

Social entrepreneurship: empirical evidence on its contribution to the realization of the sustainable development goals in Uganda

Realization of
the SDGs in
Uganda

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Received 3 February 2023
Revised 7 April 2023
30 September 2023
10 December 2023
22 January 2024
Accepted 24 January 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the contribution of social entrepreneurship to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Uganda.

Design/methodology/approach – We employed a qualitative approach and a multiple-case design to engage 20 participants. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather the perceptions and views of the participants regarding the study phenomenon.

Findings – Study findings indicate that social entrepreneurs support a number of people and undertake activities that solve social, environmental and economic problems. However, environmental issues receive less focus when compared to other sustainability aspects. It is also evident that social entrepreneurs are financially constrained with limited managerial skills, undermining their potential to fulfill their social mission. Despite these challenges, social entrepreneurs have significantly contributed to the attainment of SDGs 1, 4, 5, 8 and 10 in Uganda.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the existing literature on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. Specifically, it provides initial empirical evidence on the social entrepreneurial activities, the beneficiaries and challenges being addressed by social entrepreneurs and contribution to the attainment of the SDGs in Uganda.

Keywords Social entrepreneurship, Social entrepreneurial activities, Beneficiaries, Challenges being addressed, Contribution to SDGs 1, 4, 5 and 10, Uganda

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim at, among other things, combating poverty, hunger, gender discrimination and inequality (SDGs 1, 4, 5 and 10). The presence of such global initiatives motivates academics and practitioners to act and propose strategies for accomplishing the SDGs (Hák *et al.*, 2016). One approach is for scholars to undertake studies promoting the concept of social entrepreneurship (Rosca *et al.*, 2020). Social entrepreneurship entails the activities of individuals and groups (social entrepreneurs) who

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The authors would like to thank the administration of Makerere University Research and Innovation Fund and the Ugandan government for their support of the study that led to this paper. The authors also thank the anonymous reviewers for their contribution to this publication.



identify gaps in the social system as an opportunity to serve marginalized groups of individuals in entrepreneurial ways (Björk *et al.*, 2014, p. 35). Through their creative and innovative operations, social entrepreneurs undertake actions that curtail a number of social problems like unemployment, crimes, poverty, illiteracy and environmental degradation that are presently common in Uganda (Nsereko, 2020). This is likely to enhance access to education and health and create more decent work opportunities for the social and economic development of the country.

Currently, social entrepreneurship scholars have conducted several studies in the Ugandan context. For example, Nsereko (2020) investigated the contribution of competencies, entrepreneurial tenacity and social entrepreneurial actions. In the same context, Ntamu *et al.* (2021) profiled a case of social enterprises establishing and sustaining social values through collaborative efforts. Palacios-Marqués *et al.* (2019) further explored the relationship between social entrepreneurship and organizational performance. However, to our knowledge, little is known about the social entrepreneurial activities undertaken to address community-based problems, the beneficiaries of social entrepreneurship and their contribution to the realization of the SDGs using evidence from Uganda.

Moreover, existing studies (Abaho *et al.*, 2017) are quantitative in nature, which limits the social entrepreneur's ability to share their knowledge, experience and insights about social entrepreneurship. Likewise, most extant studies on social entrepreneurship are based on secondary data (Bansal *et al.*, 2019; Saebi *et al.*, 2019). However, calls for further research on the contribution of social entrepreneurship to the achievement of sustainable development in developing countries are common and evident (Bansal *et al.*, 2019).

In addressing gaps in the extant literature and calls for further research on social entrepreneurship, this study explored the contribution of social entrepreneurship to the realization of the SDGs in Uganda, with a focus on addressing two specific research questions.

- RQ1. What social entrepreneurial activities are undertaken to address social problems in Uganda?
- RQ2. To what extent does social entrepreneurship contribute to realization of SDGs in Uganda?

