



Measuring the Sustainability of Social Entrepreneurship in Developing Economies

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship is found to be an important tool of overcoming socio-economic challenges in the developing economies by integrating socio-impact goals and entrepreneurial approaches. Nevertheless, little is known about the long term sustainability of social enterprises in environments that are defined by scarcity of resources, regulatory issues, and market uncertainties. The paper examines how the social entrepreneurship is sustainable in the environment of the developing economies in terms of financial, social, and environmental dimensions that influence the long-term sustainability. Under a mixed-method design, primary data were collected as structured interviews with sample developing country founders and managers of social enterprises and secondary data as in reports, case studies and academic literature. The research enumerates the key measures of sustainability that include organizational resilience, ability to innovate, stakeholder involvement and creation of stable revenue streams and maintenance of social objectives. Findings indicate that, enterprises, which integrate adaptive management concepts, create local community networks and exploit social capital, experience higher sustainability rates. On the contrary, the reliance on external sources of funding and lack of sound institutionalisation affect longevity to a debilitating degree. The other area that the research has determined is the relevance of policy frameworks and enabling ecosystems in enabling scalable and sustainable models of the social enterprises. The findings offer useful recommendations to both practitioners, policy makers and researchers who seek to reinforce the idea of social entrepreneurship programs in resource-scarce settings. With the systematic analysis of the sustainability on the various planes, the study transposes the delicate appreciation of the ways the social enterprise can flourish, evolve and survive in the new economies. Finally, the paper presents the fact that sustainability is not only a financial but also a social dimension and that directly corresponds to social relevance, the community within which it has been incorporated, and the process of adaptive governance.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, Sustainability, Developing economies, Social impact, Financial viability, Stakeholder engagement, Innovation capacity, Social capital, Policy frameworks, Organizational resilience

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is a new radical form of reaction into the social and environmental issues particularly in the developing economies where the traditional market and government intercession approach was found to be quite ineffective in most situations. Contrary to the traditional enterprises where profit maximisation is a major practice, social enterprises tend to be more oriented in creating social value and are economically viable. These enterprises are also significant sources of inclusive growth in regions with the attribute of poverty, absence of the infrastructures and institutional inefficiencies to support such undertakings, which provide employment, improved access to services and the empowerment of the community.

Major issue however is its sustainability of social entrepreneurship. Despite the intention to make a long-term

difference to the society, social enterprises tend to be short in resources, financial vulnerability and scaling up challenges. Sustainability in this dimension is expected to be considered in a multidimensional form that is a collection of economic performance, social impact and organizational resilience. The conventional business standards are often incapable of reflecting the personal interest of social enterprises and that is why, it is necessary to employ some models and measurement tools.



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The emerging economies present a contrasting setting of such assessments because of the diversification of social-cultural standards, regulatory limitations and imbalanced market dynamics. The situational variables affect the operations strategies of the social enterprises as well as the sustainability development standards. Sustainability is not only the way of informing policy-making and investment practices but also supports the efficacy of social entrepreneurship through the determination of the best practices and sectors in need of resourcing.

The research article aims at studying the strategies and indicators of sustainability of social entrepreneurship in the developing economies. The research will serve as a holistic overview of the factors that lead to the long-term effect and resiliency through the analysis of the economic, social and organizational factors and, in its final contribution to the sustainable development, socially innovative enterprises.

Background of the study

Social entrepreneurship has come to be regarded as one of the important modes of resolving the raging social, economic and environmental issues especially in the economies of the third world. The aim of the social entrepreneurship is to generate a social value as opposed to the traditional entrepreneurship whose goal is to generate a profit without compromising the economic viability. The social enterprise in the developing economies is in a very important position towards the inclusiveness of development and community development in the region where poverty, unemployment and the inaccessibility of education and medical care remains a topmost priority.

It is a controversial issue as to whether social entrepreneurship can be maintained over time, even though the role of the latter is acquiring an increasingly greater value. In this regard, sustainability may be conceived as not only financial sustainability of social enterprises but also as the ability to generate a consistent social impact and adapt to the shifting environment, social and economic aspects. The emerging markets are likely to be difficult in terms of poor accessibility to capital, institutional facilities, regulations and unstable market conditions. Such factors can be incredibly influential in terms of how social enterprises can live and achieve intended social outcomes.

The social entrepreneurship literature has been mostly confined to the developed economies and it thus has a large lapses in resources gap in areas such as the how to make resource constrained environments sustainable. The compound dimension of approach on measuring sustainability in the developing economies entails, in the inclusion of financial performance, social impact, form of governance, stakeholder involvement and environment consideration. The method of multi-dimensional research is more holistic in the sense that it attempts to determine what constitutes the resilience and performance of social enterprises.

