

Empowering Change: Unleashing the Potential of Social Enterprises through Contextually Relevant Support Mechanisms in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

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Abstract: **Background:** Innovative solutions are imperative in the face of escalating socio-economic and environmental challenges worldwide. Social entrepreneurship has served as a widely recognized, viable approach to these challenges. However, such initiatives often struggle due to insufficient support. **Research objectives:** This study investigates contextually relevant support mechanisms that could optimize the impact of social enterprises in addressing socio-economic and environmental issues within Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. **Research design and methods:** Through focus group discussions with both practicing and aspiring social entrepreneurs, the study identifies 13 interconnected mechanisms that could bolster the growth and sustainability of social enterprises in the region. **Results:** The findings suggest that policy interventions should center on strengthening these support mechanisms, which may include financial incentives, capacity-building programs, regulatory reforms, and fostering collaborative networks among stakeholders. **Conclusions:** This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on social entrepreneurship by providing empirical evidence on the role of support mechanisms in enhancing the effectiveness of social enterprises. The results presented in the article draw from the lived experiences of social entrepreneurs within a resource-constrained and developmentally significant setting of the province. Thus, this article offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners in the field, bridging the gap between theory and practice in social entrepreneurship.

Keywords: social enterprises, innovative support mechanisms, South Africa

JEL Codes: L26, L31

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Amidst global socio-economic and environmental challenges, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a beacon of hope, harnessing the power of business to drive positive change in communities (Moon, 2018; Ly & Cope, 2023). Social entrepreneurship plays a vital role in developing countries such as South Africa, where poverty, unemployment, income inequality, climate-

related environmental degradation, and lack of access to basic services remain rife (Stats SA, 2022). Existing literature shows that social entrepreneurship can address socio-economic and environmental challenges by delivering innovative solutions (Ahmad & Bajwa, 2023), empowering communities, promoting social inclusion (Akinboade et al., 2023; Staiculescu, 2023), and creating employment that stimulates local economies (van der Westhuizen & Adelakun, 2023). Thus, this article examines the potential of social entrepreneurship to act as a catalyst for addressing socio-economic and environmental challenges in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province and argues that innovative support mechanisms remain crucial to unlocking this potential.

Using focus group data, the study identified support mechanisms that could foster the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in the region. Framing the study within Mpumalanga offers an underexplored yet highly empirical setting to advance social entrepreneurship theory and practice. Rich in natural resources and human capital, Mpumalanga Province faces unique developmental challenges that call for innovative solutions (Mpumalanga Economic Development Agency, 2020). The province records one of the highest unemployment levels in South Africa (Stats SA, 2024) and very limited access to basic services such as health and education due to its predominantly rural character (HSRC, 2019). In the first quarter of 2025, the official unemployment rate reached 32.9%, while the expanded unemployment rate stood at 49.3% (Stats SA, 2025). Despite its significant economic potential, the region shows low levels of entrepreneurship and innovation (Mpumalanga Economic Development Agency, 2020). Thus, initiatives to boost the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in the province remain paramount.

The following section includes a critical discussion of existing literature on the topic, followed by the research methodology adopted in this study, presentation and interpretation of the research findings, and finally, a discussion of the results and concluding remarks that summarize the article.

Literature Review

The world continues to face escalating socio-economic and environmental challenges (Moon, 2018; Ly & Cope, 2023). In spite of concerted efforts to curb these issues, they persist (Hariram et al., 2023; Ly & Cope, 2023) and require lasting solutions. Among the various measures to address environmental and socio-economic problems, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a promising tool (Moon, 2018). Social entrepreneurship applies social mission-driven business principles to tackle pressing socio-economic challenges in communities (Blanda, & Urbančíková, (2020). The pursuit of a social mission – rather than profit maximization – makes social entrepreneurship an attractive solution, especially since some global challenges stem from greedy, profit-driven practices that ignore the long-term sustainability of the environment. In this regard, Blanda and Urbančíková (2020) affirm that social entrepreneurship solves a vast majority of the world's social, economic, and environmental problems. For example, the European Union reports that social entrepreneurship provides employment for over 11 million people (European Commission, 2020). The contribution to employment creation highlights social entrepreneurship as a critical tool for addressing socio-economic challenges posed by a lack of livelihood opportunities. Simultaneously, the specific focus of social enterprises on issues such as food security, poverty alleviation, education, skills development, inequality, and job creation directly impacts these challenges (Moon, 2018; Talmage, 2021). Talmage (2021) reveals that social entrepreneurial innovation serves as a key contemporary

