

Exploring the Role of Resources in Sustaining Social Enterprises

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Abstract

Social enterprises operate under persistent resource constraints while pursuing the dual objectives of generating social impact and achieving economic validity. Despite a growing body of research, existing studies provide fragmented insights into the types of resources that matter and how they collectively shape sustainability and growth. This study develops an integrative resource-based framework by synthesizing prior literature on social enterprise sustainability. The findings identify six critical resource categories: financial, human and managerial, relational, legitimacy and identity, technological, and institutional/governance resources. The study further demonstrates that resource possession alone is insufficient because sustainability outcomes depend on the organization's resource orchestration capabilities. These capabilities include encompassing bricolage, dynamic capabilities, and business alliance formation. These capabilities mediate the relationship between resource bundles and sustainability outcomes, including social impact scaling, economic viability, and organizational resilience. The conceptual framework also highlights the moderating role of institutional environment, financial availability, and external uncertainty. By advancing a resource bundle perspective, this study contributes to social entrepreneurship theory and extends resource-based and dynamic capabilities approaches into hybrid organizational contexts. The findings offer a practical implication for social enterprise leaders and policymakers seeking to strengthen sustainability through coherent resource alignment rather than resource accumulation alone.

Keywords: Social Enterprise, Sustainability, Resource Orchestration, Dynamic Capabilities, Bricolage, Hybrid Organization, Social Impact, Economic Viability, And Institutional Environment

Introduction

Social enterprises are assuming a more significant role in tackling enduring social, environmental, and community issues. These difficulties are inadequately addressed by the state or conventional market settings. The sustainability of a social enterprise as a corporate organization is fundamentally determined by its capacity to organize and utilize resources effectively. Prior studies indicate that access to financial capital, human resources, networks,

legitimacy, and organizational competencies is essential for operational effectiveness, scaling, and long-term sustainability (Barraket et al., 2019; Borchardt et al., 2024; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021). In contrast to traditional enterprises, the sustainability social enterprise depends on how effectively they mobilize scarce and heterogeneous resources under conditions of uncertainty (Brown & Neyme, 2025; Glasbeek, 2025).

A key attribute of social enterprises is their commitment to a dual mission that consists of social impact and economic sustainability. This hybrid orientation introduces structural tensions, as the development of social value is not consistently aligned with cost efficiency (Bhardwaj et al., 2022; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). Although commercial activities are frequently essential for financial viability, they can also distract from primary social goals, increasing the risks of derailing from the organizational mission (Borchardt et al., 2024; Urban & Bukula, 2024). Empirical studies indicate that social enterprises must engage in ongoing balancing acts, strategically utilizing resources to harmonize conflicting institutional logics (Ji & Konrath, 2024; Ko & Liu, 2025). The capacity to navigate these dual challenges is closely tied to leadership competencies and governance frameworks and the availability of suitable financial and relational resources (Achi, 2024; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021).

Resource restrictions are not just impediments for social enterprises. They constitute a fundamental characteristic of the organizational structure. Numerous social enterprises function in environments marked by restricted financial access, inadequate institutional backing, unclear legal acknowledgement, reliance on volunteers, and dependence on external entities such as donors, government, and communities (Barraket et al., 2019; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). These limits influence both the actions and strategic behavior of the enterprises. Consequently, social enterprises often employ adaptive strategies such as bricolage, bootstrapping, alliance formation, and capability reconfiguration to mitigate resource scarcity (Brown & Neyme, 2025; Jewer et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2021). The innovative recombination of existing assets, utilizing networks, legitimacy, identity, and local knowledge to maintain their operations (Drencheva et al., 2022).

Scholars have investigated particular resource categories pertinent to social entrepreneurs. Certain studies highlighted financial resources and income generation as main factors for sustainability and expansion (Ji & Konrath, 2024; Urban & Bukula, 2024). Other scholars concentrated on human capital, leadership experience, and entrepreneurial mindset as essential resources for performance enhancement (Achi, 2024; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021). Further studies underscore the significance of networks, collaborations, and social capital in obtaining external resources and establishing legitimacy (Barraket et al., 2019; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). Recent research expands this perspective by highlighting digital resources, status-oriented marketing assets, and identity-related capital as facilitators of geographic growth and impact amplification (Ko & Liu, 2025; Yordanova & Shotarov, 2025). Collectively, these studies illustrate that the sustainability of social enterprises is influenced by a wide array of resources.