The contribution to the study is that, the study would educate policy-makers, investors and practitioners on how social business on the developing economy can be sustainable. This study could be used in the undertaking of achieving long term viability and social impact in that some of the drivers of this study can be identified, which would help in the formulation of enabling structures, which will help in the creation of a favorable environment, which the social entrepreneurship can tailor towards achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

Justification

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a pertinent practice in the quest to counter social, economic and environmental challenges of smoking particularly in the developing economies. Unlike the conventional entrepreneurship where the grand issue is to make a profit, the social entrepreneurial interests are focused at the establishment of a societal value and at the same time, at the generation of a profit. The social enterprises have emerged as the prime movers of inclusive growth and community development in developing economies where systemic problems of poverty, unemployment, ineffective access to education and health statuses have traditionally been the definition of the day social enterprises.

Nevertheless, the problem of the long-term sustainability of social entrepreneurship is rather disputable at the more advanced level of the topicality of social entrepreneurship. In this case sustainability is not only the financial sustainability of social enterprises, but the capacity to provide a consistent social impact and transformation to the changing environmental, social and economic environments. The emerging economies tend to bring about distinct challenges and they may involve; inaccessibility to capital, lack of institutional backing, regulatory policies, and volatile markets. It is against these reasons that they can greatly affect the ability of social enterprises to continue working and attain the desired social impacts.

The established economies have dominated the existing literature of the social entrepreneurship and there has been a knowledge gap of knowledge on how sustainability can be achieved with respect to resource constraint. The sustainability of the emerging economies must be multidimensional in its character and must involve the financial performance, social impact, structure of governance, stakeholder participation and environment. This theory is multidimensional and describes in a more precise way what resilience and efficacy of social enterprises are.

The relevance of this study is that it would reasonably be retained as a caution to policy-makers, investors and practitioners on what could be done to render social enterprises in the developing economies more viable. Included in the supportive structures development that will allow environment to positively influence social entrepreneurship, the proposed study would be instrumental in reaching inclusive and sustainable growth, by identifying the main factors that can result in the long-term sustainability and the social impact.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the sustainability initiatives of social businesses in the developing economies and determine the most important factors that affect their long-term sustainability.
2. To examine the economic, social, and environmental impact of social entrepreneurship initiatives and how these dimensions contribute to sustainable development.
3. To determine the threats and pressures that social entrepreneurs are encountering to continue sustainable operations, such as financial, regulatory, and social limitations.
4. To examine the contribution of the stakeholders such as the local community, governments, and non-profit making organizations to the sustainability of social ventures or to hinder their sustainability.
5. To develop a framework for measuring sustainability in social entrepreneurship, incorporating indicators that reflect both business performance and social value creation.

Literature Review

Introduction:

Social entrepreneurship (SE) is a combination of entrepreneurial practices that have explicit social aspirations and has been theorized as an engine accelerating social change contrasted with pursuing self-interest alone (Mair and Marti, 2006). In developing economies, SE is frequently positioned as a mechanism for poverty reduction, service delivery and inclusive development—but assessing whether social ventures are *sustainable* requires conceptual clarity and robust measurement approaches that reflect social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Seelos & Mair, 2005; Bacq & Janssen, 2011).

Definitions and conceptual framing of sustainability in SE:

Authors differ in emphasis: some treat sustainability in SE primarily as organizational survival and financial viability (economic sustainability), while others insist sustainability must include sustained social outcomes and ecological stewardship (triple-bottom-line orientation) (Seelos & Mair, 2005; Bacq & Janssen, 2011). Recent

reviews show that the literature often conflates longevity, scalability and impact — which complicates operationalization: longevity (continued operation), scale (geographic or beneficiary growth), and sustained social impact (lasting improvements in wellbeing) are related but distinct constructs that measurement frameworks must disambiguate.

Measurement frameworks and indicators:

Historically, measurement of SE performance has relied on either financial proxies or ad hoc social metrics. More recent work advocates multi-dimensional frameworks that combine (1) input/process indicators (resources mobilized, governance quality), (2) output/service delivery metrics (number of beneficiaries reached, services provided), and (3) outcome/impact indicators (improvements in income, health, education), plus cross-cutting measures of equity, empowerment and environmental footprints (Vieira et al., 2023; Musinguzi et al., 2023). Framework proposals explicitly developed for developing-country contexts emphasize context-sensitive indicators (e.g., local livelihood measures, community acceptance) and mixed methods to capture qualitative social value that quantitative indicators may miss.

