

# Philosophical Practices within Social Enterprises in South Africa: A Search for Inclusive Socio-economic Development

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**Abstract:** Generally, economic investment models are primarily premised on maximising profit and accumulating wealth, a development paradigm that mostly benefits investors, with little attention to the indigent. South Africa, despite being one of the richest countries in Africa, continues to record high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and social injustice. This paper focuses on social entrepreneurship as a socio-economic paradigm that aims to balance profit-making and social impact for economic inclusivity in Buffalo City Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. An interpretivist paradigm, which aligns with a qualitative research approach, was adopted. Using a case study research design, three social enterprises in the agriculture, ICT, and clothing sectors were selected from which ten participants were purposively sampled and interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed that people-centrism, socio-economic empowerment, cultural integration, and continuous innovation are key philosophical pillars driving social enterprise practices. The findings highlight that by aligning traditional African values with market-oriented strategies,

social enterprises contribute to rebuilding community solidarity, democratising economic participation, and addressing systemic inequalities. These principles advance the social investment paradigm in social enterprises by enabling the reconceptualisation and contextualisation of wealth creation and its concomitant social impact on communities. However, tensions remain due to differing perceptions of social enterprises as either Afrocentric solutions or neo-colonial constructs. The study concludes that philosophical authenticity and contextual sensitivity are crucial for enhancing the efficacy and acceptance of social entrepreneurship models in South Africa's socio-economic development landscape. The study recommended that practitioners implement inclusive, equity-based investment models to promote human development.

**Keywords:** Social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, philosophical practices, inclusion, social value creation.

## 1. Introduction

The 21st-century development models maintain economic and political hegemonic philosophies in various African countries. The investment models informed by these philosophies primarily aim to maximise profit and accumulate wealth for a small segment of the population while disenfranchising the majority (Arnold, 2017; Giacomo, 2017). Consequently, this phenomenon has resulted in high income disparity and inequality between the rich and the poor globally, including South Africa (Urban & Kujinga, 2017). Arguably, despite the significant contribution of profit-making investments to the development of countries in general, they equally expose most of the population to social vulnerability and a loss of human dignity. This has been exacerbated by political hegemony between continents, top-down development approaches, and corrupt governance systems that fail to recognise the abilities and capabilities of people to emancipate themselves. South Africa, as a community, continues to battle with the pernicious legacy of apartheid, which manifests through gender inequality, poverty, a culture of violence, and unemployment among women and youth (Plagerson et al., 2019; Rogan & Reynolds, 2019; Urban & Kujinga, 2017). It is therefore prudent to

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evaluate the dominant and exorbitant profit-making and wealth accumulation investment models and philosophies and suggest alternatives for creating and distributing wealth inclusively (Angela, 2016). This paper is premised on a positive deconstructive narrative to rethink the conventional socio-economic development approaches contributing to increasing inequality, cultural erosion, loss of human dignity, and threatened social sustainability, especially in South Africa. Therefore, rethinking the way the government implements development projects and how entrepreneurs invest in their communities is a subject of concern in the current dispensation in South Africa.

The paper focuses on social entrepreneurship and its philosophical attributes in selected South African social enterprises. Social entrepreneurship as a process and social enterprises as institutions that implement it attract varied perceptions in different contexts globally. Research and debate on various aspects of social entrepreneurship have grown over the last decade (Forouharfar et al., 2018; Littlehood & Holt, 2018), unearthing some philosophical fundamentals on creating wealth in local contexts and blending new ideologies into predominant economic approaches. This is important, especially for social development practitioners whose professional mandates address socio-economic ills through innovative, empowering, and inclusive approaches. According to Ndhlovu and Ndida (2017), social entrepreneurship is premised on institutionalising the social organisation framework and the agenda of social transformation. Evidence from social entrepreneurship literature shows that the emergence of social enterprise debates and undertakings reflects the breakdown in conventional organisational and institutional systems (Esau & Tengeh, 2022; Gordon, 2017). Thus, philosophically, technically, and institutionally, social entrepreneurship heralds a paradigm shift in socio-economic transformation for future communities (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020). A study by Smith and Nemetz (2009) reported that communities support the pro-social entrepreneurship ideology because it can create self-reliance and sustainability over time, compared to government and foreign aid handouts. Similarly, Manyaka (2015) noted that social entrepreneurship has a higher potential to leverage the economic and social transformation of the 'poorest of the poor' in developing societies. Therefore, this paper explores the philosophies within social enterprises towards inclusive socio-economic development in South African communities.

### **1.1 An overview of the social entrepreneurship milieu in South Africa**

Three concepts constitute the social entrepreneurship paradigm. These are social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, and social entrepreneurs. This section will briefly describe these concepts and illustrate the impact of social entrepreneurship on development, as well as its potential to create wealth for positive social change in South Africa.