Despite these advancements, the current literature continues to be disjointed. Many studies analyze resources in isolation. For example, studies analyze finance, leadership, networks, technology, or legitimacy without adequately integrating the interaction or substitutions among these resources during various stages of the enterprise development (Bhardwaj et al.,

2022; Borchardt et al., 2024). Some studies indicate that bricolage improves performance in conditions of scarcity. While other studies warn that overdependence on bricolage may hinder organizational growth unless it is supported by formal capacities and consistent funding (Barraket et al., 2019; Jewer et al., 2024). Similarly, while earning production is a robust indicator of sustainability, financial resources are inadequate without effective governance and stakeholder involvement (Ji & Konrath, 2024; Urban & Bukula, 2024). This lack of integration limits theoretical clarity and offers only partial guidance for practitioners and policymakers to support social enterprise sustainability. We address this gap by investigating the types of resources that are important in collectively shaping the sustainability and growth of social enterprises. In addition, social enterprises need to mobilize their resources within the ecosystem to overcome institutional constraints (Sottini et al., 2025; Spanuth & Urbano, 2024). Therefore, this paper aims to review the literature on the role of resources in sustaining social enterprises.

Literature Review

Social Enterprises

A social enterprise is an organization that sells products and services to fulfil social objectives and generates economic value and revenue. It is distinguished by a social mission, community-oriented operation, and commitment to reinvesting profits for the benefit of the community (Akter et al., 2020). Social enterprises are widely recognized as hybrid entities that seek a social objective while participating in market-driven activities to ensure sustainability. Their sustainability and expansion are consequently heavily influenced by the resources they can acquire, mobilize, and utilize (Barraket et al., 2019; Borchardt et al., 2024; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021). In contrast to traditional enterprises, social enterprises generally function under persistent scarcity and institutional uncertainty (Glasbeek, 2025). The literature increasingly shows that sustainability is influenced more by the integration and reconfiguration of resource bundles than by the mere availability of resources to balance social impact with economic viability (Bhardwaj et al., 2022; Jewer et al., 2024).

Dual Challenges and Resource Tension

A recurring topic is the combined difficulties of achieving social benefits while ensuring financial sustainability. This duality generates difficulties over the distribution of limited resources and subjects' social enterprise to risks. For example, mission drift occurs when commercial pressures dominate or when external funders impose conflicting priorities (Urban & Bukula, 2022; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022; Borchardt et al., 2024). Evidence further suggests that sustainability outcomes are strongly associated with the capacity to navigate these tensions via governance framework strategic prioritization and competence enhancement (Achi, 2024; Jewer et al., 2024).

Types of Resources

Financial Resources

Financial resources include grants, donations, contracts, earned income, sponsorship, and investment capital. The literature consistently identifies finance as a binding constraint, especially in the early stages of ventures and in contexts lacking supportive legal structures (Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022; Urban & Bukula, 2022). Urban and Bukula (2022) argue that earned income significantly enhances scalability and self-sustainability. It is also reducing the dependence on donations and allowing more control over organizational goals. However,

access to finance is influenced by hybrid identity effects. These effects may be disadvantages to social enterprises in philanthropic markets due to competition for equity investment. Thus, indicating that financial access depends on funder perceptions and identity fit (Ji & Konrath, 2024).

Human Resources

Human resources include leadership experience, an entrepreneurial attitude, managerial abilities, learning capacity, and workforce skills. Leaders' exposure and entrepreneurial attitude have been proven to favourably predict social enterprise performance with financial resource availability (Achi, 2024). Ciambotti (2021) underscores that sustainability is dependent on entrepreneurial and managerial competencies that enable decision-making in the face of uncertainty and the condition of dual aims. Furthermore, leadership must be able to improve the capabilities of an organization. Strong entrepreneurial leadership can sometimes make the benefits of bricolage less clear unless it is backed up with disciplined project management competencies (Jewer et al., 2024). Thus, sustainability is dependent not only on leaders but also on routine organizational abilities.

Relational Resources, Networks and Social Capital

Networks serve as both inherent resources and pathways to additional resources, including finance, assets, market opportunities, and legitimacy. Rural social enterprises depend on community networks to obtain funds, goods, and volunteer assistance from surrounding communities. On the other hand, urban social enterprises depend more on business partnerships and structured philanthropy (Barraket et al., 2019). Collaboration with funders can expand networks and access to opportunities but may create tension that requires a governance mechanism to prevent mission drift (Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). Social capital enhances opportunity growth and organizational resilience by facilitating trust-based collaboration and resource sharing (Dixit et al., 2025; Nyiawung & Ayilu, 2025).

Legitimacy and Identity Resources

Legitimacy and identity serve as intangible yet essential resources that facilitate access to financing, partnership, and community backing. Hybrid identity can provide both drawbacks and advantages. Philanthropic donors may see social businesses less favourably than NGOs, while equity investors may perceive them as credible and worthy of investment, indicating identity-based disparities in resource accessibility (Ji & Konrath, 2024). Resources associated with status stemming from recognition as a social enterprise can enhance geographic expansion by bolstering trust and acceptability in new markets (Ko & Liu, 2024). Trust also contributes to resource exchange beyond financial support, including the individual entrepreneur's approach for feedback and guidance. Trust also affects whether high-quality intangible resources can be accessed (Drencheva et al., 2022).

