

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Saving the world through private-sector efficiency and local empowerment? Discursive legitimacy construction for social entrepreneurship in the Global South

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Abstract

In efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, social entrepreneurship has gained popularity as a vehicle for positive change in developing countries. The multiplicity of stakeholders, diverging sociocultural contexts and the hybrid mission complicate the process of legitimacy construction for social entrepreneurs as a basis for the acquisition of scarce resources. This study investigates how social entrepreneurs operating in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia tackle this challenge of bridging conflicting directions in discursive interaction with their European funders. We conduct a multimodal discourse analysis to uncover discursive strategies for legitimacy construction by combining linguistic data from interviews with visual data from social media accounts. Legitimacy construction, and thus resource acquisition, centers on three aspects which interlink pragmatic, cognitive and moral legitimacy: developing innovative solutions, mobilizing private-sector efficiency, and contributing to local empowerment. Presenting these aspects as mutually reinforcing overcomes contradictions between social and business logics and provides an expanded space for legitimacy construction of social entrepreneurship. Discursively constructing legitimacy around a 'glorified version of social entrepreneurship' mobilizes resources but downplays the risk of being an entrepreneur in the Global South, contributing to increasing corporatization of social purpose organizations.

KEYWORDS

discourse, Global South, legitimacy, resource acquisition, social entrepreneurship, sustainable development

1 | INTRODUCTION

In efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), increasing attention lies on private-sector engagement (Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2020). Social entrepreneurship, or "entrepreneurial activity with an embedded social purpose" (Austin et al., 2006, p. 1), in particular, has gained popularity as a vehicle for development and positive change in the Global Southⁱ (G20 Development Working Group, 2015; Chandra, 2018). Although the body of literature on social entrepreneurship is growing, research is still skewed toward European and US contexts, leading to a call to look at "social

entrepreneurship in countries and contexts about which we know relatively little, e.g. African nations" (Doherty et al., 2014, p. 429). The neglect is unfortunate given persistent inequality and poverty render the Global South and the African continent in particular a pertinent context for business and management research with a societal focus (Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018; Littlewood & Holt, 2018). Where private initiatives cater to basic needs, filling vacuums left by an absence of public action, social entrepreneurs face increased pressure and responsibility, but also higher competition for legitimacy and community acceptance (Thorgren & Omoredede, 2018). At the same time, access to finance remains a key challenge for

social entrepreneurs, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mirvis & Googins, 2018).

Legitimacy, the perception of an entity's or approach's rightfulness against a system of institutionalized norms, has been proposed as a central factor to resource acquisition and organizations' survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Owing to a multiplicity of stakeholders and conflicting social and business logics, social entrepreneurship as an emergent organizational field has been found to escape traditional isomorphic pressures (Borzaga & Defourny, 2004; Nicholls, 2010; Sud et al., 2009; Yang & Wu, 2016). This leaves room for agency: Actors employ legitimation strategies by purposefully highlighting some aspects while omitting others depending on their importance to relevant stakeholders (Rueede & Kreutzer, 2015). Yet, strategies to construct legitimacy for social entrepreneurship beyond norm conformity are under-researched (Dacin et al., 2011).

Analyzing legitimation processes provides insights into social entrepreneurship's conceptualization and justification for their sustainable missions. Furthermore, relationships between social entrepreneurs and their diverse technical and financial supporters are central to legitimation (Weidner et al., 2019). However, studies addressing how actors shape legitimacy through discourse focus on actors who are powerful in terms of resource allocation, decision-making capacity, or network linkages (Cieslik, 2018; Fury, 2010; Hervieux et al., 2010; Nicholls, 2010). They thereby perpetuate what they criticize, that is "the relative marginalization of social entrepreneurs [...] from the processes of legitimation at the discourse level" (Nicholls, 2010, p. 626).

Hence, this article asks: How is legitimacy discursively constructed for social entrepreneurship in the Global South? The study builds on empirical data collected from social entrepreneurs operating in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and European facilitators as exemplary perspectives from the Global South and the Global North. A multimodal discourse analysis is conducted to uncover discursive strategies for legitimacy construction by combining linguistic data from interviews with visual data from social media accounts. Suchman's (1995) typology of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy serves as a lens to examine discursive arguments systematically.

This study thereby makes three contributions. First, examining discourse across all three types of legitimacy following Suchman's (1995) typology adopts a theoretically grounded approach and engages critically with research seeing social entrepreneurship as morally legitimated (Dart, 2004; Venot, 2016). Secondly, we contribute to counterbalancing the continued underrepresentation of the Global South in entrepreneurship research (De Bruin & Teasdale, 2019; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018; Tan Luc et al., 2022; Terjesen et al., 2016). Thirdly, the novelty of our study lies in the analysis of primary interview data collected from (arguably less powerful) social entrepreneurs and facilitators combined with social media images. Existing studies examining social entrepreneurship discourse either build on secondary data drawn from large bodies of text from powerful actors such as academic researchers or facilitating organizations (e.g., Chandra, 2018; Cieslik, 2018) or from a small number of

case studies (e.g., Najafzade & Cohen, 2017; Venot, 2016); none use visual data and none include both the facilitators' and the social entrepreneurs' perspectives. Filling this gap, we provide more realistic insights into the complexity of discursive legitimacy construction of social entrepreneurship in the Global South.

From our findings we draw practical implications for managers of social enterprises, facilitators and policy makers. First, social entrepreneurs should stress the value of local ideas in discursive legitimacy construction and co-create solutions with beneficiaries to foster empowerment. Then, facilitators and policymakers should look beyond 'hero entrepreneurs', building skills for social enterprise employees. Recognizing social entrepreneurship as distinct from conventional entrepreneurship can help target support to the specific needs of social enterprises. Finally, actors in the field need to recognize the approach's limits seeing it as not more and not less than a puzzle piece to solving complex challenges through multi-stakeholder engagement.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, a literature overview outlines the role of agency in social entrepreneurship and how social entrepreneurs in the Global South make use of discursive legitimation strategies to acquire resources. Then, material and methods are discussed, justifying the selected study approach to conduct a discursive analysis through a multimodal technique. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of results that give rise to two novel findings. First, social entrepreneurs and facilitators alike construct legitimacy across a continuum of legitimacy types. Second, the barriers to being considered a social enterprise are lower in the context of the Global South compared to the Global North, expanding the discursive space of legitimacy construction. This article ends with conclusions and implications for further research.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | The agency of social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship has been conceptualized as "a burgeoning yet emerging [academic] field" (Saebi et al., 2019, p. 71) and an organizational field in a "pre-paradigmatic stage" (Nicholls, 2010, p. 611). Despite increased attention, no agreement on a coherent definition has emerged (Saebi et al., 2019). However, as a least common denominator, social entrepreneurship can be described as the result of entrepreneurial activities characterized by a hybrid nature, equating financial sustainability and social (and environmental) purpose (Doherty et al., 2014). The double line integration is not always distinct from traditional entrepreneurship with strong social missions (Phillips et al., 2015). However, in the role of change agents, social entrepreneurs found their enterprise by means of integrating social purpose from the start as a core part of their enterprise, while conventional entrepreneurship introduces a social purpose to their business model at a later stage and/or in a peripheral way.

Typically, in response to resource-based pressures, organizations within an organizational field adopt increasingly similar structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This process serves to build legitimacy, i.e., the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Entrepreneurs in a newly emergent field face challenges in gaining legitimacy as there is no deeply institutionalized system they can conform with (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). The multiplicity of stakeholders and institutional logics further complicates legitimation (Yang & Wu, 2016). The heterogeneity of the field may explain why social entrepreneurship has been found to be largely immune to isomorphic pressures, leaving room for dynamic change and for sentient agents to construct legitimacy through strategic action (Nicholls, 2006).

2.2 | Discursive legitimacy construction of social entrepreneurship

Discursive strategies have been identified as a powerful means for constructing legitimacy in the field of social entrepreneurship (e.g., Cieslik, 2018; Hervieux et al., 2010; Nicholls, 2010). These accounts allocate explanatory power to the performative nature of language and communication. Discursive strategies have been conceptualized as the deliberate choice and utilization of communicative practices based not only on linguistic frames (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) but also on visual frames (see O'Halloran, 2004). The contestation in the discursive arena concerns both what is considered legitimate and who is entitled to assign legitimacy (Lounsbury, 2007). It is hardly surprising that the multiplicity of stakeholders – including social entrepreneurs, their employees, suppliers, customers, governments and (other) funders (Wooten & Hoffmann, 2017) – has been found to complicate legitimacy construction in the field (Borzaga & Defourny, 2004). When stakeholders are numerous and embedded “in different sociocultural contexts with divergent institutional logics” (Weidner et al., 2019, p. 518), legitimacy construction becomes challenging.

Studies addressing how actors shape legitimacy of social entrepreneurship through discourse mention legitimacy in passing rather than explicitly defining and systematically approaching it, assuming universal understanding and omitting the multidimensional nature of the concept (e.g., Fury, 2010; Hervieux et al., 2010; Schmidt, 2008). Cieslik (2018) analyzes how academic research, in interaction with public discourses, has shaped the field of social entrepreneurship. The paper uncovers discursive mechanisms and includes reference to ‘legitimacy’, but does not define the term nor differentiate between different types of legitimacy. To address these shortcomings, this article draws on Suchman's (1995) tripartite categorization of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy as a lens enabling a more differentiated investigation of discursive legitimacy construction. Pragmatic legitimacy arises from the fulfillment of actors' self-interests, foregrounding exchange elements (Suchman, 1995).