From an institutional point of view, the World Bank Group defines social enterprises as privately owned organisations, whether for-profit, non-profit, or a hybrid of the two, that use business methods to advance their social objectives (World Bank Group, 2017). South Africa has been identified by the World Bank Group as the leading country in promoting social entrepreneurship in Africa, and Southern Africa in particular (World Bank Group, 2017). This recognition makes research on social enterprises in South Africa of significant interest. Many characteristics of social enterprises have been elucidated in the literature, some of which are crucial in building the philosophical foundations for social entrepreneurship (Dassah & Ngatse-Ipangui, 2019; Kajiita, 2022; Pittaway, 2005; Waghid, 2019). For instance, Mandyoli et al. (2017) identified social mission, value creation, value capture, innovation, reinvesting profits, impact, and market-based operations as the seven key characteristics of a transformative social enterprise. These characteristics can be categorised into two main themes. First, social enterprises are driven by social value creation and market-based needs. Therefore, social enterprises are institutions or businesses with strategic social missions achieved through market-based strategies. Given the high levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment in South Africa (Plagerson et al., 2019; Rogan & Reynolds, 2019), social enterprises become pertinent agents of change and transformation towards a more equitable and just society (Kajiita, 2022).

Social enterprises, as organisations or business entities, operate within the concept of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is the process or belief system that institutions and businesses adopt to satisfy social and economic objectives (Esau & Tengeh, 2022; Khandker, 2010). Smith and Nemetz (2009) describe this process as a two-pronged approach involving input transformation and transformation-output activities, which implies the interconnectedness of the value chains of social enterprises. The input aspect refers to marketing efforts aimed at creating drivers and resources to initiate and sustain capital markets for investing in social enterprises. The output side pertains to the marketing efforts that involve developing products and services that meet customer needs while being economically sustainable through fair trade practices (Yunus, 2007). Adopting and sustaining this two-pronged approach distinguishes social enterprises from other businesses and non-profit entities within the wealth creation and distribution paradigm. Given the contemporary socio-economic challenges in South Africa, such as unemployment, inequality, and persistent poverty, alternative development philosophies and practices, such as social enterprises, are highly advocated for (Gordon, 2017; Kajiita, 2022; Littlehood & Holt, 2018).

According to Sengupta, Sahay, and Croce (2018), five key dimensions of social entrepreneurship are emerging from growing economies. These dimensions are social welfare, social capital, social entrepreneurship, economic value creation, and collective endurance. They provide a platform for understanding social entrepreneurship discourse, diversity, meaning, and evolution. The different perspectives on these dimensions could lead to embracing, rejecting, or integrating social entrepreneurship into developmental interventions in various contexts (De Avillez et al., 2020). Communities can evaluate social entrepreneurship through these lenses, drawing upon related normative meanings and those embedded within the local context to create solutions to their problems. For instance, Wright (2010) associated social entrepreneurship with socialist principles, arguing that the nexus between social entrepreneurship and socialism lies in the idea that people have the power to control what they want to be and do. The benefits of social enterprises through goods and services reflect the skills and needs of the involved individuals. Consequently, social entrepreneurship typically endeavours to lessen the exploitation, domination, alienation, and inefficiencies characteristic of conventional market systems (Wright, 2010). In the South African context, social enterprises are perceived through the lens of African value systems that emphasise communal living and resource sharing (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2021; Kajiita, 2022), representing both a welfarist approach and new commercial models designed to leverage dwindling markets (Littlehood & Holt, 2018; World Bank Group, 2017).

Like socialists, social entrepreneurs promote ideals and principles of equality, democracy, individual freedom, self-realisation, and community solidarity (Kajiita, 2022; Wright, 2010). Ideally, these tenets illuminate the need for individuals to recognise their inherent responsibilities to support others. The desire for responsibility towards humanity is emphatically illustrated by Cohen (2009), who argues that people should "care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another" (Cohen, 2009, p. 34). In social work and social development, the 'narrative of care' is a fundamental tenet for protecting and promoting human dignity, as championed by world social work bodies and the Agenda for Social Development (IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW, 2016). In the spirit of solidarity and empowerment, social entrepreneurship, as a development paradigm, requires recognition of people's valuable capacities to pursue a prosperous life and avoid impoverishment by integrating them into economic systems (Gilabert, 2017). South Africa is embracing social entrepreneurship because of its potential to address the daunting challenges of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and economic exclusion resulting from historic injustices (Gordon, 2017; Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020; Kajiita, 2022; Littlehood & Holt, 2018; World Bank Group, 2017). This implies that social enterprises are guided by philosophies that resonate well with people's and the market's needs to generate social and economic value.

Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises are driven by social entrepreneurs, who are philosophically and technically characterised as social bricoleurs, social engineers, and social constructionists (Smith & Stevens, 2010). According to Smith and Stevens (2010), social entrepreneurs who fit the social bricoleur model work with communities to identify their real issues and find context-appropriate solutions. This category of social entrepreneurs demonstrates a strong affinity for their communities, which enables them to develop solutions for local social problems, such as water provision, food supply, and internet connectivity. Accordingly, Mandyoli et al. (2017) describe these social entrepreneurs as individuals who identify and utilise opportunities and resources within their local domains for the benefit of the community. These entrepreneurs are important because they transform 'dead community assets' into income-generating ventures, thereby creating wealth in such settings.

