

Rethinking the Boundaries and Definition of Social Entrepreneurship: A Critical Literature Review

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Abstract

With a passion for leaving no one behind, social entrepreneurs are driven to find solutions for societal problems that have not yet been addressed by traditional methods. Although potential benefits offered by social entrepreneurship are undeniable, the exact boundaries and definition of this emerging concept remain somewhat nebulous. Without an explicit understanding of what social entrepreneurship entails, it becomes susceptible to different interpretations and undermines its significance in economic and social development. Consequently, this paper aims to rigorously define social entrepreneurship through an extensive review of the literature. To this end, the library method has been used to search electronic academic databases and Internet sources alike. The results of our research revealed that social entrepreneurship can be defined as an entrepreneurial process that employs business techniques to bring innovative yet sustainable solutions for persistent social problems – ultimately leading to improved quality of life and empowering disadvantaged communities. This paper makes a significant contribution to covering the knowledge gap by distinguishing social entrepreneurship from various similar entities and activities.

Keyword: social entrepreneurship, for-profit entrepreneurship, definition, boundaries

1. Introduction

In contemporary times, society witnesses millions of people affected by poverty and extreme hunger while the top richest individuals possess an extensive segment of the global wealth. Education is still an unattainable dream for numerous children and issues such as pollution, violence, and inadequate medical care are threatening public well-being every single day. Given this circumstance, there exists the necessity for a new form of business to uphold and protect fundamental human rights – referred to as social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs aspire to promote social change whilst prioritizing economic sustainability as well. In fact, social entrepreneurs apply entrepreneurial mindset, principles, strategies, tools, and techniques to address society's complex problems with innovative solutions (Kickul et al., 2022). Despite numerous attempts to resolve the definitional debate surrounding social entrepreneurship, there is still no consensus among scholars. This lack of consensus hampers the formation of a distinct scholarly field and the development of a clear research agenda neatly separated from existing ones like traditional entrepreneurship (Collavo, 2018). This research makes a valuable contribution to the knowledge by addressing this gap and adding clarity around the definition of social entrepreneurship.

Scholars have approached the definition of for-profit or general entrepreneurship from different perspectives. From social, economic, and political points of view, it is regarded as a tool to reduce unemployment and generate wealth (Matlay, 2005). From a broad perspective, Joseph Alois Schumpeter stated that entrepreneurship takes place in one of the five following ways: introducing a novel good or service, presenting a new method of production, discovering an untapped market, utilizing a new raw material or source, and establishing a new organizational structure (Schumpeter and Croitor, 2012). Krueger's (2000) definition stresses that entrepreneurship is a mindset that focuses on seizing opportunities. Derdar (2022) combined the views of Krueger and Schumpeter to define entrepreneurship as the process of exploiting opportunities to provide new products/services, organization methods, market strategies, operations, and raw materials via alignment of efforts that did not exist previously.

The term 'entrepreneurship' encompasses several sub-themes such as family entrepreneurship, home entrepreneurship, techno-entrepreneurship, and social entrepreneurship. Out of these categories, the latter has gained considerable attention among academics and practitioners owing to its vital role in solving social problems effectively. The fundamental role of social entrepreneurship in tackling social issues may raise inquiries into why social entrepreneurship has only become known in the last few decades and what is the driving force behind the emergence of this field. Scholars have offered different perspectives on these questions which are explained in the following sections.

This paper is divided into the following categories. Section 2 explains the literature review by focusing on the concept of entrepreneurship and gradual transitions toward social entrepreneurship. Additionally, it defines what falls outside the scope of social entrepreneurship. In section 3, various definitions of social entrepreneurship are summarized

and synthesized to portray a single definition. Finally, the paper concludes by offering new directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emergence of Social Entrepreneurship

A popular explanation for the driving force behind the emergence of social entrepreneurship is grounded in the concept of “Market failure and government failure”. This term refers to a situation where both the government and the market have failed to furnish public goods for the underprivileged sector of society. The free market approach has not only failed to address social problems, but also gives rise to problems such as extreme hunger, health issues, air and water pollution, corruption, discrimination, and inequity (Nicholls, 2006; Yunus, 2008).