These can be stakeholders who benefit directly or indirectly. Moral legitimacy refers to normative judgments of what ‘should be done’ according to a set of norms and values in the social environment (Suchman, 1995) and evolves around societal contributions. Lastly, cognitive legitimacy is the most deeply embedded and hence least available type of legitimacy, reflecting the “acceptance of the organization as [comprehensible,] necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account” (Suchman, 1995, p. 582). Studies that make reference to Suchman's typology, link social entrepreneurship to ‘moral legitimacy’ (Dart, 2004; Venot, 2016). Broadening the perspective by looking beyond moral legitimacy and considering interactions of different types of legitimacy, this study will help provide a richer picture of social entrepreneurship legitimation and challenge “the normative domain of propriety” (Dart, 2004, p. 418).

A further shortcoming of previous research on social entrepreneurship legitimation is that it focuses on powerful actors such as investors, consultants (Hervieux et al., 2010), academics (Cieslik, 2018), associations (Fury, 2010), governments, foundations, and other network organizations (Nicholls, 2010). This contributes to social entrepreneurs being marginalized from discursive legitimation processes. However, interaction plays a central role for discursive processes. The understanding of ideational power allows seeing power exertion as a two-way influence of top-down and bottom-up influences (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2010). By investigating discursive strategies on *both* the level of facilitators and social entrepreneurs in the Global North and Global South, this article takes into consideration bottom-up and top-down influences and addresses the call for “further research [...] on micro-discourses in social entrepreneurship, those of social entrepreneurs” (Hervieux et al., 2010, p. 61). Knowledge is lacking as to what extent discourses of resource-rich actors are reflected in or adopted by social entrepreneurs and how discursive strategies at the two levels may differ.

2.3 | The ‘double burden’ of social entrepreneurs in the Global South

Private-sector approaches to solving societal and environmental problems in the Global South have gained popularity against the background of the SDG financing gap and decreased development funding (Chandra, 2018; Karnani, 2007; Scheyvens et al., 2016). However, research points to the limits of business approaches in fostering development and contributing to poverty reduction. Criticism addresses the narrow view of seeing development in predominantly economic instead of multidimensional terms and viewing “social, cultural and political benefits at best as by-products of economic gains” (Karnani, 2007, p. 106). This criticism is, in particular, aimed at big multinational firms; arguably, local micro, small and medium (social) enterprises are better placed to serve “the poor” (ibid).

Historically, the emergence of social entrepreneurship in the Global South is tied to structural adjustment programs leading to a withdrawal of the state (Bewayo & Portes, 2016; Cieslik, 2018; Kerlin, 2010). In contrast to the Global North, regions in the Global

South are characterized by weaker market functioning and state capability (Kerlin, 2010)ⁱⁱ. This context provides fertile ground for further understanding legitimacy construction of social entrepreneurship to the point that it “is being celebrated because it attempts to address social problems traditional entrepreneurs and governments fail to address” (Bewayo & Portes, 2016, p. 39).

Limited research exists on discursive legitimacy construction of social entrepreneurship in the Global South (Doherty et al., 2014). Going beyond the study of a small number of cases, only two studies have - to our knowledge - undertaken an analysis of discursive elements in promoting social entrepreneurship in the Global South (Chandra, 2018; Cieslik, 2018). Neither study explicitly defines ‘legitimacy’ or focuses on legitimation processes, and both rely on secondary data from powerful actors - Chandra (2018) on narratives from the website of a prominent facilitator of social entrepreneurship and Cieslik (2018) on academic literature. Still, their findings point to central elements in social entrepreneurship discourse. Chandra (2018) studies “development narratives that social entrepreneurs (SEs) construct to represent and promote their work” (p. 306) and identifies two dominant themes of “*business and money* and *impact evaluation*” (p. 320, emphasis in original). Notable is the absence of non-profit narratives and a depoliticization of otherwise politicized development discourse. Both the dominant themes and the apolitical nature of narratives may be linked to “fundraising reasons” (Chandra, 2018, p. 321) - uncontroversial, impact-focused and financially sustainable social enterprises are likely attractive targets for funders. Resource acquisition is a central theme as legitimacy is discursively constructed against the backdrop of disillusionment with the welfare state, disappointment with outcomes from donor-funded initiatives, and decreased donor funding in conjunction with a heightened belief in entrepreneurial approaches (Cieslik, 2018). Discursive strategies tend to over-emphasize financial or economic sustainability over social (and/or environmental) sustainability (ibid).

As access to finance remains one of the main barriers for (social) entrepreneurs in the Global South, and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular - alongside the countries' colonial legacy, political instability, weak regulatory environments, corruption, and shortage of well-educated staff (Mirvis & Googins, 2018) - the focus on resource acquisition is likely to be present, if not exacerbated, in this context. Drawing on academic literature and socioeconomic data, Kerlin (2010) finds that social enterprise models in Sub-Saharan African countries Zimbabwe and Zambia heavily rely on market-based logics despite operating in a context of weak market performance. One potential explanation is that this model serves as a strategy for resource acquisition, owing to the dependence on international donors who “are pushing the more market-oriented concept of social enterprise” (Kerlin, 2010, p. 177). Our study adds to the body of research by collecting primary data from both social entrepreneurs and facilitators (including international donors). It is unique in its juxtaposition of primary data from exemplary regions in the Global North and Global South, arguably providing ‘rawer’ voices that are closer to the empirical context than online promotional narratives, academic literature reviews and socioeconomic statistics.

An overly commercial orientation diverts attention from and endangers the social mission - to avert this tendency, organizations require both space for negotiation and for connection to the institutional context (Ometto et al., 2019). The specific institutional context of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asiaⁱⁱⁱ, investigated in this study as an exemplary Global South context, features counteracting forces to the prioritization of commercial over social ends. While inter-country differences should not be neglected or downplayed, studies for example root (social) entrepreneurs' motivation in reciprocal community responsibility based on “the indigenous value system of Ubuntu,^{iv} which is prevalent in South Africa and neighbouring countries” (Abubakre et al., 2021, p. 839). In a small business context, the motivation to ‘give back’ to the community and/or society has also been found to be a driving force for social responsibility activities in Nigeria (Uba et al., 2022). In Latin America, collectivistic thinking drives social enterprise development (Bewayo & Portes, 2016; Kerlin, 2010); in Southeast and South Asian countries, solidarity plays a major role in peer-based and collective strategies for achieving impact (Zhao, 2021). Comparing all three regions, Kerlin (2010) found that while social entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan African countries operates at the interface of market and international aid, the Latin American examples investigated adopted a civil society based social enterprise model while enterprises in Southeast Asia incorporated all three logics.

Common to all three regions, and in contrast to the Global North, personal experience of societal and environmental problems is a key motivator for social entrepreneurs (Bewayo & Portes, 2016). Going beyond self-perception, this likely also influences legitimation strategies toward external stakeholders pursued by social enterprises in the context here investigated. Against the background of all types of small-scale entrepreneurship, the likelihood of identifying as a social entrepreneur and choosing activities around an enterprise's social mission increases with the level of poverty and the strength of ethnic group identity in Sub-Saharan Africa (Rivera-Santos et al., 2015). Fighting poverty, and issues related to it, has been found to be a major focus of social entrepreneurship not only in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also in Southeast Asia and Latin America (Bewayo & Portes, 2016). Conclusions on whether social entrepreneurship can indeed lead to transformative change in the Global South, however, differ, with some pointing to the limits (e.g., Najafizada & Cohen, 2017; Venot, 2016) and others highlighting the capacity for driving systemic change (e.g., Maseno & Wanyoike, 2022; Zhao, 2021).

In the case of social entrepreneurship in the Global South supported by facilitators in the Global North investigated in this article, actors face a ‘double burden’: diverging sociocultural contexts and achieving a hybrid mission (Borzaga & Defourny, 2004). To alleviate this double burden, agents may turn to ambiguity as a powerful discursive strategy “as different parties to the discussion can interpret the ideas differently” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 324). Furthermore, when agents simultaneously pursue multiple strategies for managing expectations, manipulating different stakeholders' perceptions, and discursively engaging with skeptics (Scherer et al., 2013), then conflicting accounts of discursively legitimizing

social entrepreneurship may exist simultaneously: on the one hand foregrounding its positive private-sector characteristics such as efficiency through sustainable solutions (Lounsbury & Strang, 2009), on the other its societal purpose counteracting dysfunctional practices of capitalism (Cieslik, 2018).

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative approach fits the study focus of discursive legitimation as a socially constructed phenomenon based on a performative view of language (Ormston et al., 2014). Abductive reasoning is employed as a holistic way “of capturing the dialectical shuttling between the domain of observations and the domain of ideas” (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 149). The assumption that discourse on social entrepreneurship contains elements of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy is not adopted for verifying its truthfulness, but to present a starting point for investigation (Douven, 2011). This pragmatic approach takes advantage of the large body of previous research on legitimacy while leaving room for novel findings – that we deem crucial given the understudied nature of social entrepreneurship in the Global South.

