these competing claims tend to achieve broader and more durable SDG-aligned outcomes than those that privilege a single stakeholder group. Read together, the two frameworks position social entrepreneurship as a mechanism that converts multi-stakeholder social needs

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into innovative, resource-mobilising ventures, and they guide the thematic interpretation of the literature synthesised in this study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a systematic literature review approach, appropriate for synthesising and critically interpreting existing knowledge on social entrepreneurship's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. A literature review of this kind is itself a recognised research methodology rather than a preliminary step toward some other method, and it is particularly well suited to mapping a fragmented field, clarifying its conceptual boundaries, and identifying gaps that justify further inquiry (Snyder, 2019). Rather than generating primary data, the research integrates conceptual, empirical, and policy-based evidence drawn from prior studies to provide a comprehensive account of the catalytic mechanisms and constraints documented in the literature. To enhance transparency and methodological rigour, the review process was guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. In line with qualitative research traditions, PRISMA was not applied as a statistical meta-analytic tool but as a structured guide for documenting the identification, screening, and selection of relevant literature (Page *et al.*, 2021).

Data Sources

The study relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from reputable academic and institutional sources. Peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and institutional reports were retrieved through structured web-based academic search, covering material indexed by Google Scholar and hosted on publisher platforms (including Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Emerald) and institutional repositories such as ResearchGate, alongside primary reports from the United Nations, the World Economic Forum, and multilateral development bodies. This search-engine-based retrieval approach was adopted in place of direct institutional subscription access to closed databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, and this constitutes an acknowledged limitation of the review, discussed further below. The review concentrated on literature published between 2015 and 2025, a period bounded at the lower end by the formal adoption of the SDGs and marked throughout by increasing scholarly and policy attention to social entrepreneurship as a development mechanism.

Search Strategy

A structured and systematic search strategy was developed to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies. Eight distinct search queries were run, combining terms derived directly from the study's objectives, including social entrepreneurship, sustainable development goals, social innovation,

impact measurement, and blended finance, with Boolean-style combinations and regional and temporal qualifiers applied consistently across queries.

PRISMA Stage	Description
Identification	Records identified through web-based academic search and institutional sources
Screening	Duplicates removed; titles and abstracts screened for relevance
Eligibility	Full-text and detailed records assessed against inclusion criteria
Included	Final set of studies included in qualitative synthesis

Following the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework, the systematic review progressed through four sequential stages. The search returned 63 records across eight web-based search queries, supplemented by 4 additional records identified through citation tracing to foundational theoretical and methodological works, for a total of 67 records identified. After removing 21 duplicate records, largely arising from the same source being surfaced by more than one query or appearing across multiple citation-index pages, 46 unique records remained for screening. Title and abstract screening led to the exclusion of 14 records that were not specific to social entrepreneurship, including general development-finance content, tourism- or SME-focused pieces without a social entrepreneurship or SDG framing, and studies with a mismatched unit of analysis. Full-text and detailed

assessment was then conducted on the remaining 32 records, resulting in the exclusion of a further 12 records due to unverifiable authorship, reference-listing-only pages with no retrievable analytical content, publication outside the 2015–2025 SDG-era window, or thematic mismatch on closer reading. This left 20 studies for inclusion in the final qualitative synthesis, of which 17 are cited by name throughout this paper and listed in the references; the remainder informed the thematic coding described below without being individually quoted.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before study selection to maintain analytical rigour. Studies were included if they explicitly examined social entrepreneurship, social enterprise activity, or social innovation in relation to one or more of the Sustainable Development Goals. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and policy documents written in English. Studies were excluded if they lacked relevance to social entrepreneurship or the SDGs, were purely opinion-based without analytical grounding, appeared as duplicate records across searches, or could not be traced to a verifiable author and publication source.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, a qualitative method well suited to synthesising

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findings across multiple textual sources. Each of the 20 included studies was reviewed in detail and coded according to recurring themes related to social entrepreneurial practices, SDG outcomes, and the institutional or financial factors shaping those outcomes. The identified themes were interpreted through the lenses of Social Entrepreneurship Theory and Stakeholder Theory, enabling the study to move beyond descriptive summaries toward an integrated understanding of how innovation, resource mobilisation, and stakeholder alignment interact to determine SDG-related outcomes.

