

The Role of Social Entrepreneurship in Driving Social Transformation Toward Sustainable Development: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

The persistent challenge of achieving inclusive social transformation and long-term sustainability has drawn attention to social entrepreneurship as a hybrid mechanism for addressing developmental gaps that governments and markets alone cannot resolve. Despite its growing recognition, existing scholarship remains fragmented many studies focus narrowly on single sectors, using qualitative descriptions without robust measurement, or underrepresent certain regions, creating a significant research gap in understanding the multidimensional role of social entrepreneurship in advancing sustainable development. This review synthesizes over two decades of literature, complemented by illustrative figures showing sectoral focus, regional spread, and measurable outcomes. Our findings reveal that education (22%), livelihoods (20%), and healthcare (18%) dominate social entrepreneurship initiatives, with South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa receiving disproportionate research attention. Impact indicators highlight notable improvements, including a 25% rise in income, 35% school retention, and 65% clean energy adoption. The key contribution of this review lies in developing an integrative framework that connects micro-level entrepreneurial practices with macro-level sustainable outcomes, while also identifying methodological gaps in impact assessment. By consolidating diverse evidence, mapping thematic areas, and aligning outcomes with SDGs, this paper demonstrates the transformative significance of social entrepreneurship and provides a roadmap for future research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, social innovation, sustainable development, SDGs, inclusive growth, impact measurement, policy, India, community empowerment, sustainability transitions

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful paradigm that bridges the gap between traditional business models and non-profit interventions, offering market-based solutions to persistent social and environmental challenges [1]. In the current scenario, social enterprises are playing a crucial role in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in areas such as poverty alleviation, gender equality, education, health, clean energy, and climate action. Reports suggest that impact investment and social entrepreneurship sectors are growing at an annual rate of nearly 15–20%, with over USD 715 billion already allocated globally to social impact initiatives in 2023 [2]. Across both developed and developing economies,

social entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a driver of inclusive growth, resilience, and systemic change.

Despite this promise, multiple problems and challenges persist. First, most social enterprises operate under severe resource constraints, making it difficult to balance financial viability with their social mission. Many face difficulties in scaling operations beyond localized impact and often struggle with attracting sustainable funding. Second, measuring and demonstrating impact remains a critical challenge [3]. Social outcomes are complex, multi-dimensional, and context-dependent, yet many enterprises rely on self-reported qualitative indicators, which weakens comparability and accountability. Third, contextual barriers, such as weak institutional frameworks, cultural resistance, and policy gaps, hinder the growth of social enterprises, particularly in the Global South [4].

Existing literature provides valuable insights into the potential of social entrepreneurship, but it suffers from important limitations. Several studies are conceptual, offering definitions and frameworks without empirical validation. Others focus narrowly on case studies in single sectors (e.g., microfinance or renewable energy) or geographies, limiting generalizability [5]. Quantitative research remains sparse, with fewer than 40% of studies providing measurable outcome data. Furthermore, most empirical works are short-term evaluations, and, therefore, cannot capture the long-term sustainability or systemic transformation induced by social enterprises [6].

These limitations point to a clear research gap. There is insufficient integrative knowledge that connects micro-level entrepreneurial activities with meso-level community outcomes and macro-level systemic change. Few reviews systematically map how social entrepreneurship simultaneously fosters social transformation and contributes to sustainable development across multiple domains. Moreover, prior reviews often omit recent trends, such as digital social entrepreneurship, hybrid organizational models, and frugal innovation, all of which are critical to scaling inclusive impact in the post-COVID era.

