Social Entrepreneurship: Bridging Service Gaps and Addressing Inequality

Dr. R. Chandini, Dr. Ruben Shah, Uma Shankar, GV Radhakrishnan, Dr. Aarti Sharma

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Faculty of science and Humanities, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Medicaps University, India ³Associate Professor, Ramcharan School of Leadership, Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, India.

⁴Senior Professor, Department of Economics and Finance, School of Management, Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) Deemed to be University, India. ⁵Assistant Professor, Department of MBA, IMSEC Engineering College, India.

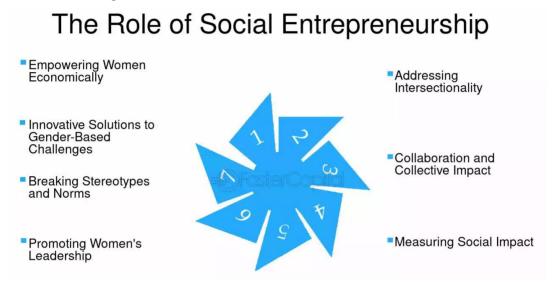
Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative force aimed at addressing societal issues while generating sustainable social and environmental impact. This study explores the role of social entrepreneurship in bridging service gaps and combating inequality, focusing on innovative business models and strategies employed by social entrepreneurs to solve critical challenges. The paper investigates how social enterprises are disrupting traditional business approaches by prioritizing social value over profit maximization, particularly in underserved communities. Key themes include the identification of gaps in public services, the role of cross-sector collaboration, and the scalability of social enterprises in addressing issues such as poverty, education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability.

Through an examination of successful case studies, this paper highlights the ways in which social entrepreneurship is leveraging creativity, community-driven solutions, and resource optimization to tackle systemic inequality. The paper also addresses the challenges faced by social enterprises, including funding barriers, scaling constraints, and the difficulty in measuring social impact effectively. Furthermore, the paper discusses policy frameworks and institutional support needed to foster the growth of social entrepreneurship globally. By examining the intersection of business and social change, this paper underscores the potential of social enterprises to create lasting change and contribute to the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ultimately, this research illustrates that social entrepreneurship is not only a viable model for addressing inequality but also a critical mechanism for social innovation, offering scalable solutions to some of the world's most pressing challenges.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, service gaps, inequality, social impact, business models, underserved communities, cross-sector collaboration, poverty, education, healthcare, environmental sustainability, social value, community-driven solutions, funding barriers, scaling challenges, social innovation, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative approach to addressing pressing social challenges and bridging critical service gaps that traditional public and private sectors often fail to fill. By blending innovative business models with a mission-driven focus, social entrepreneurs seek to tackle systemic issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. These ventures not only aim to generate economic value but also prioritize creating lasting social impact, making them a powerful tool in fostering equitable and sustainable development.



Source: FasterCapital.com

In many regions, marginalized communities remain underserved due to gaps in infrastructure, inadequate policy implementation, or economic constraints. Social entrepreneurship addresses these challenges by employing resource-efficient, scalable, and community-centered strategies. Unlike conventional businesses, these ventures reinvest profits to expand their reach and amplify their impact, often partnering with governments, non-profits, and private organizations to drive change.

This study explores the multifaceted role of social entrepreneurship in bridging service gaps and reducing inequality. It examines successful case studies, highlights innovative models, and delves into the challenges and opportunities faced by social entrepreneurs. The paper also investigates how technology, particularly digital tools and platforms, is reshaping the landscape of social entrepreneurship, enabling ventures to scale their impact and reach global audiences.

By critically analyzing existing literature, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social entrepreneurship contributes to sustainable development and social equity. Furthermore, it sheds light on the policies and frameworks necessary to support these initiatives, underscoring their potential as catalysts for inclusive growth and systemic change.

Background of the study

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative approach to addressing systemic inequalities and filling critical service gaps in societies worldwide. Unlike traditional business models, which primarily focus on profit maximization, social entrepreneurship integrates innovative strategies to achieve social, environmental, and economic objectives. By leveraging entrepreneurial principles, social enterprises strive to tackle pressing challenges such as poverty, education inequality, healthcare accessibility, and environmental degradation, particularly in underserved and marginalized communities.