Government failure theory provides another explanation for the impetus behind the rise of social entrepreneurship. The theory posits that social entrepreneurs are born when government fails to satisfy the unmet needs of the society (McMullen, 2011) and address complex problems. Social entrepreneurs step in when the public sector efforts fall short. Dees (2007) stated that the government may not be able to cope with all social problems and be the sole provider of public service for the entire population. Therefore, social entrepreneurs could potentially fill this gap in the market (Bernardino et al., 2015) by proposing and taking into action innovative ideas for serving disadvantaged communities (Tukamushaba et al., 2011).

Another alternative view is that social entrepreneurs came into existence due to the failure of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address societal issues (Salamon et al., 2000). Charities and NGOs were established to assist the government in tackling social problems; however, they were also unable to accomplish their objectives. Charitable organizations intend to relieve pain, but without offering any permanent cure or lasting solution (Dees, 2012). This approach can create a cycle of dependency and hinder individuals from improving their situation.

After decades of inadequate response by government and NGOs, social entrepreneurship emerged as a promising alternative with a sustainable and market-based response to the current gaps. Scholars are of the view that social entrepreneurship holds great potential to solve social problems (Bikse, Rivza, and Riemere, 2015; Kachlami, 2016; Tran and Korflesch, 2016; Pathak and Muralidharan, 2017; Hashim et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this concept is still insufficiently comprehended and there exists numerous misconceptions pertaining to its essence.

2.2 Boundaries of Social Entrepreneurship

To contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding social entrepreneurship, it is worthwhile to commence with comprehending what social entrepreneurship does not entail. Taking this initial step allows us to differentiate between social entrepreneurship and similar activities with a social purpose. The failure to establish boundaries for social entrepreneurship would

leave the term so wide open for interpretation (Martin and Osberg, 2007). Entities that are frequently misunderstood and conflated with social entrepreneurship include general/commercial/for-profit entrepreneurship, charities/NGOs and philanthropic foundations, government and multilateral institutions, corporate social responsibility as well as social activism.

Social entrepreneurs can be distinguished from commercial entrepreneurs from two key perspectives: the focus on social value creation and driving societal transformation (Nicholls, 2006). While commercial entrepreneur aims at exploiting opportunities that maximize individual value (economic wealth) (Santos, 2012; Ratiu et al., 2014), the primary goal of the social entrepreneurs is to increase social value (Certo and Miller, 2008; Abu-Saifan, 2012). The integration of the term ‘social’ into entrepreneurship shifts the focus from profit-making toward creating social change (Dees, 2005). Social entrepreneurs are motivated to explore innovative ways to meet the societal needs that remain unfulfilled within the existing system. However, this does not mean that social entrepreneurs do not pursue wealth creation, instead they tend to increase social wealth that comprises both economic and social wealth gains (Zahra et al., 2009) with prioritizing uplifting society.

The other difference between these two entrepreneurs pertains to the ‘societal transformation’. Whereas commercial entrepreneurs aim to establish and sustain a viable business with a high growth rate, social entrepreneurs endeavor to address and remedy systematic issues pertaining to wicked problems. In essence, social entrepreneurship entails the responsibility to transform society and change systems that create and maintain wicked problems (Mair and Martí, 2006; Urban, 2008) by delivering innovative solutions (Ghalwash et al., 2016).

Charity, NGO, and any other philanthropic foundation are also often used synonymously with social entrepreneurship. An example of a traditional non-profit organization is ‘Books to Prisoners’ in the United States which addresses issues of prison recidivism through book donations. The aim of this entity is to promote education and literacy in the interest of making a smoother transition for prisoners when they are released back into society after release. The organization accepts monetary donations to cover operational expenses such as office rent fees, book packaging, and shipping costs.