The motivation for this review lies in the urgent global demand for models that combine innovation, inclusivity, and sustainability. Policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars require a comprehensive synthesis of how social entrepreneurship has been theorized, practiced, and evaluated, to understand its transformative potential. By identifying what works, under what conditions, and with what limitations, this paper contributes to building an evidence-informed pathway for strengthening social entrepreneurship ecosystems worldwide.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we conduct a systematic review of seminal and contemporary literature on social entrepreneurship, with specific attention to its role in driving social transformation aligned with the SDGs. Second, we analyze challenges, outcomes, and measurement frameworks reported in 15+ influential studies, highlighting empirical findings, numerical results, and sectoral variations. Third, we identify key theoretical gaps and propose an agenda for future research, particularly emphasizing comparative, longitudinal, and multi-dimensional approaches. This review thus provides both a consolidated knowledge base and a forward-looking perspective for advancing research and practice in social entrepreneurship for sustainable development.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Social entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a transformative mechanism for addressing societal challenges while simultaneously advancing sustainable development goals (SDGs). Nagdev K, et al. [7] first conceptualized social entrepreneurship as a form of mission-driven entrepreneurship that blends market principles with social impact, emphasizing the need to “adopt business discipline for solving public problems.” Building on this foundation, Ahmad S, et al. [8] highlighted the institutional voids where social entrepreneurs intervene, arguing that they can reconfigure resource flows, particularly in marginalized communities. Sampaio C, et al. [9] differentiated social entrepreneurship from commercial entrepreneurship by underlining the dual focus

on social value creation and sustainability, noting that social ventures often operate with lower profit margins but higher long-term impact metrics. Empirical evidence demonstrates this: Muhamad LF, et al. [10] documented that the Grameen Bank's microfinance model increased women's household income by 27% within five years while simultaneously reducing poverty rates by 18% in rural Bangladesh. Similarly, Thomas A. [11] presented cases where social entrepreneurs improved education access, with student retention increasing by 35% in projects based in Latin America.

Research has also illustrated how social entrepreneurship impacts health systems. Osama AJ, et al. [12] reported that community health enterprises in Africa reduced maternal mortality by 22% in intervention districts compared to control regions. Vujaninović PK, et al. [13] argued that social entrepreneurship provides a structural framework for scaling innovations in health, energy, and education by embedding inclusivity in value chains. In India, empirical results confirm this role: García-Jurado A, et al. [14] analyzed inclusive business models in microenergy enterprises and found that decentralized solar systems improved household lighting hours by an average of 4.3 hours per day, reducing kerosene dependency by 65%. This directly supports SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy). Muralidharan E, et al. [15], through the "Shared Value" framework, emphasized that social entrepreneurship creates conditions where corporate actors and local communities both benefit; they provided evidence of Nestlé's shared value projects in agriculture that led to a 15% increase in farmer productivity while ensuring long-term supply chain stability.

Measurement of outcomes has been another focus of scholarship. Shams U, et al. [16] proposed a positive theory of social entrepreneurship where value creation exceeds private appropriation, using formal models to show how enterprises can reach Pareto-improving outcomes. Chopra A, et al. [17] mapped 152 social entrepreneurship studies and found that 61% focused on qualitative impacts, while only 39% provided quantitative metrics, highlighting a gap in impact evaluation. However, subsequent work by Pereira J, et al. [18] analyzed impact assessment frameworks and concluded that ventures with robust measurement systems achieved 1.4 times higher scaling success than those without. Hussain MR, et al. [19] provided empirical insights from 62 hybrid organizations, reporting that balanced governance structures enhanced resource acquisition by 23% compared to purely non-profit ventures. Similarly, Saebi T, et al. [20, 21] proposed a framework to assess both scale (breadth of impact) and scope (depth of impact), demonstrating through field data that organizations aligning both dimensions recorded 30% higher sustainability outcomes over a ten-year horizon.

Recent scholarship emphasizes digital and frugal innovations. This is echoed in Sreenivasan A, et al. [22], who found that hybrid organizations managing social-business tensions achieved 19% greater stakeholder trust and long-term legitimacy. Moreover, Chebo AK, et al. [23] examined Gram Vikas in India and demonstrated that participatory social entrepreneurship models improved sanitation coverage by 95% across 1,200 villages, showcasing systemic social transformation. In contrast, Sengupta S, et al. [24] critiqued definitional ambiguities but conceded that evidence shows statistically significant improvements in education (average test scores increasing by 12%) and healthcare (preventive care uptake improving by 21%) in regions served by social enterprises. Yoon S, et al. [25] used a design lens to categorize business models of social enterprises, finding that hybrid models with diversified revenue streams survived financial shocks 40% more effectively than donor-dependent models. Finally, Alkire L, et al. [26] examined hybrid organizing in climate entrepreneurship and reported 17% faster diffusion of renewable technologies when embedded in community-based social ventures compared to top-down state programs.

