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Impact of Tech-Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs on Sustainable Development: Evidence from Early-Stage Start-Up Social Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that no matter how benevolent, a government alone cannot provide all the needs of its citizenry. The development of a nation and continent is, therefore, perceived as the joint responsibility of government and the entire citizenry. The main objective of this research is to look at and examine the extent to which social entrepreneurial programs can boost economies by helping to create early-stage social enterprises. The research work focused on technology-based social entrepreneurial programs in the Gambia that have benefited from International Trade Center (ITC) support. The study is exploratory in nature with a survey as its research strategy. Primary data with the aid of a structured questionnaire was used to elicit information from respondents. The study findings indicated that tech-based social entrepreneurial programs had a significant positive impact on economic, social, and sustainability. The study concluded that using technology as the social enterprises' business proposition helps to break several barriers and allows people to escape the vicious cycle of ongoing social problems. The study recommends that organizations regardless of the sector or industry should ensure that their developmental objectives align with the triple bottom line objectives of profit, people, and the planet.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Social Enterprise, Data, people Sustainability, Start -Ups, Technology.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse on social entrepreneurship has been widely held among scholars and social enterprises that seek solutions to address problems that have attracted considerable interest among policymakers, academics, and practitioners. Social entrepreneurship is an emerging phenomenon and an important field that tackles the social problems of today's world (Mair & Marti, 2006; Nichols, 2008). Hadad and Gauca (2014) argue that social impact is positive changes in the status quo of people, resulting from a particular social issue, as an outcome of an action, activity, process, project, or policy, generated by individuals, enterprises, NGOs, governments and so forth. Social entrepreneurship is the action of a social entrepreneur with a social mission, who identifies a social problem and addresses this problem by social innovation. The objective is to create social impact and social value by contributing both to the social enterprise in terms of sustainability and the society in terms of scalability (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006; Hadad, &Gauca, 2014).

Social enterprises contribute to addressing today's key social challenges – including poverty, social exclusion, and unemployment – as well as overcoming gaps in general interest service delivery. They also promote sustainable development and new ways of doing business, drawing on local assets and supporting job creation while generating tax revenues and triggering more efficient government spending. The increasing social challenges the world facing today need to be tackled. Social entrepreneurs, social enterprises, and social innovations are emerging as significant actors and drivers for social change, which can solve and meet the difficult social challenges the world confronts currently. Moreover, they contribute to efficient and sustainable societies (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004; Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2018; Konda, Starc, & Rodica, 2015; Townsend & Hart, 2008).

Despite marked global economic growth, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened, and "a large part of the world's population is deprived of fundamental labor standards, the right to work and an adequate standard of living, health, and education" (Nieuwenhuys, 2006). The increasing gap between the rich and the poor, damage to the environment and the recent financial crisis have all led many people to question the prevalent market economy in our society. Individuals, societies, businesses, and governments are searching for sustainable and groundbreaking solutions to the challenges that the world faces (Churchman, 1967). There are a variety of reasons contributing to the perpetuation of society's most devastating social ills and there is little agreement on the precise differences between countries that lead to such divergent experiences (Weil, 2008). The United Nations, in a bid to create a common global vision, developed the Sustainable Development Goals to embody solutions to these problems and challenges (Osborn, Cutter & Ullah, 2015).

It is pertinent to state that social challenges are consequences of the absence of effective systems or the failure of the existing ones. Hence, situating appropriate social systems may facilitate the achievement of national development (Raghda, 2013; Kim & Lim, 2017). Therefore, social entrepreneurship may serve as a springboard for the achievement of national development in Africa since creating social impacts by changing systems that combat social challenges is the focal point of social entrepreneurship (Banodia & Dubey, 2017). Doherty, Haugh, and Lyon (2014) attribute the emergence of social enterprises to market failure, the fall in philanthropic donations, new models of public delivery, and interest in new economic models.



1.1 Statements of the problem

There have been a few academic studies of social enterprises, in the context of developing countries (Elkington & Hartigan, 2008; Mair, Martí, & Ventresca, 2012). In these studies, social enterprises are identified as potential mechanisms to address institutional voids (Bornstein, 2007; Geoffrey Desa, 2012; Mair & Marti, 2009; Seelos & Mair, 2005), and as vehicles of emancipation, empowerment, and social change (Datta & Gailey, 2012; Haugh & Talwar, 2014). Social enterprises aspire to scale their social impact (Heinecke & Mayer, 2012). This is because the main objective is to provide goods and services to achieve a social mission and to contribute to social change (Mair, Battilana, & Cardenas, 2012; Ormiston, & Seymour, 2011).