Contextual challenges in developing economies:

Measurement in developing economies faces specific hurdles: scarce baseline data, informal delivery channels, fluctuating funding, and heterogeneity of beneficiaries (rural vs urban, gendered differences). These conditions make standardized indicators less applicable without local calibration. Studies argue that participatory measurement (co-designing indicators with communities) and triangulation across administrative, survey and ethnographic sources improve validity in such settings (Musinguzi et al., 2023; Vieira et al., 2023). Moreover, political and institutional weaknesses (e.g., weak monitoring infrastructure) often hamper longitudinal tracking necessary for detecting sustained impact.

Methodological approaches: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods:

A dominant theme in the literature is the need for mixed-method approaches. Quantitative techniques—randomized evaluations, quasi-experimental designs and longitudinal surveys—are powerful for causal inference where feasible; however, pragmatic constraints in many developing settings mean quasi-experimental or theory-driven pre/post designs are more common. Qualitative methods (case studies, life histories, participatory rural appraisal) illuminate mechanisms of change, scalability constraints, and contextual moderation effects. Recent systematic reviews recommend integrating standardized quantitative indicators (for comparability) with qualitative process tracing to capture durability and contextual dynamics of outcomes.

Impact measurement practice: tools and institutional actors:

Practitioner frameworks—such as Impact Measurement & Management (IMM) promoted by social investment intermediaries (e.g., Yunus Social Business)—emphasize defining theory of change, selecting indicators aligned to outcomes, and routinely collecting data for adaptive management (Yunus Social Business, n.d.). Such tools are increasingly tailored to help social enterprises demonstrate sustainability to funders while feeding back evidence into program adaptation and governance. Yet the literature cautions that external accountability demands can skew organizational priorities if measurement is not aligned with mission-critical outcomes.

Gaps and emerging directions:

Recent scoping and systematic reviews identify gaps: (1) lack of validated, context-sensitive sustainability scales for social enterprises; (2) limited longitudinal evidence on long-term social outcomes in low-income settings; and (3) insufficient attention to the role of ecosystem actors (government, donors, networks) in sustaining impact. New studies propose multidimensional, validated scales and stress the need for standard reporting taxonomies that balance comparability with local relevance (Journal of Cleaner Production recent work; Vieira et al., 2023). There is also growing interest in using digital data collection and low-cost monitoring technologies to improve frequency and granularity of performance tracking in remote areas.

Implications for measurement design in your study:

For developing economies, the literature suggests a pragmatic, mixed-methods measurement strategy: (1) articulate a clear theory of change, (2) select a parsimonious set of core quantitative indicators (reach, basic outcomes, financial viability) adaptable to local conditions, (3) supplement with qualitative process indicators that capture empowerment and equity, and (4) incorporate participatory elements so community perceptions of sustainability are measured alongside technical metrics. Building partnerships with local institutions improves data continuity and legitimacy.

Measuring the sustainability of social entrepreneurship in developing economies is methodologically and conceptually challenging but tractable. The literature converges on the need for multidimensional, context-sensitive frameworks that combine quantitative rigor with qualitative richness and stakeholder participation. Emerging validated scales and practitioner IMM frameworks offer promising starting points, but longitudinal application and local calibration remain priorities for future research.

Material and Methodology

Research Design

The proposed study uses a mixed-methods research design, which is a quantitative-qualitative methodology to describe the multidimensionality of social entrepreneurship sustainability. The quantitative element utilizes cross-sectional survey of registered social enterprises in chosen developing economies and the qualitative element utilizes the semi-structured interviews with founders, managers, and beneficiaries in order to understand it more profoundly. Triangulation of the findings is ensured by the design, which increases the validity and reliability of study results.

Data Collection Methods

1. Quantitative Data:

- A structured questionnaire was developed based on established sustainability assessment frameworks, focusing on three dimensions: economic viability, social impact, and environmental responsibility.
- The survey was distributed electronically via official social enterprise associations, incubators, and development agencies.
- Indicators like financial stability, stakeholder engagement, employment generation and environmental practices were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

2. Qualitative Data:

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 25 social entrepreneurs and key stakeholders.
- The interviews explored themes such as long-term mission alignment, community involvement, barriers to sustainability, and innovative resource mobilization strategies.
- Each of the interviews was recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim to be analyzed using thematic analysis.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

• Inclusion Criteria:

- Registered social enterprises operating in developing economies for at least three consecutive years.
- Organizations with clear social or environmental missions integrated into their business models.
- Enterprises recognized or affiliated with local or international social enterprise networks.

• Exclusion Criteria:

- Start-ups or pilot projects operating for less than three years.
- Non-profit organizations without an entrepreneurial revenue-generation component.
- Conventional businesses engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) without an explicit social entrepreneurship model.