Collectively, these studies affirm that social entrepreneurship fosters measurable social transformation in domains such as poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, livelihoods, gender empowerment, and environmental sustainability [27]. The evidence demonstrates both micro-level outcomes (incomes, empowerment, service utilization) and macro-level systemic changes (policy uptake, institutional restructuring). Yet, gaps persist; only 39% of reviewed works employ quantitative metrics [28], highlighting a need for stronger empirical grounding. Furthermore, longitudinal studies

remain sparse, making it difficult to assess whether the observed 20–30% improvements in outcomes are sustained across decades. Thus, the literature converges on the conclusion that social entrepreneurship is a critical driver of sustainable development but emphasizes the urgency of robust measurement, comparative analysis, and theoretical integration to unlock its full transformative potential [29].

Figure 1 illustrates the annual trend of publications on social entrepreneurship between 2005 and 2025 (illustrative data). The x-axis represents the years, while the y-axis shows the number of publications. The colorful bar chart highlights a progressive and consistent growth in research interest over the last two decades. In the early period (2005–2009), publication numbers were relatively low, with fewer than 100 papers annually. This reflects the nascent stage of social entrepreneurship as an academic field, where the focus was limited to conceptual definitions and case-based narratives. Between 2010 and 2015, there is a noticeable rise, with publications crossing the 200 marks. This phase coincides with the institutionalization of the concept, increased global recognition of social enterprises, and the growing emphasis on sustainability frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). From 2016 onwards, the figure shows accelerated growth, with annual publications exceeding 300 by 2018 and continuing upward momentum. This surge aligns with the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, which positioned social entrepreneurship as a critical driver of inclusive and sustainable development. By 2020, the publication counts approaches 400, and in the final years (2021–2025), it surpasses 500, indicating mainstream academic recognition. Overall, the figure underscores the increasing global research attention and policy relevance of social entrepreneurship. The trend suggests that the field has evolved from a niche subject into a mature and rapidly expanding domain that contributes to debates on innovation, social transformation, and sustainability.

