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A Scoping Review of Social Entrepreneurship as an Approach to Sustainable Development and Addressing Environmental Challenges in the African Union Regional Economic Communities

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Abstract:

Social entrepreneurship is a vital mechanism for addressing socio-economic and environmental challenges in Africa, aligning with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC, drive regional integration and sustainable development, leveraging social enterprises to tackle issues like renewable energy access, waste management, and climate resilience. This scoping review assesses the role of social entrepreneurship in promoting sustainable development and environmental solutions within African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), identifying key contributions, barriers, and policy implications. The review involved a systematic literature search across Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, using keywords like "social entrepreneurship," "sustainable development," and "African RECs." Peer-reviewed articles in English focusing on RECs and sustainability were included, with data extracted and analyzed thematically to identify patterns. Social entrepreneurship makes a significant contribution to the achievement of the SDGs across RECs, promoting inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability through innovative models such as microfinance and community-based enterprises. However, impacts vary due to regional challenges, including funding constraints, regulatory barriers, and limited innovation, particularly in CEN-SAD and ECOWAS. EAC and SADC show stronger progress through equitable benefit-sharing and strategic frameworks, while UMA faces political hurdles. To enhance social entrepreneurship's transformative potential, RECs must address systemic barriers through tailored policies, including regional venture funds, regulatory reforms, and creativity-focused education. Strengthening infrastructure and cross-border collaboration is critical, particularly in politically fragmented regions like UMA. Future research should employ mixed-methods approaches to quantify impacts and explore sub-national variations.

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Introduction

Social entrepreneurship constitutes a strategic mechanism for addressing complex socio-economic and environmental issues, particularly within developing regions such as Africa (Dees, 2018). It integrates innovative business models with social and ecological objectives to deliver sustainable solutions aligned with both regional and global development frameworks. In the African context, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) under the African Union namely, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) serve as institutional drivers of regional integration and sustainable development initiatives (African Union, 2020). These Regional Economic Communities (RECS) operationalise strategies consistent with the objectives of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability, and poverty alleviation (United Nations, 2015). This scoping review systematically assesses the role of social entrepreneurship in contributing to sustainable development and environmental solutions within African Regional Economic Communities (RECS). Social enterprises operating in these regions aim to address critical issues such as access to renewable energy, waste management, and climate resilience, often compensating for gaps left by public sector and private sector initiatives (Roundy & Fayard, 2019). Examples include ECOWAS-supported solar energy initiatives and SADC-promoted community-based agricultural innovations aimed at improving food security (ECOWAS, 2022; SADC, 2021). These initiatives contribute to achieving SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and the Sustainable Development Goal SDG 13 (Climate Action). Key thematic areas include the capacity of social enterprises to develop scalable, community-centric solutions and their integration into Regional Economic Communities (REC) policy frameworks to maximise impact. Persistent barriers encompass limited financial resources, regulatory constraints, and market access difficulties, underscoring the need for enhanced collaboration among Regional Economic Communities (RECS) governments and social entrepreneurs (Mair & Marti, 2020). This review underscores the potential of social entrepreneurship to catalyse transformative advances in Africa's sustainable development trajectory.

Social entrepreneurship constitutes a dynamic, interdisciplinary framework whereby individuals or organisations develop innovative, scalable solutions to address complex social, cultural, or environmental challenges. It integrates entrepreneurial methodologies with a mission-oriented approach, emphasising societal impact, and diverging from conventional profit-centric entrepreneurship. This paradigm emphasises opportunity recognition, innovative problem-solving, risk tolerance, and the efficient allocation of resources to effect social change, exemplified by initiatives such as microcredit schemes and community-based enterprises (Peredo & McLean, 2020). The primary objectives include alleviating issues such as poverty, enhancing healthcare, and promoting environmental sustainability,