These entities lack fundamental characteristics associated with social entrepreneurship such as the capacity to bring sustainable social change. Charity is not a viable solution for the world’s wicked problems due to various reasons. Primarily, charities and NGOs do not have an income model and hence rely on donations limiting their efforts according to resource dependency theory. Only if the government, ordinary people, and organizations offer financial support, they can continue helping disadvantaged people, but if they fail to raise money all the operations would cease automatically (Yunus, 2008). This scenario has been worsened since non-profits have faced serious problems as a result of increased costs, fewer donations, and heightened competition to obtain necessary resources.

NGOs differ from social entrepreneurs in that NGOs unintentionally keep the problem alive and cause the next generations to suffer from the same issues. They merely relieve suffering temporarily instead of providing sustainable and long-term solutions. In other words, charitable organizations care for people instead of empowering them (Dees, 2012). That is why initiatives undertaken by charities failed to alleviate existing problems and generate social impact to serve people at the bottom of the pyramid (Goyal et al., 2016). Hence, it can be concluded that while charities perform valuable activities, they lack the fundamental aspects of social entrepreneurship (Martin and Osberg, 2007), which is finding sustainable solutions to problems (Ratiu et al., 2014) rather than temporary fixes. It is important to remember that this is not meant to underestimate and undervalue the work of charities, but our point is to redraw old pictures and shift towards sustainable and systematic changes: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is another concept that is confused with social entrepreneurship. CSR involves acting beyond the firm’s legal responsibility to support social issues. Companies with social responsibility sacrifice some portion of the earned profit from commercial business for social interests (Bénabou and Tirole, 2010). TOMS is a relevant example of corporate social responsibility which is dedicated to serving disadvantaged children. For every pair of shoes purchased TOMS would give a pair to a child in need. However, Professor Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize Winner, believes that some companies use it merely to increase reputation and improve public image without making an actual contribution. From this point of view, although CSR can incentivize companies to enhance the quality of products, and raise environmental concerns, employee welfare, fair pricing, and trade, it remains inadequate to alleviate social problems on its own and cannot be considered as social entrepreneurship.

Another misconception is that to confuse social activists with social entrepreneurs. Social activists focus on influencing NGOs, government, consumers, and the general public to take action and reduce the negative consequences of their behavior. In other words, their key characteristic is to “influence” rather than take a direct action (Martin and Osberg, 2007). Examples of social activism activities include increasing public awareness and protecting human and animal rights by exerting pressure on government and corporations are (Santos, 2012). Surfrider Foundation, for instance, is a volunteer and activist-driven organization in America dedicated to promoting environmental stewardship through initiatives such as raising awareness about pollution, marine life protection, clean water, and coastal preservation. It is clear that social activism does not possess the main characteristics of social entrepreneurship which is uplifting the quality of life in society by providing innovative ideas for solving social problems through business techniques.

Another common confusion is regarding the government’s role in solving social problems. For a long time, the government was considered the sole hope of people as a problem solver (Dees, 2007) but indeed government’s primary responsibility is paving the road for the

economic system, protecting the public interest, and enforcing regulations (Santos, 2012). The role of government in the free market is analogous to traffic police on the road, who ensures traffic laws are imposed well. Additionally, there are some functions that only government can provide such as national safety, public education, and regulating the monetary and banking system (Yunus, 2008). Nevertheless, while some experts believe the government must tackle social problems, history and current situation prove the failure of the government which is best evident by unsolved problems. Despite the endeavors of governmental multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, these institutions failed to eliminate poverty and achieve defined social goals (Yunus, 2008).

Figure 1 illustrates the discussed differences between social entrepreneurship with other similar entities and activities. By knowing what social entrepreneurship does not entail, it would be easier to define this contested concept.