tool for advancing community development education, contributing to both skills development and community upliftment. Other social enterprises are tailored to tackle environmental challenges, such as those caused by climate change (Moon, 2018). A study of 100 social enterprises worldwide by Moon (2018) found that social enterprises effectively engage in initiatives aligned with all 17 Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the UN Vision 2020 charter. Notably, more than 25 initiatives deal with ecological and social problems. This underscores the critical importance of social entrepreneurship in addressing socio-economic and environmental issues.

Although literature widely acknowledges the significance of social entrepreneurship in tackling socio-economic challenges, the emergence and growth of social enterprises – especially in developing countries – remains very limited (Kasych et al., 2019; Anh et al., 2022; Roslan et al., 2022). Scholars attribute this limited growth to a lack of support for these enterprises (Kasych et al., 2022; Anh et al., 2022). The slow development of social enterprises due to insufficient support raises concerns, especially given their enormous contributions toward solving global socio-economic and environmental problems. Therefore, the fundamental research question guided this study:

- What support mechanisms can help foster the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship activity in Mpumalanga?

Against this backdrop, this article reports the findings of a study that sought to identify contextually relevant support mechanisms that could improve the emergence and growth of social enterprises. The study focused on Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. The next section presents the materials and methods employed in this study.

Materials and Methods

This article aims to identify innovative support mechanisms that can help foster the emergence and growth of social enterprises in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. While Mpumalanga shares socio-economic features with other South African regions, it offers a unique empirical context due to its spatial inequalities, youth unemployment rates, and the predominance of rural social enterprise initiatives that national policy frequently overlooks (Stats SA, 2025; Mpumalanga Economic Development Agency, 2020). Therefore, this study contributes to the field of social entrepreneurship by foregrounding the lived realities of rural and peri-urban entrepreneurs whose voices often remain excluded from broader theoretical frameworks. The study's methodological contribution lies not only in identifying support mechanisms but also in grounding them in a context-specific ecosystem, characterized by fragmented public-private support systems and under-documented community innovations.

To meet the study's aim, we conducted focus group discussions with a sample of social enterprises from various areas across Mpumalanga Province. The exploratory nature of the topic necessitated the use of focus groups to collect data, primarily because focus groups allow for in-depth exploration of social entrepreneurs' lived experiences in an interactive and dynamic setting that encourages the exchange of ideas and perspectives (Liamputtong, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Furthermore, the diversity of participants in the focus group enabled gathering different perspectives while empowering participants to share their voices in a relatively open platform, which proves crucial for individuals from marginalized groups (Cornwall & Jewkes, 2015; Fern, 2019). Thus, the use of focus groups in this study seems justified due to their exploratory nature, ability to provide rich qualitative data, interactive and dynamic

approach, inclusion of diverse perspectives, empowerment of marginalized communities, and contribution to contextual understanding. Through these focus groups, we gained a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurs' experiences, challenges, and needs, ultimately informing the development of effective support mechanisms.

After receiving ethical clearance, we pilot tested the focus group data collection protocol and recruited participants. The pilot test involved a trial run at the focus group venues to check equipment setup, seating arrangements, and the validity of guiding questions, following Breen's (2006) guidelines. To recruit participants, we shared a call for expressions of interest on social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, inviting both practicing and aspiring social entrepreneurs and asking them to confirm availability for focus group discussions. The call remained open on social media for three months, from April to June 2023. Twenty-eight individuals expressed their interest, indicating willingness and availability to participate. All of them met the inclusion criteria, which required participants to be practicing or aspiring social entrepreneurs from Mpumalanga Province.