Secondly, social entrepreneurs who are social engineers focus on large-scale, complex issues that are often beyond the capacity of a community to manage on its own (Smith & Stevens, 2010). They identify systemic problems such as unemployment, inequality, or entrenched poverty within a social system and then develop or design programmes to address them. To achieve large-scale impact, they engineer or re-engineer existing and often dominant institutional systems and practices, decisively replacing them with more socially efficient alternatives (Zahra et al., 2009). The renowned social entrepreneur Muhammad Yunus, founder of the successful microfinance institution Grameen Bank, exemplifies a social engineer. The bank's impact in providing credit, financial literacy, and skills to previously impoverished individuals who could not access credit and financial information from mainstream banking systems (Khandker, 2010) serves as a clear demonstration of a social engineer within a socio-economic context.

Thirdly, social entrepreneurs as social constructionists are highly opportunity-driven, though not to the same extent as pure commercial entrepreneurs. They identify and pursue opportunities to create social wealth that positively impacts society (Smith & Stevens, 2010). They identify opportunities and develop solutions to effectively address social needs that are not adequately met by existing institutions (Mandyoli et al., 2017). Furthermore, Manyaka (2015) notes that a social constructionist approach acknowledges that individuals play a role in developing a preferred reality for themselves. This implies that people interpret development differently based on their needs. Consequently, socio-economic development approaches that advance the interests of communities, families, and individuals should be embraced and integrated into mainstream development systems (Lombard & Wairire, 2010). South Africa has a cluster of emerging social entrepreneurs in various sectors, such as agriculture, health and welfare, technology, and the textile industry (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020; Kajiita, 2022). Thus, social entrepreneurship needs to be understood from multiple dimensions to maximise its benefits in the South African socio-economic development context.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework illustrating the social enterprise environment, with a focus on the philosophical principles, processes, and potential impact. Informed by the literature and the preceding discussion, the framework demonstrates that social enterprise is grounded in philosophical foundations such as ubuntu, people-centrism, empowerment, and innovation, which drive social value creation, community engagement, and skills development. Importantly, it identifies the key actors—social entrepreneurs—and the necessary inputs for generating impact, including empowerment, inclusivity, and poverty reduction. This framework enhances our understanding of the unique ecosystem of social enterprises, encompassing the belief systems that underpin them and the social impact they seek to create. Additionally, it is essential for comprehending the contextual factors relevant to the missions of social enterprises and how they operate to achieve those missions.

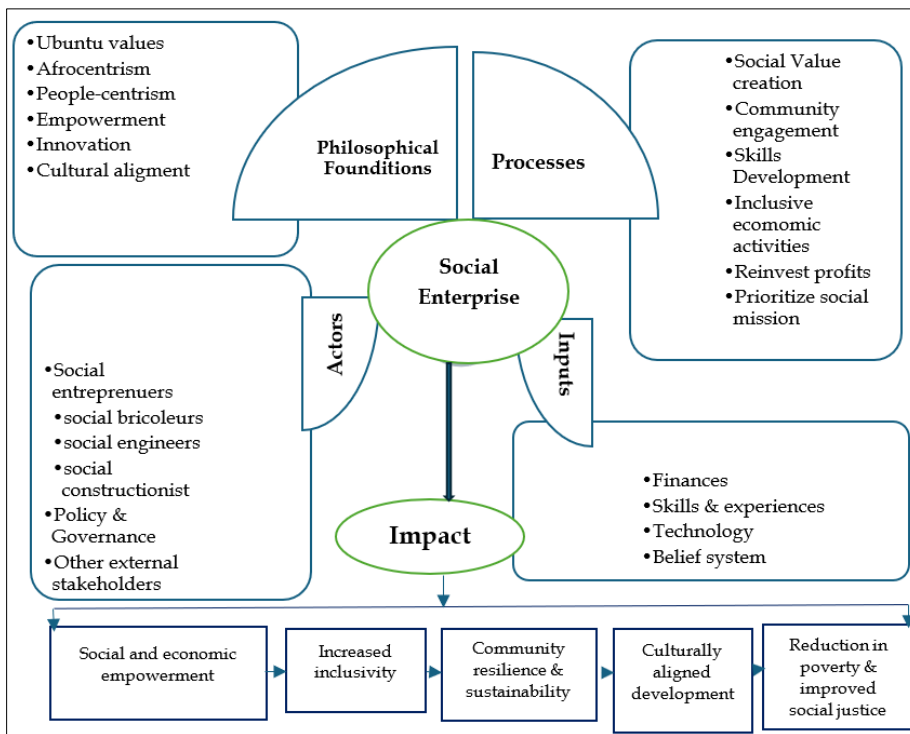


Figure 1: Conceptual framework-social enterprise ecosystem. Source: The Authors

## 1.2 Problem statement

In South Africa, socio-economic inequality remains a pressing challenge, deeply rooted in the country's historical context and exacerbated by contemporary issues such as unemployment, poverty, and uneven access to resources (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020; Kajiita, 2022). Social enterprises, which operate at the intersection of business and social impact, present a potential solution for addressing societal issues through sustainable economic models (Gordon, 2017; Kajiita, 2022; Littlehood & Holt, 2018). However, the philosophical underpinnings of these enterprises—particularly their role in fostering inclusive development—are underexplored. Many studies prioritise financial sustainability and impact metrics, entrepreneurial intentions, and the mapping of social enterprises (Ahuja, Akhtar, & Wali, 2019; Dassah & Ngatse-Ipangui, 2019; Esau & Tengeh, 2022). Understanding philosophical practices, such as ethical leadership, participatory governance, Ubuntu, and social justice, could enhance the role of social enterprises in driving inclusive socio-economic development. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand how social enterprises in South Africa adopt and operationalise philosophical practices to promote inclusive socio-economic development and how these practices contribute to addressing the systemic inequalities that persist in the country. This understanding is crucial for creating sustainable models that drive impactful socio-economic growth and ensure that marginalised communities benefit adequately from development investments.