3.1 | Material

Discourses have been defined as a set of interrelated ‘texts’ “that construct objects and an array of subject positions” (Parker, 1994, p. 245). We adopt a broad understanding of ‘texts’ including visual and linguistic stimuli (O'Halloran, 2004). To allow for an integrated analysis of linguistic data from 24 interviews and visual data from 21 social media accounts, data were collected from the same organizations. Twelve individuals representing facilitators from the Global North (private foundations and public development agencies) were identified based on their affiliation with an organization headquartered in Europe and their previous experience with social entrepreneurship in a development context. Twelve social entrepreneurs from the Global South operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, with one operating predominantly in Asia, were identified from facilitators' portfolios. They qualified because their operating model represents “entrepreneurial activity with an embedded social purpose” (Austin et al., 2006, p. 1) – we operationalized the ‘social purpose’ based on whether they addressed ‘development challenges’ as specified in the SDGs. As enterprises in our sample represent micro and small enterprises, transferability to large-scale initiatives may be limited. Appendices A and B detail our participant sampling.

3.2 | Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with open questions allowed participants to elaborate on the most salient aspects in their lifeworld (Saunders et al., 2009). A flexible approach with probing and

spontaneous follow-up is useful for exploring novel areas of investigation (Adams, 2015). Further, discourse analysis requires “techniques which allow diversity” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 165) instead of fully standardized approaches. Interviews were conducted via phone, WhatsApp or Skype, lasting on average one hour. Questions focused on four thematic areas and were tailored to social entrepreneurs and facilitators respectively: (1) Presentation of the organization and interviewee's motivation to working in social entrepreneurship, (2) Legitimation in cooperation and communication with stakeholders, (3) Definition of social entrepreneurship and advantages/disadvantages compared to other organizational forms, (4) Reflections on social entrepreneurship's limitations and challenges, including access to funding.

Social media has been identified as a powerful channel for legitimation (Colleoni, 2013). Visual data helped immerse us as researchers in the context. We selected 77 social media images, posted between March 2017 and April 2019, from facilitators and social entrepreneurs' Facebook accounts until we reached data saturation, that is, images before March 2017 did not reveal further basic entities and key agents. As some facilitators support not only social enterprise activities, we collected data from their accounts via a hashtag search (#socialenterprise, #socialentrepreneur, #socialentrepreneurship, #socialbusiness). Finally, following Austin et al.' (2006) conceptual model, we collected social entrepreneurs' images based on whether they showed activities and/or objects related to opportunity, people, capital, and context centered around the social-value proposition.

Triangulation can help facilitate the discovery of findings and increase accuracy (Denzin, 1978). We employed ‘between-method’ triangulation by combining interviews and social media for data collection. ‘Within-method’ triangulation was used by interviewing both facilitators from the Global North and social entrepreneurs in the Global South. We applied the same contextual diversification to social media images to allow for an integrated analysis.

3.3 | Data analysis

Discourse analysis recognizes the performative nature of language and other ‘texts’ playing a major role in constructing reality and shaping people's perceptions (Potter, 2004). It is action-oriented in that it sees discourse not as a neutral meaning-conveying device but as “strategies they [people] employ in trying to create different kinds of effect” (Bell & Bryman, 2015, pp. 535–536). This prioritization of process over outcome makes the discourse analytic method suitable for the research question investigated in this study.

Given the emerging character of discourse analysis, there is no universally accepted step-by-step guide to approaching data (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) and too much structuring is often considered counterproductive (Potter, 1997). However, some consensus exists on the need to first identify basic entities (concepts, objects) and key agents to then explore the relationships discursively established between them, paying attention to stylistic devices (Dryzek, 2013;

Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Following Sayago (2015), a process of tagging, desegregation and reaggregation was conducted. We transferred the method from linguistic stimuli to visual texts and expanded it to a four-step process including stylistic devices.

Interview data was coded using the data management program NVivo. First, basic entities and key subjects were tagged as categories. These were then labeled (e.g., money, customers), thereby desegregating or extracting specific elements from broad categories. Subsequently, the elements were reaggregated, producing new texts in the form of three discourses reinforced through rhetorical devices (see Table 1 for exemplary analysis).

Similar to linguistic texts, images contain components (objects, subjects) and display relational meaning (cf. O'Halloran, 2008). This allows for integration of visual data into the four-element analysis of basic entities, agents, discourse and textual features (see Table 2).

The analysis was first conducted for the exploration of discursive strategies to initially bracket the different types of legitimacy in order to remain open for emergent themes. The data were then re-coded and re-examined using the categories of pragmatic, moral

and cognitive legitimacy, eliciting the pattern shown in Figure 1. The pattern around three central discourses is built on basic entities (money, awards, products, and services and poverty) and key agents (social entrepreneurs, facilitators, customers or beneficiaries, non-governmental organizations [NGOs] or charities, and local governments). These serve as a starting point for the core results of discursive strategies presented in the following section.

4 | RESULTS

Our data showed novelty in two regards. First, rather than drawing on one dominant type of legitimacy, social entrepreneurs and facilitators alike construct legitimacy across the continuum of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. These three types of legitimacy feed into discursive strategies employed to legitimate social entrepreneurship in the Global South, consistent across social entrepreneurs' and facilitators' accounts. They highlight private-sector efficiency through market mechanisms (pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy)

TABLE 1 Exemplary analysis of interview data.

Data	Step 1: Tagging	Step 2: Desegregation	Step 3: Reaggregation	Step 4: Stylistic devices
<p>"If there is a business case and you are solving the challenge with your product, there should be a profit. If [...] you cannot put money in something, then you cannot solve the problem."</p> <p>"It is different than with NGOs and public sector. They tend to keep on talking instead of acting."</p>	<p>Basic entities</p> <p>Key subjects</p>	<p>Money</p> <p>Products & Services</p> <p>NGOs</p> <p>Governments</p>	<p>Private sector approaches in a market economy setting framed as the universal solution to meeting social needs and resolve societal challenges.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperbole • Repetition • Conditional sentences • Contrast

TABLE 2 Exemplary analysis of social media data.

Data	Step 1: Tagging	Step 2: Desegregation	Step 3: Reaggregation	Step 4: Stylistic devices
	<p>Basic entities</p>	<p>Products</p> <p>Awards</p>	<p>Presenting social entrepreneurship as an enabler of a happier world with optimistic communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bright colors • Basic entities in the center
	<p>Key subjects</p>	<p>Customers/beneficiaries</p> <p>Social entrepreneurs</p> <p>Facilitators</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close arrangement of key subjects • 'Happy' gestures and expressions

and frame social entrepreneurship (moral legitimacy) as a 'world changer' through social impact creation and local empowerment. Secondly, discursive legitimacy construction embraces the double burden of social entrepreneurship. On the one hand, social entrepreneurs and facilitators bridge different socio-cultural contexts by creating a discursive space with a common language. On the other hand, business focus and social mission are presented as mutually reinforcing, connecting all three types of legitimacy. This is aided by contextual peculiarity where barriers to being considered a social enterprise are lower in the context of the Global South, expanding the discursive space of legitimacy construction.

4.1 | Private-sector efficiency through market mechanisms

The first discourse identified centers on private-sector efficiency through market mechanisms, mobilizing both pragmatic and cognitive elements of legitimacy. All facilitators (echoed by social entrepreneurs) argue that social entrepreneurship creates better returns on investments, particularly in comparison to supporting charity organizations and local government: "I think that part of the answer is that there has been some disappointment about how the aid money is spent and what the value of that money is in terms of how much impact it has generated" (Facilitator 6 - Sofia). Quantification of social impact highlights an underlying exchange logic - central to

pragmatic legitimacy (see Table 3). Facilitators display their grant-giving activities on social media, thereby highlighting money as a central entity.

Building on explicit contrast to NGOs and local government, most social entrepreneurs and facilitators build an idealized image of the private sector around the key factors innovation, efficiency, and financial sustainability. They use terms imported from the business sphere to present social entrepreneurship as functioning on market mechanisms and embedded in a capitalist economic order. These aspects highlight the comprehensibility and necessity of social entrepreneurship vis-à-vis traditional institutions of altruism, hence constructing cognitive legitimacy.

Financial sustainability and innovation are repeatedly mentioned as key differentiators of social entrepreneurship: "Our financial sustainability will also make sure that there will be an implementation of it and continuity past any project time" (SE 1 - Janet) and "Innovation, I think, is a central point when we talk about social entrepreneurship and inclusive business. That is really what drives this whole sector is innovation. You have to do things differently." (Facilitator 10 - Albert).