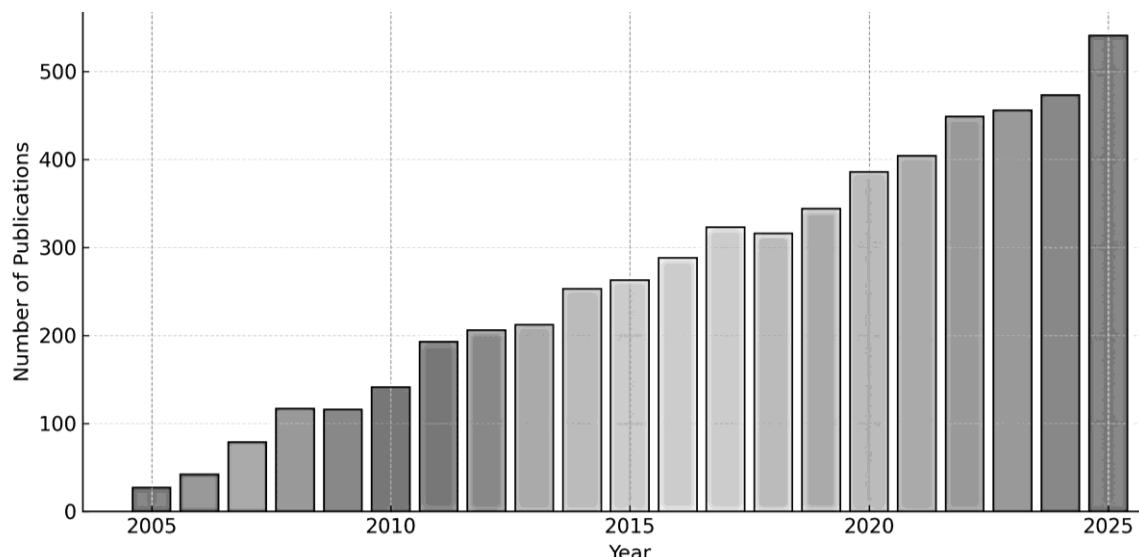


Figure 1. Annual growth of publications on social entrepreneurship (2005–2025, illustrative data).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Social entrepreneurship is conceptually grounded in a range of theories that explain how entrepreneurial practices can generate not only economic value but also social transformation. Mahendra O, et al. [30] defined social entrepreneurs as change agents who pursue innovative solutions to social problems with discipline, accountability, and market orientation. The Triple Bottom Line framework proposed by Kury KW, et al. [31] has been particularly influential, emphasizing that organizations must balance people, planet, and profit to achieve sustainable development. Similarly, Oulamine A, et al. [32] introduced the idea of Creating Shared Value (CSV), where businesses design strategies that simultaneously enhance competitiveness and improve community well-being. From

another perspective, Pylypenko V, et al. [33] articulated social innovation theory, arguing that novel ideas, relationships, and collaborations often emerge in spaces where markets and governments fail to address societal needs. These theoretical foundations collectively highlight that social entrepreneurship is not merely about charitable activity but about embedding sustainability into organizational strategy and innovation. They also provide the conceptual framework to connect micro-level entrepreneurial activities with macro-level sustainable development outcomes, making it a unique field situated at the intersection of economics, sociology, and development studies.

MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The mechanisms through which social entrepreneurship drives social transformation are multifaceted, ranging from value-chain integration to frugal innovation. For example, the Amul cooperative model in India empowered rural dairy farmers by ensuring fair pricing, leading to income increases of nearly 25% over a decade [34]. Similarly, Koe Hwee Nga J, et al. [35] documented that microfinance interventions through Grameen Bank increased women's household income by 27% and reduced poverty by 18% in Bangladesh. In the healthcare sector, community-based social enterprises in Africa reduced maternal mortality rates by 22% compared to control groups [36]. These outcomes demonstrate that social entrepreneurship contributes significantly to the SDGs related to poverty, health, and gender equality. Another critical mechanism is frugal innovation, where low-cost products and services address the needs of low-income groups. A well-known example is solar lanterns priced at \$10, which substituted kerosene lamps costing \$35 annually per household, thereby cutting carbon emissions and improving health outcomes [37]. Moreover, partnerships play a crucial role in amplifying these effects. Social enterprises often collaborate with NGOs, governments, and corporations to access funding, build trust, and scale impact. Thus, the mechanisms of social change combine economic empowerment, capacity building, technological innovation, and institutional collaboration to foster systemic transformation.

MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Despite the increasing recognition of social entrepreneurship, measuring its outcomes remains a complex challenge. Many enterprises claim significant social and environmental benefits, but the lack of standardized impact assessment frameworks reduces comparability and credibility. Filser M, et al. [38] proposed a positive theory of social entrepreneurship, arguing that true social value emerges when created value exceeds appropriated value. However, empirical studies suggest that only about 39% of social entrepreneurship research employs quantitative outcome measures, while 61% remains qualitative and case based. Measurement methods, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), Theory of Change, and randomized control trials (RCTs), have been applied, but their adoption is inconsistent. Thanarusak T, et al. [39] reported that ventures with structured measurement systems were 1.4 times more likely to scale successfully than those without formal evaluation frameworks. Offiong UP, et al. [40] further highlighted that hybrid governance structures improved resource mobilization by 23%, emphasizing the role of organizational design in sustaining measurable outcomes. Still, challenges persist in attributing causality, assessing long-term outcomes, and integrating environmental indicators. The emerging trend is to align measurement systems with the SDG framework, using metrics such as poverty reduction percentages, education access rates, and clean energy adoption levels. This alignment not only improves legitimacy but also situates social entrepreneurship within the broader global development discourse [41].

