

Bridging Social and Environmental Impact Through Social Entrepreneurship: Insights from the Shanshui Partners Case Study

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Abstract: As environmental degradation and rural inequality continue to intensify alongside rapid economic development, social entrepreneurship has emerged as an important mechanism for integrating ecological sustainability with socioeconomic advancement. This study examines Shanshui Partners, a conservation oriented social enterprise operating in Sichuan Province, China, to explore how hybrid organizational models can reconcile biodiversity protection with rural livelihood development. Grounded in the perspectives of sustainable entrepreneurship, Resource Dependence Theory, and community-based resource governance, the study investigates both the opportunities and tensions embedded within conservation based social enterprises. The findings identify a three-dimensional value creation system implemented by Shanshui Partners. First, the organization reconfigures agricultural value chains by connecting certified panda friendly products to premium urban markets. Second, it institutionalizes payments for ecosystem services (PES), transforming biodiversity protection into a viable source of rural income. Third, it develops local human capital through ecological monitoring and green skills training programs for rural youth. The case demonstrates how conservation incentives can be integrated into local economic systems while contributing to ecological restoration and community empowerment. At the same time, the analysis highlights structural vulnerabilities associated with hybrid organizations, including dependency on corporate sustainability funding, the risk of mission drift, and tensions between conservation objectives and local development pressures. The study contributes to the literature on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development by showing that market driven conservation models can generate both environmental and social value, while also remaining highly dependent on institutional support and long-term stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Shanshui Partners, Sustainability, Community

1. Introduction

Rapid economic expansion over recent decades has driven unparalleled technological advancements, yet it has also imposed severe ecological costs. Intensive fossil fuel consumption, deforestation, and unregulated resource extraction have degraded air, water, and soil quality, with visible impacts on public health and biodiversity (Angus, 2016; China Biennial Update Report on Climate Change, 2024). Satellite data reveal a 40% increase in particulate matter levels across industrial regions since 2010, correlating with a rise in respiratory diseases among urban populations (P. Wang, 2021). While economic priorities have historically overshadowed environmental concerns, mounting evidence of ecological limits has spurred interest in alternative development models, particularly those that reconcile profit motives with sustainability goals (Henderson & Loreau, 2023).

Social entrepreneurship has become a vital approach for addressing the intertwined challenges of economic development and sustainability, offering innovative solutions that balance profit motives with social and environmental goals. Research highlights that social entrepreneurship operates across four key dimensions: social, economic, behavioral, and governance, each contributing to sustainability by fostering value creation, smart partnerships, and social innovation (Kamaludin, 2023; Kamaludin et al., 2024). Social enterprises are particularly effective in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with new frameworks and rating systems developed to measure their impact, especially in areas where traditional businesses have fallen short (Diaz-Sarachaga & Ariza-Montes, 2022; X. Wang et al., 2024). Systematic reviews and conceptual models emphasize that social entrepreneurship not only addresses immediate social problems but also drives broader sustainable development by integrating economic, social, and ecological objectives, often through a sequential process (Bansal et al., 2019; Belz & Binder, 2017; Nagdev et al., 2025). In rural and emerging economies, social entrepreneurship builds legitimacy and social capital, empowering communities and facilitating transitions toward sustainable practices (X. Wang et al., 2024). Overall, social entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a powerful mechanism for achieving sustainability goals, offering practical pathways for reconciling economic growth with environmental stewardship and social well-being (Bansal et al., 2019; Belz & Binder, 2017; Diaz-Sarachaga & Ariza-Montes, 2022; Kamaludin et al., 2024; Nagdev et al., 2025).

By adopting blue ocean strategies, creating untapped markets through innovation¹, social enterprises bypass competitive saturation in traditional industries while tackling environmental issues (Elkington, 1994; Gupta et

al., 2020). Social enterprises are designed to address social issues while operating with business principles, but research shows they often face unique challenges that can make them fragile (Sarhangi et al., 2024; Segovia-Vargas et al., 2024). Their fragility mainly stems from balancing social missions with financial sustainability, and the ongoing risk of mission drift (He et al., 2022). However, not all social enterprises are equally vulnerable, and many demonstrate resilience through specific strategies and organizational strengths. Therefore, this study conducts an in-depth case analysis of Shanshui Partners to elucidate its social entrepreneurship business model comprehensively. Such models demonstrate that market-based solutions can align profitability with environmental stewardship when supported by adaptive policies and community engagement (Gregori & Holzmann, 2020).