These principles are complemented by a deep faith in market mechanisms (the 'invisible hand') and the private sector's consequent efficiency emphasized by a rhetorical question:

In a private sector setting, that sorts itself out. If the new way is more efficient, or better, or has a higher

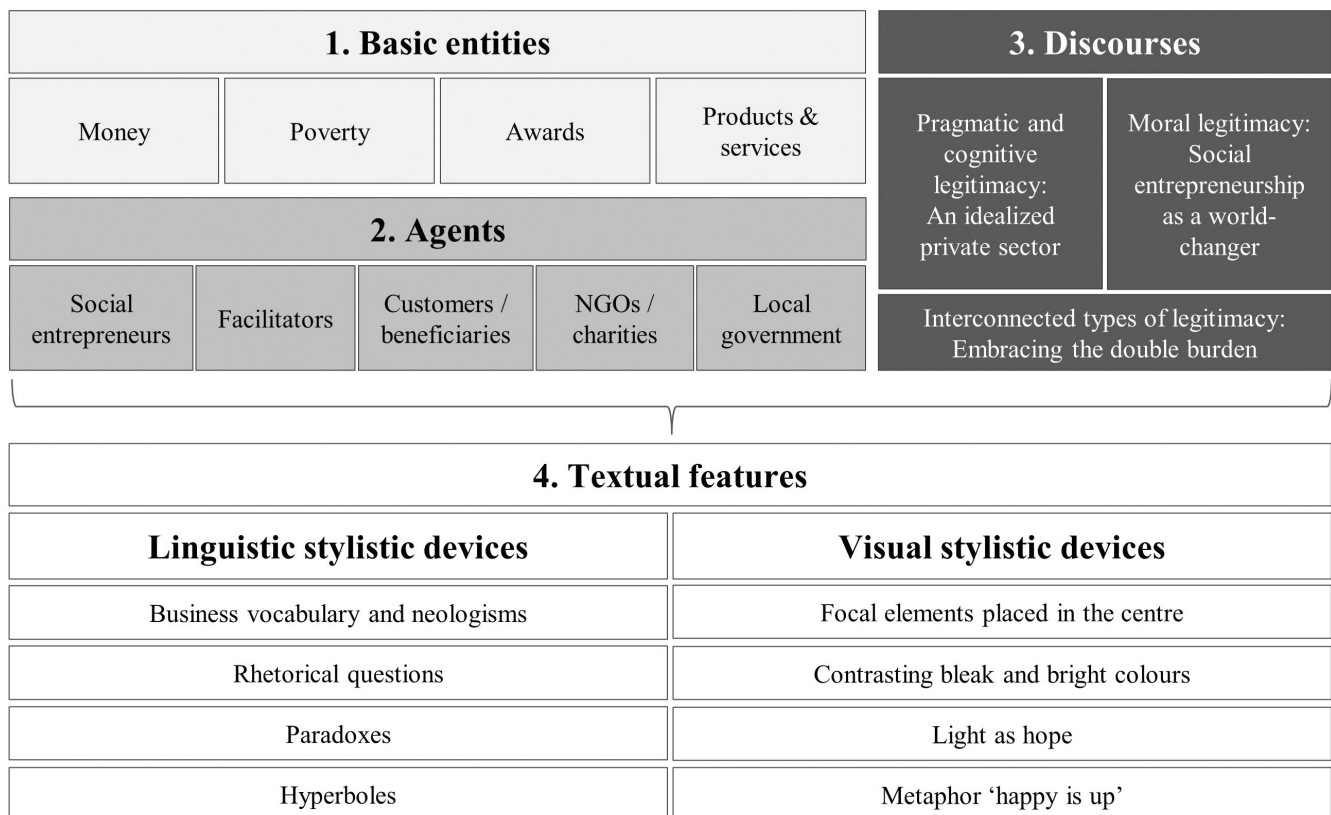
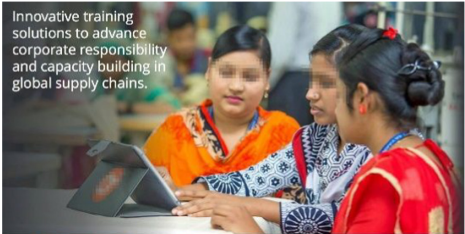
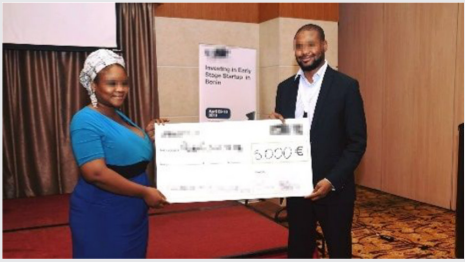


FIGURE 1 Overview of basic entities, agents, discourses, and textual features.

TABLE 3 Private-sector efficiency through market mechanisms (pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy).

	Interview data	Social media data
Social Entrepreneurs	<p>“People want a better return on their contribution. I can talk to any large development aid organization; they are shifting more and more of their resources to support social businesses mainly because their one dollar can continue to evolve.”</p> <p>SE 11 – Derrick</p>	 <p>Number of Factories Using Q&R: 200</p> <p>Total Completed Training Sessions: 119778</p> <p>Total Number of People Trained: 46337</p>
Facilitators	<p>“I think that part of the answer is that there has been some disappointment about how the aid money is spent and what the value of that money is in terms of how much impact it has generated.”</p> <p>Facilitator 6 – Sofia</p> <p>“It is different than with NGOs and public sector. They tend to keep on talking instead of acting. On the other hand, private sector actors really try to make it happen because of their result-driven orientation.”</p> <p>Facilitator 10 – Manon</p>	 <p>Facilitator 3</p>

margin, or is more popular, it will win, right? And then the old way of doing it will be replaced. It feels like a safe thing to find better things; something better will win.

(SE 6 – Alloysius)

When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of social enterprises to NGOs, most interviewees were critical of NGOs' role in the Global South, which is juxtaposed with the effectiveness of social enterprises: “I realized, an NGO which is only giving out handouts is not sustainable; at one point it will not work with the very dominating lifestyle in this current era” (SE 3 – Christian). The word choice “lifestyle”, however, suggests that the criticism goes beyond the argument of financial sustainability, likely referring to capitalism as the dominating economic and political system. This interpretation is buttressed by an interviewee who also founded an NGO. She has observed a lack of recognition for this organizational form based on paralleling NGOs' mode of operation with communism: “Our personal choice was to found our organization as an NGO so that participants would not have to pay for knowledge. In the perception of some, this qualifies as a ‘communist’ approach” (Facilitator 3 – Malini).

Pragmatic legitimacy is further built around the interests of social entrepreneurs, customers, governments, suppliers, and facilitators. As salaried employment is limited, self-employed work often is considered the only way to cover the cost of living, including education: “I had to look at the best way to support my school fees. [...] And practical life experiences challenged and motivated me to see an opportunity out of the very existing problems” (SE 3 – Christian).

Central to all social entrepreneurs' accounts are personal experiences of practical problems they want to help solve through

entrepreneurial models: “If you're going to solve a problem, solve a problem, but find a business solution to it and make sure it survives” (SE 5 – Brian). This is reinforced in social media, juxtaposing visually ‘the problem’ and ‘the solution’ (Figure 2).

This differentiates social entrepreneurs and facilitators – social entrepreneurs' proximity and local embeddedness lead to a higher proportion of pragmatic legitimacy construction as their business is often vital for their own livelihood. Common to both accounts and central to social entrepreneurship discourses, meanwhile, is client orientation. Customers' demands and characteristics drive the supply of well-adapted solutions. However, in the context of the Global South, needs often exceed financial resources:

As a social enterprise, the most important stakeholder you have is your customer – are you addressing a problem or a need that they have? But in this context, it is a problem. They will have 150 needs but have to prioritize between them because they are quite poor.

(SE 6 – Alloysius)

The high frequency of using terms such as “products”, “services”, and “solutions” exemplifies the business vocabulary imported into the space of social welfare. Products play a central role not only verbally but also visually (see Figure 3). The communicative activities by the majority of both entrepreneurs and facilitators link cognitive comprehensibility to pragmatic legitimacy construction. Social entrepreneurs highlight the quality of their products and services, thereby linking universally understood terms and principles (cognitive legitimacy) to concrete value creation, serving customers' and other stakeholders' (pragmatic legitimacy): “I believe that we have created a really clever,



FIGURE 2 Problem and solution – SE 4.

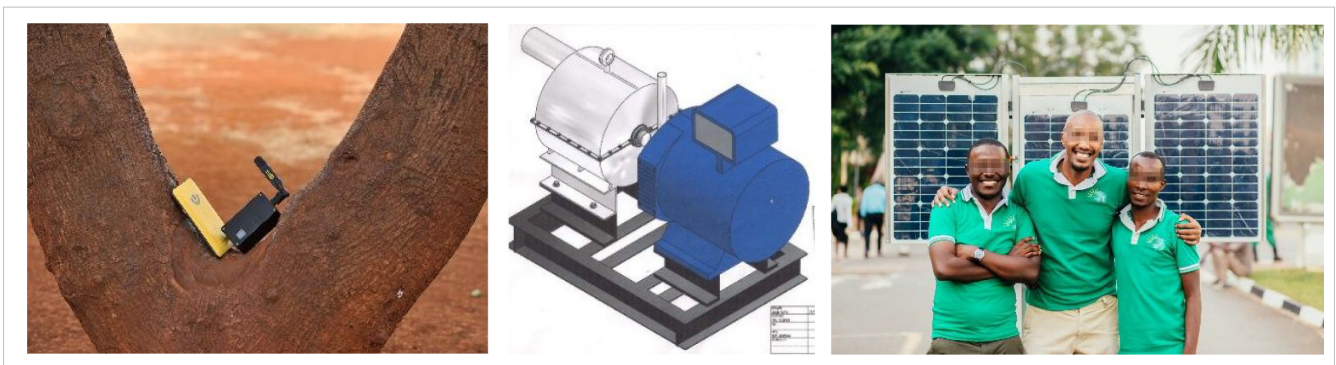


FIGURE 3 Products displayed by SE 8, SE 7, and Facilitator 9.

value-adding program and they [customers] see that what we do is not necessarily something that is being done somewhere else” (SE 2 – Thomas).

4.2 | Social entrepreneurship as a “world changer” through social impact and local empowerment

The second discourse is based on presenting social entrepreneurship as a “world changer” (see Table 4). Positive normative evaluations are threefold. Firstly, consequential moral legitimacy emphasizes the contribution to society. Secondly, procedural moral legitimacy highlights the empowerment aspect of local social entrepreneurship. Thirdly, personal moral legitimacy is constructed around passionate social entrepreneurs. All social entrepreneurs use social media to communicate moral legitimacy: Images present happy customers and beneficiaries (see Table 4), enthusiastically presenting the products or completing their work seemingly worry-free. Raised hands construct a metaphor of ‘up’, signifying happiness and optimism.