Following an invitation to attend the focus group discussions, only 13 participants showed up. Despite the low turnout, the participants represented each of the three district municipalities within Mpumalanga Province: Ehlanzeni, Nkangala, and Gert Sibande. We divided participants into two focus groups: Focus Group 1 with six participants and Focus Group 2 with seven participants, while ensuring representation from all three district municipalities in each group. The group sizes aligned with Krueger and Casey's (2014) recommendation that a focus group of 6–8 participants prove appropriate for effective interaction and qualitative data collection. Focus Group 1 lasted 63 minutes, while Focus Group 2 lasted 68 minutes. The focus group discussions took place in July 2023. The main facilitator, a timekeeper, and a note-taker also participated in the sessions. In addition, we audio-recorded all discussions and later transcribed the recordings into text data.

We employed a grounded theory qualitative data analysis technique (Strauss, 1987) to analyze the data with the assistance of the Atlas.ti software. Atlas.ti has become an essential qualitative analysis tool, widely adopted by many researchers in the fourth industrial revolution. The software streamlines identification, coding, and categorization of themes from data. The 2023 version of Atlas.ti integrates GPT-4 through a partnership with OpenAI, enabling automatic coding and categorization via artificial intelligence (AI). Researchers have praised these functionalities for efficiency, as they offer more time for data interpretation (Carius & Teixeira, 2024). Taking advantage of this benefit, we used Atlas.ti's intentional AI coding tool for the initial coding. In several studies, like the one by Carius and Teixeira (2024), intentional AI coding and human coding proved consistent from a lexical perspective but inconsistent from a semantic viewpoint. Nevertheless, intentional AI coding effectively identified specificities that human coding might otherwise miss or consider irrelevant. Thus, aware of the strengths and weaknesses of intentional AI coding, we used it to complement human coding.

Blending AI-driven coding (Bryda & Sadowski, 2024) with the traditional grounded theory represents a methodological innovation in analyzing social entrepreneurship in localized contexts. While previous studies utilized thematic or manual coding techniques, few integrated intentional AI coding within developing-country settings, especially in community-based social entrepreneurship. This triangulation of human insight and AI-generated codes enabled a more granular understanding of both overt and latent themes, adding rigor and novelty to the qualitative process (Bryda & Sadowski, 2024; Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Table 1 shows the instructions entered into the intentional AI coding tool.

Table 1. Intentional AI Coding Instruction

Attribute	Instruction
Context	This research relies on focus group discussions with social entrepreneurs and aspiring social entrepreneurs.
Research Question	What support mechanisms can help foster the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship activity in Mpumalanga?
Data	Focus group data from practicing and aspiring social entrepreneurs across Mpumalanga Province
Type of Coding	Coding by themes, extracting the main themes from the data
Research Objective	To investigate support mechanisms that can help foster the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship activity in Mpumalanga

The intentional AI coding tool generated 72 codes. Some codes lacked meaning, while others proved repetitive despite using different terminology, revealing the semantic inconsistencies noted by Carius and Teixeira (2024). This prompted manual review and recoding to address these inconsistencies. Our coding involved an inductive analysis method to openly search for and identify codes and emerging patterns in the data. After thematically sorting the data, we deep-read and coded them manually according to the preliminary AI intentional coding list. Employing open coding techniques (Blair, 2015; Strauss, 1987), we also openly and flexibly generated new codes as needed, provided they aligned with the research themes. For non-existing and emerging themes that did not match, we deconstructed, categorized, and named new categories to accommodate variations using a selective coding approach (Blair, 2015). We repeated this process until no further meaningful refinement was possible, achieving theoretical saturation.

In doing so, we removed some codes and merged others to form meaningful categories and themes. Manual coding reduced the initial list to 13 themes covering support mechanisms that could help foster the emergence and growth of social enterprises in Mpumalanga Province. This grounded, iterative process ensured that the final themes reflect not only policy-relevant mechanisms but also context-specific, locally validated strategies that social entrepreneurs view as viable, scalable, and transformative. The following section describes study findings.

Findings

We present the findings in two sections. The first section covers participant background information, while the second outlines the themes related to support mechanisms for social entrepreneurs.

Participant Background Information

The findings in this article draw from focus group discussions with 13 participants from all three district municipalities of Mpumalanga Province. Table 2 shows the participants' background information.