2. Literature review

2.1 Sustainable development

Sustainable development is conceptualized as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This means that economies all over the world should strive to ensure development that addresses social, economic and environmental needs to benefit current and future generations by implementing the 17 SDGs. These include the need to end poverty (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), gender inequality (SDG 5), creating decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and reducing inequality (SDG 10). As such, all United Nation (UN) member countries, including Uganda, are mandated to develop programs and initiatives aimed at implementing and achieving the SDGs (Vinuesa *et al.*, 2020). As such, the government of Uganda, based on the SDGs, developed the 3rd National Development Plan (Nhamo *et al.*, 2019) and the current Parish Development Model (Ministry of Local Government, 2021). Despite these interventions, it is evident that social and environmental problems have persisted in Uganda (Abenawe, 2022), creating room for the development of social entrepreneurship (Gupta *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Social entrepreneurship

Globally, people are experiencing social, environmental and economic challenges and entrepreneurs are trying to devise varied ways of mitigating these (Gupta *et al.*, 2020). Unlike

traditional entrepreneurship that focus on profit maximization, social entrepreneurship aims at tackling social problems that include poverty, unemployment, poor education and health services, child abuse, early marriages and environmental degradation. Thus, popularizing the concept of social entrepreneurship has attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers. As such, we note from extant literature that the debate over the concept of social entrepreneurship continues with researchers having differing perspectives.

Accordingly, Lumpkin *et al.* (2013) present social entrepreneurship as the process of creating social value in which resources are combined with innovative ideas to meet social needs, promote social change, or develop new businesses. Kamaludin *et al.* (2021) noted that social entrepreneurship is based on the principle of social change, innovation and accountability with both social and commercial goals. As such, Morales *et al.* (2021) document different forms of social entrepreneurship to include for-profit (commercial and hybrid) and nonprofit social enterprises. Specifically, for-profit (commercial and hybrid) social enterprises aim at maximizing profits while providing solutions to community-based problems, while nonprofit enterprises on the other hand mainly focus on the development of innovative solutions to societal problems.

To date, scholars have conducted a number of studies on social entrepreneurship (Nsereko, 2020; Hsu and Wang, 2019; Luc, 2018; Saebi *et al.*, 2019; Gupta *et al.*, 2020). However, most of these studies are based on a literature review, and the empirical ones (Hsu and Wang, 2019) mostly employ a quantitative approach with a focus on students (Luc, 2018) who are just developing social entrepreneurial intentions. Therefore, little is known about the social entrepreneurial activities undertaken to address the challenges faced by marginalized people in Uganda. Based on the foregoing discussion, we adopt a qualitative approach to address the research question.

RQ1: What social entrepreneurial activities are undertaken to address social problems in Uganda?

2.3 Social entrepreneurship and sustainable development

Social entrepreneurship has the potential to foster sustainable development that intends to enable the current and the future generations to meet their needs. Specifically, Arend (2023) indicates that social entrepreneurship provides innovative solutions to burning society problems like hunger, poverty, education and health. These problems are evident in developing economies such as Uganda, where marginalized populations such as the widows, orphans, children and women have limited access to essential services that are scarce and costly. This is in line with SDGs 1, 2, 3 and 4 that are geared towards improving the social-economic conditions of marginalized populations across the globe.

Similarly, Nsereko (2020) reported that a large number of individuals are initiating social enterprises in the fields of education, health, environmental protection, sanitation and eradicating drug abuse among marginalized people in East Africa with the goal of improving their wellbeing. Related results are evident in other studies (Frouharfar *et al.*, 2019; Al-Qudah *et al.*, 2022). However, Al-Qudah *et al.* (2022), for example, based their findings on secondary data from the regional comprehensive economic partnership (RCEP) countries, while Méndez-Picazo *et al.* (2021) focused on 15 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries between 2015 and 2016, and Frouharfar *et al.* (2019) conducted a literature-based study.

Moreover, contradictory findings are also common, as reported by Obinna and Blessing (2014), who revealed that social entrepreneurship does not contribute to sustainable development. This disagreement could be explained by the fact that the authors based their results on simple correlational analysis, which limited their potential to comprehensively examine the contribution of social entrepreneurs to sustainable development. Furthermore,

the study was conducted in Nigeria, where entrepreneurial activities are generally low compared to Uganda, where entrepreneurs exhibit high creative and innovative potential to support sustainable development. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study sought to address the following research question:

RQ2: To what extent does social entrepreneurship contribute to realization of SDGs in Uganda?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Given the limited knowledge about the study phenomenon, we adopted a qualitative approach to engage social entrepreneurs in Kampala, who are part of the social enterprise forum that inspires, transforms and builds the capacity of social entrepreneurs who are working with marginalized communities in Africa. Specifically, a multiple-case design was adopted to engage 20 participants, including 19 social entrepreneurs and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the social enterprise forum (Miller *et al.*, 2018). This design involves the investigation of phenomena through examining several individual cases (social entrepreneurs) with the goal of comparing and contrasting different cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). We conducted semi-structured interviews in the English language with the aid of recorder and note books.

