

Has Social Entrepreneurship Reduced Economic Inequality Among Non-state Actors? A Systematic Review

Ian Jester M. de Vera¹, Rizza G. Valdez-de Vera², Dana Jenelle S. Calica³, Mika Ella O. Perez¹, Danica Q. Pacardo¹, and Eliana May G. Andres⁴

¹Research Division, University of the Philippines Institute for Small-Scale Industries, Quezon City, Philippines

²Entrepreneurship Department, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines

³University of the Philippines College of Science, Quezon City, Philippines

⁴University of the Philippines College of Arts and Letters, Quezon City, Philippines

imdevera@up.edu.ph

rgvaldez@pup.edu.ph

dscalica@up.edu.ph

moperez4@up.edu.ph

dqpacardo@up.edu.ph

egandres@up.edu.ph

Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between social entrepreneurship (SE) and economic inequality, aiming to understand SE's potential in addressing economic disparities among non-state actors. Social entrepreneurship, often recognised for its capacity to create social value and drive social change, offers unique opportunities to tackle pressing societal issues, including economic inequality. By leveraging innovative business models, SE can bridge gaps in income distribution and create sustainable livelihoods for marginalised communities. However, understanding the extent of this impact requires a closer examination of SE's contributions to economic inclusion and equity. Through a systematic literature review, as well as a bibliometric and content analysis of the selected studies, this paper investigates the growing body of research on SE, identifying key themes, trends, and research gaps. The analysis reveals a global interest in SE, as evidenced by an increasing number of publications over the past two and a half decades. This rise in academic attention reflects the recognition of SE's potential to address various social challenges. Despite this progress, the direct relationship between SE and economic inequality remains underexplored. Most research has focused on SE's social impact—such as community development, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability—rather than its economic implications. The paper also identifies core concepts associated with SE, including social entrepreneur, social enterprise, social innovation, social capital, economic development, work and employment, and sustainable entrepreneurship. However, references to economic inequality are often implicit rather than explicit, highlighting a gap in the literature. This suggests a need for more focused research that examines how SE can effectively reduce economic disparities, particularly through income redistribution, wealth creation, and access to economic opportunities for marginalised communities. Whilst SE has the potential to be a powerful tool for reducing economic inequality, realising this potential requires addressing persistent challenges. Among these challenges is the widening gap between low- and high-income sectors, which complicates SE interventions and limits their transformative impact.

Keywords: Economic Equality, Income Equality, Social Capital, Social Enterprise, Social Entrepreneurship, Social Innovation

1. Introduction

Interest in the concept of social entrepreneurship (SE) has been rising in the last 25 years. A cursory search in the electronic database Scopus on the keyword *social entrepreneurship* will generate a result exhibiting a steady increase in the number of documents indexed between the years 2000 and 2024 (see Figure 1). This upward trend is expected to continue overtime.

The growing interest in SE may be attributed to its dual benefits: harnessing the positive effects of entrepreneurship whilst generating meaningful social impact within communities. It is the form of entrepreneurship that serves as an impetus for economic growth and social change (Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018). The myriad benefits of entrepreneurship, both financial and non-financial, to the individual and the society are well established (Luke et al., 2007). By integrating traditional entrepreneurship with social principles to tackle pressing social issues such as unequal wealth distribution and income inequality, the potential for inclusive benefits is greatly enhanced.

Current extant research is focused on the factors that drive an individual to become a social entrepreneur (Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018). Bozhikin et al. (2019), for instance, defined these drivers as “(i) social inclusion and social economy, (ii) SE and economic development, and (iii) networks and social innovation” (p. 736).

Meanwhile, other studies are focused on the role of government and key non-state actors in promoting or facilitating SE in developing countries (Bozhikin et al., 2019). However, limited research exists on the direct relationship between SE and economic inequality.

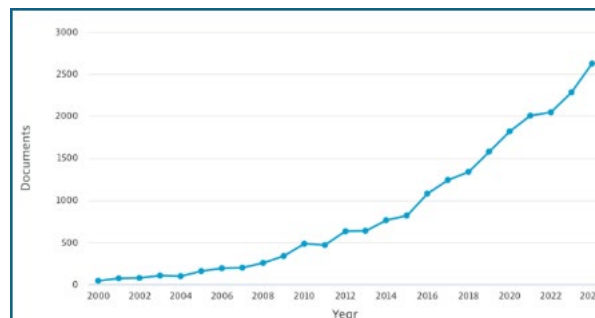


Figure 1: Number of documents related to ‘social entrepreneurship’ and indexed by year in Scopus

One study examining the link between SE and economic inequality involved a total of 77,983 individual responses sourced from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor data across 26 countries, and similar country-level data retrieved from the Global Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum (Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018). The study found that income inequality increases the likelihood of SE under conditions of low-income mobility (Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018). Whilst it is one of few studies that found a link between economic inequality and SE, other contextual factors that did not surface from the study deserve an exploration. Our study therefore aims to expand their findings by determining other conditions that can connect economic inequality with SE using data from extant literature.