Throughout the majority of accounts, social entrepreneurship is constructed as desirable because of its potential for empowerment, facilitating community engagement and local solutions rooted in the

Global South: “Let us have our voice heard. Let not people come with their own mind, or preoccupied mind, or mindset or concepts of what innovation or a social enterprise should look like in Africa” (SE 5 – Brian). The participatory aspect is also highlighted in almost all social media presences. Many images display interaction and discussion, both in the immediate context of solutions and at more formal occasions such as presentations with audience-involvement (see Figure 4).

Social entrepreneurs act as nodes of community engagement and visually present themselves as central to the products offered, thereby constructing their own legitimacy (see Figure 5).

Generally, social entrepreneurs presented themselves and were presented, as not interested in maximizing personal gain. Money in the form of large profits is foregone. They are framed as inspirational change-makers driven by a feeling of responsibility:

I was fully passion-driven to focus and build on what I am driving. [...] Sometimes I only go with a cup of strong tea for the whole day to survive because the community is on my neck, and I have to give them my best and my all.

(SE 3 – Christian)

TABLE 4 Moral legitimacy.



	Interview data	Social media data
Social entrepreneurs	<p>"I just know that as we keep creating awareness, most people will get enlightened and social entrepreneurship will become one of the biggest world changers in the future."</p> <p>SE 9 – Paul</p>	 <p>SE 11</p>
Facilitators	<p>"Social enterprise has a very strong part to play because we all could be part in our own development. When you are in control of your own fate, and your own development and developing solutions for the issues, you do it in a way that makes sense and fits the context and actually works for the people."</p> <p>Facilitator 8 – Marieta</p>	 <p>Facilitator 6</p>



FIGURE 4 Highlighting participation and empowerment – SE 10, Facilitator 4 and SE 5.

The last sentence may have been a hyperbole addressed at us as interviewers seen as potential supporters. Still, it highlights the ultimate wish to contribute to and support the community. Facilitators linguistically frame social entrepreneurs as powerful and central, "leaders that can carry the flag" (Facilitator 10 – Albert).

Key to constructing moral legitimacy are awards and competitions which not only represent a channel for funding but also increase recognition and formalize the positive normative evaluation: "To acquire funding, we entered social innovation awards and competitions. And when we won, it gave us momentum and credibility" (SE 10 – James). Award reception is featured in many of the social entrepreneurs' and facilitators' social media accounts (see Figure 6). Awards and competitions connect actors in the Global North and Global South by increasing visibility. They may, however, also

exacerbate power imbalances if milestones are not set in collaboration: "The problem with awards is [...] sometimes the milestones you have to attain to get the next tranche of the money, it may not be in the interest of the company" (SE 4 – Julien).

Poverty is an entity mobilized to argue why social entrepreneurship is needed in the Global South, hence legitimizing the approach. Social entrepreneurship is rhetorically personified, attaching to it agent-like characteristics, including the ability to 'address' the SDGs. This highlights the action elements and motivates people to identify with the concept: "We have such a big picture of it, as it can really go to address the SDG 1 which is to reduce extreme poverty" (SE 7 – Emmanuel). The high hopes – with a focus on multidimensional poverty that includes aspects beyond income, such as access to education and health are echoed



FIGURE 5 Social entrepreneurs and their products – SE 10 and SE 3.

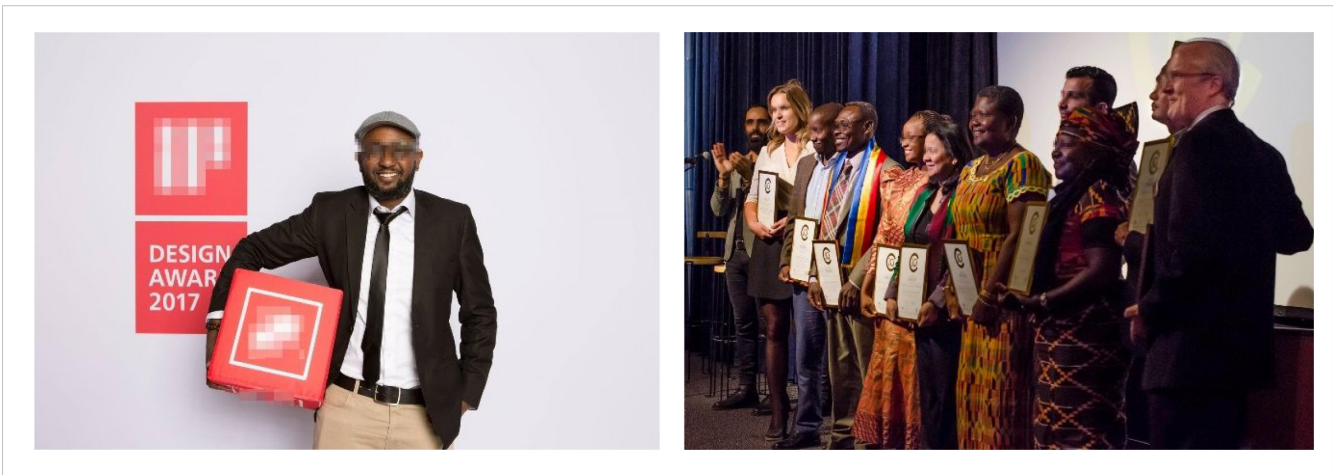


FIGURE 6 Awards received – SE 8 and Facilitator 8.

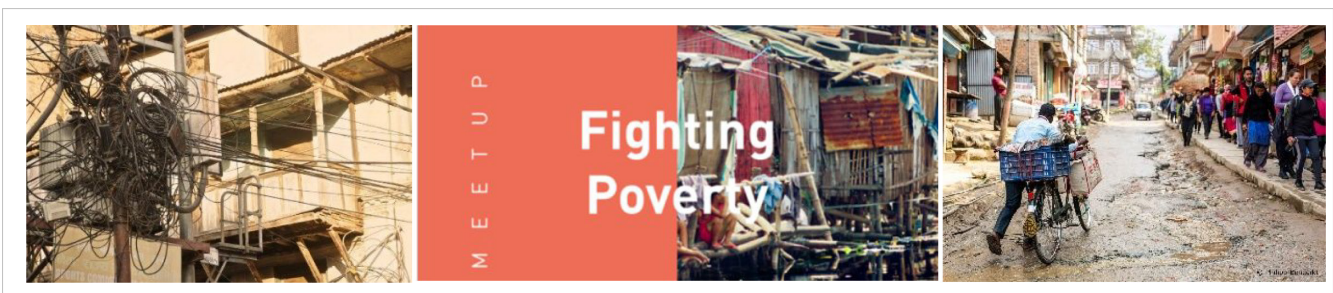


FIGURE 7 Addressing poor living conditions – SE 8, Facilitator 2, Facilitator 7.

by facilitators: “The prime focus is on social impact. The social enterprise most likely reaches through the intervention poor segments of society. Or in some ways maybe not economically poor but vulnerable segments of society” (Facilitator 6 – Sofia). Poor conditions serve as the visual backdrop against which solutions to improve the circumstances are presented. Bleak colors dominate

pictures displaying context without solutions, evoking a moral responsibility to get involved (see Figure 7).

Pictures showcasing products and/or beneficiaries contrast through bright colors, thereby highlighting social enterprises' positive societal contribution: Pictures displayed above in Table 4 involve colorful objects held or thrown into the air, the first image in Figure 3

above shows a yellow object on a tree in an otherwise empty picture and Figure 5 displays colorful products. Social entrepreneurship is often framed as bringing hope, displayed as being the light in the darkness in both a pragmatic and a moral sense (see Figure 8).

From a moral legitimacy perspective, all social entrepreneurs and facilitators highlight the importance of local solutions. This is presented in a logical chain with revenue generation. Moral legitimacy is linked to cognitive legitimacy by rendering it comprehensible, if not taken for granted that social entrepreneurship is thus the 'right' approach: "If you are here, you know the exact problem, you can now use your own resources to solve the problem you want to solve and at the same time find it sustainable financially to go ahead" (SE 7 - Emmanuel).

The 'universally accepted' premise that job creation leads to income, leads to better livelihoods lifts the positive normative evaluation of business approaches to a cognitive pattern of modern life, emphasized by repeating "we all". "We all" in association with "the world" links Global North and Global South, relating to unified principles:

That is not how the world works. We all want to have jobs, we all want to feel that we are doing something meaningful, but there needs to be a driver, [...] something else than just the thought of it being good.

(SE 1 - Janet)

4.3 | Embracing the double burden as a discursive strategy to facilitate resource acquisition

Access to funding consistently emerged as the major challenge to social entrepreneurs in the Global South. Hence, legitimacy construction as a means for resource acquisition is mainly targeted toward potential funders. In line with this, all but two interviewees talked about money, foregrounding money as a basic entity. Social entrepreneurs addressed it more than facilitators. The pivotal role of financial resources was highlighted by the variety of neologisms of compound words: "big money", "learning money", "impact money", "social innovation money", "cheap money" and "free money". Money

was framed as both a challenge due to restricted financial resources in the Global South and the means to solve social problems.