Technological and Digital Resources

Technological resources increasingly serve as facilitating assets for collaboration, expansion, and resource optimization. Digital tools and platforms enable social enterprises to utilize resources without ownership by utilizing open and free network-based infrastructures (Yordanova & Shotarov, 2026). Technology can facilitate geographic development and operational coordination, particularly when employee participation and corporate decision-making structures are involved (Ko & Liu, 2024). These studies indicated that the sustainability

value of technology is conditional and legitimate and suitable for organizational competencies.

Institutional and Governance Resources

Institutional resources include legal frameworks, policy assistance, government structures, and participatory management systems. In situations where the legal frameworks for social enterprises are ambiguous, access to resources and participation in the market are limited (Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). On the other hand, institutional transformation and governance frameworks can facilitate sustainability by safeguarding resource rights and validating collaborative activity. Nyiawung and Ayilu (2025) stressed that exclusive use rights and co-management frameworks serve as essential resources for environmental stewardship, economic benefits, and equitable distribution of value. Moreover, governance safeguards mission integrity by facilitating the strategic selection of initiatives and mitigating external influence (Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022; Jewer et al., 2024).

Resources Use Strategies: Bricolage, Alliance and Dynamic Reconfiguration

Social enterprises frequently employ resource utilization strategies that optimize and reconfigure limited inputs due to the enduring nature of scarcity. Bricolage is consistently recognized as a fundamental strategy that facilitates survival and the expansion of social effect in constrained environments. (Brown & Neyme, 2025; Glasbeek, 2025; Liu et al., 2021). Alliance formation can grant access to experience, technology, market intelligence, and capital, with its impact frequently mediated through bricolage (Liu et al., 2021). However, excessive dependence on bricolage may hinder organizational development unless it is supplemented by structured competence (Barraket et al., 2019; Jewer et al., 2024). Dynamic capabilities, including sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring, constitute a superior set of capabilities that explain how social enterprises change resource bundles throughout time and under uncertainty (Bhardwaj et al., 2021).

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature consistently indicates that the sustainability of social enterprises relies on interdependent resource bundles rather than isolated resource types. The evidence is still disjointed across various resource categories and theories. With the insufficient integration of the interaction among financial, human, relational, legitimacy, technology, institutional, and process resources in influencing sustainability and growth across different contexts. This fragmentation hinders both theoretical clarity and practical guidance. A comprehensive synthesis that integrates various types and explains their functions in relation to sustainability outcomes is therefore needed.

Discussion

This study consolidates fragmented literature to offer a cohesive picture of how resource configuration influences the sustainability and growth of social enterprise. The results demonstrate that sustainability is influenced not by a singular resource type, but by the interplay of financial, human, relational, organizational, legitimacy, and technological resources. Although financial resources, especially earned income, are essential for expansion and minimizing dependency, they are inadequate without accompanying managerial competencies and a governance framework to avert mission drift. The evidence indicates that human resources and an entrepreneurial attitude serve as translation resources, allowing

enterprises to transform limited inputs into enduring performance. Networks and legitimacy facilitate access to finance, markets, and stakeholder support. However, it necessitates governance procedures to address power imbalance and uphold mission integrity. Adaptive strategies like bricolage and resource reconfiguration bolster resilience in times of scarcity. Nevertheless, enduring sustainability relies on integrating resourcefulness into established organizational routines. The discussion promotes a resource bundle view illustrating that the viability of social enterprise arises from the coherent alignment and complementarity of diverse resources rather than merely from an excess of resources.