We divided the participants into two focus groups: Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2. Participants 1 to 6 formed Focus Group 1, while participants 7 to 13 comprised Focus Group 2. Among the 13 participants, seven identified as aspiring social entrepreneurs and six as practicing social entrepreneurs. Seven participants were female and six were male. Most participants were young adults aged 18–25. The majority of participants practiced and/or aspired to engage in social entrepreneurial activities aimed at addressing socio-economic problems.

Table 2. Participants' Background Information

Participant	Participant Type	Gender	Age Group	Social Entrepreneurship Interests
Participant 1	Practicing	Female	60+	Environmental, socio-economic
Participant 2	Practicing	Male	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 3	Aspiring	Female	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 4	Aspiring	Female	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 5	Aspiring	Male	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 6	Practicing	Male	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 7	Practicing	Male	18–25	Environmental
Participant 8	Practicing	Female	18–25	Environmental
Participant 9	Aspiring	Male	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 10	Aspiring	Male	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 11	Practicing	Female	26–35	Socio-economic
Participant 12	Aspiring	Female	18–25	Socio-economic
Participant 13	Aspiring	Female	18–25	Socio-economic

Three participants focused on environmental issues, and all three of them were practicing social entrepreneurs.

Support Mechanisms for Social Entrepreneurs

An analysis of the data produced 13 themes related to support mechanisms for social entrepreneurs, as depicted in Figure 1. The following subsections discuss and interpret these themes.

Access to Funding. Providing access to funding emerged as one of the most critical support mechanisms that could help foster the emergence and growth of social enterprises in Mpumalanga Province. Both practicing and aspiring entrepreneurs identified limited access to funding as a major obstacle in this respect. The theme of access to funding appeared 20 times in the coded data. One participant mentioned, "I struggled for a good three years, going to a financial institution like the NYDA to look for funding until I had to start my business with no funding" (Participant 4, Focus Group 1). Participants in Focus Group 2 echoed similar sentiments: "It is extremely difficult to find a funder who is willing to invest in our social mission-driven ventures, especially considering the low levels of profits that we achieve" (Participant 7, Focus Group 2). Other participants expressed the need for grants and/or low interest loans for social entrepreneurs. As one participant explained, "We need access to government grants and low-interest loans to grow our businesses" (Participant 4, Focus Group 1).

These perspectives underscore the necessity to establish funding platforms aligned with the goals of social entrepreneurs and the social mission-driven nature of their business.

Mentorship. Participants emphasized the significance of mentorship in their social entrepreneurship endeavors. They observed that it is crucial not only to have a mentor but also to ensure that the mentor understands the concept and operations of social entrepreneurship. Participants argued that "having a mentor that understands the operations and dynamics of social entrepreneurship is very important" (Participant 1, Focus Group 1).

The role of mentorship in the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship appeared in 15 parts of the coded data, showing how participants value it as a catalyst for development.



Figure 1. Support Mechanisms for Social Entrepreneurs

While most participants stressed the importance of mentorship, a few stated that “getting a suitable mentor for a social enterprise is very difficult, as there are quite a few experienced individuals involved in this space” (Participant 8, Focus Group 2).

As a solution to the mentorship challenges, participants proposed the creation of information-sharing events and mentorship programs that would pair emerging social entrepreneurs with experienced ones.

Alignment of Support Structures. Participants in both focus groups expressed significant concerns over the misalignment of various social entrepreneurship support structures. One participant described it as follows:

So, one of the things I just picked up in this discussion is the misalignment of structures and priorities. It seems to me that there is a misalignment of priorities. I think Siphe also mentioned it. I think we need to share goals to achieve what entrepreneurs need. We need to really align our varieties as a government. Not just government, but civil society and higher institutions, all of those. (Participant 6, Focus Group 2).

Participants highlighted the need for alignment and coordination among existing structures – such as government agencies, NGOs, and private sector organizations – to support social entrepreneurship in Mpumalanga. Participants' quotes in this regard include: "We need a one-stop shop for social entrepreneurs, where we can access all the resources and support we need" (Participant 5, Focus Group 1), "There's a lot of duplication of efforts among organizations; we need to work together more effectively" (Participant 6, Focus Group 1), and "Government agencies, NGOs, and private sector organizations need to be on the same page to provide comprehensive support to social entrepreneurs" (Participant 11, Focus Group 2).