3.2 Sample selection

In this study, 20 participants were engaged. These included the CEO of the social enterprise forum and 19 social entrepreneurs from the membership of the forum who were selected using homogenous purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, only members of the forum who operate in Kampala, were considered (Andrade, 2021). This technique enabled the researchers to get the right participants. Using an introduction letter and a list of social entrepreneurs from the social enterprise forum, participants were contacted and appointments were secured to meet them at their convenience. During the data collection process, the point of saturation was attained during the 20th interview, and at this stage, we had gathered sufficient data to draw the necessary conclusions, and additional data collection was not yielding new insights relevant for the study.

3.3 Reliability

In this study, intra-coder and inter-coder reliability was employed. In particular, intra-coder reliability involved each author independently developing a scheme of codes from the transcripts in order to generate a more complete set of codes that represent the collected data (Moore *et al.*, 2019). While inter-coder reliability involved both authors harmonizing the codes generated during the process (Hughes and Garrett, 1990). This enabled the authors to discuss the independently generated codes and agree on the codes with the goal of achieving consistency in the coding process for reliable and accurate representation of the data.

3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis process started by transcribing the views of the key informants as provided by the participants during the face-to-face interviews that lasted for about 45 min. Data analysis utilized Atlas TI software, which chronologically synthesized the 20 interviews using the generated themes and codes (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). As such, we followed Gioia *et al.* (2013)'s bottom-up approach to allow the data to speak for itself. During the analysis process, the first and second authors coded the interviews independently to generate the first-

order codes. For the second-order codes, all authors participated in multiple rounds of iteration and debate concerning the selection of the second-order themes. This guaranteed that each second-order topic represented relevant and homogeneous sets of first-order codes, and those superfluous themes were eliminated. The coding process led to three aggregated categories that included social entrepreneurial activities, social entrepreneurial beneficiaries and the contribution of social entrepreneurship to the realization of SDGs, as indicated in [Table 1](#).

3.5 Ethical consideration

During the course of this study, careful adherence to ethical principles was maintained. Specifically, the study was approved and cleared to be conducted by the authors University Research and Innovation Fund with support from the Government of Uganda. We also took measures to uphold the privacy of the participants by refraining from collecting any personally identifiable information as well as assigning each of them numerical identifiers. Likewise, all participants were engaged after providing their informed consent.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Social entrepreneurial activities

In addressing [RQ1](#), analysis of the study findings resulted in the emergence of two subthemes, as presented below.

4.1.1 Theme 1: activities undertaken. 4.1.1.1 Training. Engagement with all 20 participants shows that training is one of the core activities undertaken by social enterprises in Uganda. In particular, social entrepreneurs train students, youths, girls, women, farmers and some other social entrepreneurs. It is also important to note that customized training programs are designed by the social entrepreneur to address the specific needs of different beneficiaries. For example, the social enterprise forum designed an accelerator program that develops the capacity of social entrepreneurs in the areas of marketing, finance, management and governance to enable them to offer holistic services to their target audience, as indicated in [Table 1](#) by cases 9 and 13.

4.1.1.2 Agricultural value addition. It is evident that agriculture is the backbone of Ugandan economy. As indicated in [Table 1](#) by cases 8 and 11, social entrepreneurs are directly engaged in agricultural production. This is intended to generate revenue to sustain their social ventures, whose objective is to solve community-based problems while empowering community members for sustainability purposes. Besides their participation, they encourage the farming community to embrace value additions. Through processing agricultural produce to gain more value like maize into maize flour, coffee beans into coffee, milk being processed into cheese, yogurt and ghee to increase their income and generate more employment opportunities for the county's youthful population.

4.1.1.3 Providing financial support. The study findings show that, in addition to social entrepreneurs assisting other stakeholders in their respective jurisdictions, they are also assisted by other entrepreneurial eco-system actors. The case in point is a social enterprise forum, which provides the necessary capital to enhance and sustain their operations. In our interaction, the Chief Executive Officer of the social enterprise forum reported that they mobilized their members and started a Savings and Credit Cooperative that enables them to obtain credit at favorable interest rates (see Cases 12 and 10, [Table 1](#)).