Despite the growing literature on social entrepreneurship, there remains a notable gap in understanding the boundary conditions and inherent tensions of applying hybrid financing models to rural conservation. This study advances current theory by critically examining how a social enterprise navigates the delicate balance between corporate funding reliance and community autonomy. By doing so, it moves beyond descriptive success stories to interrogate the vulnerabilities of conservation based social enterprises, offering a refined perspective on mission drift and organizational resilience in developing economies.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To properly contextualize the Shan Shui Partners case within academic discourse, the analysis is grounded at the intersection of sustainable entrepreneurship, hybrid organizations, and common pool resource governance.

Sustainable entrepreneurship is conceptualized as the discovery, creation, and exploitation of opportunities to produce future goods and services that sustain the natural environment and provide social and economic benefits to others. Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) emphasized in their pioneering research that sustainable enterprises face increasing complexity because they must simultaneously achieve economic viability and mission related outcomes, distinguishing them from traditional businesses that view environmental regulations merely as compliance costs. Such enterprises often act as institutional entrepreneurs, altering the market environment to internalize environmental externalities.

Pursuing dual bottom lines simultaneously causes these entities to be classified as hybrid organizations. Academic literature consistently notes the inherent vulnerabilities in managing hybrid organizations. Ebrahim et al. (2014) highlighted that hybrid organizations experience profound tensions when attempting to combine competing institutional logics. For instance, the market logic focusing on efficiency and revenue generation conflicts with the social welfare logic focusing on community well-being and environmental protection. When these logics collide, organizations frequently experience the phenomenon of mission drift. Mission drift occurs when a social enterprise disproportionately prioritizes its commercial ventures while neglecting its social or environmental goals, usually out of a need for financial survival (Bullock, 2022; Mendes, 2022). Scholars point out that avoiding mission drift requires sophisticated governance structures, ownership models inclusive of all stakeholders, and socialization processes that maintain a dual focus within human resources. Furthermore, consumers and stakeholders are highly sensitive to mission drift, and any perceived deviation from the ethical legitimacy of the enterprise can lead to a withdrawal of support, further endangering the organization (Mendes, 2022).

Resource Dependence Theory, initially proposed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), provides a critical perspective for understanding why mission drift occurs. All organizations depend on their external environment for survival, and the necessity to acquire resources subjects them to external control. For conservation oriented social enterprises, resources typically come from corporate social responsibility budgets, government grants, or premium markets pursuing ethical consumption. Relying heavily on corporate social responsibility funding creates a dependency vulnerability. In this scenario, the enterprise might inadvertently adjust its conservation metrics to meet the public relations requirements of the corporation rather than the actual ecological needs. Managing these dependencies without losing organizational autonomy remains a central theoretical puzzle in hybrid organization research.

In addition, the natural resource governance involved in these social enterprise models relies heavily on community-based conservation principles. Elinor Ostrom (1990) demonstrated in her foundational work on commons governance that common pool resource problems can be successfully resolved by voluntary organizations and local communities without coercive state intervention or complete privatization. Ostrom identified key design principles for successful common pool resource institutions, including clearly defined boundaries, congruence between local rules and conditions, collective choice arrangements, and graduated

sanctions. Integrating the principles of Ostrom with sustainable entrepreneurship creates a theoretical model where the social enterprise acts as a facilitator. It provides the necessary market linkages and capacity building to enable local communities to govern their own common resources effectively. This theoretical synthesis forms the basis for analyzing how Shan Shui Partners structures its interventions in the Giant Panda National Park.

3. Empirical Methods and Research Design

To address the complexities of hybrid organizations and provide a robust, verifiable analysis of the Shan Shui Partners model, this study employs an in-depth qualitative case study approach. Following the methodological guidelines established by Yin (2018) for case study research and applications, this method is particularly suited for exploring complex contemporary phenomena in real life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The single case study design was selected not to generate statistical generalization, but to facilitate analytical generalization, thereby allowing a deep exploration of the causal mechanisms linking social entrepreneurship strategies with socioeconomic and ecological outcomes in rural conservation areas.