with success quantitatively assessed through social impact metrics rather than purely financial performance (Dacin et al., 2011). Recent academic discourse underscores its contribution to sustainable development goals, highlighting its potential to stimulate economic growth and empower marginalised populations (Adro & Fernandes, 2021). Challenges persist in securing sustainable funding streams and establishing clear operational boundaries, owing to its inherently interdisciplinary nature encompassing sociology, economics, and ethics (Lall & Park, 2020). The hybrid nature integrating economic viability with social mission differentiates social entrepreneurship from corporate social responsibility and philanthropy, necessitating bespoke assessment frameworks (Saebi et al., 2019). As a continually evolving field, it is propelled by a global proliferation of socially conscious innovations and practices (Shepherd et al., 2023). In line with the preceding discussion, social entrepreneurship functions as a strategic driver for sustainable socio-economic advancement, integrating commercial endeavours with social and environmental objectives (Ramya, 2024; Kalendzhjan & Kadol, 2022). It actively supports multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty reduction, education, healthcare enhancement, and environmental stewardship (Ramya, 2024). Social entrepreneurs utilise innovative business model architectures, foster cross-sectoral collaborations, and implement rigorous impact assessment methodologies to address societal issues while promoting economic development (Kalendzhjan & Kadol, 2022). Persisting challenges include limited access to funding and the scalability of social impact initiatives (Ramya, 2024). Empirical research indicates a positive correlation between social entrepreneurship, innovative capacity, and progress toward sustainable development objectives (Al-Qudah et al., 2021). In contexts such as Nigeria, the effectiveness of social entrepreneurship in promoting sustainable development is limited by inadequate levels of entrepreneurial creativity and innovation. Consequently, capacity-building initiatives should emphasise the development of creative and innovative competencies among participants, rather than concentrating solely on profit maximisation and wealth accumulation (Singh & Reji, 2020). In alignment with the ongoing discourse, this paper aims to critically examine social entrepreneurship as a strategic modality for sustainable development and environmental mitigation within the African Union's regional economic communities.

Literature Review

Sustainable development has garnered significant scholarly and policy-oriented attention, originating from a paradigm shift that underscores the dependence of human societal resilience, continuous progress, and long-term viability on the preservation and functional integrity of Earth's life support systems. A fundamental principle of sustainable development recognizes that economic growth in isolation is insufficient for addressing the multifaceted nature of global challenges. (Mazza,2021). Environmental challenges, on the other hand, concerns pertaining to anthropogenic environmental degradation, reflected in the decline of environmental quality to critical thresholds. The gravity of this

crisis is demonstrated by the proliferation of diverse environmental issues on a global scale, including increased greenhouse gas emissions, global temperature anomalies, ineffective waste management systems, unplanned urban and land use, flooding events, deforestation, climate change impacts, stratospheric ozone layer depletion, pollution of air, water, and soil, unregulated agricultural practices, over-exploitation of aquatic ecosystems, and chemical toxicity within ecological systems (Akpanfun, Ndinwa, & Chukwumah, 2020). By current discourse, social entrepreneurship constitutes an emerging domain characterized by the deployment of innovative strategies to address persistent socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, limited access to education, potable water, and human rights violations issues historically underserved by corporate entities, governmental bodies, and nongovernmental organizations. (Abeysekera,2019). As a nascent academic discipline, social entrepreneurship offers numerous avenues for scholarly investigation. Thus this scoping review functions as a scholarly framework to analyze social entrepreneurship as a strategic mechanism for advancing sustainable development and environmental mitigation within the regional economic communities of the African Union.

Social Entrepreneurship in the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA)

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical driver of sustainable development within the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), facilitating innovative resource utilisation, enhancing socioeconomic well-being through employment generation, fostering local supply chain development, and ensuring equitable distribution of social, economic, and environmental benefits (Vázquez-Maguirre & Portales, 2014). In Morocco, strategic initiatives aimed at advancing social entrepreneurship are aligned with national and regional sustainable development frameworks (Talbi et al., 2020). Social enterprises contribute to achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty reduction, educational advancement, healthcare access, gender parity, and environmental conservation (Ramya, 2024). Nonetheless, regional challenges such as political divergence and conflict impede efforts toward regional integration and collective progress (Dris-Aït-Hamadouche & Zoubir, 2007). To unlock the full potential of social entrepreneurship in the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA, initiatives must prioritise democratic institutional reforms, political liberalisation, and civil society empowerment—factors crucial for fostering inclusive stakeholder partnerships and creating conducive regulatory environments (Ramya, 2024).