Money is 'good' and necessary because it allows for addressing problems and decreases dependence on donors. The phrase "In order to do good, you need to do well" (e.g., SE 10 - James) evokes parallels to natural laws of a universally accepted truth, constructing cognitive legitimacy building on elements of moral legitimacy ('do good') and pragmatic legitimacy ('do well'). The use of the same wording by several interviewees, both social entrepreneurs and facilitators, shows the deep embeddedness of this 'mantra'. Logical "if..., then..." constructions make business-centered activities appear self-evident, constructing cognitive legitimacy:

If there is a business case and you are solving the challenge, there should be a profit. If there is no profit, there is no need of you putting money in it. And if you cannot put money in something, then you cannot solve the problem.

(SE 5 - Brian)

In order to facilitate resource acquisition, entrepreneurs and facilitators embrace the double burden - diverging sociocultural contexts and hybrid missions. In order to cater to different stakeholders across sociocultural contexts and account for both social and business aspects of the mission, all interviewees linked different types of legitimacy. Connecting social enterprises' products to the fulfillment of the SDGs, facilitators connect the products and services to their development priorities, blurring the line between pragmatic self-interests and morally desirable social impact (see Figure 9).

Funders profit from the 'disposition' of social entrepreneurs, that is, allow for identification with the enterprises based on the social impact they create. This further blurs the lines between pragmatic and moral legitimacy. Development agencies' priorities or 'self'-interests are inherently social in nature, although often following national strategic focus areas:

You have the bilateral country strategy, for example between our country and Tanzania. There is a bilateral understanding of what the focus areas will be

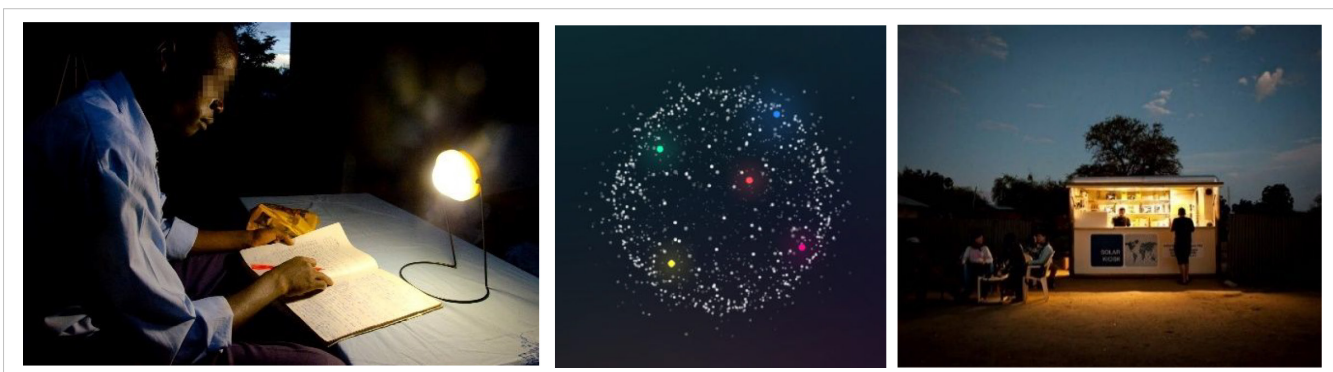


FIGURE 8 Light in the darkness - SE 6, Facilitator 8, Facilitator 2.



FIGURE 9 Linking products to the fulfillment of the SDGs – Facilitator 4.

for our development assistance funds into Tanzania. Often you have three priority areas, it can be agriculture, it can be gender, it can be health.

(Facilitator 5 – Martin)

Some foundations, depending on the closeness of ties to the founding and funding private companies, demonstrate the increased interest of companies' clients in social impact: "We are a client-facing foundation, with the idea of helping our clients maximize the impact of their philanthropy" (Facilitator 6 – Sofia). This raises a fundamental question: Where does self-interest (pragmatic legitimacy) end, and where does altruism (moral legitimacy) start?

Data furthermore showed a tight interlinkage of pragmatic, cognitive and moral legitimacy as social impact is often seen in exchange terms embedded against the background of a market economy: "For everyone trying to solve the global warming problem [...], there is a marketplace where we have buyers and sellers" (SE 11 – Moses). The financial exchange is framed as important for creating accountability and partnership rather than dependence: "Your machine is no longer working, send your people to come and fix it.' That is the mentality for NGO projects generally, but with a social enterprise, it is a partnership" (SE 11 – Moses).

In addition to linking different types of legitimacy, legitimation profits from an expanded space of legitimacy construction for social entrepreneurship in the Global South. Several interviewees suggested there is no fundamental difference between conventional and social entrepreneurship, but the label 'social entrepreneurship' is used for branding a business in line with expectations by facilitators in the Global North: "The concept is spread by the money. When people come and say we have impact money or social innovation money, entrepreneurs say they are social entrepreneurs" (SE 8 – Ajume). Customers are equally pragmatic when it comes to their interest in social enterprises' products and services. It does not necessarily matter whether an enterprise is labeled 'social' or not, emphasized by the repetition of the product type:

For them it is not necessarily a social enterprise. If somebody is selling you a cheap affordable water filtration system, for you as a customer, it is a water filter. You do not care if it is a social business, it is a water filter. It will help you get clean water much like solar cells provide you energy.

(Facilitator 9 – Fredrik)

5 | DISCUSSION

As the concept of social entrepreneurship originated in the Global North (Borzaga & Defourny, 2004), ideational power on the approach's dissemination lies with facilitators. The imbalance of ideational power is counteracted by conscious efforts for empowerment and community building by both social entrepreneurs and facilitators. However, relying on ideas and institutions rooted in the Global North, social entrepreneurs forego the possibility to further mobilize discursive agency for legitimation to reflect local realities. This shows the complexity of legitimation processes in fields where different institutional contexts are involved.

5.1 | An integrated model of legitimacy construction

Striking is the degree of homogeneity of social entrepreneurs and facilitators' accounts. This is buttressed by several entrepreneurs and facilitators mentioning their 'circle' or 'bubble' in which businesses' contributions to social welfare are universally accepted. It reflects the forming of a "recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). This, however, renders it difficult to disentangle micro-discourses of social entrepreneurs. It also raises the question of whose "socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574) predominantly informs legitimation of social entrepreneurship. Partly implicitly, partly

explicitly, Europe's path to development is taken as the ideal to strive for and close the gap in material wealth between Global North and Global South.

The homogeneity of accounts across actors contrasts with the heterogeneity reflected in the discourses covering all three types of legitimacy conceptualized by Suchman (1995). However, when considered in their entirety, the accounts create a pattern that maps the discourses across the continuum of legitimacy types: Discourse around returns on investment on the pragmatic side and an idealized free market economy on the cognitive side come to frame discourses around a glorified^v version of social entrepreneurship based on empowerment and local solutions. Business- and finance-focused arguments dominate, mutually reinforcing legitimacy construction (signified by the arrows in Figure 10).

The combination of different types of legitimacy shows to be on a continuum where overlapping establishes connections across clear-cut boundaries. The interlinking of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy depicted in the model does not imply a chronological progression such that cognitive legitimacy can only be mobilized once pragmatic and moral legitimacy have been reached. Rather, this study suggests that multifaceted legitimacy construction, simultaneously mobilizing different types, allows catering to the paradoxical demands of the context investigated.

The proposed continuous nature of legitimacy construction contrasts conceptual and empirical views that strictly separate the three types of legitimacy. Suchman's depiction of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy suggests discrete types of legitimacy, its representation in vertical order implying a hierarchy (see Suchman, 1995, p. 584). In partial contrast, we argue that the boundaries are permeable, and interlinkage is possible and sometimes advantageous or even necessary. According to Suchman (1995), cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy "differ so greatly that they often seem to operate in mutual oblivion" (p. 585). In our empirical setting, however, cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy are shown to interlink: The self-interested exchange logic on the pragmatic side is the concrete materialization of the underlying pattern of market mechanisms on the cognitive side. Our study also contrasts with empirical research, such as a study by Castelló and Galang (2014), which identifies three avenues to legitimation by Asian firms employing strategic, institutional and political rhetoric, constructing pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy respectively. The continuous nature of legitimacy connects to the understanding that social entrepreneurship is embedded in complexity and dynamism, making it difficult for the social entrepreneur to follow clear-cut legitimacy strategies (Yang & Wu, 2016). This rather fluid approach might be partly owed to the sometimes emergent decision-making pattern of entrepreneurs. The interlinked