Validity, Reliability, and Transparency

Several measures were adopted to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study. Data triangulation was achieved by drawing evidence from diverse sources, including academic literature, institutional reports, and policy documents spanning multiple regions. The use of explicit inclusion criteria, a transparent screening process, and PRISMA-guided documentation further strengthened methodological consistency. A limitation of the review is that retrieval relied on web-based search rather than direct institutional access to subscription databases such as Scopus and Web of Science; while this broadened access to open, publicly indexed literature, it may have excluded some paywalled studies and means the identification counts reported here reflect what a search-engine-mediated review could retrieve

rather than a full census of the published literature. Although qualitative systematic reviews do not aim for statistical generalisation, the structured and transparent approach employed in this study supports analytical reliability and allows future researchers to replicate or extend the review using institutional database access.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied solely on secondary data, no ethical approval involving human participants was required. Nevertheless, ethical standards were upheld through accurate representation of original authors' findings, avoidance of misinterpretation, and proper acknowledgment of all sources in accordance with APA 7th edition referencing guidelines.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are organised around three dominant themes that consistently appeared across the reviewed literature. Across the corpus, seven SDGs recur with direct, named empirical support: SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 7, SDG 8, and SDG 10. These themes reflect how social entrepreneurship currently functions as a catalytic mechanism for these seven goals, the outcomes associated with this role, and the constraints shaping its effectiveness.

Concentrated Catalytic Contribution to Poverty, Gender, and Livelihood Goals

The most consistent and significant finding across the reviewed studies is that

social entrepreneurship makes a measurable catalytic contribution to a specific cluster of Sustainable Development Goals, most prominently SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Evidence from Uganda shows social entrepreneurs supporting vulnerable populations while addressing overlapping social, environmental, and economic problems, with the clearest and most consistently documented outcomes concentrated in poverty reduction and livelihood improvement (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025). Parallel evidence from Kenya demonstrates how ventures built around mobile financial inclusion, clean energy access, and agricultural market linkages simultaneously advance multiple SDGs through a single commercial proposition, illustrating the multiplicative character of well-designed social enterprise models (Kithae & Munge, 2025). Similarly, social entrepreneurial activity in India and South Africa shows that ventures operating at the base of the economic pyramid advance several SDGs concurrently, precisely because they are structurally positioned to serve populations that both government programmes and conventional markets tend to overlook (Kaur *et al.*, 2023).

However, the findings also reveal that this catalytic contribution is not evenly distributed. Environmental sustainability goals receive markedly less attention from social entrepreneurs than social and

economic goals, a pattern attributed to the comparatively longer payback horizons and higher technical barriers associated with environmental interventions relative to livelihood-focused ventures (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025). This confirms that social entrepreneurship functions as a genuine catalytic mechanism for SDG advancement, directly addressing the first research question, but also demonstrates that this catalytic role is selective rather than comprehensive. Read through the lens of Social Entrepreneurship Theory, this selectivity reflects the fact that social entrepreneurs, like their commercial counterparts, gravitate toward opportunities where the combination of resources required to act is most readily assembled, meaning that goals requiring longer-term, capital-intensive interventions are systematically under-served by the current social enterprise landscape.

Financial and Institutional Mediation of Catalytic Capacity

A second major finding is that financial and institutional conditions act as decisive mediating variables between social entrepreneurial innovation and realised SDG outcomes. Across the reviewed studies, social entrepreneurs are consistently reported to be financially constrained, with limited managerial capacity further undermining their ability to fulfil their social mission at scale (Turyakira *et al.*, 2025). In Kenya, access to finance, complex regulatory processes,

and intense competition from both established firms and informal market actors are identified as the three most significant barriers restricting the scale of social enterprise impact, despite the demonstrated viability of the underlying business models (Kithae & Munge, 2025). At a continental level, this financing constraint is compounded by a broader philanthropic imbalance: African social entrepreneurs report facing persistent difficulty in accessing the funding needed to start and scale their ventures, with the large majority of major donor gifts continuing to flow to international rather than local organisations (World Economic Forum, 2023).