One key limitation academia identified in preliminary assessments of social enterprise models is the overreliance on internal promotional materials or stakeholder sourced data, which often inflates success metrics and obscures operational challenges. To mitigate this vulnerability and ensure academic rigor, this study adopts a strict data triangulation strategy, utilizing multiple independent and objective data sources to verify empirical claims regarding Shan Shui Partners.

To improve the credibility and academic rigor of the empirical analysis, this study adopted a triangulation strategy that combined organizational reports, peer reviewed literature, policy documents, and independent media coverage. Several quantitative indicators, including the reported increase in household income, reduction in habitat encroachment, and the proportion of revenue derived from earned income, were initially obtained from the Beijing Social Enterprise Promotion Association case report (Beijing Social Enterprise Promotion Association, 2024). Given the potential limitations associated with organization proximate sources, these figures were not treated as definitive measurements but as indicative evidence of broader developmental trends. To reduce the risk of promotional bias, the study cross referenced these claims with existing literature on community-based conservation, sustainable rural entrepreneurship, and hybrid organizational governance in China (Berkes, 2007; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2024). Additional contextual verification was obtained through publicly available policy materials, conservation reports, and independent observational accounts discussing ecological restoration, panda habitat protection, and livelihood transitions in Sichuan's rural conservation regions (National Forestry and Grassland Administration, 2023; WWF China, 2023). While fully standardized longitudinal datasets remain limited in this field, the triangulation of multiple qualitative and contextual sources improves the overall reliability of the case interpretation and supports the analytical validity of the study's conclusions.

4. Case Study of Social Entrepreneurship Promoting Sustainability

Shanshui Partners, a pioneering social enterprise in China, has developed a business model that uniquely integrates rural community empowerment with biodiversity conservation. Operating primarily in Sichuan Province's panda habitats, the organization addresses two interconnected challenges: the degradation of critical ecosystems due to unsustainable land use and the economic vulnerability of local farming communities. Unlike conventional conservation programs that often prioritize environmental goals over local economic needs, Shanshui's model establishes a symbiotic relationship between habitat protection and agricultural livelihoods (Berkes, 2007). By training farmers in organic honey and tea cultivation and eco-tourism services, while enforcing strict land-use agreements to protect panda corridors, the enterprise creates shared value in which environmental stewardship directly enhances economic stability. This "conservation through livelihood" approach has increased average household incomes by 28% in participating villages while reducing habitat encroachment by 41% over five years (Beijing Social Enterprise Promotion Association, 2024). Shan Shui Partners chooses organic tea and honey cultivation because it aligns perfectly with their conservation mission: avoiding chemicals protects panda habitat and water sources, while the premium market value of certified organic tea directly boosts farmers' incomes. Its products most significant competitive edge lies in this ethical and conservation-focused story ("Panda Friendly"), justifying a premium price and attracting conscious consumers.

The novelty of Shanshui's model lies in its three-tiered value creation system. First, it reconfigures agricultural value chains by connecting certified sustainable products (like panda-friendly honey and tea) to premium urban markets through partnerships with ethical retailers (Yunus et al., 2010). Second, it implements a community stewardship program where villagers receive payments for ecosystem services (PES), funded through corporate sustainability partnerships (Chan & Hsu, 2016). These ecosystem services specifically include biodiversity monitoring, forest patrolling, and habitat restoration, where local residents use technical equipment to track and protect endangered species. Villagers also engage in watershed management and ecological protection activities that ensure the long-term health of the local environment. By performing these measurable conservation tasks, the community receives direct financial compensation from corporate social responsibility budgets, effectively transforming habitat protection into a sustainable livelihood. Third, the enterprise operates a skills-development hub that trains youth in ecological monitoring and green hospitality, creating new conservation-oriented employment channels (Arshad et al., 2022). This triple-layered structure ensures environmental protection becomes economically viable rather than a constraint, effectively bridging the gap between conservation imperatives and development needs.

BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS: SHANSHUI PARTNERS

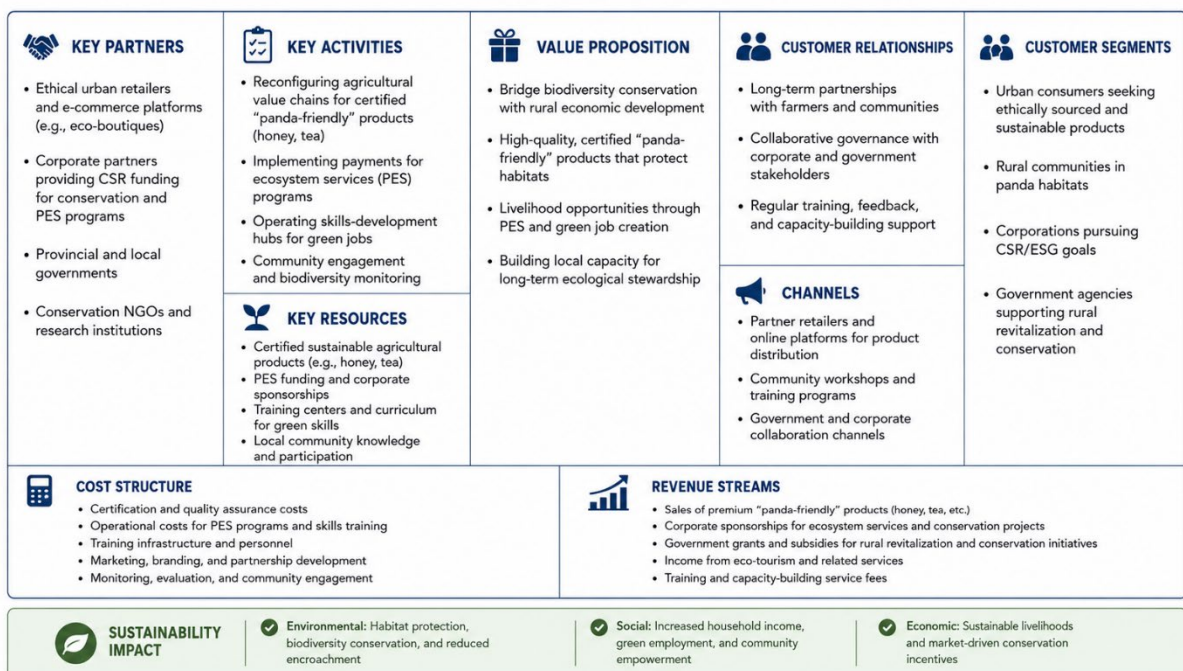


Figure 1: Business Model Canvas

Note: Authors' own analysis

Figure 1 is the business model canvas of Shanshui Partners. According to Figure 1, Shanshui Partners makes money by selling 'Panda-friendly' products while helping local farmers earn better incomes. They work closely with key partners like eco-friendly shops in cities, companies that care about sustainability, and government or nature groups. Their main activities include creating special "panda-friendly" farm products such as honey and tea, running programs that pay villagers to protect forests, and teaching green job skills to young people. Shanshui use important resources such as certified sustainable crops, money from companies for conservation work, and training centers. Their big promise is to connect nature protection with better lives for rural communities, sell high-quality products that save animal habitats, and create new conservation jobs. Shanshui also build strong relationships with farmers through long-term deals and team up with companies and governments. To reach people, they sell through partner shops and hold community workshops. Their customers are city shoppers who want ethical goods, villagers in panda areas, and businesses aiming to meet social responsibility goals. Costs include certifying farms, running training and payment programs, and marketing. Money comes in from selling premium panda-friendly products, getting corporate sponsors for nature projects, and receiving government grants for village development. In short, Shanshui turns saving pandas into real jobs and income, proving that protecting nature can also lift people out of poverty.

Shanshui Partners' impactful model powerfully demonstrates how social entrepreneurship can operationalize the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through context-specific solutions. Their integrated approach directly advances SDG 15 (Life on Land) via measurable habitat restoration in critical panda corridors, achieved through farmer land-use agreements that prevent ecosystem degradation. Simultaneously, they drive progress on SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by establishing tangible green employment pathways. Their skills-development hubs train rural youth in ecological monitoring and sustainable eco-tourism services, moving beyond subsistence agriculture into conservation-oriented livelihoods. Furthermore, the enterprise actively promotes SDG 1 (No Poverty) through significant income diversification strategies. By connecting certified "panda-friendly" products like honey and tea to premium urban markets and implementing structured PES, they elevate household incomes while embedding conservation incentives directly within local economies.