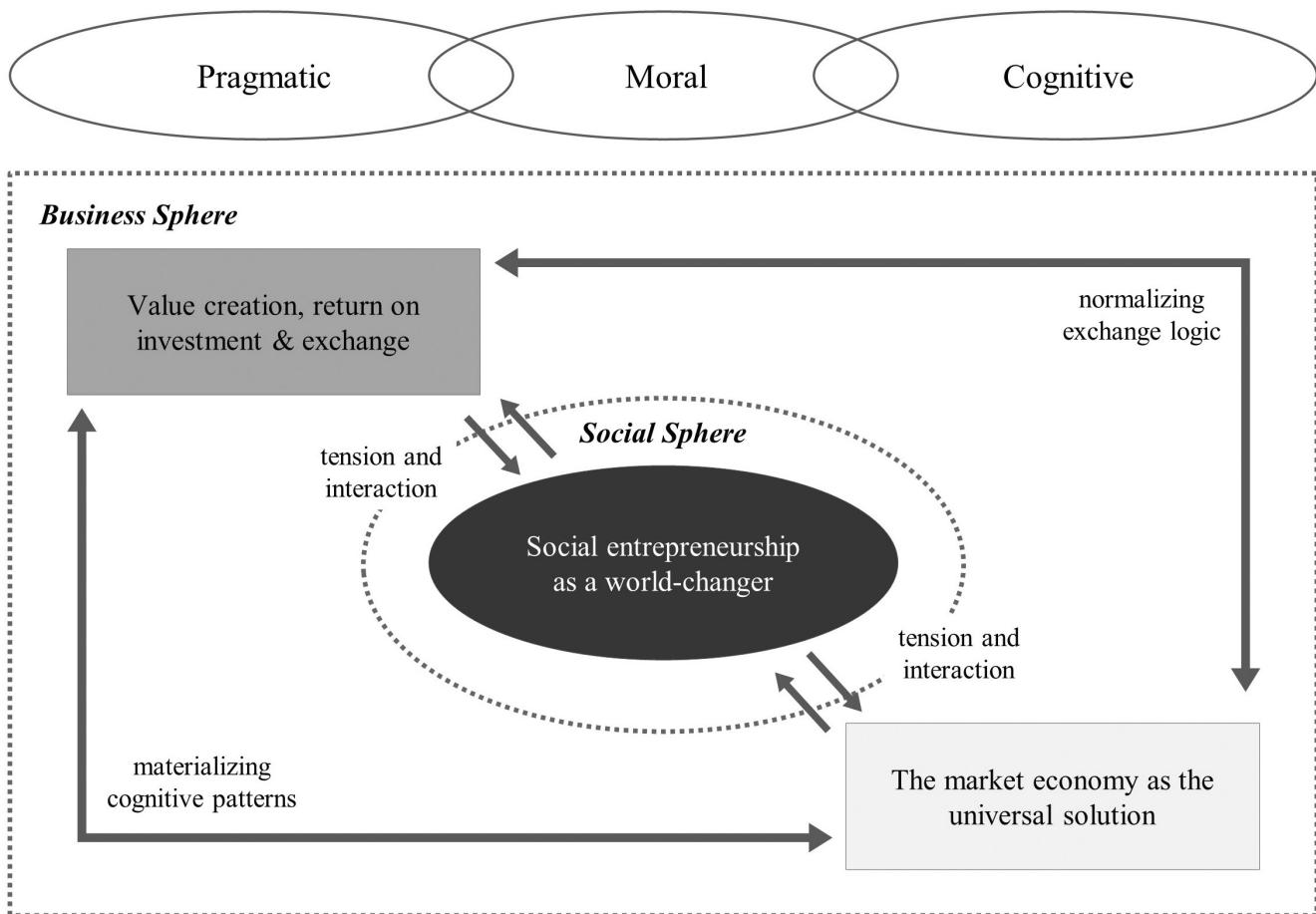


FIGURE 10 Strategic legitimacy construction by social entrepreneurs and facilitators.

usage of all three different types of legitimacy identified by our study can be interpreted as a strategy in its own right.

5.2 | Embracing the double burden

Abstracting from individual accounts, legitimacy for the overall field is constructed through interaction and tensions. Contestation and interaction of top-down/outside-in and bottom-up/inside-out influences are integral to discursive legitimacy construction, “a process of ongoing contestation in deliberative discursive processes” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 320). On the one hand, the pattern illustrated in the model (see Figure 10) can be interpreted as top-down or outside-in pressure, forcing business logic into the social space and limiting empowerment and marginalizing discourses around communitarianism and social justice (Howaldt et al., 2014). Legitimacy in this case is derived from finance- and efficiency-driven discourses. Conversely, one could adopt a stance of seeing societal contribution at the core, emanating social logic and empowerment bottom-up or inside-out. Thereby, concerns associated with utility maximization in business-focused discourses are counteracted. This is interpreted to substantiate the multi-discursivity characteristic of the field of social entrepreneurship (Poldner et al., 2017).

Parallels can be drawn to Cieslik's (2018) findings about the mainstream narrative focusing on social entrepreneurship's power to correct market failures which remains in the discursive space of market and business mechanisms. Sustainable solutions are ‘imported’ into the business sphere. The emergent account, conversely, focuses on social entrepreneurship's disruptive power toward systems change with a social logic replacing profit-/business-focused thinking. In the context investigated here, it could be argued that this is rooted in ‘Ubuntu’ philosophy as an indigenous communitarian value system (cf. Abubakre et al., 2021). As such, the emergent account not only counteracts the dominance of the business sphere over communal wellbeing, but also contributes to empowering the Global South relative to the Global North. This reflection of local realities could be strengthened further to mobilize discursive agency for legitimation.

Tensions were also observed between the discourses where arguments of empowerment are constructed alongside arguments of efficiency-driven private sector approaches. Morally argued, interviewees advocate for actively bringing a more social and/or environmental orientation to business – hence questioning an ‘automatic’ contribution to sustainability. Arguing in the opposite direction, cognitive considerations focus on the necessity of bringing in business approaches to social and/or environmental welfare to achieve financial sustainability, from which societal contributions will follow. Social entrepreneurship as an organizational field in a “pre-paradigmatic stage” (Nicholls, 2010, p. 611) allows for the adoption of contradictory accounts as its conceptualization is still under formation.

Embracing these tensions constitutes a discursive strategy to help facilitators and entrepreneurs reconcile the double burden experienced. First, it allows incorporating the hybrid nature of social

entrepreneurship (Doherty et al., 2014). Secondly, it serves as a strategy to simultaneously cater to multiple stakeholders (Borzaga & Defourny, 2004). Advantageous “in the face of heterogeneous environments with conflicting demands” (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 259), embracing the double burden helps bridge different institutional contexts.

Finally, embracing the double burden is facilitated through the enthusiasm and passion that unites social entrepreneurs and facilitators. The identification of an increasing number of actors with social entrepreneurship builds legitimacy by signaling community membership. To create this sense of belonging, social entrepreneurs and facilitators rely on optimism and passion (cf. Thorgren & Omoredede, 2018) although legitimation goes beyond personal moral legitimacy around leaders.

5.3 | The empty meaning of social

In contrast to Cieslik (2018), we argue that rather than existing separately, in the practical sphere investigated here, social and business logics work in unison, becoming fully merged. By bouncing back and forth between the two logics, agents construct multidimensional legitimacy across pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions. The close interlinking, however, blurs the line between ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘social entrepreneurship’. In the thus constructed wide discursive arena, the approach is legitimized even where the label ‘social entrepreneurship’ is not used.

This points to the particular difficulty of drawing the line regarding the connotation of ‘social’ in the context of the Global South. A ‘colloquial’ understanding of what ‘social’ means or is results in automatic positive associations which benefit legitimacy. However, if helping low-income segments is ‘social’ (in contrast to helping high-income people), then what threshold do we set for ‘poor’ people? What does ‘helping’ mean alongside a capitalist logic of efficiency and entrepreneurship? How do we determine what product affects whom? Given these difficulties, Santos (2012) proposes defining social entrepreneurship, consciously refraining from tautologically using the adjective ‘social’, “as addressing neglected problems with positive externalities” (p. 337).

Instead of an overreliance on ‘imported’ ideas from the Global North and a ‘colloquial’ understanding of social ends, the distinctiveness of the approach would benefit from further using active discursive strategies to fill ‘social’ with meaning. This can help avoid prioritizing financial over social ends resulting from seeing social sustainability as automatically achieved and financial sustainability as the result of hard efforts. Our findings highlight the challenges embedded in the dualism of structure and agency: The recognition of individuals as sentient agents creates possibility but requires them to actively make use of it to drive public discourse and debate. Structure entails a certain automaticity; agency relies on choice. Balancing missions is a choice that requires effort.

Further, the difficulty of balancing missions is masked by pragmatic considerations of income generation and job creation

integrating social aspects into business 'by default'. Interviewees proposed that every business is inherently solving problems catering to social needs, giving the example that the invention of cars provided a faster mode of transport than horse carriages. Owing to the specific context of the Global South, the line between value capture and value creation, as suggested by Santos (2012), is blurred: On the one hand, value capture is restrained by charging 'fair' prices sufficient for sustaining the social enterprise. On the other hand, value capture by social entrepreneurs is welcomed; where they are part of low-income populations, value capture is discursively turned into value creation, thereby widening the discursive space and further legitimating social entrepreneurship as a field. This underlines that environment matters for social entrepreneurship (Littlewood & Holt, 2018) – findings from the institutional context of the Global North cannot carelessly be transferred to the Global South.

As the 'market sphere' comes to dominate other spheres in society such as the 'social welfare sphere', this endangers the balance that is the very groundwork for complex equality (Walzer, 1983). It further limits the extent to which interactive processes of legitimacy construction are discursively "carried out by different agents in different spheres" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309). This is beneficial to legitimacy derived from coherence and consistency but may endanger the critical reflection that first led to the rise of social entrepreneurship.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study explores discursive legitimacy construction for social entrepreneurship in the Global South. Social entrepreneurs and facilitators span a common discursive space to deal with the double legitimation burden bridging the Global North, exemplified by Europe, and the Global South, exemplified by Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Multiple stakeholders are simultaneously catered to by interlinking pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. Building on the tension between social and business logics, agents construct legitimacy around the hybridity of social entrepreneurship, embracing paradoxes. These findings contribute to research in three ways – conceptually, empirically, and methodologically.