4.1.1.4 Marketing. The study results reveal marketing as another activity undertaken by social entrepreneurs. Specifically, entrepreneurs supporting women, girls and youth are helping them to market their products using different social media platforms. For example, a social entrepreneur developed an online marketing shop, which is a digital marketing

First-order code	Second-order themes	Aggregated categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We developed an accelerator program, where social entrepreneurs go through a six-month program to train them in the different aspects of managing their businesses (Case 9) 	Training	Social entrepreneurial activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I started an in-service program for nursery teachers because I realized that many of the teachers I was getting were not qualified teachers (Case 13) 	Agricultural value addition	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I started growing coffee on 5 acres and during that process I employed five people in the garden, so I provide employment to people in the community (Case 8) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have taught some of the youths how to add value to agricultural products like ghee, coffee and honey, which they pack (Case 11) 	Providing financial support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the moment it has 3,000 members with loan portfolio of one billion here in Luzira and employing over 15 young people (Case 12) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We help them with the basic things to do with their businesses, like research, developing their products, getting their first customers, etc. (Case 10) 	Marketing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building the online store for fashion is one of the simplest options I have available to support women and girls (Case 2) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most of the young people have engaged in IT-related activities where they have innovated applications that are being used online to track businesses and support their marketing operations. (Case 7) 	Reforestation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are also involved in afforestation since we work with cars that negatively affect the environment through carbon emissions (Case 5) 	Women and girls	Social entrepreneurship beneficiaries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With me, my interest in the industry is to change the narrative for girls and women in fashion to have their hopes and dreams in fashion come alive (Case 2) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustainability of those children especially girls in the schools is also a problem that is why we have high rates of school drop outs (Case 18) 	Teachers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many of the teachers who are teaching are really untrained. So, that gap really motivated me to see how to integrate the in-service teacher training program so that we can have teachers who are really qualified (Case 3) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> But also our children believe in the teachers so if they're not well educated, you'll get garbage in, baggage out (Case 3) 	Students and youth	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The activities we do are basically car repairs and on the aspect of social entrepreneurship we do work with the youths. We train the youths and release them into the market (Case 17) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To me we all know that the elephant in the room is unemployment that is brought about by lack of creativity among the youths (Case 4) 	Farmers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our farmers really have a very bad nutritional lifestyle. Though they work very hard, they usually take one meal at 3 p.m. and that meal is not balanced at all. (Case 18) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most farmers also continue to engage in subsistence agriculture with limited value addition and the skills needed to commercialize agriculture and market their output. (Case 19) 	Social entrepreneurs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One of the things that inspire our mission at the social entrepreneur forum has always been the limited access to finance by most of the social entrepreneurs. (Case 14) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other social entrepreneurs in Uganda lack systems and policies including human resource, finance and marketing systems. (Case 15) 	The environment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We understand that we work with cars and cars are negative for the environment through carbon emissions. (Case 5) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> So, out of our profits, we have that strategy of buying land and planting trees as a way of replenishing the environment. (Case 5) 	Parents and children	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> So, privatization has come up where we think starting up these private schools can help to fuel that gap which is left by the government schools. (Case 7) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are many people in the communities who cannot afford the high sounding schools and can at least bring their children to schools which are charging low fees. (Case 9) 		

Table 1.
The code structure and summary of the results

(continued)

First-order code	Second-order themes	Aggregated categories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the moment it has 3,000 members with loan portfolio of one billion here in Luzira and employing over 15 young people (<i>case 8</i>) All these social entrepreneurs under the social enterprise forum who are gathered here share knowledge and technology transfer that transforms the society. (<i>Case 5</i>) 	Economic contribution	Contribution to the realization of SDGs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without education, an economy cannot really develop. So starting up these schools is really playing a big role in providing education since the school is the first place where everyone gets knowledge, which knowledge is a tool which bridges people to get employment (<i>Case 4</i>) 	Social contribution	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When we consider what happened during COVID-19, most people got depressed, the business owners didn't know what to do, it is the social entrepreneurs who supported them. (<i>Case 8 and 9</i>) We understand that some business activities negatively affect the environment through carbon emissions. (<i>Case 6</i>) So, out of our profits, we have that strategy of buying land and planting trees as a way of replenishing the environment. (<i>Case 6</i>) 	Environmental contribution	

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 1.

platform for women and girls in tailoring to market their products. This has provided their beneficiaries with a ready market, ultimately sustaining the operations of their businesses (see case 2 and 7) in Table 1.