Participants' insights demonstrate the need to establish a social entrepreneurship hub that would serve as a one-stop resource center for funding and services. Furthermore, participants suggested considering a collaborative framework that brings together government agencies, NGOs, and private sector organizations to support social entrepreneurship. Another recommendation concerned creating communication channels to facilitate information sharing and coordination among stakeholders.

Community Support. Participants reported that support from the communities they serve can make a significant difference in their businesses. They argued that community support could aid in fostering a conducive environment for social entrepreneurship to thrive. One participant pointed out that "the community needs to understand and support our social enterprises" (Participant 10, Focus Group 2). Similarly, another participant emphasized that "the support that we get from communities that we serve helps us to stay motivated." (Participant 13, Focus Group 2).

In this regard, participants suggested engaging with the community through events, workshops, and meetings to raise awareness and build support for social entrepreneurship. In addition, participants highlighted the need for mentorship and role models from within the community to inspire and guide social entrepreneurs. Participants also proposed establishing community-based incubation programs to provide resources and support to social entrepreneurs.

Collaboration. Collaboration with fellow social entrepreneurs, other private businesses, and various community stakeholders emerged as a tool to foster social entrepreneurship growth in Mpumalanga Province. As participants said, "we need to collaborate amongst ourselves as social entrepreneurs as well as work with various stakeholders to capitalize on our combined strengths" (Participant 2, Focus Group 1). In this respect, participants stressed the value of collaboration among social entrepreneurs, stakeholders, and organizations to leverage resources, expertise, and networks in supporting social entrepreneurship in Mpumalanga. The following quotes extracted from the focus group data illustrate this point: "We need to work together to achieve greater impact" (Participant 4, Focus Group 1), "Collaboration is key to accessing resources and expertise" (Participant 9, Focus Group 2), and "We can learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses" (Participant 12, Focus Group 2).

These expressions underline the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders to benefit from resources and support while facilitating the co-creation of social innovations. Therefore, establishing collaborative platforms for social entrepreneurs, community stakeholders, government agencies, and private sector organizations to share knowledge and expertise remains essential to this process.

Private Sector Support. Participants also identified private sector support as a key mechanism for the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in Mpumalanga Province. They noted that this type of support opens access to the market, resources, expertise, and networks that drive success for social enterprises in the region. Several participants shared the following: “Partnerships with the private sector help reach new customers and new markets” (Participant 2, Focus Group 1), “Private sector organizations provide mentorship and expertise that is critical for business survival” (Participant 6, Focus Group 1), and “We need access to funding and resources from the private sector to grow our business” (Participant 9, Focus Group 2).

These statements showcase the importance of the private sector in supporting the growth of social entrepreneurship in the province.

Regulatory and Policy Support. Participants expressed frustration with policies that do not support social entrepreneurs and called for regulations aligned with the intentions and goals of social entrepreneurship. As one participant explained, “It is difficult to navigate the regulatory requirements for social entrepreneurs” (Participant 3, Focus Group 1). Another said that “we need guidance on how to comply with government policies to gain access to government grants” (Participant 4, Focus Group 1). In this regard, participants emphasized the need to create a dedicated office to assist social entrepreneurs in navigating regulatory and policy hurdles.

Government Support. Participants unanimously agreed that the government, through its various departments and agencies, could play a central role in driving the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in the province. They believed that government support creates an enabling environment for social entrepreneurship to thrive in Mpumalanga. Some quotes from the focus groups include: “Government policies and programs can help us access funding and resources” (Participant 4, Focus Group 1), “We need government support to navigate regulatory requirements” (Participant 7, Focus Group 2), and “Government can provide infrastructure and facilities to support our work” (Participant 8, Focus Group 2).

Participants suggested that the government can provide policies and regulations that support social entrepreneurship. Furthermore, they proposed tailored funding and resources for various government agencies and social entrepreneurs. In addition, participants recommended that the government ensure infrastructure and facilities to support social entrepreneurship in the region.