Firstly, we expand on the work by Suchman (1995) demonstrating the tight interlinkage of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. Building on the dualism of structure and agency, we have investigated legitimacy not as a state, a "generalized perception or assumption" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), but as "a process of ongoing contestation in deliberative discursive processes" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 320). This dynamic perspective allows for contrasts and contradictions not to hamper but to aid legitimation. An overreliance on background ideas 'imported' from the Global North, however, gives structure precedence over agency. Constructing legitimacy in contrast to perceived failures of other actors and automatic positive associations with 'social' may endanger the active pursuit of the social mission. Further, the glorification of social entrepreneurship raises it to a level where impact measurement is not necessary due to the

belief attached to it. Discourse can be a powerful driver for change but depends on the active choice to assume agency.

Secondly, examining social entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia answers calls for furthering research in contexts other than Europe and North America (De Bruin & Teasdale, 2019; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018; Tan Luc et al., 2022; Terjesen et al., 2016). Our research shows an expanded space for legitimacy construction of social entrepreneurship: In contrast to its European counterpart, a utility provider in for example Sub-Saharan Africa is framed as a social entrepreneur, thereby opening scarce channels for resource acquisition. This gives an indication that in the institutional context of the Global South, what is perceived as 'social' is broadened compared to its delineation in the Global North. The idealization – driven by optimism and passion – of social entrepreneurship in the Global South masks the high-risk involved in entrepreneurship, with 9 out of 10 start-ups failing (Patel, 2015). In a context where the own business often is crucial for a family's sustenance, it may produce legitimacy at a price.

Thirdly, the use of visual stimuli from social media facilitates remote immersion in the context, familiarizing us with facilitators' and social enterprises' realities. As the images are publicly available, they are directed at a broad audience instead of us as interviewees, avoiding for our own embeddedness in the Global North to influence the results. Images, and social media in particular, are powerful at transporting emotions and creating affiliation – including the visuals allows discerning the optimism, hope, motivation and drive that render social entrepreneurship distinctively legitimate.

This study brings forward implications for practitioners and policy makers. First, visually and verbally, managers of social enterprises should highlight local ideas as a central legitimating element, going beyond norm conformity and daring to reinvent the meaning of social entrepreneurship as it best delivers societal value in the specific context. In providing products and services to low-income population groups, it is important to ensure eye-level interaction and recognize beneficiaries as agents for co-creating local solutions. Only then can social entrepreneurship foster empowerment. Policy makers and facilitators, on the other hand, should refrain from romanticizing (social) entrepreneurship. *Social* entrepreneurship should be recognized as an approach in its own right with unique potential while acknowledging the approach's limits – some needs may be better served by government or non-profit organizations. Finally, going beyond 'hero entrepreneurs', more should be done to support the employees of the social enterprise, increasing visibility for the team 'behind the scenes' and building skills for collectively solving complex problems. Social entrepreneurship is no silver bullet for eradicating poverty and addressing systemic challenges in the Global South – but it can be one puzzle piece for achieving positive change through multi-stakeholder engagement.

The authors acknowledge that accounts of social entrepreneurs and facilitators showed strong similarity. This alignment may have arisen from sampling based on selecting social entrepreneurs largely from facilitators' portfolios and the dissemination of narratives among close-knit circles of facilitators and

social entrepreneurs. To overcome this limitation, future research could contrast the study's findings with data collected by referral through entrepreneurs rather than facilitators. Furthermore, the sampling approach led automatically to – at that point in time – successful cases. This selection of interviewees was useful for our study as it was likely to provide us with rich data for why social entrepreneurship is legitimate. Addressing this survivorship bias by including social entrepreneurs whose efforts are less successful or have failed provides avenues for future research. Studying why social entrepreneurship is *not* legitimate may help engage in a more critical debate on the powers and limits of social entrepreneurship in the Global South.

Although studying social enterprises in several Sub-Saharan African and Asian countries which target low-income population groups spans a context well suited as an example of the Global South, it may miss nuances in inter-country and inter-region specificities. Broader comparative studies, including social enterprises from South-East Asia and Latin America, could help shed more light on differences between socio-geographical contexts within the Global South. Likewise, including facilitators from, for instance, North America would broaden the eligibility of claims on the Global North.

Lastly, in order to account for the complexity of the field and the interdependencies at work, future research on social entrepreneurship in the Global South could mobilize systems change theory (e.g., Foster-Fishman et al., 2007) as an avenue to further investigate two contrasting views: are NGOs pressured to become more commercially driven or are corporates pushed to become more socio-environmentally responsible? This may help discern future trajectories of social entrepreneurship toward systems consolidation or systems change in the context of addressing development challenges. Will hybridization lead to 'one-size-fits-all-purposes' organizations where neither side of the social-business-spectrum is being fully served?

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Eva Katzer assisted by Tina Sendlhofer. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Eva Katzer and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/beer.12530>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ We adopt a definition of the Global South and Global North that goes beyond geographical notions. In that understanding, the North–South divide is made on the basis of socio-economic factors, political governance, and power relations, reflecting “a turn away from the language of developmentalism” (Müller, 2020, p. 735). The Global South is commonly denoted as comprising Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia while the Global North is typically used as an umbrella term for North America, Western Europe and parts of Asia-Pacific including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea (Müller, 2020). Central Eastern Europe represents a borderline case, being neither center nor periphery, leading to a call for moving from a binary North–South distinction to adding “the Global East” as a category (ibid).
- ⁱⁱ Kerlin (2010) compares Western Europe, East-Central Europe, Japan, the United States, Zimbabwe and Zambia, Argentina, and Southeast Asia.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Our sample included 12 social enterprises of which eleven operate exclusively in Sub-Saharan Africa and one operates predominantly in Asia (see Appendix B).
- ^{iv} The word Ubuntu originates from Zulu language (mainly spoken in South Africa); other terms referring to the same concept exist in other countries/regions in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- ^v Glorification here should not be understood condescendingly, but as reflecting facilitators' and entrepreneurs' enthusiasm in promoting the close interlinkage of entrepreneurial and social elements. The tone reflects a positive outlook and hope for social entrepreneurship to contribute to the SDGs.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF FACILITATORS INTERVIEWED






























TABLE A1 Anonymized overview of facilitators – all based in Europe.

	Name	Organization type	Description
1	Christine	Development Agency	Funds, supports & accelerates transitions to fairer and more sustainable world. Focus on climate, biodiversity, peace, education, urban development, health and governance.
2	Daniel	Foundation	Aims to promote achievement of the SDGs through its responsible leadership programs, global network, & impact investments.
3	Malini	Incubator	Mission to facilitate the creation of innovative enterprises. Incubator cooperates with development agency on social entrepreneurship in Africa.
4	Anna	Other Development Organization	Initiative that supports eco-inclusive enterprises across sectors that generate positive environmental, social and economic impacts.
5	Catherine Martin	Development Agency	Mission to reduce poverty in the world through project implementation, advocacy and statistics / information dissemination.
6	Sofia	Foundation	Aims to drive impactful philanthropy for solutions to pressing social issues. Section for social finance solutions aims to mobilize private capital in new and more efficient ways.
7	Michael	Development Agency	Funds projects to improve living conditions in the Global South with focus on combatting poverty, ensuring peace and preserving the environment.
8	Marieta	Foundation	Aims to find and support local early-stage social entrepreneurs who work toward one or more of the SDGs. Entrepreneurs are supported to scale innovations through capacity building, networks & funding, all in partnership with multiple sectors.
9	Fredrik	Foundation	Aims to make promising low-tech solutions accessible and further their successful implementation through sustainable entrepreneurship models.
10	Manon Albert	Other Development Organization	Not-for-profit development organization, working in agriculture, energy, and water, sanitation & hygiene. Implementing partner of a challenge fund for innovative private sector solutions that can contribute to the fight against poverty and climate change; focus on inclusion & empowerment of women and youth.

APPENDIX B


LIST OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS INTERVIEWED

TABLE B1 Anonymized overview of social entrepreneurs – all operating in Sub-Saharan Africa with one operating predominantly in Asia.

Name	Operating in	Description	SDG contribution
1 Janet	Ghana, Nigeria	Tropical weather forecasting services helping small-scale farmers reduce risk and increase profits.	  
2 Thomas	Mauritius, Bangladesh, China, Thailand	Digital training solutions for employment rights and responsibilities in garment factories.	   
3 Christian	Kenya	Footwear from waste materials, providing work and scholarships for youth.	  
4 Julien	Cameroon	App monitoring system for road safety / emergency teams and families showing a traveler's location in case of accident.	 
5 Brian	Zambia	Constructs and operates toilets and showers, converting waste into fertilizer/bio-fuel and re-cycling water.	   
6 Alloysius	Kenya	Modern and efficient energy solutions, incl. solar lamps, solar home systems and energy-efficient stoves.	   
7 Emmanuel	Nigeria	Integrated clean energy generation (solar, biomass) and management for rural/sub-urban usage.	  
8 Ajume	Kenya	Hard- & software provider creating rugged, self-powered mobile routers to increase internet connectivity.	   
9 Paul	Kenya	Mobile & USSD platform connecting people to health services, SMS notifications in case of an emergency.	 

(continued)

TABLE B1 (continued)

	Name	Operating in	Description	SDG contribution
10	James	South Africa	Env. awareness raising, construct preschools using bricks built from un-recyclable plastic waste on PET-bottles framed by insulating building material.	
11	Moses Derrick	Kenya Nigeria	Safe drinking water solutions for schools & health-care centers through modern water purification systems & long-term payment plans.	