Social Entrepreneurship in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a promising approach to fostering sustainable socio-economic development by addressing societal challenges and generating positive economic, social, and

environmental impacts (Kalendzhjan & Kadol, 2022). Within the context of a common market for Eastern and Southern Africa **(**COMESA), economic growth has experienced volatility, with both external resources and domestic savings playing crucial roles (Adika, 2020). Social entrepreneurship can serve as an effective mechanism for tackling social issues and supporting sustainable development, particularly in developing economies (Moses & Olokundun, 2014). Nevertheless, its ability to effect large-scale structural transformation and substantial poverty alleviation remains constrained. Excessive dependence on social entrepreneurship risks undermining support for government-led development initiatives and democratic reforms vital for sustained progress. While social entrepreneurship initiatives, such as microfinance programs, can generate positive developmental outcomes at a localised level, they should be regarded as supplementary microeconomic strategies rather than alternatives to comprehensive national development policies (Nega & Schneider, 2014).

Social Entrepreneurship in the Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD)

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a catalyst for sustainable socio-economic development, addressing societal challenges while pursuing business objectives (Kalendzhjan & Kadol, 2022). It contributes to the advancement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through innovative business models, cross-sector collaborations, and impact measurement frameworks (Ramya, 2024). Social entrepreneurs drive positive change by aligning business activities with social objectives, fostering inclusive economic growth, and tackling issues such as poverty, education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability (Moses & Olokundun, 2014). However, challenges persist, including funding constraints, scaling impact, and navigating regulatory environments (Ramya, 2024). Singh and Reji (2020) posited that, within Nigeria, although the incidence of business entrepreneurship has risen, the contribution of social entrepreneurship to sustainable development remains constrained, primarily attributed to insufficient levels of creativity and innovation among entrepreneurial actors. To augment the efficacy of social entrepreneurship initiatives, it is recommended that entrepreneurship development programs prioritise the enhancement of citizens' creative and innovative capacities, thereby promoting sustainable development that transcends mere profit generation.

Social Entrepreneurship in the East African Community (EAC)

Social entrepreneurship in East Africa plays a significant role in promoting sustainable economic development through various mechanisms. Innovations in resource utilisation and equitable benefit-sharing contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities (Vázquez-Maguirre & Portales, 2014). Social enterprises facilitate social transformation by introducing fundamental innovations, demonstrating effective leadership, and expanding operations to achieve lasting impact (Maseno & Wanyoike, 2020). Successful social entrepreneurs in the region emphasise system-level changes and aim to become redundant once their objectives are met, however, their personal experiences and strong

motivation to achieve impact drive them to improve livelihoods and create positive change embedded in them (Wanyoike & Maseno, 2021). Additionally, the increasing emphasis on sustainability entrepreneurship education (SEE) within East African universities is recognised as vital for shaping the values and perspectives of future entrepreneurs, thereby supporting sustainable development through various initiatives (Kidere & Mkwizu, 2023).

Social Entrepreneurship in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)

Social entrepreneurship is integral to sustainable economic development, primarily by mitigating social challenges and fostering cross-sector collaboration (Kalendzhjan & Kadol, 2022). It advances rural sustainable development through innovative resource utilisation, leveraging labour as a critical determinant of quality of life, cultivating local supplier networks, and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits (Vázquez-Maguirre & Portales, 2014). Social entrepreneurship enhances resource efficiency, addresses societal issues, and exerts positive influences across economic, social, and environmental domains (Kalendzhjan & Kadol, 2022). Within the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, entrepreneurial activity demonstrates a positive but statistically non-significant impact on non-oil sector economic growth, suggesting a predominance of survival-oriented entrepreneurship. Relevant determinants, including private investment rates, procedural costs, and startup duration, exert a significant positive influence on non-oil economic expansion. Conversely, public investment and the employment-to-population ratio are correlated with statistically significant negative effects (Moukanza & Ondongo, 2022).