The increasing recognition of social entrepreneurship's potential stems from its ability to combine mission-driven goals with sustainable operational frameworks. While governments and non-profit organizations often face resource constraints or bureaucratic hurdles, social enterprises possess the agility and adaptability to respond swiftly to community needs. Furthermore, they frequently serve as catalysts for systemic change by fostering local empowerment, encouraging grassroots participation, and driving sustainable development.

In recent decades, the field of social entrepreneurship has gained momentum, fueled by advancements in technology, innovative financing mechanisms, and heightened global awareness of social and environmental issues. Numerous case studies have highlighted the impact of social enterprises in bridging service gaps, such as providing affordable housing, promoting renewable energy solutions, and enhancing access to quality education and healthcare. Despite their contributions, social entrepreneurs face challenges, including resource limitations, scalability concerns, and navigating complex regulatory environments.

This paper aims to explore the multifaceted role of social entrepreneurship in addressing inequality and improving service delivery. By examining theoretical frameworks, practical applications, and case studies, the study seeks to uncover best practices, identify challenges, and propose strategies to strengthen the impact and sustainability of social enterprises in diverse contexts. As inequality continues to widen and service gaps persist, understanding and supporting the potential of social entrepreneurship is crucial for fostering equitable and inclusive development globally.

Justification

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative force in addressing the pressing social and economic inequalities that persist across the globe. Unlike traditional businesses that primarily focus on profit maximization, social enterprises prioritize creating social value by tackling systemic challenges such as poverty, lack of access to education, healthcare, and environmental degradation. This review paper is essential for understanding how social entrepreneurship fills service gaps left by governments and conventional businesses while promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to highlight the innovative approaches adopted by social entrepreneurs to address critical societal issues. By reviewing existing literature, this paper aims to uncover patterns, success factors, and challenges faced by these ventures. Such insights can guide policymakers, investors, and stakeholders in fostering ecosystems that support social entrepreneurship. Moreover, the study provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the impact of these initiatives on marginalized

communities and the broader economy.

The research is timely and relevant given the growing focus on sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the need for scalable solutions to global inequalities. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this paper contributes to the academic discourse on social entrepreneurship while offering actionable insights for real-world applications. Ultimately, this study underscores the pivotal role of social enterprises in creating equitable and inclusive societies, making it a valuable addition to the field of development studies and entrepreneurship research.

Objectives of the Study

- 1. To examine the evolution and fundamental principles of social entrepreneurship, highlighting its role in addressing social and economic challenges.
- 2. To investigate how social entrepreneurs identify and address unmet needs in underserved communities, focusing on innovative approaches and sustainable solutions.
- 3. To assess the effectiveness of social enterprises in promoting equitable access to resources, opportunities, and services across diverse demographics.
- 4. To evaluate successful case studies to uncover strategies that contribute to the scalability and sustainability of social entrepreneurial ventures.
- 5. To analyze the barriers, such as financial, operational, and regulatory challenges, that social entrepreneurs encounter in their efforts to create social impact.

2. Literature Review

Defining Social Entrepreneurship:

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical approach to addressing social challenges, particularly in underserved and marginalized communities. According to Dees (1998), social entrepreneurship is characterized by the pursuit of social objectives through innovative practices and business models, which differentiate it from traditional entrepreneurship focused solely on financial profit. The dual focus on social impact and sustainability positions social entrepreneurship as a unique mechanism for addressing inequality. Similarly, Zahra et al. (2009) highlight that social entrepreneurs are change agents who identify and exploit opportunities to address systemic social issues, often operating where traditional institutions have failed.

Bridging Service Gaps:

Service gaps often arise due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of government resources, or systemic inefficiencies in both developing and developed economies (Yunus, 2007). Social enterprises play a pivotal role in bridging these gaps by creating innovative solutions that are both scalable and sustainable. For example, studies by Santos (2012) emphasize how social ventures leverage local resources and community engagement to deliver essential services such as healthcare, education, and sanitation. Furthermore, Bhatt and Altinay (2013) argue that social enterprises often operate in "institutional voids," providing critical services where

market mechanisms and public policy interventions are ineffective.