### 1.2.1 Research questions

The paper sought to address the following questions:

- What philosophies are embedded in social enterprise practices in Buffalo City Municipality in Eastern Cape, South Africa?
- How do social enterprises promote inclusive socio-economic development in Buffalo City Municipality in Eastern Cape, South Africa?

## **2. Materials and Methods**

To understand the philosophical nuances within the social entrepreneurship milieu, an in-depth analysis of social enterprises, along with reflections from social entrepreneurs and the experiences and views of beneficiaries, is crucial. Therefore, this paper utilises qualitative research to gather and analyse data on social enterprises in Buffalo City Municipality, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The qualitative research approach is commendable for studies seeking to understand real-life experiences aimed at solving societal problems, as it unearths the genuine experiences, views, and perceptions of participants in their natural settings (Creswell, 2014; De Vos et al., 2011; Patton, 2015). Additionally, qualitative research is appropriate for studying organisational programmes and activities (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Through this research approach, the researchers explored the practices within social enterprises and how various beneficiaries and social entrepreneurs experience and perceive them. A qualitative research approach also enables researchers to interact with participants and the systems involved, allowing for a deeper understanding of the research problem from their perspectives, including context-based thinking and interpretations of social enterprise activities. Thus, engaging with social entrepreneurs and beneficiaries in this study generated the most relevant data, enriching the researchers' understanding of the philosophical foundations of social enterprise within the study domain.

Consequently, this paper is grounded in the interpretivism paradigm. The interpretivism paradigm emphasises understanding the subjective meanings and social constructions of reality between the researcher and the participants (Patton, 2015). Moreover, interpretivism allows researchers to comprehend the world through lived experiences in various contexts and constructs, making it a valuable philosophical standpoint in qualitative research that focuses on human and organisational complexities. Therefore, the interpretivism paradigm was deemed prudent for analysing and interpreting data on social enterprise operations, principles, and impact in the study domain.

In line with the qualitative approach and the interpretivism paradigm, the study adopted a case study design. Case study design is a robust methodology that enables a deep, contextualised understanding of a specific phenomenon within its real-life setting (Creswell, 2014). In this paper, multiple cases (three) were selected and studied to understand the philosophies embedded in social enterprises and how they promote inclusive socioeconomic development in Buffalo City Municipality, Eastern Cape Province.

### **2.1 Sampling techniques and sample size**

The study adopted non-probability sampling techniques. The sampling method was informed by the need to select data-rich and experienced participants from the identified social enterprises. Consequently, these enterprises were selected purposively and conveniently based on their operations and the ease of access. These sampling techniques were employed because social enterprises in the study area are few, and they allowed for data gathering from participants directly involved in the operations of the enterprises. This limitation also underscores the need to adopt a case study design, which entails studying small units of the population or organisations to generate in-depth data for analysis (Patton, 2015).

The social enterprises included in the sample were engaged in the agriculture, ICT, and textile sectors, all having operated in the study domain for more than ten years. In terms of size, the agriculture-based social enterprise had created over 100 job opportunities. The ICT-based enterprise reported a significant impact on the community through skills development and transfer, having trained over 50,000 people and operated more than forty branches nationally. The textile-based social enterprise prides itself on three signature programmes: a clothing programme for women, an appliance programme for men, and early childhood development centres for children.

The selection of social enterprises was based on their clear and defined social mission, the nature of their services, the programmes they invest in, and the class of beneficiaries they target or work with. The researchers used the primary definition of a social enterprise as an organisation that utilises a social business model to create social value for and with the community it serves (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2021) to select the cases. From the three social enterprises, ten participants were selected and interviewed. Using purposive sampling, three participants were chosen from two social enterprises and four from one social enterprise. Notably, data saturation informed the number of participants interviewed; data saturation was reached at the tenth participant, and thus the sample was deemed sufficient for analysis.

## **2.2 Data collection methods and procedure**

Informed by the principles of a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The significance of in-depth interviews in qualitative research is widely acclaimed (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2014; De Vos et al., 2011; Patton, 2015) because they provide rich and original evidence of the subject under investigation. The interviews were conducted at the workplaces of the ten participants, as this was convenient for them. As primary data collection instruments, the researchers also had the opportunity to observe the actual activities taking place in the social enterprises, which enriched the understanding of the data collected from the interviews.