Networking. Participants identified networking as a mechanism to foster collaboration and the sharing of ideas. They pointed to networking’s role in connecting social entrepreneurs with resources, expertise, and opportunities in Mpumalanga. One participant expressed that “Networking events helped us connect with potential partners and investors” (Participant 1, Focus Group 1). Another mentioned that “We need a platform to connect with other social entrepreneurs and share experiences. In addition, having networks can help us access new markets and customers” (Participant 9, Focus Group 2).

These perspectives highlight the need to establish a networking platform for social entrepreneurs to connect with resources, expertise, and opportunities. Both online and in-person

platforms can facilitate networking and connection, advancing the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in the province.

Research and Innovation. Participants believed that platforms supporting research and innovation, particularly social innovation, function as another mechanism to foster the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in Mpumalanga. They indicated that research and innovation play a critical role in developing new solutions and improving existing ones to address social problems in the region. As one participant said, “we need research to identify and understand the social problems we are trying to solve so that we come up with sustainable solutions” (Participant 6, Focus Group 1). Another stressed the importance of research and innovation: “We need to stay up to date with the latest trends and technologies to remain relevant” (Participant 10, Focus Group 2).

These sentiments demonstrate the need to open research and innovation centers and provide support for social entrepreneurs to develop innovative solutions to community problems.

Capacity Building. Education and training emerged as important tools for raising awareness and building capacity among both practicing and aspiring social entrepreneurs. One participant explained:

So, it becomes challenging to decentralize this intended knowledge or training, but there is a need to mobilize young people and use resources such as the University of Mpumalanga to provide training and knowledge access, create awareness, and inspire young people to engage in social entrepreneurship. (Participant 5, Focus Group 1).

Participants pointed out that the province already holds capacity-building resources that can effectively strengthen social entrepreneurship among the youth. Therefore, it remains important to create opportunities for individuals to learn about social entrepreneurship, especially by using the province’s existing resources.

Civil Society Support. Participants noted that civil society organizations such as churches and NGOs can support the emergence and growth of social entrepreneurship in the region. They recognized that civil society organizations play a crucial role in offering support, resources, and advocacy for social entrepreneurs in Mpumalanga. One participant highlighted this by saying, “my church has been very instrumental in providing us with resources and support. We need more partnerships with civil society organizations to expose our social enterprises” (Participant 1, Focus Group 1). Another participant added, “civil society organizations can help us advocate for policies that support social entrepreneurship.” (Participant 3, Focus Group 1).

Thus, it remains crucial to create platforms and opportunities for social entrepreneurs to connect and interact with civil society organizations.

Access to Resources. Overall, participants emphasized that a lack of access to resources, such as land, presents a significant obstacle to the growth of their social enterprises. In this respect, they suggested creating a centralized platform to offer easier access to resources, funding, and other services for social entrepreneurs in the province. One participant expressed these challenges clearly:

South Africa was dual, so some developed in more affluent areas as opposed to others, and because of that, access to resources remains a big problem for marginalized communities ... generally, the social context of those people is not the same. So, I believe that the people who need social intervention are those who are perhaps on the periphery of the margin when it comes to resource access. (Participant 3, Focus Group 1).

Therefore, it remains important to create platforms that improve access to resources.

Discussions and Managerial Implications

The article presents a qualitative study that explored the innovative mechanisms to support the development of social entrepreneurship in Mpumalanga. The study used focus group discussions to gather data from social entrepreneurs, stakeholders, and experts in the field. As a result, it identified 13 mechanisms that could help foster the emergence and growth of this entrepreneurship within Mpumalanga Province. The themes that emerged from the data include access to funding, mentorship, alignment of structures, community support, collaboration, private sector support, policy support, government support, networking, research and innovation, capacity building, civil society support, and resource access.

The findings suggest that access to funding constitutes a critical factor in supporting social entrepreneurship. This aligns with studies such as Khan et al. (2020). In general, literature stresses the importance of access to finance for entrepreneurial ventures (for example, see Odeyemi et al., 2024). This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical data that underlines the crucial role of financial access for social enterprises. In fact, evidence presented in this article confirms the statement that “Social enterprises’ survival, economic success, and the scale of their potential social impact depend on their access to (financial) resources” (Schätzlein et al., 2023, p. 176). Given the socially driven mission of social entrepreneurs, it becomes important to consider mechanisms such as grants or low-interest loans, as recommended by study participants.