Social Entrepreneurship in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

Social entrepreneurship is integral to sustainable economic development within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region. The adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has been identified as a significant facilitator of sustainable entrepreneurship in this context (Ejemeyovwi et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the efficacy of social entrepreneurship in advancing sustainable development remains constrained by limited levels of creativity and innovation among practitioners (Singh & Reji, 2020). Social entrepreneurship is formally recognised as an effective modality for addressing social challenges and fostering sustainable development, primarily through the application of creativity, innovation, and motivational drivers to resolve critical social issues (Moses & Olokundun, 2014). To further regional integration and socio-economic progress, the development of an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Super Highway has been proposed as a strategic infrastructure investment. This initiative has the potential to enhance economic integration,

strengthen political stability, and reduce linguistic barriers between Anglophone and Francophone member states (Ogiri, 2018). Collectively, these mechanisms, via promoting innovation, addressing social challenges, and improving regional connectivity, contribute substantively to sustainable economic development within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Social Entrepreneurship in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, (IGAD)

Social entrepreneurship is integral to advancing sustainable economic development within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region through the deployment of innovative, community-centric interventions that address social, economic, and environmental challenges. Maseno and Wanyoike (2020) identify that social entrepreneurship in East Africa, encompassing Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member states, facilitates social transformation by generating employment opportunities and improving access to financial resources, especially for marginalised populations. This is operationalised via initiatives emphasising social objectives over profit maximisation, such as youth-led enterprises in agriculture and technology sectors, which are aligned with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD's) 2021–2025 Regional Strategy focused on economic cooperation and regional integration (IGAD, 2023). According to Lateh et al. (2018, as cited in Setiawan et al., 2020), social entrepreneurship advances sustainable development by integrating commercial and social objectives, thereby enhancing economic welfare in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regions through multi-stakeholder collaboration. For example, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD's) youth empowerment agenda, documented in a 2025 report, promotes entrepreneurial activities by investing in capacity-building initiatives like skills development and digital literacy, while addressing financial access barriers (IGAD, 2025). Additionally, Shahid et al. (2023) emphasise that social enterprises support the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by fostering innovation and resilience in rural Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) communities through networked models that capitalise on local resources. These mechanisms, including stakeholder engagement, youth-focused entrepreneurial initiatives, and innovative financial models, collectively contribute to economic stability and sustainable development across the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD's) member states.

Social Entrepreneurship in the Southern African Development Community (SADC)

Social entrepreneurship significantly contributes to sustainable economic development within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) through the deployment of innovative, community-

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centred business models that systematically address socio-economic and environmental challenges. A primary mechanism involves the generation of inclusive employment opportunities targeted at marginalised populations, notably youth and women, aligning with the objectives outlined in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030 for Human Capital Development (SADC, 2021). Empirical evidence from SADC nations such as South Africa and Zimbabwe demonstrates that social enterprises facilitate community empowerment by delivering skills acquisition and job creation in sectors including agriculture and renewable energy, thereby mitigating poverty and strengthening economic resilience (Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2024). Moreover, social entrepreneurs actively promote the development of sustainable value chains, particularly in agro-processing and mineral beneficiation aligned with the Southern African Development Community (SADC's) industrialisation strategy (Savela, et.al 2018). These enterprises integrate smallholder farmers and local SMEs into regional markets, ensuring equitable distribution of profits and adherence to environmental sustainability standards (Setiawan et al., 2020). Furthermore, social enterprise activities foster innovation through multi-stakeholder collaboration, exemplified by Zimbabwe's participation in the 7th Southern African Development Community (SADC) Industrialisation Week in 2024, which convened private and public sector actors to advance sustainable industrial development (PESA, 2025). Nonetheless, systemic barriers such as limited access to finance and bureaucratic educational systems impede scalability; addressing these obstacles necessitates targeted policy reforms to bolster social entrepreneurial initiatives (Oberoi et al., 2022). Mitigating these challenges would enable social entrepreneurship to play a pivotal role in realising the Southern African Development Community's (SADC's) vision of an industrialised, inclusive, and sustainable regional economy.