## **2.3 Data analysis**

The data was analysed using the inductive thematic analysis technique. Inductive reasoning involves generating meaning from textual data (Patton, 2015). The six steps of thematic data analysis were followed, which included familiarisation with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing the emerging themes, defining and categorising the themes, and finally, writing the findings. The thematic analysis identified emerging themes for further interpretation and discussion. The findings are triangulated with the literature on social entrepreneurship to draw meaningful conclusions.

## **2.4 Ethical consideration**

The researchers adhered to ethical research requirements, including participant consent, avoidance of harm, anonymity, and confidentiality. Before the commencement of the interviews, participants were briefed on the entire study process and asked to sign consent forms for voluntary participation. During and after the data collection process, the data was reported in a manner that would not harm the participants individually or their organisations, nor reveal their identities or confidential information. Therefore, the study did not harm or expose the participants to any social, financial, or health risks. The study also complied with standard institutional review procedures, ethics clearances, and general research ethical guidelines and principles. An ethical clearance certificate, KAN241SKAJ01, was issued by the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee.

## **3. Presentation of Results**

The key findings from this study are presented and interpreted in this section. The themes are supported by selected participants' verbatim responses. The paper aimed to explore philosophies within social enterprises concerning inclusive socio-economic development in South Africa. The first research question on the philosophies embedded in social enterprise is addressed in the first theme (people-centrism as a tenet of wealth creation and inclusion) and the second theme (cultural sensitivity in socio-economic investing). In these themes, philosophies such as Afrocentrism, ubuntu, communalism, and eurocentrism are illustrated. The second research question on how social enterprises promote inclusive socio-economic development is answered by the third theme (empowerment and emancipatory participation) and the fourth theme (innovation). The findings are presented in detail as follows.

### 3.1 People-centrism is a basic tenet of creating social wealth and inclusion

During the interviews with social entrepreneurs, social enterprise managers, and beneficiaries, statements such as 'improving people's well-being,' 'mutual benefits for the community and social investor,' 'Ubuntu values,' and 'serving, growing, and sustaining communities' were emphatically expressed when describing various aspects of social enterprises. These statements reveal fundamental intentions and reasons for the emergence and existence of social enterprises, such as promoting shared prosperity (inclusion) and developing communities for a better future. This indicates that social entrepreneurship creates and promotes platforms for enriching individual and community well-being. For instance, the participants discussed Ubuntu values, the need to accommodate one another, investing in people, connectedness, and improving the well-being of individuals, which irrefutably encapsulates the principle of people-centredness in a development endeavour.

Literature on social entrepreneurship associates its emergence with government weaknesses and inefficiencies in addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020; Littlewood & Holt, 2018). This suggests that the proponents of social entrepreneurship identified a developmental gap that required an alternative ideology and approach. However, the prevailing question remains: What drives social entrepreneurs to act differently, and how differently do they act in addressing developmental gaps in various world contexts? The findings of this study indicate that social entrepreneurs harness community resources, as well as individuals' capabilities and skills, to improve well-being through mutual investments. This creates an opportunity for previously excluded individuals and communities to enter the market-based economy. Therefore, social entrepreneurs promote and enhance inclusivity and encourage communities to invest in their capabilities and resources. These findings align with De Avillez et al. (2020), which suggests that social entrepreneurship captures multiple facets of human development. Their study indicates that the participants described social enterprises in their communities as everything they needed, originating as a necessity for people to solve their problems innovatively (De Avillez et al., 2020).

In this study, the participants shared similar sentiments, revealing that social entrepreneurship is largely people-centric and embraces the principles of shared prosperity, community growth, sustainability, and human well-being. The following selected participants' verbatim illustrate this revelation:

*The desire to be close to people and help them solve their problems sets social enterprises apart from other businesses or organisations. It is [social enterprise] a mutual business entity between the investors and the communities because the investor brings his resources and works with the community to solve some problems. Such undertaking benefits us all (Interview Participant: Clothing, Social entrepreneur).*

*I could describe it [social entrepreneurship] as a way for people to create and share their wealth with the rest of the community members and just be there for one another. However, we can now say it has been advanced to take the market approach due to many changes in societal structures (Interview Participant: Agri. SE Beneficiary).*

Arguably, when people perceive development approaches as inclusive and people-centred, they are more likely to embrace, support, and participate meaningfully. Consequently, there is a desire to cultivate, preserve, and sustain collective efforts to address common challenges faced in the local context. By being people-centric, social entrepreneurship promotes the generation of social capital among community members and facilitates the achievement of social missions across various dimensions.

### 3.2 Ubuntu: Cultural sensitivity in socio-economic investing

Generally, social entrepreneurship has attracted varied perceptions and interpretations globally. Accordingly, statements such as 'social enterprises are pure business entities,' 'they are white people naming an African style of life,' and 'entrepreneurs expect profits' were captured during the interviews. These sentiments allude to the fact that social enterprises also harbour some capitalistic values. This may be why some participants associated them with Westernisation and perceived them as Eurocentric.

On the other hand, most participants enthusiastically elucidated that social entrepreneurship manifests African traditions, values, and the spirit of communalism. This observation is illustrated by phrases such as 'African way of communal living,' 'African values,' and 'Ubuntu values,' as expressed by the participants during the interviews on the various aspects of social enterprises. African values such as Ubuntu, which is famously associated with South African society, were perceived as fundamental drivers of social entrepreneurship in the South African context. Therefore, social enterprises import Ubuntu into the market discourse to address daunting challenges such as unemployment, inequality, and economic exclusion. These findings reveal the vitality of business models and development approaches embedded in communities' cultural identities and values, facilitating effective social value creation to address local social challenges.