4.1.1.5 Reforestation. In fostering environmental conservation, social entrepreneurs specifically in case 5 are currently engaged in reforestation, an activity that involves replanting trees in areas that are environmentally constrained. The motivation behind this action is that participants understand the value of the environment and that their business activities cause severe damage. For example, our interaction with the social entrepreneurs who repair cars indicates that their activities emit carbon monoxide that is not only dangerous to the natural environment but also to the general society.

4.1.2 Theme 2: beneficiaries and challenges addressed by social entrepreneurship. 4.1.2.1 Girls and women. The study results show girls and women as part of the beneficiaries of social entrepreneurship in Uganda. Social entrepreneurs 2 and 18 indicated that girls in Uganda face several challenges that revolve around early marriages, school dropouts, rape, defilement and child labor. Likewise, most women in Uganda have become single mothers with home-based responsibilities. In addition, women were noted to have limited access to collateral securities that could enable them to access financial support that is vital in unlocking their entrepreneurial potential with the goal of enhancing their wellbeing and that of the general community.

4.1.2.2 Teachers. In the conversations held with the participants, we noted that teachers facilitating at different levels of education, ranging from lower primary to the university level, face varied challenges. However, Case 3 revealed that teachers at the lower levels are more challenged as compared to their counterparts at the university level. First, the supply of qualified nursery teachers is very limited and second, the few who are available lack the skills and competencies needed to effectively handle teaching and learning activities. As such, social entrepreneurs operating schools are trying to support them through the provision of opportunities for building their skill set with the goal of ensuring effective service delivery.

4.1.2.3 Students and youths. Engagement with the participants shows that students and youth are vital for the sustainable development of the country. However, we noted that they face a number of challenges, including unemployment and lack of the skills needed in the labor market. As a result, entrepreneurship lecturers (see cases 4 and 8 in Table 1) have decided to make the teaching of entrepreneurship more practical. In our interaction, it is evident that, besides class work, students are challenged to identify feasible ideas that can be

turned into viable businesses with the goal of starting their businesses while at the university or immediately after campus.

4.1.2.4 Parents and children. Our results also singled out parents and children as another set of beneficiaries. We noted that parents in Uganda are enthusiastic about educating their children with the goal of helping them in the future. However, there are very few government-aided primary and secondary schools with limited capacity to accommodate all children in different communities in Uganda, as opined by Cases 7 and 9 in [Table 1](#). On the other hand, most private school proprietors are profit-oriented and eventually charge high fees that most parents from marginalized backgrounds cannot afford. Thus, schools established with a social mission bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in order to enable children from poor families to also access education services.

4.1.2.5 Farmers. The findings present farmers as another stakeholder benefiting from the operations of social entrepreneurs in Uganda. In the interviews with Cases 18 and 19, it was noted that agriculture significantly contributes to the growth of Uganda's economy. This influenced many social entrepreneurs to work with the farming community, especially in a rural context. Further interactions with social entrepreneurs show that while farming is vital, farmers face a number of challenges centered on poor nutrition, low-value additions to their products, limited markets and entrepreneurial skills.

4.1.2.6 Social entrepreneurs. Interaction with key informants shows that, as with other stakeholders, social entrepreneurs face unique challenges while offering services that are geared towards societal transformation. An analysis of the transcripts shows that social entrepreneurs have limited access to finance, is poor and at times feel hopeless given that others look to them for support, as indicated by Cases 15 and 14 in [Table 1](#). It is also evident that some social enterprises lack systems and policies, including human resources, finance, marketing, procurement and general management, that demoralize their ability to organize their little resources to effectively and efficiently serve the community.

4.1.2.7 The environment. The study findings also show that the environment has to a certain extent benefited from the operations of Uganda's social entrepreneurs. Analysis of the interviews demonstrates that the business community in Uganda has contributed much to the degradation of the natural environment. In particular, social entrepreneurs operating car garages shared evidence showing that the process of car repair and servicing emits dangerous gases into the natural environment (see Case 5). Likewise, the quality of life of people living in such surroundings is greatly affected, triggering them to engage in actions that have a net-positive impact on the natural environment while preserving societal wellbeing.