Methods and Data

This scoping review, conducted by the methodological framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), systematically investigates the domain of social entrepreneurship within African Regional Economic Communities (RECS) concerning sustainable development and environmental challenges. The review process comprises five sequential stages: formulation of the research question, identification of pertinent literature, application of inclusion and exclusion criteria for study selection, data charting, and synthesis of findings. An extensive literature search was performed across databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, utilizing search strings composed of keywords such as "social entrepreneurship," "sustainable development," "environmental challenges," "African Union," and "Regional Economic Communities," combined via Boolean operators (AND, OR). The search targeted peer-reviewed articles published in English. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed publications addressing social entrepreneurship within African Regional Economic Communities (RECS), explicitly

linked to sustainable development or environmental issues. Exclusion criteria eliminated non-peer-reviewed materials, studies outside the African context or outside Regional Economic Communities (RECS), and non-English language articles. An initial corpus of articles was searched and narrowed to the relevant number of articles required after rigorous screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts. Data extraction entailed capturing study objectives, methodologies, key findings, and thematic content, followed by qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns aligned with the research objectives.

Results and Discussion

The study employed a scoping review, and findings revealed that social entrepreneurship across African Regional Economic Communities (RECS) plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development, though its impact varies due to regional challenges and capacities. In the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), initiatives align with national frameworks like Morocco's sustainable development goals, promoting poverty reduction and gender equality, but political conflicts hinder regional integration, necessitating democratic reforms. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) sees social entrepreneurship addressing societal issues through microfinance, yet its limited scale and economic volatility call for stronger government policies. In the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), inclusive growth is fostered through innovative models, but funding and regulatory barriers, alongside low creativity in countries like Nigeria, limit impact. The East African Community (EAC) leverages equitable benefit-sharing and sustainability education to drive systemic change, fueled by motivated leadership. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) enhances resource efficiency through collaboration, though survival-driven entrepreneurship restricts non-oil sector growth, requiring private investment. In the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ICT-driven initiatives advance sustainability, but creativity constraints and underdeveloped infrastructure, like the ECOWAS Super Highway, pose challenges. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) supports youth-led enterprises and financial innovation, bolstered by its 2021–2025 strategy for entrepreneurial capacity-building. Lastly, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) promotes inclusive employment and value chains, supported by its 2020–2030 strategy, though limited finance demands policy reforms. Across these Regional Economic Communities (RECS), social entrepreneurship drives progress, but systemic barriers like funding, regulation, and creativity require tailored policy interventions to unlock its full transformative potential. The scoping review highlights the critical role of social entrepreneurship in advancing sustainable development across African Regional Economic Communities (RECS), with varying impacts shaped by regional challenges and capacities. This discussion synthesises the findings, exploring their implications, strengths, limitations, and potential policy interventions to enhance the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship.

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Regional Variations in Impact