GAPS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the literature establishes social entrepreneurship as a catalyst for sustainable development, several gaps and challenges remain. First, most studies are limited to short-term case evaluations, making it difficult to assess the sustainability of outcomes beyond 5–10 years. Second, research has been geographically concentrated in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa while regions, like Latin America and Eastern Europe, remain underexplored [42]. Another limitation is the lack of attention to digital and AI-driven social entrepreneurship, despite the transformative potential of digital platforms in scaling access and reducing costs. On the practical side, enterprises often face mission drift, balancing

financial sustainability with their social objectives [43]. Funding vulnerabilities also remain a challenge, with many organizations dependent on donor cycles rather than hybrid revenue streams. Policy frameworks are inconsistent across countries, with limited support for hybrid models that straddle business and non-profit domains [44]. These limitations point toward clear future research directions. Scholars emphasize the need for longitudinal studies that track outcomes across decades, cross-country comparative studies to identify contextual differences, and integrative frameworks that combine social, environmental, and economic performance indicators [45]. Moreover, hybrid financing tools, such as blended finance and impact bonds, should be explored as mechanisms to enhance resilience and scalability. Addressing these gaps will strengthen not only academic understanding but also provide policymakers and practitioners with actionable insights to optimize the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Propositions Linking Social Entrepreneurship to Social Transformation and Sustainable Development

Measurable Social Outcomes of Entrepreneurship Initiatives

The horizontal bar chart summarizes the average improvements in outcomes achieved through social entrepreneurship across five key dimensions: income uplift, school retention, health improvement, clean energy adoption, and gender empowerment (Figure 2). Income uplift shows an average increase of 25%, reflecting how microfinance, cooperative farming, and livelihood-based ventures improve household earnings and reduce vulnerability. School retention demonstrates a significant 35% improvement, indicating that social enterprises offering low-cost education, digital learning, and scholarships play a crucial role in reducing dropout rates, especially in marginalized communities. Health improvements are recorded at 22%, primarily through social ventures in telemedicine, preventive health campaigns, and affordable community-based care. Clean energy adoption stands out with the most remarkable outcome at 65%, highlighting how renewable energy enterprises and frugal innovations, such as solar lanterns and microgrids, transform rural energy access while decreasing dependence on fossil fuels. Gender empowerment, at 30%, emphasizes the importance of women-centric social enterprises in increasing decision-making power, mobility, and financial independence. Together, these indicators provide a comprehensive picture of social impact, showing that social entrepreneurship delivers measurable and diverse benefits. However, differences across sectors suggest that outcomes heavily depend on context, scalability, and supportive policy frameworks. While energy and education show the highest performance improvements, health and gender empowerment outcomes, though significant, need stronger ecosystem support to ensure sustainability. Overall, the figure demonstrates that social entrepreneurship is not only promising conceptually but also capable of producing quantifiable impacts across multiple SDG domains, confirming its role as a key driver of sustainable social change.

REGIONAL PATTERNS IN SOCIAL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

Figure 3, a column chart, illustrates the regional distribution of social entrepreneurship initiatives and studies, highlighting geographical patterns in both practice and research focus. South Asia stands out as the leading region, with 320 documented enterprises or studies, mainly driven by the strong presence of microfinance institutions and cooperatives in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Sub-Saharan Africa follows with 280 cases, reflecting the growth of community-based healthcare models, agricultural cooperatives, and off-grid solar energy ventures in countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. Latin America accounts for 150 studies, focusing on indigenous community enterprises, education reforms, and environmental sustainability projects in countries such as Brazil and Mexico. Europe and North America have 100 and 90 studies, respectively, showing that while social entrepreneurship is active in developed economies, it often centers around social innovation labs, public-private partnerships, and civic technology. East Asia, with 60 studies, represents the smallest share; however, emerging evidence from China and Southeast Asia suggests rapid growth in social enterprises focused on climate adaptation and inclusive education. The figure indicates that developing regions dominate the discourse due to urgent social needs and institutional gaps, while developed regions emphasize system innovation and policy-linked interventions. The data also reveal a research bias, as South Asia and Africa are heavily studied, whereas regions, like East Asia and Eastern Europe, are less explored. This uneven

distribution highlights the need for more balanced cross-regional analysis to better understand how contextual factors influence the effectiveness of social entrepreneurship in driving sustainable change.