Addressing Inequality:

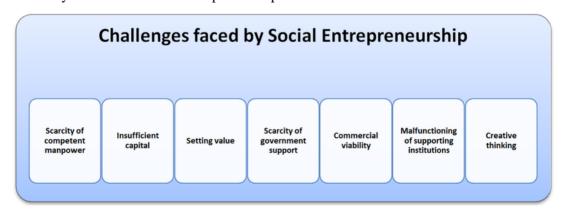
Social entrepreneurship is inherently linked to reducing inequality by targeting underserved populations and empowering marginalized groups. As highlighted by Mair and Martí (2006), social enterprises focus on creating inclusive economic opportunities, particularly for women, minorities, and the economically disadvantaged. By integrating marginalized populations into the value chain, these enterprises promote equity and contribute to long-term social and economic development. Moreover, the work of Seelos and Mair (2005) demonstrates how social entrepreneurship fosters grassroots development by enabling access to resources and creating pathways for upward mobility.

The Role of Innovation:

Innovation is a cornerstone of social entrepreneurship, enabling the development of transformative solutions to persistent social problems. Martin and Osberg (2007) propose that successful social entrepreneurs combine innovative problem-solving with a deep understanding of societal challenges, resulting in systemic change. For instance, digital technologies and platforms have allowed social enterprises to scale their operations and extend their reach, as documented by Kickul and Lyons (2012). The integration of technology in social entrepreneurship has particularly amplified its impact in areas such as financial inclusion, education, and healthcare delivery.

Challenges in Social Entrepreneurship:

Despite its potential, social entrepreneurship faces significant challenges, including funding constraints, scalability issues, and limited institutional support. According to Austin et al. (2006), balancing the dual objectives of financial sustainability and social impact often creates operational complexities for social enterprises. Moreover, Pache and Santos (2013) identify the challenge of maintaining legitimacy across diverse stakeholder groups, which can hinder the ability to attract resources and partnerships.



Source: researchgate.net

Policy and Ecosystem Support:

Effective policy frameworks and supportive ecosystems are critical for fostering social *Nanotechnology Perceptions* Vol. 20 No. S15 (2024)

entrepreneurship. Governments and international organizations play a crucial role in providing financial incentives, capacity-building programs, and regulatory environments conducive to social innovation (Nicholls, 2010). Moreover, collaborative networks involving private, public, and non-profit sectors enhance the scalability and sustainability of social enterprises (Dacin et al., 2010).

Measuring Social Impact:

An essential aspect of social entrepreneurship is the ability to measure and demonstrate social impact. Researchers such as Ebrahim and Rangan (2014) emphasize the importance of developing robust metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of social enterprises. These metrics not only help in assessing impact but also play a crucial role in attracting funding and fostering stakeholder trust

3. Material and Methodology

This research paper is based on an extensive analysis of secondary data sources, including academic journals, books, reports, case studies, and online resources. The methodology employed ensures a comprehensive, unbiased, and systematic approach to examining the role of social entrepreneurship in addressing service gaps and inequality.

Research Design:

The study follows a qualitative research design, utilizing a review-based approach to synthesize existing knowledge on social entrepreneurship. The focus is on understanding key themes, challenges, strategies, and the measurable impact of social entrepreneurship initiatives across various sectors and geographical contexts.

Data Collection:

Data for this study was collected from the following sources:

- 1. Peer-Reviewed Journals: Articles were sourced from reputable academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.
- 2. Books and Reports: Relevant literature, including books on social entrepreneurship and reports from international organizations like the United Nations, World Bank, and Ashoka, were analyzed.
- 3. Case Studies: Documented examples of successful social entrepreneurship ventures addressing service gaps and inequality were incorporated to provide practical insights.
- 4. Web Resources: Reliable online platforms and government publications were reviewed to capture the latest trends and statistics.

The timeframe for literature inclusion spans from the early 2000s to 2024, ensuring both historical and contemporary perspectives are covered.

Selection Criteria:

The inclusion of materials was guided by the following criteria:

- 1. Relevance: Sources addressing social entrepreneurship, service gaps, and inequality were prioritized.
- 2. Credibility: Only peer-reviewed and verified materials were included to maintain the study's rigor.
- 3. Comprehensiveness: Preference was given to studies that provided in-depth analysis, frameworks, or models.

Data Analysis:

The collected data was systematically categorized and analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes, such as the operational models of social entrepreneurship, strategies for addressing inequality, and measurable outcomes, were identified and synthesized. Comparative analysis was conducted to highlight variations in approaches across different regions and sectors.

Ethical Considerations:

As this research relied solely on secondary data, ethical approval was not required. However, due care was taken to properly cite all sources, ensuring adherence to academic integrity and copyright laws.