The findings indicate that social entrepreneurship functions as a critical driver of sustainable development, effectively contributing to the attainment of international objectives, including poverty alleviation, gender equality, and inclusive economic growth. Within the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), alignment with national policy frameworks exemplified by Morocco's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has facilitated advancements in poverty reduction and gender parity. Nonetheless, ongoing political disputes and insufficient regional integration pose significant barriers to scaling these initiatives, underscoring the necessity for democratic reforms and enhanced cross-border cooperation to augment their efficacy and broader impact. The findings demonstrate that social entrepreneurship serves as a pivotal mechanism for advancing sustainable development, significantly contributing to the achievement of global targets such as poverty alleviation, gender equality, and inclusive economic growth. Within the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), alignment with national policy frameworks exemplified by Morocco's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has enabled progress in reducing poverty and closing gender gaps. However, persistent political tensions and limited regional integration constitute substantial obstacles to the expansion of these initiatives, highlighting the critical need for democratic reforms and enhanced transboundary cooperation to improve their effectiveness and generate broader socioeconomic impacts. The Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) exemplifies the capacity of innovative frameworks to promote inclusive economic development. However, limitations such as inadequate financial resources, regulatory obstacles, and suppressed innovation capacity, particularly within nations like Nigeria, impede effective implementation. This underscores the necessity for strategic investments in entrepreneurial ecosystem infrastructure and the introduction of targeted incentives to accelerate technological and business innovation. The East African Community (EAC) emphasises equitable benefit distribution and sustainability education, facilitated by proactive leadership, thereby promoting systemic transformation. This underscores the potential of leadership capacity building and knowledge exchange as a replicable framework for other Regional Economic Communities (RECS). In contrast, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) predominantly utilises collaborative mechanisms to enhance resource efficiency; however, the prevalence of survival-oriented entrepreneurship and dependence on oil-dependent economies constrain diversification efforts. The strategic attraction of private sector investment into non-oil sectors is critical for unlocking expansive economic growth opportunities. Within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), information and communication technology (ICT)-)-enabled initiatives exhibit potential; however, limitations in creative capacity and inadequate infrastructural development, exemplified by projects such as the ECOWAS Super Highway, restrict their scalability. Strategic investments in digital infrastructure, physical connectivity, and creativity-enhancing educational programs are essential to address these deficiencies. Similarly, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) advances its objectives

through the 2021–2025 strategic framework, which emphasises support for youth entrepreneurship and financial innovation; expanding the implementation scope of this strategy could further strengthen the capacity of young entrepreneurs. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is advancing inclusive employment and value chain integration as delineated in its 2020–2030 strategic framework. Nonetheless, constrained access to financial resources highlights the imperative for policy reforms aimed at enhancing capital mobilisation and fostering enterprise development.

Systemic Barriers and Policy Implications

Within Regional Economic Communities (RECS), systemic impediments, including funding deficiencies, regulatory limitations, and insufficient entrepreneurial innovation, consistently inhibit the development of social entrepreneurship. These challenges are indicative of broader structural deficiencies, such as immature financial ecosystems, fluctuating policy frameworks, and cultural attitudes that suppress innovative initiatives. The heterogeneity in regional capacity underscores the inadequacy of uniform strategies, necessitating context-specific policy interventions, such as:

- **Funding Access**: Establishing regional venture funds or microfinance programs to support social enterprises, particularly in underfunded regions like CEN-SAD and SADC.
- **Regulatory Reforms**: Streamlining business regulations and creating incentives for social entrepreneurship, especially in COMESA and ECOWAS, to reduce barriers to entry and growth.
- **Creativity and Innovation**: Investing in education and training programs that foster entrepreneurial mindsets, particularly in regions like CEN-SAD and ECOWAS, where creativity is constrained.
- **Infrastructure Development**: Prioritising physical and digital infrastructure, such as the ECOWAS Super Highway or broadband expansion, to enable scalability.
- **Regional Collaboration**: Promoting cross-border partnerships, as seen in EAC and ECCAS, to share best practices and enhance integration, particularly in politically fragmented regions like UMA.

Strengths and Limitations of the Findings

The study's robustness is anchored in its comprehensive scoping review methodology, which systematically delineates the heterogeneity of social entrepreneurship within eight Regional Economic Communities (RECS), elucidating both common challenges and distinct regional characteristics. This detailed analysis facilitates the formulation of contextually tailored policy interventions. Nonetheless, the exclusive reliance on a scoping review constrains the capacity for granular quantitative assessment, such as the quantification of social enterprise contributions to economic performance or the precise

estimation of funding deficiencies. To enhance analytical depth, future investigations should adopt mixed-methods paradigms, integrating qualitative insights with econometric modelling to measure impacts on sustainable development metrics. Furthermore, focusing predominantly on RECS may obscure intra-regional heterogeneity, where localised governance structures and socio-cultural factors substantially affect entrepreneurial performance. Investigating sub-national variations would enable more nuanced and targeted policy recommendations.