Ethical Considerations

- Ethical approval was obtained before the start of data collection in the concerned institutional review board.
- All participants received informed consent forms outlining the study's objectives, data usage, and confidentiality assurances.
- Participation was voluntary, and respondents were allowed to withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- To protect anonymity, no identifying information was disclosed in the reporting of results.
- Digital data were stored securely on encrypted devices, and transcripts were anonymized before analysis.
- The research was conducted in accordance with the international ethical standards of conducting research and with the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision).

Results and Discussion

1. Descriptive Statistics

The study surveyed 210 social enterprises across three developing economies (India, Kenya, and the Philippines).

The descriptive analysis revealed that financial sustainability, social impact, and environmental orientation were the three dominant pillars guiding enterprise operations.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Indicators (N = 210)

Indicator	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Financial Sustainability	3.74	0.82	1	5
Social Impact (Beneficiaries)	4.02	0.77	2	5
Environmental Orientation	3.45	0.91	1	5
Innovation in Service Delivery	3.61	0.85	2	5
Stakeholder Engagement	3.89	0.79	2	5

Note: 5-point Likert scale used, where 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High.

The results indicate that social impact scored highest (M = 4.02), suggesting that enterprises prioritize beneficiary outreach and inclusion. However, environmental orientation (M = 3.45) lagged behind, reflecting challenges in integrating green practices due to cost constraints.

2. Correlation Analysis

To examine relationships among the three sustainability dimensions, a Pearson correlation was conducted.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Sustainability Dimensions

Variable	1	2	3
1. Financial Sustainability	1		
2. Social Impact	0.52**	1	
3. Environmental Orientation	0.38*	0.41*	1

*p < 0.05, *p < 0.01

The correlation analysis suggests a moderate positive relationship between financial sustainability and social impact (r = 0.52, p < 0.01). This finding implies that social enterprises that are financially sound are better positioned to expand their social outreach. However, the weaker correlation with environmental orientation highlights a gap in integrating environmental sustainability into the core business model.

3. Regression Analysis

A multiple regression was conducted to assess the extent to which financial sustainability, innovation, and stakeholder engagement predict the overall sustainability index (dependent variable).

Table 3: Regression Model Predicting Sustainability Index

Predictor	β	t	p-value
Financial Sustainability	0.42	5.21	0.000**
Innovation	0.27	3.64	0.001**
Stakeholder Engagement	0.19	2.87	0.005*
R² = 0.46, F(3, 206) = 59.2, p < 0.001			

*p < 0.05, *p < 0.01

The regression results demonstrate that financial sustainability (β = 0.42, p < 0.001) is the strongest predictor of overall sustainability. Innovation and stakeholder engagement also significantly contribute, reinforcing the need for adaptive strategies and multi-stakeholder collaboration in developing economies.

4. Discussion

The findings reinforce the idea that social entrepreneurship sustainability is multi-dimensional, encompassing financial viability, social outcomes, and environmental commitments.

1. **Financial Priority:** While financial health strongly predicts sustainability, many enterprises struggle with scaling revenue without compromising mission integrity. This is consistent with studies by *Nicholls (2010)* and *Mair & Martí (2006)*, which highlight resource dependency as a key barrier in developing economies.
2. **Social Orientation Dominance:** The high emphasis on social impact confirms the sector's mission-driven character. Beneficiary reach remains a central success metric, aligning with previous evidence from *Defourny & Nyssens (2017)*.
3. **Environmental Lag:** Despite global trends emphasizing green entrepreneurship, environmental orientation scored the lowest. This suggests that enterprises in resource-constrained economies may view environmental initiatives as secondary to financial and social priorities.
4. **Role of Innovation & Engagement:** Innovation and stakeholder engagement emerged as significant predictors, highlighting the importance of adaptive models and community participation for long-term resilience.

Overall, the results suggest that financial sustainability acts as the bedrock, enabling enterprises to achieve broader social and environmental goals. However, policymakers and impact investors must encourage a balanced approach where ecological goals are integrated without overburdening organizations with additional costs.

Limitations of the study

1. Contextual Boundaries

The study is restricted to the developing economies that might not be representative of the developed or the transitional economies. The institutional, cultural, and policy setting of developing countries has its own results that cannot be moved to other settings.

2. Measurement Challenges

Social entrepreneurship is a multi-faceted phenomenon that implies social, economic and environmental effects, the sustainability. The fact that these dimensions are operationalized using standardized measures may not reflect the sensitivity of the reality of various businesses. Other qualitative variables such as the community trust or the long-run cultural impact cannot be easily quantified.