However, if communities perceive investments and development approaches as manipulative of their cultural values, it may stifle growth and development within those communities. For instance, in this study, while some participants viewed social entrepreneurship from an Afro-centric lens, others viewed it from a Euro-centric lens. In the South African context, some participants associated social entrepreneurship with wealthy commercial entities that originated in Europe and Asia, where capitalist tools have been developed and exported to other parts of the world. Moreover, during the interviews, some participants expressed feelings of being hoodwinked by the use of English concepts to represent their cultural ways of life. This could be attributed to the local leadership's weaker support of social enterprises. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate how participants viewed social enterprise through cultural and racial lenses.

*This [social entrepreneurship] is white people's name for the African way of community lifestyle. The problem is that African intellect is stored in the mind, not books. So, the white community has hidden this concept in the books, and as the adage goes, if one wants to succeed in hiding something from black people, put it into books. Many people do not understand the concept in the local context. They see social enterprises as pure business, not as a different entity. They also think it is a way white people use to promote and diversify their businesses by making them look different (Interview Participant: Agri. Social entrepreneur).*

*Our services are rooted in the principles of Ubuntu that echo Ulutho. While the other sectors are driven by profit-making and do not necessarily consider humanistic values, we are in front of promoting our values through business (Interview Participant: ICT, Social entrepreneur).*

The sentiments expressed above indicate that social enterprises suffer from racial and cultural misconceptions, as some participants perceive them as vehicles of colonialism operating in isolation to promote their own agendas. Notably, such perceptions are detrimental to the growth and development of the social economy sector in South Africa. The findings reveal a paradox within social entrepreneurship in the country, with some celebrating and embracing it as a solution to serious socio-economic problems, while others view it as a form of neocolonialism.

### 3.3 Empowerment and socio-economic emancipatory

To create sustainable wealth, people must be empowered holistically and emancipated from social bondages. The dominant phrases that emerged during the interviews include 'changing lives in the community,' 'best model for community empowerment,' 'unlocking economic activity,' 'promoting

ownership and inclusion,' and 'skill development and improvement,' among others. These phrases and statements reveal that social entrepreneurship upholds and promotes empowerment, capabilities and strengths development, and self-realisation. The study indicates that social entrepreneurship involves endeavours that positively change lives in communities by developing and improving skills, creating employment, and unlocking social and economic activities in neglected sectors and areas. Through this approach, individuals' inherent talents, skills, and capabilities are strategically and objectively developed to unlock benefits for themselves and the communities they inhabit. Moreover, the study revealed that, in a socio-political context, social entrepreneurship provides platforms for democratic ideals such as active participation in making decisions about issues that affect people most, as well as social, economic, and political emancipation, and radical socio-economic transformation. The following interview extracts echo these findings:

*We have been engaging the local farmers in farming macadamia nuts, which are high-value crops with high economic returns. We have helped the farmers to secure international markets contracts. We sell our produce while the harvesting is not yet finished. This is an excellent opportunity for our local farmers since they do not have to incur losses or get stranded while looking for markets (Interview participant: Agric. Social entrepreneur).*

*Our approach stand high as far as rural development is concerned. This is because we have provided youth with computer skills, and now they can earn a living for themselves through employment or owning an internet cybercafé in the local villages. We are changing the lives of many people for better (Interview Participant: ICT, SE Manager).*

*We are result-oriented in approach and not only making recommendations to communities. We are trying to make the communities the co-owners of the services and products created by employing them in our projects and programmes (Interview Participant: Clothing, SE Manager).*

*Their focus has always been on accessibility, flexibility and affordability of the services and products they create and provide. As women we are provided with volumes of stock and make payment as we sell. If we cannot sell after a certain period, we are allowed to return the stock and have another set that can sell fast. This has developed trust between the enterprise and the unemployed mothers. This creates a sense of ownership as we can use their services and products with confidence and freedom (Interview Participant: Clothing SE Beneficiary).*

### **3.4 Innovation: Pursuit of recreating and creating social value**

Social enterprises are characterised by innovation as the engine of operationalisation, and they distinguish themselves from other development entities. This finding emanated from the participants' use of phrases such as 'unique design,' 'self-competition,' 'results-oriented,' 'variety,' and 'technology,' among others, during the interviews. The data revealed that innovation for creating social value distinguished social enterprises' operating philosophy from that of pure commercial enterprises. The study indicated that innovation improved service delivery by increasing accessibility and affordability. This finding emanated from the participants' use of phrases such as 'customer sense of ownership,' 'good customer feedback,' and 'accessibility and convenience' during the interviews. By being innovative, social entrepreneurs enhance participation and inclusivity in the market systems for the local people, as well as bridging the gap in service delivery. Generally, social enterprises in the study area were perceived to add value to the communities' social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions by branding or rebranding services and products. During the interviews, the following social entrepreneurs expressed their prowess and agility in identifying social challenges and developing practical solutions thereof:

*The difference comes from being innovative in what you want to do. This is because you might find that what you want to do is already on the market, and many people are doing it. So, it is either you modify the existing products and services or you create new ones altogether for you*

*to succeed in bringing change to the community (Interview Participant: ICT, Social entrepreneur).*

*To grow and be sustainable, you need to be innovative and understand the market structure worldwide. Our enterprise has the right people for marketing, and before we finish our production, we will already have orders waiting for us (Interview participant: Agri. Social Enterprise manager).*

*We are very proud to have turned 'dead community assets' into viable economic activities in our area. That is critical, especially when we sustain jobs in rural communities. We bring dignity to the rural people by bringing them to international market platforms through innovative marketing strategies (Interview participant: Agri. Social entrepreneur).*

Through innovation, communities have discovered and developed competitive services and products that enhance the lifestyles of people locally, nationally, and internationally (Elliott, 2019; Kajiita, 2022). From a human development perspective, the significance of innovation cannot be overstated due to its benefits and the plausible solutions it offers. It is arguably for these reasons that the ratification of global development goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW, 2016; 2018), has placed innovation at the forefront of efforts to address social challenges worldwide.

#### **4. Discussion of Findings**

The success of an economic or social philosophy depends on how the people it affects most accept, embrace, and integrate it into their day-to-day operations. From a development perspective, social entrepreneurship has been embraced as a global driver for social change (Bansal, Garg & Sharma, 2019). This study, along with previous research in the South African context, has shown a growing acceptance of social entrepreneurship as an alternative socio-economic development philosophy. This is attributable to unique characteristics such as people-centredness, innovation, empowerment, inclusivity, and cultural alignment in promoting the worth and dignity of individuals (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2020; Kajiita, 2022). The strategic nature of partnerships formed by social enterprises has provided a platform for acceptance at local, national, and international levels (Forouharfar, Rowshan, & Salarzei, 2019). The multidimensional constructs of social entrepreneurship have allowed for the expression of entrepreneurially virtuous behaviour to achieve the social mission. As a principle, virtuous behaviour prompts social entrepreneurs to be coherent in purpose and action regarding social value, creating opportunities through innovativeness, proactivity, and risk-taking with individuals of various abilities and capabilities (Mort et al., 2003). For years, social workers and social development planners have sought ways to harmonise the simultaneous pursuit of social and economic objectives (Chikadzi & Warri, 2018). Social entrepreneurship offers a new paradigm for addressing this quagmire, as it presents an organisational model that can be adopted from micro to macro levels, leading to a new socio-economic framework. According to Chikadzi and Warri (2018), such an economic order would result in a collectivist, redistributive, and egalitarian growth model based on communised capitalism. These perspectives highlight the potential alternatives that communities can adopt and embrace to create wealth for themselves and future generations.

The findings of this study showed that social entrepreneurship is greatly influenced by personal and communal intentions to emancipate and achieve a better standard of living. These findings accord with Ahuja et al. (2017), who state that social enterprises generate and promote social capital, human capital, social values, opportunities, conscientiousness, self-efficacy, and an upbeat personality, all of which encapsulate people-centredness. A study by Mandyoli et al. (2017) exploring how the social entrepreneurship ecosystem prepares students for the workplace to reduce graduate unemployment suggested that opportunities exist for social entrepreneurs to provide practical, project-based learning experiences for college and university students. This would ensure that by the time they graduate, students have achieved reasonable work readiness that enhances their employability. Such

an approach is prudent, especially in South Africa, a country beset by increasing poverty, inequality, and violence (Plagerson et al., 2019; Rogan & Reynolds, 2019).

This study revealed the importance of culturally aligned development and investment approaches. For instance, social entrepreneurship is gaining acceptance in South Africa because its operations and philosophies align with Ubuntu, an African principle that emphasises responsibility for others and a moral obligation to care for others while sharing community benefits (Akyeampong, 2018; Wyk & Adonisi, 2010). African communities have various philosophies that encourage their constituents to take responsibility for others, such as Ujamaa in Tanzania (Akyeampong, 2018; Keskin & Abdalla, 2019). Ujamaa, loosely translated as brotherhood, embodies a significant traditional African value with an emphasis on familyhood and communalism (Keskin & Abdalla, 2019). Essentially, Ujamaa advocates for freedom, equality, and unity in sharing wealth and prosperity within society. These philosophical undertakings imply that one must recognise one's abilities to work cooperatively and build a community of common interest, which is essential in any community where transformative development is expected. Similarly, Kwame Nkrumah's agenda for 'social revolution,' Leopold Sedar Senghor's 'negritude,' and Kenneth Kaunda's 'Zambian humanism,' along with similar humanistic attitudes among postcolonial African leaders (Ibhawoh & Dibua, 2003), align with the people-centred philosophy espoused in social enterprises. Although these political slogans emphasise aspects of socialism (Nikula & Tchalakov, 2013), they advocate for development that aligns with the cultural values and norms of the African indigenous people.