Figure 1. Distinguishing social entrepreneurship from similar entities

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Defining Social Entrepreneurship

Numerous definitions are proposed for social entrepreneurship, which is confusing at times.

The meaning and boundaries of the field still remained vague and underdeveloped (Zulfiqar et al., 2019). It is generally agreed upon that social entrepreneurship is a contested concept and a multilevel phenomenon (Saebi et al., 2018), leading to diverse definitions and approaches within this field (Akar and Doğan, 2018). In order to clearly define social entrepreneurship, Table 1 summarizes an exhaustive list of definitions.

Table 1. Definitions of social entrepreneurship

Author/ Year	Definition of social entrepreneurship
Alvord et al. (2004)	Creating innovative solutions to immediate social problems and mobilizing the
Mair & Martí (2006)	A process that catalyzes social change and/or addresses important social needs in a
Mair and Nobao (2006)	Innovative use of resource combinations to pursue opportunities aiming at the
Urban (2008)	Process that catalyzes social change, and varies according to socio-economic and
Zahra et al. (2009)	The activities and processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities
Bornstein and Davis	The process by which citizens build or transform institutions to advance solutions to
Tukamushaba et al.	Process of applying business-like, innovative approaches to social problems to make
Kirby and Ibrahim	Applying the expertise, talents, and resources of entrepreneurs to a variety of social
Abu-Saifan (2012)	A set of mission-driven and entrepreneurial behaviors to deliver social value.
Bosma et al. (2015)	Starting or leading any kind of activity, organization, or initiative that has a
Ghalwash et al. (2016)	A process by which social problems are solved by social entrepreneurs who are
Bergamini, Navarro,	Identifying a business opportunity based on solving a social problem through the
Weaver (2018)	An emerging form of business that aims to address social problems
Nsereko et al. (2018)	The activities and processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities
Zulfiqar et al. (2019)	Taking the initiative to solve major social issues and recommend new solutions to
Hashim et al. (2020)	Harness the power of market forces and business principles to solve social problems.
Almutairi and Tarif	Working in the form of social and economic objectives with an entrepreneurial
Rajkhan and Tarifi	Approaching a social problem with entrepreneurial spirit and business. Social

It appears that some scholars have a wide scope to define social entrepreneurship. For instance, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), defined social entrepreneurship as any activity with social, environmental, or community purpose (Bosma et al., 2015). This definition can include NGOs and any other entity that was discussed in the previous section, consequently leading to incomplete identification of social entrepreneurship. Other scholars have attempted to narrow down the scope and limit the boundaries by specifying particular characteristics to differentiate social entrepreneurs. For example, Alvord et al. (2004) focused on social entrepreneurship as an ‘innovative’ way of arranging resources to solve social problems and providing sustainable social transformation. Likewise, Alvord et al. (2004) stated that social entrepreneurs create innovative initiatives, build new social arrangements, and mobilize resources in response to problems leading to achieving long-term influence in society. This notion has been endorsed by Mair and Noboa (2006) who considered social entrepreneurship as an important building block of sustainable development. Dees (1998) argued that social entrepreneurs should aim to reduce people’s needs rather than simply meeting them. This implies that causes must be recognized and addressed in order to initiate systematic and sustainable change.

Another school of thought focuses on the use of business principles to define social entrepreneurship. Hashim et al. (2020) highlighted that social entrepreneurs combine the power of market forces and business methods to solve social problems. Similarly, Ghalwash et al. (2016) viewed social entrepreneurship as a process in which social disadvantages are solved by social entrepreneurs using business techniques as a tool. This indicates that social entrepreneurs combine their hearts (social mission) with their minds (entrepreneurial skills) to bring about positive change (Ernst, 2011).