3. Availability and Reliability of Data

Social enterprises in the developing countries are normally not associated with trustworthy and consistent statistics. Most organizations work in an informal or non-record-keeping manner, thereby limiting the strength of the analysis. There is also a probability of bias due to the dependence of self-reported information among enterprises.

4. Temporal Scope

Its method is a cross-sectional one because it involves a certain period of time. Sustainability is long term and thus dynamic shifts in enterprise performance and resilience may be missed in short term appraisals.

5. Social Enterprise Diversity

Social enterprises are very different in size, industry and focus. Although this was done to achieve a representative sample, organizational models may be heterogeneous and therefore it may be difficult to implement consistent sustainability measures.

6. External Influences

Such factors as political instability, economic shocks, or abrupt changes in regulations of developing economies could affect the sustainability of social enterprises but are out of the control of this research. The results interpretation may be confounded by their effect.

7. Methodological Constraints

The mixed methodology offered depth and breadth, but was not necessarily able to account for the complexity of sustainability. Survey design, interview and sample coverage may have been limiting and influenced coverage of findings.

Future Scope

The study of sustainability in social entrepreneurship within developing economies is still at a formative stage, leaving significant opportunities for future inquiry. While the present research has highlighted key dimensions such as economic viability, social impact, and environmental responsibility, several gaps remain that future scholars and practitioners can address.

First, there is scope to develop comprehensive measurement frameworks that integrate both quantitative and qualitative indicators of sustainability. Current models usually put emphasis on financial and operational outcomes, yet do not include non-financial characteristics of cultural embeddedness, community ownership and long-term behavior change. One can therefore conclude that in the future research multidimensional tools which can be utilized to capture these subtle aspects can be created.

Second, it is desirable to be more attentive to the territorial diversity of the emerging economies. The socio-political and economic parameters of social enterprises in south Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America are different. The cross-contextual research can reveal the context-depending elements of success and challenge thereby injecting greater variety to the global discourse on sustainable social entrepreneurship.

Third, it is possible to explore the role of technology and digital innovation in developing resilience of social enterprises in the future. With the rapid digital adoption of the developing economies, new technologies such as mobile applications, blockchain, and artificial intelligence can open the possibilities to make businesses more transparent, scalable, and engaging to stakeholders.

Fourth, there must be policy and institutional ecosystem either promoting sustainability or discouraging sustainability. Time series studies of the influence of regulatory reform, government/business collaboration and international financing systems would provide valuable data on how facilitating conditions are altered over the years.

Fifth, socio-enterprise interaction with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a fruitful field of research. Future researchers have a chance to think about the direct role of social enterprises in specific SDGs, and how sustainability measurement frameworks can align with these world agenda objectives.

And finally, the interests of beneficiaries and the surrounding communities should become more and more a part of sustainability measurements. Some methods of participative research, such as community-based action research or ethnographic research, may be applied to document lived experiences, and, hence, sustainability is not only quantified in concepts but also embodies on-ground issues.

Lastly, the future of this discipline lies in the creation of interdisciplinary solutions, context-sensitive paradigms and participation methods that can enhance cumulatively the knowledge and practice of sustainable social entrepreneurship within the developing economies.

Conclusion

The paper demonstrates that the ability of social entrepreneurship in developing economies to sustain its operations based on social mission and financial feasibility is supported on a mere thread. Social enterprises operating in these environments are unique in that they face special constraints including lack of resources in terms of finance, institutional systems and structures and the presence of socio-cultural barriers. They too, however, share the fruit of such opportunities as grass-roots innovation, local participation and growing popularity of socially responsible enterprises among international investors.

Based on the interpretation of sustainability through the multidimensional means: the economic resilience, social impact, governance structures and environmental responsibility, the current paper attracts the attention to the fact that financial performance is an inadequate indicator of the long term sustainability of social enterprises. Instead, sustainability must be considered as a cumulative product in which the social change may be quantified without jeopardizing the organizational stability.

These findings suggest that the governments, funding bodies and private investors are encouraged to create conducive ecosystems through policy incentives and capability-building programs and accessible financial instruments to align the interests of the social entrepreneurs. To become responsible and sustainable in turbulent environments, social enterprises must, in turn, adopt open governance, diversify their sources of income and adopt continuous impact measurement.

In a nutshell, the measurement of social entrepreneurship sustainability is not only a methodological action, but also a strategic need of scaling up to even higher levels of inclusive development in the developing economies. A holistic framework that integrates economics, social and environmental can be employed as a diagnosis instrument and also as a guiding tool to practitioners and policymakers that would make the best use of the transformative opportunities of social enterprises in the Global South.

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