But how social impact in social entrepreneurship and social innovation should be measured to understand if and how one achieves a social mission and contribute to social change remains a dilemma. The actors in these fields face new competitive environments which consequently require better assessment of their social impact to be able to improve their performance and to communicate the contributions of their activities efficiently (Grieco, Micheline, & Iasevoli, 2015). There is a lack of knowledge about the actual success of social enterprises achieving social impact, and measuring social impact is one of the most significant challenges for social enterprises (Grieco, Micheline, & Iasevoli, 2015). To manage the complexity of assessing social impact and to understand what social impacts social enterprises have, probably requires a more common understanding of the social impact and this research intends to contribute in this regard. This knowledge gap needs to be filled and the phenomenon of social impact needs to develop.

Arising from the above, this research seeks to examine the impact of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs on early-stage social enterprises. Technology has been identified as a vital resource that possesses the capability to transform ideas into operational endeavors, the opportunities afforded by technology allow for the development of new enterprises and ventures, and the scaling up of existing ones (Gopalkrishnan, 2012). The implications of technology on the economic growth of a nation or firm are numerous and often varied – depending on contextual factors, technological innovation, either through technology transfer or development of new technologies, could lead to increased productivity and employment, or reduced employment (Naudé, 2019). In a favorable context, technological advances lead to the development of innovations, and the formation of new enterprises (Ulijn & Brown, 2004). A favorable context is one in which the opportunities presented by technology are used to drive growth through the creation of new effective solutions.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of tech-based social entrepreneurial programs on sustainable development in The Gambia. The specific objectives are to

- i. investigate the extent to which tech-based social entrepreneurial programs have impacted social sustainability in the Gambia
- ii. determine the extent to which tech-based social entrepreneurial programs have impacted the economy in the Gambia
- iii. evaluate the extent to which tech-based social entrepreneurial programs have impacted environmental sustainability in the Gambia



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises are organizational entities that create both economic and social values by solving social problems through business mechanisms. They utilize the economic value that they create as a resource to solve social problems and underpin sustainable development. Unlike traditional business organizations that create social value by participating in social projects to complement the core objective of economic value generation, social enterprises focus on their social mission to create positive social impact and measure the impact to communicate and collaborate with various stakeholders. Furthermore, the traditional options engaged by most nations towards combating social challenges and achieving national development emphasize the importance of social entrepreneurship (Christian & Johanna, 2005; Kannampuzha, 2017). As social enterprises generate value that benefits local communities and society at large, scaling their social impact is in the interest of today's decision-makers at all levels (Buckingham & Teasdale, 2013; Borzaga & Galera, 2011; Borzaga & Defourny, 2001; McKinsey, 2012; Social Entrepreneurship Network, 2014; OECD, 1999).

Social enterprises have been noteworthy as a key solution to a variety of social problems within current market economy systems (Light, 2005). Although enterprises create economic and social value in the market economy system, they also raise various social problems, such as inequality and environmental pollution. These social problems are spreading to a wide variety of areas, and the severity of each area is also becoming greater. The damage caused by social problems lies not at the level of certain persons or a particular region but the level of all humankind, and they threaten not only the convenience of everyday life but also the survival of the planet. It is not possible to solve these diverse and severe social problems through the endeavors of one special person, a certain organization, or even a single country (Dorado, 2006).

Social Entrepreneurship

The interest in social entrepreneurship, that is, an entrepreneurial activity that primarily serves a social objective, has been on the rise in recent decades (Austin et al., 2006; Peredo & McLean, 2006). Social entrepreneurship, as a concept, is developed out of the realization that the challenges of finding effective and sustainable solutions to many social problems are substantial, and that the solutions may require many of the features associated with successful business innovations (Alvord et al., 2004). Thus, social entrepreneurial companies are those whose primary goal emphasizes the social value and economic value creation as a necessary condition to ensure financial viability (Dorado, 2006; Schuler & Cording, 2006).

Similarly, social enterprises are organizations that through some combination of products and services that it sells and its method of operation, generate net positive externalities and make conscious efforts to increase the positive externalities of its business, and reduce the negative externalities (Jamison, 2006). Accordingly, the most critical factor in the success of social enterprises is the formation of a consensus and collaboration with stakeholders in the social problems that they are trying to solve. Social entrepreneurship has been described as the simultaneous pursuit of economic, social, and environmental goals by enterprising ventures, and as a human response to social and environmental problems (Haugh, 2007).