This structured methodology ensured a robust and insightful review, contributing valuable perspectives to the discourse on social entrepreneurship as a mechanism for social change.

4. Results and Discussion

Results:

The paper highlights the transformative role of social entrepreneurship in addressing service gaps and combating inequality across diverse socioeconomic contexts. Social enterprises, by their very nature, blend business principles with social objectives, filling voids that traditional institutions often overlook. Key findings from the literature reveal:

- 1. Service Delivery in Underserved Areas: Social entrepreneurs are instrumental in providing essential services—such as healthcare, education, and clean energy—in regions where access is limited. Innovative business models like microfinance, pay-as-you-go solar systems, and mobile health clinics have proven effective in reaching marginalized populations.
- 2. Empowering Marginalized Communities: Many social enterprises prioritize local capacity-building by creating employment opportunities, fostering skills development, and supporting local entrepreneurship. For instance, initiatives in rural areas often engage women and youth, empowering them both socially and economically.
- 3. Sustainability of Social Impact: Unlike traditional non-profits, social enterprises aim to sustain their impact through self-generating revenues. The reviewed studies show that financial sustainability enhances their scalability, ensuring long-term benefits for the communities they serve.
- 4. Collaborative Governance Models: Partnerships with government agencies, private corporations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) amplify the impact of social

entrepreneurship. Collaborative frameworks enable access to funding, resources, and policy support, fostering systemic change.

5. Technology as an Enabler: The integration of technology, including digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and blockchain, has significantly enhanced the efficiency and reach of social entrepreneurship initiatives. These technologies streamline service delivery, improve transparency, and allow scalability.

Addressing Inequality:

The review underscores the pivotal role of social entrepreneurship in reducing inequalities by focusing on equity and inclusion. Key areas of impact include:

- Educational Access: Social enterprises working in education bridge gaps by delivering affordable, quality learning materials and introducing innovative teaching methodologies to underserved communities
- Gender Equality: Programs specifically tailored to empower women, such as microloans for female entrepreneurs, have demonstrated measurable improvements in economic participation and decision-making capabilities.
- Health Disparities: Social ventures addressing healthcare gaps focus on preventive care, affordable medicines, and rural outreach, narrowing the health equity divide.

Challenges and Limitations:

Despite its promise, social entrepreneurship faces significant challenges:

- Funding and Scalability: Many social enterprises struggle to secure consistent funding, which can hinder their scalability and sustainability.
- Regulatory Barriers: Inconsistent policies and a lack of clear legal frameworks often create obstacles for social enterprises to operate effectively.
- Measuring Impact: Standardized metrics for evaluating social impact remain a critical gap, limiting the ability to assess and compare outcomes across different initiatives.

Discussion:

The findings from this review affirm that social entrepreneurship is a critical mechanism for addressing structural inequalities and bridging service gaps. However, its success hinges on several factors: robust governance, access to funding, and supportive policy frameworks. Collaborative approaches involving public and private stakeholders are essential to amplify the impact of social entrepreneurship.

Moreover, leveraging technology can significantly expand the reach and efficiency of social enterprises. Digital platforms, for instance, can connect underserved populations to services and markets, while artificial intelligence can optimize resource allocation and monitor impact.

To address persistent challenges, policymakers and stakeholders should focus on developing conducive ecosystems for social enterprises. This includes simplifying regulatory processes, offering tax incentives, and facilitating access to capital. Additionally, the establishment of standardized metrics for impact assessment is essential to evaluate and enhance the

effectiveness of social entrepreneurship initiatives.

Social entrepreneurship represents a dynamic approach to tackling pressing social issues. By prioritizing innovation, inclusivity, and collaboration, social enterprises hold the potential to drive meaningful, lasting change and contribute to a more equitable world.

5. Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of social entrepreneurship in addressing service gaps and inequality, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent to the research:

- 1. Scope and Generalizability This study focuses on secondary data and literature from various regions and sectors. However, social entrepreneurship practices and their impact can vary significantly depending on socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, the findings may not be universally applicable to all settings.
- 2. Limited Primary Data The study relies on existing research and does not include primary data or fieldwork. This reliance on secondary sources may result in the omission of emerging trends or localized innovations in social entrepreneurship.
- 3. Variability in Definitions and Metrics The concept of social entrepreneurship lacks a universally accepted definition, leading to variability in how it is studied and implemented. Additionally, inconsistent metrics for assessing its impact may affect the comparability of results across studies.
- 4. Selection Bias in Literature The study may unintentionally include a bias in the selection of sources, prioritizing widely cited or accessible literature, which might overlook niche studies or unpublished works with relevant insights.
- 5. Temporal Constraints The dynamic nature of social entrepreneurship means that the data and examples analyzed might not fully capture the most recent developments or innovations in the field.
- 6. Focus on Positive Outcomes The study primarily highlights the benefits of social entrepreneurship in bridging service gaps and addressing inequality. As a result, challenges and potential negative consequences, such as unintended social or economic disruptions, may be underrepresented.
- 7. Interdisciplinary Complexity Social entrepreneurship intersects with various disciplines, including economics, sociology, and environmental studies. The complexity of these intersections might limit the depth of analysis in specific areas.
- 8. Geographical Imbalance The availability of literature is skewed toward developed or emerging economies, potentially underrepresenting the perspectives and experiences of social entrepreneurs in underdeveloped regions.

Addressing these limitations in future research through primary data collection, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a broader geographical focus could enhance the depth and applicability of findings in this field.

6. Future Scope

Social entrepreneurship holds immense potential to drive transformative social change by addressing service gaps and reducing inequality. As the field continues to evolve, several promising avenues for future exploration emerge:

- 1. Technological Integration in Social Ventures: The adoption of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and the Internet of Things (IoT) can enhance the scalability and efficiency of social enterprises. Research can explore how these technologies can be leveraged to create sustainable solutions for underserved communities.
- 2. Policy Frameworks and Government Collaboration: There is a need for research on the role of public policies in fostering a supportive ecosystem for social entrepreneurs. Collaborative models between governments, non-profits, and social enterprises could be examined to optimize resource allocation and impact.
- 3. Metrics for Measuring Social Impact: Developing standardized and universally accepted frameworks for measuring the social and economic impact of social entrepreneurship can provide better insights for stakeholders. Future studies can focus on creating innovative metrics that consider both quantitative and qualitative aspects of social value creation.
- 4. Sustainability and Financial Models: Exploring innovative financial models, such as social impact bonds and blended finance, can provide insights into long-term sustainability for social ventures. Further research can also investigate the balance between profitability and social mission in these enterprises.
- 5. Cross-Cultural and Global Perspectives: Social entrepreneurship can be studied in diverse cultural and geographic contexts to understand its adaptability and effectiveness. Comparative studies on how social enterprises address inequality in different regions can provide valuable insights for global replication.
- 6. Empowering Marginalized Groups: Research can focus on how social enterprises can more effectively empower marginalized communities, including women, indigenous populations, and persons with disabilities, to achieve equitable socio-economic development.
- 7. Education and Capacity Building: Future research could emphasize the role of education and skill development in nurturing the next generation of social entrepreneurs. Investigating the effectiveness of academic programs and training initiatives in fostering entrepreneurial mindsets can yield actionable recommendations.
- 8. Leveraging Social Media and Digital Platforms: The role of digital platforms in amplifying the reach and engagement of social ventures offers a fertile ground for research. Studies could explore how social media strategies can be optimized to enhance awareness, fundraising, and collaboration.

By addressing these emerging areas, the field of social entrepreneurship can further solidify its role in creating a more inclusive and equitable world. Future research efforts should aim to not only refine theoretical frameworks but also provide actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers.

7. Conclusion

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful tool for addressing critical service gaps and reducing inequality across societies. By integrating innovative business models with a mission-driven approach, social enterprises create sustainable solutions to pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. This paper highlights the transformative role of social entrepreneurship in fostering inclusivity, promoting equitable access to resources, and driving systemic change.

The findings suggest that social entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in mobilizing communities, leveraging technology, and aligning efforts with policy frameworks to achieve long-term impact. However, the journey is not without obstacles, as issues such as funding limitations, regulatory hurdles, and scalability challenges persist. Despite these barriers, the adaptability and resilience of social enterprises position them as critical agents of change in the quest for a more equitable world.

Moving forward, greater collaboration among governments, private sectors, and social enterprises is essential to amplify their impact. By fostering supportive ecosystems, enhancing capacity-building initiatives, and embracing innovative financial models, stakeholders can empower social entrepreneurs to create enduring solutions that bridge service gaps and combat inequality. In this way, social entrepreneurship not only addresses immediate needs but also lays the foundation for sustainable development and inclusive growth.

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