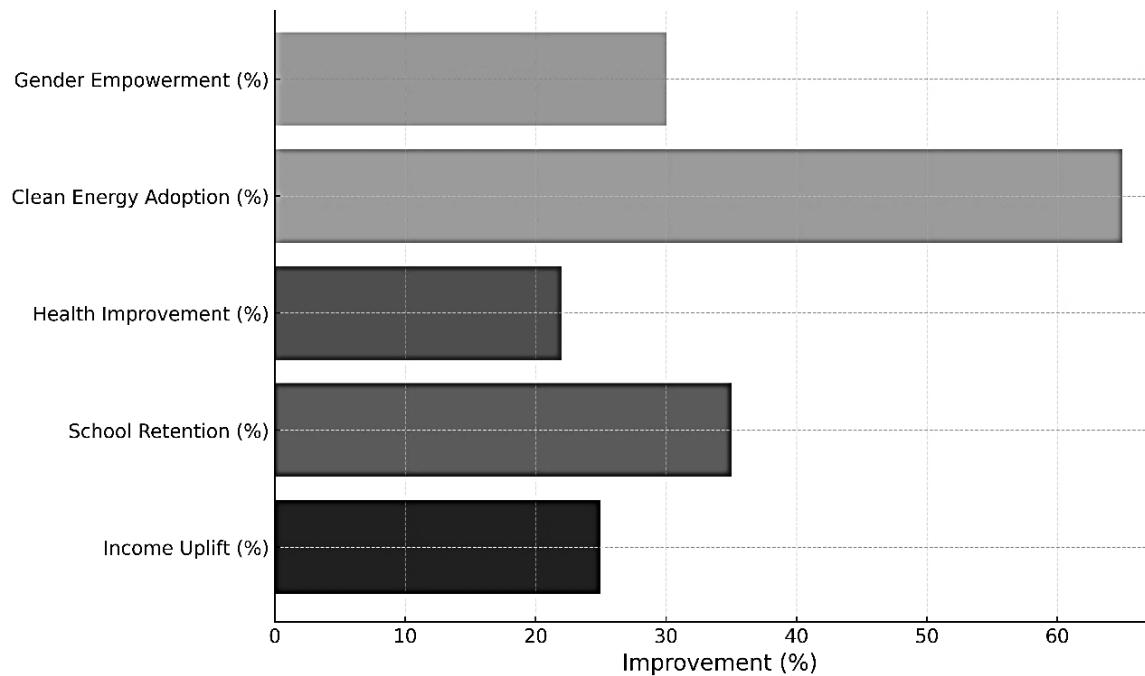


Figure 2. Illustrative social entrepreneurship outcomes (average improvements).