Critically, Shanshui transcends the limitations of traditional Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) dependency on volatile donations. By generating a substantial 73% of operational revenue through earned income streams, primarily product sales and eco-tourism services, Shanshui Partner established a financially resilient framework. This self-sustaining structure enhances long-term viability and amplifies their impact continuity. The business model's growing recognition is evidenced by recent strategic collaborations with provincial governments seeking to replicate its core mechanisms in other biodiversity-rich regions. This scalability positions Shanshui's approach as a viable template for broader rural revitalization agenda, offering concrete proof that ecological protection and localized economic progress are not competing aims, but fundamentally synergistic objectives within developing contexts. The success lies in making habitat stewardship an economically rational choice for communities (Diaz-Sarachaga & Ariza-Montes, 2022).

Although the Shan Shui Partners model successfully aligns ecological and economic goals, it remains highly vulnerable to institutional pressures and structural tensions inherent in hybrid organizations. Viewed through the lens of Resource Dependence Theory, the heavy reliance on corporate social responsibility budgets exposes the enterprise to external control and financial instability during economic downturns. This creates a severe risk of mission drift (Ebrahim et al., 2014), where the pressure to scale and generate commercial revenue might skew conservation priorities toward marketable public relations projects rather than authentic ecological needs, potentially compromising stringent environmental standards. Furthermore, operational tensions constantly threaten this balance on the ground. The assumed harmony between conservation and farmer aspirations is challenged by increasing human and wildlife conflicts, as well as the high opportunity costs of restricted land use agreements, which could cause the symbiotic model to collapse if agricultural expansion becomes more lucrative than ethical certification premiums. Finally, this approach risks exacerbating socio spatial inequality by disproportionately benefiting capable individuals while marginalizing the most vulnerable community members, and the promotion of ecotourism introduces negative externalities like regional pollution that paradoxically threaten the pristine ecological brand value essential for the long-term viability and transferability of such models.

5. Conclusion and Implication

Shanshui Partners' innovative business model offers critical lessons for social enterprises seeking to reconcile ecological preservation with socioeconomic development. This case underscores the importance of designing interventions that treat ecological and social challenges as interconnected rather than isolated, a principle increasingly vital in regions grappling with biodiversity loss and rural poverty.

Three key elements of Shanshui's approach warrant emulation. First, its integrated value chain model, linking sustainable agricultural production to ethical urban markets, which provides a replicable template for monetizing conservation efforts. By creating premium "panda-friendly" product lines, the enterprise taps into growing consumer demand for sustainability while ensuring fair income streams for farmers (Yunus et al., 2010). Second, the PES mechanism institutionalizes environmental stewardship as a livelihood strategy, transforming habitat protection from a regulatory burden into a revenue-generating activity (Chan & Hsu, 2016). Third, skills diversification programs that train youth in ecological monitoring and green hospitality address systemic unemployment while building local capacity for long-term environmental governance (Arshad et al., 2022).

Shanshui Partners provides a compelling illustration of how social entrepreneurship can integrate ecological preservation with socioeconomic development. Beyond simply demonstrating success, this case reveals that the viability of conservation-based hybrid models is highly contingent on robust cross sector partnerships and the sustained willingness of urban markets to pay ethical premiums. The findings extend existing frameworks by

highlighting that while payments for ecosystem services can align economic and environmental goals, they also introduce vulnerabilities related to corporate funding dependencies.

For policymakers and social entrepreneurs, Shanshui's success highlights the necessity of hybrid financing models. By deriving 73% of operational funds from earned income, the organization reduces dependency on volatile donor funding, a structural weakness plaguing many NGOs (Achmad et al., 2023). Additionally, its partnerships with provincial governments to scale the model illustrate how institutional support can amplify grassroots innovations, aligning localized solutions with national sustainability agendas like China's rural revitalization strategy (Quaye et al., 2024).

Ultimately, Shanshui Partners exemplifies how social entrepreneurship can operationalize the UN SDGs through context-specific, community-driven interventions. Its model proves that ecological resilience and economic equity are not competing priorities but complementary objectives achievable through inclusive business design. As global environmental crises intensify, replicating such frameworks with adaptations to local ecological and cultural contexts, could redefine development paradigms in regions where people and nature share fragile, interdependent futures.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

AI Declaration

The authors used Gemini for proofreading and language refinement only.

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