There is no consensus on the exact definition of SE. Some scholars have defined SE as an activity where business principles are adopted by non-business entities such as governments and not-for-profits in their operations (Bozhikin et al., 2019). Nonetheless, SE has been adopted in corporate social responsibility and philanthropy programmes of private-sector business enterprises (Bozhikin et al., 2019). Additionally, it has also made its way to social innovation studies (Bozhikin et al., 2019). Other definitions are related to the method and approach adopted by SE in solving social problems such as poverty and environmental degradation (Bozhikin et al., 2019; Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018). For the purposes of our study, we define SE in the context of traditional entrepreneurship; that is, it is a business or commercial activity whose financial benefits redound to a community or a marginalised sector of the society.

Meanwhile, economic inequality is described in literature as a disparity among citizens in terms of their wealth and income (Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018). The role of traditional entrepreneurship on income inequality has been investigated in a study covering data from 47 developing countries from 2009 to 2017 (Mohamad et al., 2021). Theoretically, if citizens, especially the poor and the marginalised, practice entrepreneurship, the country will experience less income inequality (Mohamad et al., 2021). Overall, the study confirmed that increasing entrepreneurship activities will decrease incidents of income inequality in developing countries (Mohamad et al., 2021).

There have been a few studies linking entrepreneurship with income inequality. Two of them find themselves in disagreement. The Swedish study (Halvarsson et al., 2018) observed that entrepreneurship increases income inequality. Self-employment widens the gap in terms of income amongst the poor whilst incorporated entrepreneurship seems to increase the dispersion among the rich (Halvarsson et al., 2018). On the other hand, the Ethiopian study (Kimhi, 2010) concluded that entrepreneurship helps reduce income inequality altogether.

This paper seeks to answer the question: *To what extent has SE contributed to reducing economic inequality among non-state actors?* While previous studies have explored the social impact of SE, this paper contributes to the literature by systematically analysing empirical studies that explore or imply SE’s influence on economic inequality. It addresses a notable gap by focusing explicitly on economic dimensions such as income redistribution, employment generation, and financial inclusion, which are often overlooked in SE research.

2. Materials and Methods

Our study draws from data available from Elsevier’s Scopus which was selected from other similar databases and platforms for its comprehensive list and quality entries (Falagas et al., 2008; Gudanowska, 2017; Mingers & Meyer, 2017). The methodology used for this research was systematic review of literature, which is regarded

as a rigorous approach to literature review for its objectivity, transparency, and replicability (Torgerson, 2003). Compared to narrative literature review, the systematic review approach can reduce bias and provides a more extensive analysis of extant knowledge (Bozhikin et al., 2019; Torgerson, 2003).

On 03 April 2025, the following search keywords were typed in the search engine of Scopus: *social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, social innovation, cooperative entrepreneurship, economic inequality, and economic equality*. The search was limited to publication years before 1999, or 2000 onwards. The reason for the selection of this period was the observed rise in the interest in SE, which started in the 2000s (see Figure 1). The same trend was detected in a related systematic literature review (Bozhikin et al., 2019), which informed and inspired this study.

The initial query generated a total of 2,062 documents in the Scopus database. To further refine our search, we added filters to find journal articles only. This was to ensure that only scholarly works were included in this systematic review. The outcome was further filtered out to obtain papers in the English language only. This surfaced a total of 1,041 studies.

The preliminary results were screened to remove conceptual papers, those not related to this research, and others that were inaccessible. The final screening resulted in a total of 53 empirical studies that would comprise the data sample for this analysis. The search methodology employed in this systematic review is reflected in the schema shown in Figure 2.

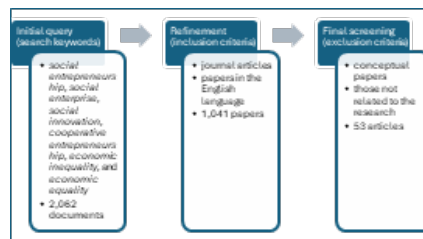


Figure 2: Schema of the search methodology used to obtain the data sample

To minimise selection bias, two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts using the predefined inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and, when necessary, consultation with a third reviewer. The final coding of included studies followed a structured template to ensure consistency in extracting data on SE dimensions and economic impacts.

3. Results

An analysis of the bibliometric data from the sample of papers using the bibliometric visualiser software VOSviewer indicates that the following words frequently occur in the text: *entrepreneurship, social entrepreneur, social innovation, social enterprise, social capital and economic development, and sustainable entrepreneurship*. They are presented in the diagram with large fonts and different colours (see Figure 3). Other minor or less recurring words are *relationship, work, employment, implementation, and Morocco*. Notably, there were no specific references made in relation to the original search keywords *economic inequality* or *economic equality*. This indicates that studies related to the link between SE and economic inequality are scarce.