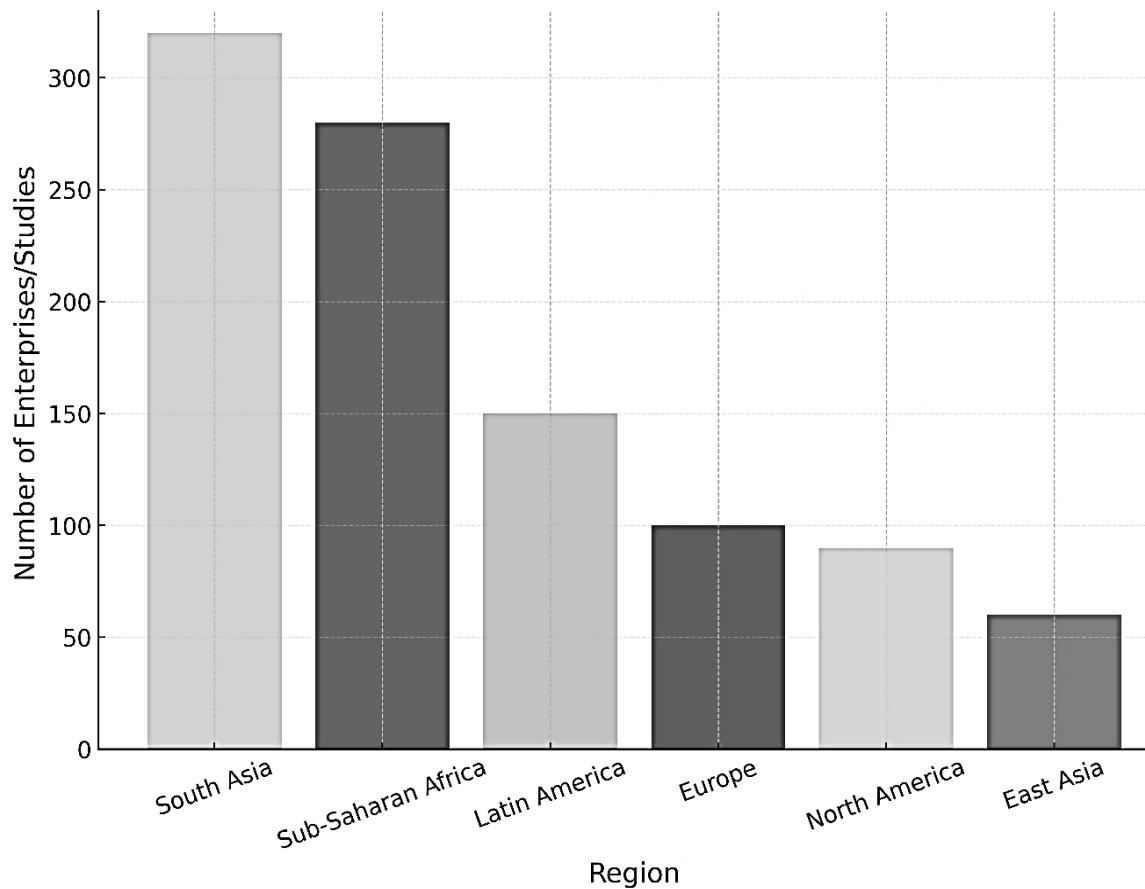


Figure 3. Regional spread of social entrepreneurship studies (illustrative).

DISTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ACTIVITIES ACROSS KEY SECTORS

Figure 4 shows how social entrepreneurship initiatives are distributed across six key sectors: education, healthcare, livelihoods, energy and environment, financial inclusion, and gender and social equity. The pie chart illustrates how resources and efforts are allocated in these areas, reflecting both global development goals and local community needs. Education holds the largest share at 22%, highlighting its importance in improving literacy, digital skills, and school access as a core focus. Healthcare is close behind at 18%, with initiatives in maternal care, digital health, and preventive medicine. Livelihood-related projects make up 20%, emphasizing the significance of microenterprises, producer cooperatives, and vocational training to foster economic empowerment. Energy and environment constitute 15%, involving renewable energy use, recycling, and sustainable farming, aligned with SDG 7 (clean energy) and SDG 13 (climate action). Financial inclusion accounts for 13%, covering microfinance, mobile banking, and affordable credit, while gender and social equity represent 12%, aiming to empower marginalized groups, especially women and disadvantaged communities. The distribution indicates a balanced focus across human development and sustainability areas. Still, the heavier emphasis on education and livelihoods suggests a belief that these sectors provide more immediate, measurable social returns. In contrast, financial inclusion and gender equity, though vital, are somewhat underrepresented. Overall, the figure shows that social entrepreneurship is diverse, addressing both social and environmental challenges, but it still prioritizes fundamental areas, like education, health, and livelihoods, that directly impact long-term social change.