Study findings on [RQ1](#) indicate that the current operations of social entrepreneurs are centered on the activities, beneficiaries and problems being addressed with the aim of mitigating social, economic and environmental problems faced by different stakeholders. The findings of this study rhyme well with [Nsereko \(2020\)](#), who revealed that a large number of individuals are launching social enterprises in the domains of education, health, environmental protection, sanitation and drug misuse eradication to benefit marginalized people in East Africa. Likewise, [Arend \(2023\)](#) revealed that social entrepreneurship offers new solutions to pressing societal issues such as hunger, poverty, education and health. This is further in agreement with [Lumpkin et al. \(2013\)](#)'s conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as the process of creating social value through the combination of resources and innovative ideas to satisfy social needs and promote social change.

4.2 Social entrepreneurship and sustainable development of Uganda's economy

Regarding [RQ2](#), the study results show that social entrepreneurs contribute to the economic, social and environmental transformation of the country, as explained in the following subsections.

4.2.1 Theme 3: economic contribution. 4.2.1.1 Creation of employment opportunities. Our results further demonstrate that social entrepreneurs have done a lot to create decent work opportunities for the youthful population in Uganda. In their operations, social entrepreneurs are currently training the youth in the skills needed by employers; others are equipped with the practical skills needed to start their own businesses instead of looking for jobs, as opined by Cases 3 in Table 1. In addition, some social entrepreneurs provide startup capital that is vital for the youth to start and sustainably operate their ventures. This has eventually made youth in Uganda more productive, reducing cases of drug abuse and other indiscipline, thus contributing to SDGs 1 and 5 since both female and male employees get equal opportunities to participate in the labor market.

4.2.1.2 Provision of financial support. Further engagement with key informants revealed that there are some social enterprises that have adopted a cooperative business model. In this model, social enterprises bring together members operating various businesses purposefully to promote a saving and investment culture. In return, members receive startup capital and others access more finances for business growth. Unlike bank loans, that are very costly and require possession of collateral, membership is the collateral for one to get funding from the social enterprise and interests are generally affordable. As a result, Case 12 indicated that many entrepreneurs in Uganda have capital and are operating sustainable ventures that are offering subsidized services and creating employment opportunities as a pathway for creating decent work opportunities to catalyze economic growth (SDG 8).

4.2.1.3 Knowledge and technology transfer. Results show that social entrepreneurship is vital in promoting the transfer of knowledge as well as technology. Specifically, some social enterprises bring together entrepreneurs, giving them a platform to share knowledge on different business aspects, as per Case 8. These revolve around identifying feasible and viable business opportunities, marketing, production and financing opportunities. It is also important to note that other social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector, who promote commercialization, give the farming community access to relevant technology. This is in the form of machinery and resilient seeds that have greatly contributed to the transformation of agriculture and a general improvement in the quality of life for the farmers, contributing to a reduction in inequality by bridging the gap between the farming communities in the rural contexts with the urban dwellers in Uganda (SDG 10).

4.2.2 Theme 4: social contribution. 4.2.2.1 Promoting education. Interaction with entrepreneurs operating social enterprises indicates that they have invested in the education sector of the country. In their view, most private schools have become a serious business where the cardinal objective of most proprietors is to maximize profits by charging high school fees that are not affordable to most marginalized people. Therefore, social entrepreneurs (see Cases 1 and 4) have recently picked up interest in the education sector through establishing schools that either charge affordable fees or offer free service to benefit the young generation, their families and the general community. Because of their participation in the education sector, the number of youth graduating from different institutions of higher learning is positively increasing, and through applying their knowledge, they have become employed, while others have created employment opportunities for fellow youth in Uganda.

4.2.2.2 Restoring hope among people during and after the pandemic. In the interviews conducted with key informants operating social enterprises, it was noted that the outbreak of COVID-19 seriously affected all people in the country. Specifically, people were not working, yet their expenditures almost tripled due to the high medical bills. As a result, the government of Uganda solicited local and international support in a bid to help the struggling population. However, they reported that most people didn't get the support and eventually became depressed, stressed and fatigued. Thus, using their little resources, social entrepreneurs intervened and offered free counseling and guidance services with the goal of restoring hope

among the Ugandans, as reported in Cases 7 and 9. Entrepreneurs whose businesses collapsed were offered refresher courses in order to prepare them to get back into business. This is in line with SDG 4 that calls for greater access to and promotion of inclusive and equitable high-quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all including business owners and marginalized populations such as girls and children from low-income families.