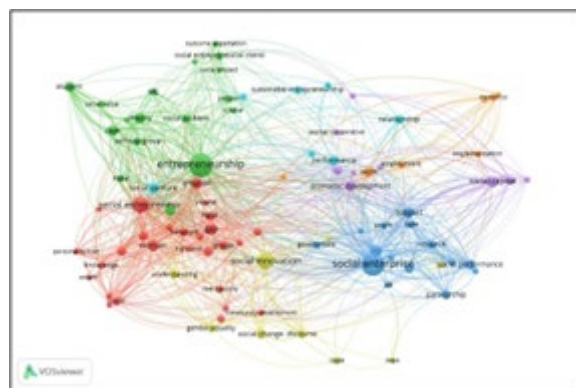


Figure 3: Network diagram of frequently occurring words from the data sample

3.1 The Social Entrepreneur

The first concept is focused on the individual, more specifically on the traits of social entrepreneurs. Several studies (e.g., Bernardino et al., 2018; Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016; Fernández et al., 2024; Hayhurst, 2014; Kawarazuka et al., 2023; E. Kim, 2023; Kumari & Eguruze, 2022; Lauri, 2021; Maguirre et al., 2016; Nsereko et al., 2021; Siqueira et al., 2023) discussed gender equality within the context of SE. The reason for the multitude of SE studies dedicated to gender equality is that it is a common view that SE is a valuable tool to solve the world's social issues, including gender inequality (Bozhikin et al., 2019).

Other studies focused on the individual traits, which are anchored on the general concept of traditional entrepreneurship as can be deduced from Figure 3. Broccia et al. (2022) related the direct and indirect effects of innovativeness with entrepreneurial and social entrepreneurial self-efficacy in the light of organisational capabilities and philanthropic corporate social responsibility. Lee et al. (2022) examined the role of social recognition in the motivational dynamics of social entrepreneurial intention. Mouraviev and Kakabadse (2022) studied the role of social entrepreneurs' cosmopolitan orientation in bridging the gap between prosperity and social deprivation whilst Choi and Chang (2020) applied the human capital theory to link social entrepreneurs' characteristics with the performance of social ventures.

3.2 The Social Enterprise

The second concept that emerged from this systematic review of literature related to SE deals with the social enterprise itself. Oloke (2024) examined the perspectives of individuals managing social enterprises and found that these organisations contribute to transforming unequal social structures to varying degrees. This impact occurs regardless of whether their work is perceived as significantly changing the situation (transformative) or addressing deficiencies (compensatory) (Oloke, 2024). Kajiita and Kang'ethe (2023) support this view, describing social enterprises as mechanisms for addressing social challenges.

Related to these studies is the work of Musinguzi et al. (2023), which examined the interrelationships between internal factors (e.g., business planning), external factors (e.g., financial and training support), and critical success factors in the performance of rural social enterprises. A similar study by Segovia-Vargas et al. (2024), analysed the factors influencing the survival or failure of social enterprises. Additionally, Wang and Ni (2023) studied the impact of internet connectivity on the productivity of rural enterprises whilst Cucchi et al. (2022) explored how social enterprises helped ease tensions within communities with fixed sets of beliefs, norms and customs. Similarly, the study of D'alessio et al. (2024) focused on the cultural dimensions surrounding social enterprise models by comparing findings between Italy and Romania.

3.3 Social Innovation

The third concept that surfaced from this systematic review concerns social innovation that arises from SE. Slee (2019) defines social innovation as any novelty of practice performed by the civil society. In his paper he presents the different types of social innovation as practiced in rural Scotland (Slee, 2019). Meanwhile, Olloqui et al. (2023), found that technological innovations are necessary to foster social innovation. Further, there is a need for public-private partnerships to facilitate social innovation, and focusing efforts on social innovation is significant for attracting development and investments (Olloqui et al., 2023).

3.4 Social Capital and Economic Development

Most papers from this systematic review were related to social capital and economic development. Specifically, these papers (Barinaga, 2013; Choi et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2018; Michele, 2021; Montgomery et al., 2008; Mulyono et al., 2020; Nurlanova et al., 2023; Pathak & Muralidharan, 2018; Pothipala et al., 2021; Sangvikar et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2023; Van Trung, 2021) discussed how SE contributed to the socioeconomic development of societies and communities. Siqueira et al. (2023) extended this socioeconomic development to include environmental change. Further, the research conducted by Okutayeva et al. (2024) was among the studies that highlighted the important contribution of social entrepreneurship in reducing inequalities and promoting sustainable development by solving social issues. Related to this study was that of Assaf (2024), which found strong links between financial inclusion strategies, among others, and women's empowerment. Nonetheless, the study of Seferiadis et al. (2023) found that SE yielded insignificant benefits for young social entrepreneurs in Ghana.