The study goes beyond these well-known insights by introducing a nuanced, contextualized view of resource productivity. Rather than assuming that resource access alone guarantees innovation, as donor-driven models often problematically suggest (Morrar & Sultan, 2020), the findings show that innovation most likely emerges when such resources remain embedded in local knowledge systems, governed by community-driven accountability, and aligned with clearly defined social impact goals. This represents a shift from top-down support models to ecosystem-based thinking, in line with Drucker’s notion of productivity as output innovation, not input maximization (Nordling, 2024).

Mentorship also served as a key theme, highlighting the importance of guidance and support for social entrepreneurs. The study findings emphasize the value of tailored mentorship from fellow social entrepreneurs who understand the field. What stands out in this study is the call for “reciprocal mentorship,” where social entrepreneurs mentor each other through peer-led learning circles and informal, trust-based support systems. This approach challenges traditional hierarchical mentorship structures and instead promotes horizontal learning as a vehicle for innovation and shared leadership. This underscores the significance of mentorship found in previous studies, such as Drencheva and Yew (2023) and Wettermark and Berglund (2022).

Moreover, private sector support, policy support, civil society support, and government support proved crucial for creating an enabling environment for social entrepreneurship (OECD, 2019). This study goes further by highlighting the need to align these support structures. Therefore, for Mpumalanga and Africa to achieve the much-needed improvement in the emergence and growth of social enterprises, participants’ observation that existing support structures for entrepreneurship do not match social entrepreneurs’ goals and priorities deserves more attention. Rather than treating these forms of support as separate silos, the study proposes the co-design of multi-stakeholder impact compacts – locally negotiated frameworks that embed shared goals and allow adaptive governance models that evolve with

changing community needs (Ambani et al., 2021). This offers a more dynamic and responsive public governance model, moving beyond static policy instruments.

Furthermore, community support and collaboration emerged as essential for social entrepreneurship growth. These themes also appear in a study by Certo et al. (2018). The insights from the focus group discussions emphasize that community support is crucial for the co-creation of social innovation. This matters because co-created social innovation has proven effective in delivering practical solutions to community problems while contributing to positive reception and collaboration with the community (Meister Broekema et al., 2023). Notably, participants proposed using digital storytelling and community mapping as bottom-up tools to reveal latent community assets and underutilized knowledge systems – tools not yet widely adopted in current policy frameworks but offering promising routes for participatory innovation.

The emphasis on networking, research and innovation, capacity building, and other key themes also surfaced (European Commission, n.d.). While existing literature highlights the importance of these mechanisms, the empirical insights offered in this article further confirm that networking serves as a critical tool for building the much-needed social capital essential to the success of social entrepreneurs. At the same time, the significance of research, innovation, and capacity building remains clear. In line with the recommendations of Radosevic et al. (2023), this study also argues for the institutionalization of social innovation labs within universities to facilitate real-time prototyping and adaptive experimentation, moving beyond conventional training workshops toward dynamic spaces for iterative learning.

Overall, the study findings align with existing literature that stresses the need for a supportive ecosystem in which social entrepreneurship can thrive (Mair et al., 2016). The study contributes to this body of knowledge by underscoring the specific themes drawn from the lived experiences of social entrepreneurs within Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Crucially, it proposes contextually responsive mechanisms such as peer-to-peer mentorship, adaptive support ecosystems, and participatory innovation platforms as alternatives to donor-centric, linear support models that have often fallen short in developing countries. This reimagined approach to supporting social entrepreneurship carries significant implications for how public policy can become more participatory, innovative, and grounded in local realities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The promising potential of social entrepreneurship as a tool for addressing socio-economic and environmental problems functions as an impetus for concerted efforts to identify and implement support mechanisms that can foster its emergence and growth. This remains critical, especially in light of the escalating challenges facing the world today. The findings suggest that policy interventions should prioritize strengthening these support mechanisms, including financial incentives, capacity-building programs, regulatory reforms, and the development of collaborative networks among stakeholders. While this study offers valuable insights, it focuses on qualitative data from focus groups with social entrepreneurs in Mpumalanga Province only. Further research could incorporate quantitative methods and expand the scope to other regions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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