Consequently, social entrepreneurship is the product of individuals, organizations, and networks that challenge conventional structures by addressing failures -and identifying new opportunities - in the institutional arrangements that currently cause the inadequate provision or unequal distribution of social and environmental goods (Oxford Said Business School, 2009). Innovation, social impact, sustainability, societal transformation, individual or citizen-driven social change, challenging existing structures, merging traditional sector boundaries, and building a more inclusive market system, all characterize social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurship is understood as an evolving set of new structures for positive social and environmental systemic change (Nicholls & Young, 2008). This is why many different sectors have been embedding social entrepreneurship to respond to sector-wise challenges. The European Commission (2013) describes the social entrepreneurship sector as an approach to make an impact on society and the economy. Social entrepreneurship involves pursuing highly innovative approaches to addressing social problems and doing so in an opportunistic, persistent, and accountable manner, either for profit or non-profit. Innovative approaches are typically pursued by non-profits or NGOs, but they can also be launched by for-profits or government agencies. Social entrepreneurship is the socially responsible practice of commercial businesses involved in trans-sector partnerships. Social entrepreneurship combines the passion of a social mission with an image of businesslike discipline, innovation, and determination

2.2 A brief summary of existing literature

In the past few years, there has been an accelerating focus on the development of appropriate approaches to measuring social impact in social entrepreneurship and social innovation (Arvidson et al. 2013; Bagnoli, & Megali, 2011; Bull, 2007; Dufour, 2016; Ebrahim, &Rangan, 2014; Hadad, &Gauca, 2014; McLoughlin et al. 2009; Nicholls, 2009). Much research has focused on the benefits of blending economic and social value creation in social enterprises (Grieco, Michelini, & Lasvoli, 2015). Nicholls (2009) developed the first theoretical and empirical analysis of reporting social impact in social entrepreneurship. He developed the Blended Value Accounting (BVA) which is a conceptual model of social impact reporting, consisting of different impact measurement methods (Nicholls, 2009), for example, Social Return on Investment (SROI) which initially was developed by the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund in 2008 (Lall, 2017; McLoughlin et al. 2009). Several social enterprises use BVA models for strategic objectives such as improve performance, wider access to resources, increase legitimacy, and credibility for stakeholders (Manetti, 2014).

There are more models for measuring social impact that has been developed. For instance, the multidimensional controlling model by Bagnoli and Megali (2011), the SIMPLE holistic measurement model for social enterprises developed by McLoughlin et al. (2009), and the organizing framework for understanding value creation developed by Ormiston and Seymour (2011). Moreover, several studies have also focused on analyzing existing social impact measurement models, and the similarities and differences across them (Arvidson et al. 2013; Manetti, 2004; Millar, & Hall, 2013; Zappalà, & Lyon, 2009). Grieco, Michelini, and Iasevoli (2015) contributed with a classification system where they grouped available models into four categories to make it easier for social entrepreneurs to understand and choose an appropriate model.



The studies of social impact indicate that the literature is dominated by different social impact assessment approaches and analyses of these. These studies are more practical and do not cover the understanding of social impact. This implies that there is a lack of a common understanding of the social impact and this gap is still not filled which this study intends to do. The research by Maas and Grieco (2017), was the first study to analyze if social enterprises were involved in impact measurement. Moreover, this was the first study using large-scale self-reported worldwide data on impact evaluation. The study also analyzed what the drivers for impact evaluation are. Their result displayed that only about 33 percent of their sample of social enterprises measure their impact (Maas & Grieco, 2017). The research by Maas and Grieco (2017) indicates that the knowledge in this field needs to be developed for more people to measure their social impact and this study can contribute by filling this knowledge gap.

Millar and Hall (2013) argue that the dominated part of the measurement literature and practices connected to the social sector focuses on monetary outcomes at the expense of other types of values. A broader understanding of social values can improve the expression of the drivers and operators of social enterprise activities. This could consequently lead to a more accurate understanding that any use and progress of measurement systems need to identify the strategic objectives, context, and influence of a social enterprise (Millar & Hall, 2013). This implies that there is a need for the contribution of the understanding of the social value and social impact. A broader understanding of social impact can contribute to better social impact measurement and a more explicit understanding of social impact.

2.3 The Gap in the Literature

A critical review of previous studies shows that most studies on technology-based social entrepreneurial programs are done in developed and industrialized countries of the world like the United State of America, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and so on. Consequently, empirical studies on technology-based social entrepreneurial programs in developing countries are still fragmented and evolving. While it is acknowledged that many important steps in the study of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs have been made, there appears to be a dearth and paucity of researches that examined the social impact of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs in Africa.