From an Ubuntu perspective, Wyk and Adonisi (2010) underscore the significance of community orientation in providing material support, empowering individuals to take responsibility for their growth, and protecting and promoting their human dignity. Through social entrepreneurship, we postulate that cultural ways of life can be integrated into market models and systems to drive emancipatory socio-economic and socio-political agendas. Social enterprises draw upon shared values from other institutions to adhere to their social mission and use setbacks as opportunities for innovation (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). Accordingly, De Avillez et al. (2020) suggest that the resilience of social enterprises in coping with resource scarcity, surviving competition, and combining their dual missions (social and economic) provides beneficiaries with tangible skills and knowledge to circumvent their socio-economic challenges. For instance, bricoleurs, or social entrepreneurs, use whatever resources are available and resist being constrained by the prevailing environmental, social, and economic circumstances (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). This implies that the structures and belief systems of social enterprises convey a message of hope—that 'it is possible,' 'it is doable,' and 'it can happen'—encouraging beneficiaries to focus on strengths rather than vulnerabilities (De Avillez et al., 2020).

Globally, the importance of social innovation in addressing social, economic, political, and environmental challenges has been widely recognised. Consequently, social innovation has become increasingly influential in both practice and policy (Forouharfar et al., 2018; Heckler & Ronguillo, 2020). Social innovation, as a new configuration of social practices, is an intentional endeavour aimed at finding solutions to problems, contrasting with established conventional practices (Howaldt, Domanski & Schwarz, 2015). Through innovative strategies for ongoing problem-solving, social entrepreneurs, in partnership with beneficiaries, develop business ventures for the community's social good. By fostering innovation, social enterprises enhance the promotion of their services and products, attracting potential partners to further strengthen and broaden their social impact within relevant communities. Social entrepreneurs operating at the grassroots level benefit from marketing and information sharing that enhance their understanding of customer needs and product development, thereby shaping the direction of their future inventions and innovations. According to Heckler and Ronguillo (2020), social enterprise managers with access to multiple interactions develop greater confidence in decision-making and can allocate specific resources to achieve mission-oriented outcomes. For social innovations to be impactful in local communities, they must produce

tangible results; otherwise, they will remain merely theoretical creativity (Howaldt et al., 2017). Therefore, social entrepreneurs must adopt a practical approach in creating solutions with those most affected by the issues, ensuring their social mission is effective and impactful (Forouharfar et al., 2018; Sheldon & Daniele, 2017).

Through social innovation, social enterprises create positive change within the market system by establishing equilibrium through the deconstruction of an unfair market order (social disequilibrium), evidenced in social classifications, market deprivations, and social injustice, among others (Howaldt et al., 2015). This endeavour to overthrow the normative structures and create a new, equitable socio-economic order can lead to transformative social change. Furthermore, Howaldt et al. (2015) argue that social and ecological challenges, such as mass unemployment, erosion of social security systems, and ecological risks, cannot be effectively addressed without implementing social innovations that directly address the nature of these problems in local, national, and global contexts. This implies that citizens and customers are no longer merely consumers of goods and services, as has traditionally been the case (Howaldt et al., 2015) but are instead active contributors to the development of new services and products aimed at solving their problems. Therefore, social innovation is a vital concept and practice for creating wealth in communities. In South Africa, a country with social investors and innovators, as well as numerous social problems such as unemployment, inequality, and poverty, social entrepreneurship represents an alternative socio-economic paradigm.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study explored the philosophical foundations embedded within social enterprises in South Africa, emphasising their role in promoting inclusive socio-economic development. Against the backdrop of persistent inequality, poverty, and historical marginalisation, the study examines how social enterprises operationalise values such as Ubuntu, empowerment, innovation, and cultural sensitivity to foster social and economic transformation. It underscores the significance of embedding philosophical principles within social enterprises as a means of fostering inclusive socio-economic development in South Africa. The findings reveal that values such as people-centrism, Ubuntu, cultural sensitivity, empowerment, and innovation are not only integral to the identity of social enterprises but also pivotal in addressing systemic inequalities entrenched by historical and contemporary socio-economic structures. By prioritising human dignity, collective prosperity, and community resilience, social enterprises offer an alternative to dominant, profit-driven economic models that often marginalise vulnerable populations. Notably, social entrepreneurship, when aligned with indigenous philosophical practices, presents a transformative pathway for empowering marginalised communities, fostering economic inclusion, and promoting sustainable development.

However, the study also highlights tensions in the perception and operationalisation of social entrepreneurship, particularly regarding its Afrocentric authenticity versus its association with Eurocentric capitalist constructs. Such tensions underline the necessity for social enterprises to ground their practices firmly in local cultural values and participatory approaches to avoid alienation and build genuine community trust.

The findings of this study are not generalisable due to the sample size (three cases) from one municipality in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The context and conditions under which they operate may differ from other settings influenced by cultural and economic characteristics. Nonetheless, the findings provide crucial insights into the fundamental principles and operations of social enterprises as alternative agents of inclusive socio-economic development. To maximise their impact, social enterprises must remain committed to innovative, culturally resonant, and socially just practices that genuinely reflect and serve the aspirations of the communities they aim to uplift. Further research is recommended to explore scalable models and policy frameworks that can

strengthen the integration of philosophical values into the broader social economy landscape in South Africa.

## 6. Declarations

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