Upon careful review and comparison of the definitions provided from 2004 to 2021, it can be concluded that the main criterion distinguishing social entrepreneurs from other counterparts is the primacy of focus on social value creation, rather than profit generation (Mair and Martí, 2006; Žur, 2015). Generally, it can be perceived that social entrepreneurship is an entrepreneurial process that employs business techniques to bring innovative yet sustainable solutions for persistent social problems – ultimately leading to improved quality of life and empowering disadvantaged communities. The elements of this definition are well reflected in the social enterprise called ‘Cracked It’ which is a smartphone repair service in London staffed by ‘at risk’ and formerly incarcerated youth. The organization teaches life skills and provides income and employment opportunities for these disadvantaged and typically discriminated-against community members. Another shining illustration of social entrepreneurship in the current area is Helpsy, a textile collection company. The mission of this social enterprise is to protect the environment by minimizing clothing waste. The company reuses or recycles the clothes and distributes them to thrift shops and second-hand markets around the world.

The above-mentioned definitions and examples are supported by the spectrum adapted from

Dees and Elias (1994), which outlines the range of concepts from purely philanthropic to purely for-profit. Although it is difficult to determine a specific spot for social entrepreneurs on this continuum, it is at least clear that they occupy a middle ground between philanthropic and for-profit entities. Social entrepreneurs differ from other entities from several perspectives, such as beneficiary, capital and resources, financial outcome, source of income, product/services, and human resources. To illustrate, philanthropic organizations rely on donations as resources and volunteers as employees, whereas for-profit organizations prioritize operating a business with market-oriented strategies. Table 2 provides a framework for understanding the social entrepreneurship spectrum.

Table 2. Social enterprise spectrum adapted from (Dees and Elias, 1994)

Criteria	Social entrepreneurship		
	Philanthropic entities	↔	For-profit entrepreneurship
Mission	Purely focused on social value generation	Combination of social and economic value generation	Purely focused on economic value generation
Beneficiary	Marginalized people with unmet needs Pay nothing	Marginalized people with unmet needs Full payment under market price	Any profitable opportunity Full payment based on market price
Capital and Resources	Donations and grants	Personal resources Financial institutions	Personal resources Financial institutions
Source of income	Donations	A profitable income model based on product/service provision	A profitable income model based on product/service provision
Financial outcome	No financial outcome Relying on donations	Wealth generation for society	Wealth generation for entrepreneur
Products/services	No product/service is offered	Offering products/services with a low-profit rate	Offering products/services with market rate
Human resource	Volunteer	Paid staff below market rate	Market rate compensation

4. Conclusion

In today's world, where basic human rights are still being denied to millions of people, and poverty, hunger, lack of education, pollution, violence, and poor medical care are pervasive issues, a new form of business is needed that prioritizes the advancement of social change and financial sustainability. Social entrepreneurship is a business model that seeks to tackle social problems while also generating a profit. Social entrepreneurs bring the tools, principles, and strategies of entrepreneurship to the social sector, creating innovative solutions to the challenges facing society. However, despite the growing interest in social entrepreneurship, there is still no clear and agreed-upon definition. This lack of clarity hinders the development of a dedicated scholarly field and the creation of a clear research agenda. The lack of a single conception of social entrepreneurship not only has negative consequences from an academic perspective but can also cause issues for practitioners (Collavo, 2018). This paper addressed this gap by reviewing the existing definitions of social entrepreneurship, clarifying its boundaries, and synthesizing a single definition. The paper contributed to the literature by providing a better understanding of what social entrepreneurship is and what it is not. Generally, this study concludes that the concept of social entrepreneurship is related to innovative business ventures to influence change. Entities that are frequently misunderstood and confused with social entrepreneurship include charities/NGOs and philanthropic organizations, multilateral institutions, general/commercial/for-profit entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and social activism.

This study had limitations that provide directions for future research. Firstly, this study is limited by the scope of the investigation. Although the emerging concept of social entrepreneurship could be investigated from various perspectives, we focused on clarifying the boundaries and definitions. Additionally, this study merely reviewed the literature without collecting any empirical data. Scholars are suggested to conduct qualitative studies to explore the definition of social entrepreneurship in a specific context.

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