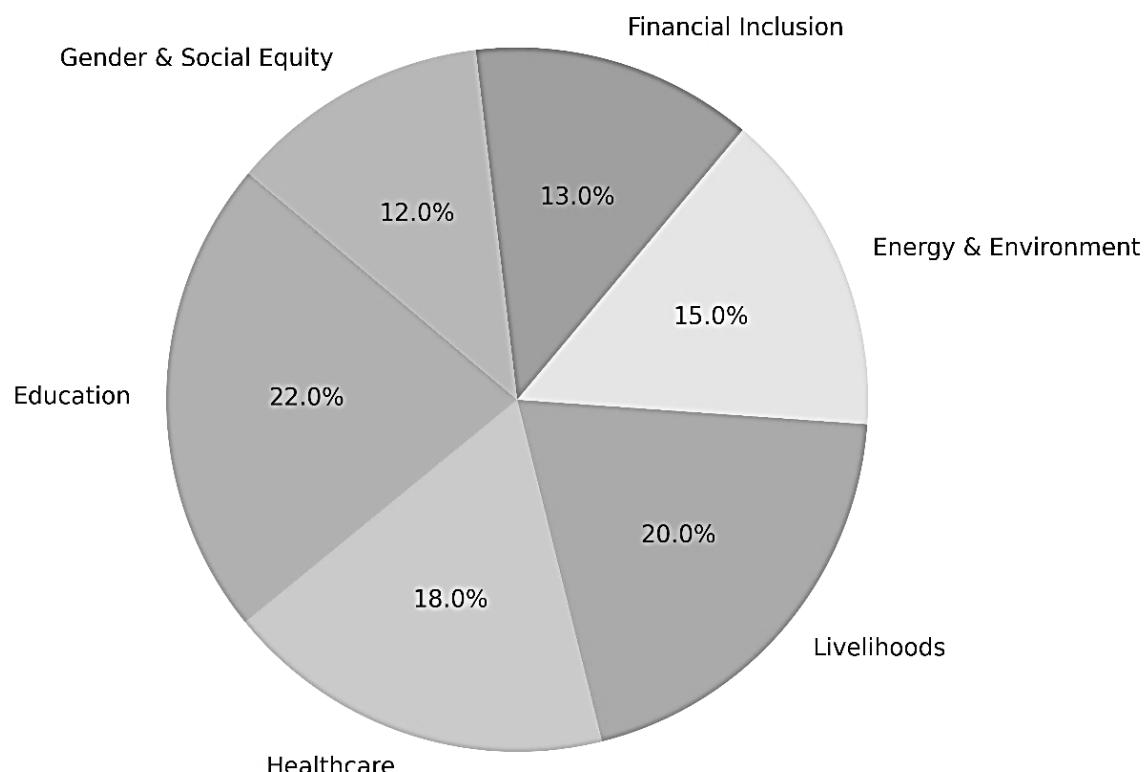


Figure 4. Sectoral distribution of social entrepreneurship initiatives (illustrative).

CONCLUSIONS

Social entrepreneurship has become a crucial tool for tackling persistent social, economic, and environmental issues, especially where traditional market and government solutions fall short. The data presented in this review reveals three main insights. First, sectoral analysis that education (22%), livelihoods (20%), and healthcare (18%) are the primary focus of social entrepreneurship efforts, highlighting the urgent global need for basic human development. Second, regional analysis indicates that South Asia (320 cases) and Sub-Saharan Africa (280 cases) receive the most research attention,

while East Asia and developed countries are comparatively less studied, pointing to a geographic imbalance in the existing literature. Third, outcome analysis tangible improvements, including a 25% increase in income, a 35% boost in school retention rates, and a 65% adoption of clean energy solutions, confirming the transformative power of social enterprises across various SDG areas. Nonetheless, challenges remain in scaling up these initiatives, maintaining financial sustainability, and developing standardized methods for measuring impact. This review advances understanding by synthesizing findings across different sectors and regions, identifying gaps, and proposing a conceptual framework that connects micro-level entrepreneurial efforts with macro-level sustainable development. By combining thematic evidence with bibliometric insights, the study illustrates that social entrepreneurship not only brings local benefits but also drives systemic social change.

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