This research would pursue a more rigorous practical study that takes an integrative and holistic perspective of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs. Also, different analytical techniques have been used to examine the social impact of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs. According to Fombrun, Gardberg, and Barnett (2000), a simple correlation between these two variables is not appropriate. This research shall employ the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) which is a multivariate technique that allows for the examination of a set of relationships between multiple independent and multiple dependent variables (Smith, 2004; Borrego, Douglas & Amelink, 2009). Given the gap observed in the empirical review of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs, this study attempts to fill the gap by researching technology-based social entrepreneurial programs in The Gambia



3. METHODOLOGY

The study population constitutes of beneficiaries of International Trade Centre (ITC) supported social entrepreneurial programs in the Gambia via The HackWeakEnd Social Impact Initiative since 2018 with about 500 applications and almost half as beneficiaries. The study adopted a survey strategy. The first reason for choosing a survey is because it is a potent strategy for collecting qualitative and quantitative primary data (Borrego, Douglas &Amelink, 2009; Sweeney, 2009). This survey research was mainly based on primary data collected from the beneficiaries. They were selected using purposive sampling having benefited from the initiative of ITC. A population census of 250 respondents in the last three years served as the respondents. The study was exploratory in nature because of the usefulness of exploratory design ingathering information on a particular problem at hand, especially where the results may not be conclusive (Hair, Black, Money, Samuel & Page, 2010; Bryman& Bell, 2007; Sekaran, 2003).

Furthermore, the research setting was a cross-sectional study design that involves collecting data only once or at one point in time to be able to meet the research objectives (Cavana, Dalahaye&Sekaran, 2001; Hair *et al.*, 2007). The reason for its adoption stems from the benefit associated with cross-sectional study which is its cost-effectiveness and time-saving nature (Sekaran, 2003; Wilson, 2010; Zikmund, 2000).Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed with the aid of a Structural Equation Model (SEM) because it is a tool that allows treatment of data analysis with multivariate relationships involving one or more independent variables against one or more dependent variables (Smith, 2004; Byrne, 2010; Hair, Hult, Ringle, &Sarstedt, 2012). The hypotheses were tested at a 5% level of significance

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Test of Hypothesis

H₀₁: - Tech-based social entrepreneurial programs do not have any significant social sustainability impact on social enterprises in the Gambia

H₀₂: - Tech-based social entrepreneurial programs do not have any significant economic sustainability impacton social enterprises in the Gambia

H₀₃:- Tech-based social entrepreneurial programs do not have any significant environmental sustainability impacton social enterprises in the Gambia

Table 1: Result of Hypotheses Testing

Hyp.	Relationship	Beta	S.Error	T - value	P -value
H ₁	Tech Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs - >Social Sustainability	0.165	0.051	3.248	0.001
H ₂	Tech Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs - >Economic Sustainability	0.317	0.067	4.720	0.000
H ₃	Tech Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs - >Environmental Sustainability	0.313	0.074	4.286	0.000

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2021(T-value ≥ 1.96).



Information in Table 1 revealed that hypothesis 1 predicted that Tech-Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs have a social impact. Hence, the table above revealed a significant positive relationship between Tech-Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs and social sustainability ($\beta = 0.165$, $t = 3.248$, $p = 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 predicted that Tech-Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs have economic sustainability impact. The result in Table 1 revealed a significant positive relationship between Tech-Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs and economic sustainability ($\beta = 0.317$, $t = 4.720$, $p = 0.000$), therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Lastly, in examining the effect of Tech-Based Social Entrepreneurial Programs on environmental sustainability impact, the result indicated that tech-based social entrepreneurial programs had a significant relationship with environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.313$, $t = 4.286$, $p = 0.000$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research, without a doubt, is a renewed effort for a better understanding of sustainable developmental-oriented understanding of technology-based social entrepreneurial programs. Sustainability impact is central and very important in the fields of social entrepreneurship and social innovations. As research of social entrepreneurship and innovation continues to increase, the area around measuring social impact has received increasing attention. The findings contribute to a better understanding of technology's meaning and function in social entrepreneurship. Business organizations around the world and the Gambia with no exception, are struggling with a new role which is to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the next generation to meet their own needs. The important role that technology-based social entrepreneurial programs will play in this regard can therefore not be over-emphasized. Using technology as the social enterprises' business proposition helps to break several barriers and allows people to escape the vicious cycle of ongoing social problems. The study recommends that organizations regardless of the sector or industry should ensure that their developmental objectives align with the triple bottom line objectives of profit, people, and the planet.



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