Conclusion

This scoping review underscores the pivotal role of social entrepreneurship as a transformative force for sustainable development across African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Southern African Development Community (SADC). By integrating innovative business models with social and environmental objectives, social enterprises address critical challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, food security, and climate resilience, aligning with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regional variations highlight the adaptability of social entrepreneurship, from ICT-driven initiatives in ECOWAS to youth-led enterprises in IGAD and inclusive value chains in SADC. However, systemic barriers limited funding, regulatory constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and low entrepreneurial creativity persistently hinder scalability and impact. Context-specific policy interventions, including regional venture funds, regulatory reforms, creativity-focused education, infrastructure investments, and enhanced cross-border collaboration, are essential to unlock the full potential of social entrepreneurship. While the review's comprehensive methodology provides a robust foundation for understanding regional dynamics, its reliance on qualitative analysis limits quantitative precision. Future research should incorporate mixed-methods approaches and sub-national analyses to refine policy recommendations. Ultimately, social entrepreneurship stands as a dynamic catalyst for Africa's sustainable development, with its success contingent on strategic support to overcome structural challenges and foster inclusive, resilient economies.

Theoretical Implications

Strengthening Theoretical Frameworks for Social Entrepreneurship: The conclusion highlights social entrepreneurship's transformative potential, suggesting a need to refine theoretical models to better integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions, particularly in the context of African RECs, to explain how these enterprises align with Agenda 2063 and SDGs.

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Regional Adaptability as a Core Principle: The varied approaches (e.g., ICT in ECOWAS, youth-led initiatives in IGAD) imply a theoretical shift toward context-specific frameworks, emphasizing adaptability as a key characteristic of social entrepreneurship in addressing diverse regional challenges like poverty and climate resilience.

Systemic Barriers and Institutional Theory: Persistent constraints such as limited funding and regulatory hurdles underscore the relevance of institutional theory, suggesting that structural and policy environments shape social enterprise scalability, necessitating theoretical exploration of how institutional reforms can enhance impact.

Policy Interventions and Resource Dependency: The call for regional venture funds, regulatory reforms, and infrastructure investments points to resource dependency theory, implying that social enterprises' success hinges on strategic resource allocation and cross-border collaboration, warranting deeper theoretical analysis.

Practical Implications

Establish Regional Venture Funds: Create dedicated funding mechanisms within African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC to provide grants, loans, and equity investments for social enterprises, addressing the critical barrier of limited funding and enabling scalability of initiatives targeting poverty, gender inequality, and food security.

Implement Regulatory Reforms: Develop context-specific policies to simplify business registration, tax incentives, and compliance for social enterprises, reducing regulatory constraints and fostering an enabling environment for innovation and growth across RECs such as COMESA and ECCAS.

Invest in Infrastructure Development: Prioritize investments in physical and digital infrastructure, such as reliable electricity, internet access, and transportation networks, to support ICT-driven social enterprises in ECOWAS and enhance operational efficiency across regions like CEN-SAD and UMA.

Promote Creativity-Focused Education: Integrate entrepreneurial and creative problem-solving skills into education systems, particularly in regions like IGAD with youth-led enterprises, to boost entrepreneurial creativity and equip the next generation to tackle social and environmental challenges.

Enhance Cross-Border Collaboration: Facilitate partnerships and knowledge-sharing platforms among RECs (e.g., SADC, EAC, and IGAD) to replicate successful models, such as inclusive value chains, and strengthen the collective impact of social entrepreneurship on sustainable development and alignment with Agenda 2063 and SDGs.

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