Whilst these papers discuss the effects of SE on economic development, a few studies from this systematic review reveal the opposite: the impact of economic development on social enterprises. For instance, Leitner et al. (2023) examined how residents of peri-urban settlements respond to unexpected developments and manage the uncertainties arising from market-induced displacement. They found that large-scale planned developments and infrastructure projects lead to widespread displacement of residents and the disappearance of agricultural fields, vegetable plots, and small enterprises (Leitner et al., 2023).

3.5 Implementation of SE and its Effect on Work and Employment

A few studies illustrated the implementation of SE and its effect on work and employment. One research (E. Kim, 2023) explored a project that involved conducting a product innovation and management course in a social enterprise by a university. Mychajluk (2023) analysed the role of the learning environment and the interactions within ecovillages as far as learning outcomes and processes are concerned. Nsereko (2021) highlighted the case of social entrepreneur Dr Moses Musaazi, the former managing director of social enterprise T4T, which manufactured low-cost sanitary napkins for teenage girls stigmatised because of their menstrual periods. Additionally, Pérotin (2006) examined the determinants of entry and exit between workers in cooperatives and conventional firms whilst Simanaviciene et al. (2017) compared social business models in Lithuania, Italy and Great Britain.

3.6 Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Lastly, several papers in this systematic review addressed the concept of sustainable entrepreneurship, another dimension of SE. Calvo et al. (2020) focused on upcycling-based social and creative enterprises. Similarly, Fernández et al. (2024) highlighted the gendered and socioenvironmental effects of seaweed production, noting its connections to the global market and susceptibility to market fluctuations.

Vázquez-Maguirre (2020) analysed how indigenous social enterprises contribute to building sustainable rural communities. Vieira et al. (2019) examined the transformative potential of food-producing social enterprises in their efforts to create sustainable and resilient urban food systems. McQuilten (2017) explored the potential role of art- and fashion-based social enterprises in contributing to sustainable community development whilst also fostering critique and political engagement within contemporary capitalism. Popkova et al. (2023) focused on the post-COVID 19 pandemic perspective of SE in relation to sustainable development.

4. Discussion

Whilst this study confirms the effectiveness of SE in reducing economic inequality, it also found several significant challenges to reduce economic inequality through SE. One key difficulty is the need to effectively serve disadvantaged groups, who often lack access to resources and opportunities, making it challenging for SE initiatives to reach and support them adequately (Oloke, 2024). Further, existing social development interventions within countries are frequently ineffective, necessitating SE to address these shortcomings, which can be complex and resource-intensive (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2023).

The gap between high- and low-income groups continues to widen, further entrenching economic inequality and making it harder for SE to bridge this divide (Mouraviev & Kakabadse, 2022). High levels of wealth inequality, combined with an ingrained patronage culture, create environments where SE struggles to gain traction and achieve its goals (Pothipala et al., 2021). The lack of social awareness and the low operational efficiency of some social enterprises further hinder their effectiveness in tackling economic inequality (Pothipala et al., 2021). Issues like failing food systems and significant health inequalities present additional barriers, as SE must navigate these complex social problems whilst attempting to reduce economic disparities (Gordon et al., 2018; Vieira et al., 2019). Finally, the lack of opportunities in local communities and the pervasive economic inequality within these areas pose significant obstacles to SE's success (Mulyono et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion

Whilst SE is often associated with concepts such as social entrepreneur, social enterprise, social innovation, social capital, economic development, work and employment, and sustainable entrepreneurship, the direct connection to economic inequality is not as prominent. This finding suggests that the discourse around SE has predominantly focused on its social impact rather than its economic implications. The absence of economic

inequality as a frequently occurring theme in the literature highlights a significant gap that future research should aim to address.

The limited research directly linking SE to economic inequality calls for more focused studies that examine the conditions under which SE can effectively narrow economic disparities. Additionally, there is a need for more empirical research that measures the economic outcomes of SE initiatives, particularly in terms of income redistribution and wealth creation among marginalised communities. Policymakers and practitioners should consider the challenges when designing and implementing SE initiatives to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to economic inclusion and equity.

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Ethics Declaration

This study did not involve human participants, personal data, or any form of intervention or interaction with individuals. As such, it did not fall within the scope of research requiring ethics review and clearance. Therefore, approval from an ethics review board was not sought nor required for the conduct of this research.

AI Declaration

An AI tool, ChatGPT by OpenAI, was used during the development of this paper solely for the purpose of checking grammar and ensuring consistency in the text. The content, analysis, and conclusions presented herein are entirely the work of the authors.

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