4.2.3 Theme 5: environmental contribution. From the social entrepreneurs engaged, cases 1 and 6 revealed that besides the economic and social contribution, they have undertaken activities that have a net-positive impact on the environment. Specifically, social entrepreneurs have integrated reforestation as a strategic pathway to conserving the environment. Their goal is to plant more trees in environmentally affected areas, contributing to the achievement of SDG 13 by taking actions to facilitate climate protection and restore environmental value.

The synthesis of our results on RQ2 demonstrates that social entrepreneurs are making a significant contribution to supplementing government efforts to foster the social-economic transformation of Uganda's economy. As such, the contribution of social enterprises is evident in the social, environmental and economic spheres of the country, and this has enabled Uganda to register progress in realizing several SDGs that range from SDG 1 to 13. Specifically, social entrepreneurial activities support different marginalized people in Uganda, including girls, women and youth, by empowering them to acquire hands-on experience that is relevant to engaging in productive business activities to earn a living. This rhymes well with SDG 1, which seeks to end poverty by eliminating all instances of severe poverty, encompassing the absence of sufficient nourishment, access to uncontaminated potable water and adequate sanitary facilities, leaving no one behind. In the same vein, our findings are vital to achieving SDG 13, which presents the need to limit and adapt to climate change. This is achieved through undertaking actions such as re-afforestation as a strategic pathway for adding a net-positive impact on the natural environment.

Our findings are supported by [Méndez-Picazo *et al.* \(2021\)](#), who report that both traditional and social entrepreneurship impact and stimulate sustainable development. This implies that social, economic and environmental issues can be addressed through various forms of social entrepreneurship, including for-profit, nonprofit and hybrid social enterprises. In the same vein, [Arend \(2023\)](#) documented that social entrepreneurship provides innovative pathways to societal challenges like hunger, poverty, education and health. However, this is contrary to [Obinna and Blessing's \(2014\)](#) findings, which indicate that social entrepreneurship does not contribute to sustainable development. This disagreement could be explained by the fact that the authors based their results on correlational analysis, which limited their potential to comprehensively unpack and appreciate the reality embedded in the activities undertaken by social entrepreneurs and their eventual contribution to sustainable development.

5. Summary and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the contribution of social entrepreneurship to the realization of the SDGs in Uganda. This was realized through conducting interviews with social entrepreneurs who are members of the social enterprise forum. The study results show that social entrepreneurs undertake a number of activities revolving around training, marketing, and financing, among others, as pathways for providing solutions to social, economic, and environmental problems faced in Uganda. However, environmental issues receive less focus compared to other sustainability aspects. In addition, we found out that the operations of the social entrepreneurs are constrained by their poor financial position, lack of managerial skills and systems, as well as a policy to guide and inform their operations in Uganda. Despite this challenge, social entrepreneurial activities have significantly contributed to the attainment of SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 10 in Uganda.

6. Contribution and implication of the study

The current study makes important contributions to the existing body of knowledge on the concept of social entrepreneurship, with a focus on its activities and the extent to which social entrepreneurs contribute to the realization of the SDGs. This strengthens extant studies (Saebi *et al.*, 2019; Gupta *et al.*, 2020) that are literature review-based and the empirical ones, such as Nsereko (2020), which employed a quantitative approach, which limited the participants' potential to provide comprehensive information about the study phenomenon. In addition, the findings of this study invalidate Obinna and Blessing (2014)'s conclusions that social entrepreneurship does not contribute to sustainable development. The difference from our findings may be because simple correlations were used by the authors, unlike the current study, which is based on the views, knowledge and experiences of social entrepreneurs about the contribution of social entrepreneurship to the realization of the SDGs in Uganda. Likewise, academics from institutions of higher learning in the global south should support social entrepreneurs by training them to acquire relevant management skills needed to effectively and efficiently operate social enterprises.

Policymakers, especially the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives (MoTIC), should establish a social entrepreneurial fund to provide capital to social entrepreneurs at favorable interest rates with the goal of boosting their operations and contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. Furthermore, the MoTIC should develop a social enterprise policy to guide, inform and regulate the operations of social entrepreneurs in the country. The social enterprise forums in the global south should train social entrepreneurs and develop enterprise management systems that will enable them to effectively and efficiently operate their businesses while providing solutions to community-based problems. It is important for the social entrepreneurs to establish synergies with other stakeholders, including nongovernment organizations and business angels, to get adequate financial resources in order to better serve their beneficiaries. As our findings are based on twenty interviews, we suggest that future research can be done on large samples utilizing a mixed-methods design in Uganda and other contexts.

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