This finding directly addresses the second research question and is best interpreted through Stakeholder Theory, which frames access to finance as one of several competing stakeholder demands, alongside beneficiary needs, regulatory compliance, and community legitimacy, that a social enterprise must satisfy simultaneously in order to survive. Where funders, regulators, and communities are not aligned around a shared understanding of what constitutes credible social impact, social enterprises are forced to divert scarce resources toward stakeholder management rather than toward the innovation and delivery that generate SDG outcomes in the first place. The evidence therefore suggests that institutional and financial mediation is not a peripheral constraint but a central determinant of whether social

entrepreneurial innovation converts into measurable SDG progress.

Fragmented Measurement and Limited Cross-Context Learning

The third theme to emerge from the synthesis is that the absence of standardised impact-measurement frameworks limit both the visibility and the scalability of social entrepreneurship's SDG contribution. Existing studies tend to document SDG-related outcomes descriptively, mapping specific ventures onto specific goals through case narrative rather than through a common measurement standard that would allow comparison across ventures, sectors, or countries (Kaur *et al.*, 2023; Kithae & Munge, 2025; Turyakira *et al.*, 2025). This fragmentation makes it difficult for investors and development finance institutions to identify which social enterprises are producing the most cost-effective SDG outcomes, and in turn makes it harder for well-performing ventures to attract the capital needed to scale beyond their initial context.

This finding directly addresses the third research question, revealing that the primary barrier to scaling social entrepreneurship's contribution to the SDGs is not a shortage of investable ideas but a shortage of the shared measurement infrastructure that would allow those ideas to be recognised, compared, and funded at scale. This interpretation is consistent with both theoretical frameworks guiding the study: Social Entrepreneurship Theory explains why

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innovative ventures continue to emerge despite these constraints, while Stakeholder Theory explains why, in the absence of a shared measurement language, funders and social enterprises struggle to reach the alignment needed for capital to flow toward demonstrated impact.

Conclusion

The clearest insight to emerge from this synthesis is that social entrepreneurship's catalytic power is being throttled less by a shortage of innovation and more by an absence of recognition. Across every context reviewed, from Uganda to Kenya to South Asia, social entrepreneurs have repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to design ventures that simultaneously address poverty, inequality, and livelihood gaps in ways that neither government programmes nor conventional markets have matched. What is missing is not the entrepreneurial capability to act, but the institutional apparatus needed to see that capability clearly enough to fund and scale it.

This points to a narrower but more consequential conclusion than the field has generally drawn. The future contribution of social entrepreneurship to the SDGs will be determined less by the volume of new ventures launched than by whether funders, governments, and social enterprises converge on a shared standard for recognising which ventures are genuinely delivering SDG-aligned outcomes. Until that convergence occurs,

the sector will remain structurally capable of producing impact far in excess of what is currently financed, measured, or scaled.

Recommendations

Governments and development partners should harmonise SDG-impact measurement and link certification to access to blended finance, including concessional loans, impact bonds, and risk-sharing facilities. Rather than leaving impact measurement to the discretion of individual funders or ventures, as is currently the case, a standardised framework would allow investors to compare the SDG performance of social enterprises across sectors and countries on a common basis, reducing the due-diligence burden that currently discourages capital from flowing to smaller, locally rooted ventures. For these recommendations to be enforceable rather than aspirational, national ministries responsible for finance, trade, and social development should be tasked with adopting the framework into existing SME and social enterprise registration processes, so that certification becomes a practical gateway to funding rather than an optional add-on. Development finance institutions, for their part, should commit a defined proportion of their SDG-focused portfolios specifically to certified social enterprises operating in the under-served environmental and long-payback goal areas identified in this study, ensuring that the current concentration of impact

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around poverty and livelihood goals is deliberately broadened over time.

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