Conceptual Framework

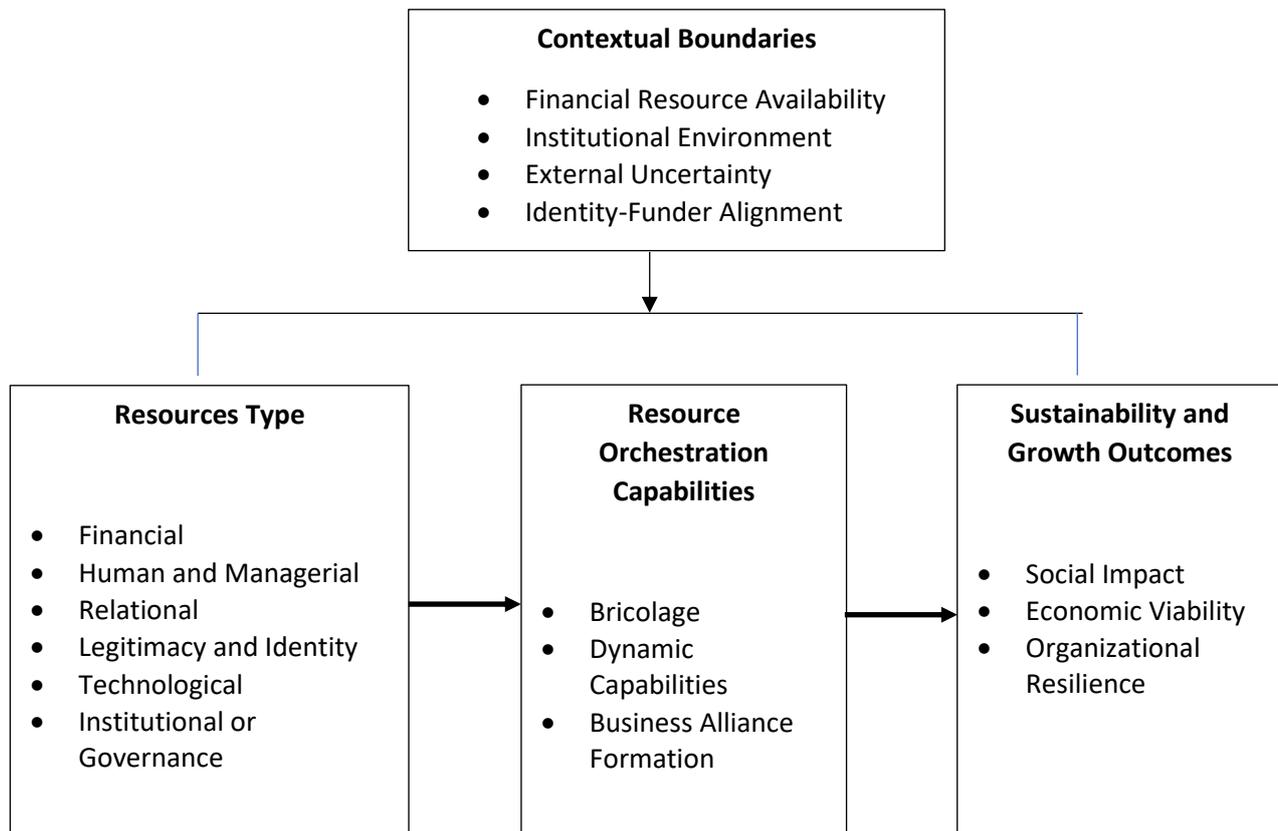
The conceptual framework in this study, as illustrated in Figure 1, outlines the types of resources that influence the sustainability and growth of social enterprises based on the examined literature. Instead of viewing resources as discrete inputs, the framework embraces a resource bundle viewpoint, arguing that sustainable outcomes arise from the interplay between essential resource kinds and the enterprise's ability to coordinate them.

The literature consistently identifies six principal resource categories relevant to social enterprises. The six resources are financial, human and managerial, relational, legitimacy and identity, technological, and institutional or governance resources (Barraket et al., 2019; Ciambotti, 2021; Urban & Bukula, 2022; Ji & Konrath, 2024; Ko & Liu, 2024; Borchardt et al., 2024). Financial resources, especially earned capital, facilitate expansion and diminish reliance on unstable funding sources. Human and managerial resources, including an entrepreneurial attitude and leadership experience, translate chances into performance results (Achi, 2024). Relational resources grant access to complementary assets and community trust, whereby legitimacy and identity resources mold donor and stakeholder perception, affecting resource acquisition trajectories. Technological resources enable geographic expansion and operational coordination, while institutional and governance resources offer structural stability and mission safeguarding (Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022).

However, the literature indicates that resource possession does not ensure sustainability. Outcomes are contingent upon the enterprise's resource orchestration capability. The orchestration ability is a proficiency in effectively combining, recombining, and deploying resources. This capability includes bricolage (creative recombination in conditions of scarcity), dynamic capabilities (sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring), and business alliance formation (managing value proposition, creation, and capture) (Brown & Neyme, 2025; Jewer et al., 2024; Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Ko & Liu, 2024). These competencies serve as a mediation mechanism that transforms diverse resource inputs into enduring social impact and economic sustainability.

Sustainability and growth are conceptualized as multidimensional outcomes comprising social impact scaling (breadth and depth), economic viability (financial self-sufficiency and revenue stability), and organizational resilience or performance (Liu et al., 2021; Urban & Bukula, 2022). The framework asserts that successfully coordinated essential resource bundles improve mission accomplishment and financial sustainability.

The strength of these relationships is shaped by contextual boundaries. Financial resource availability, institutional environment, external uncertainty, and identity funder alignment moderate how resources translate into outcomes (Ji & Konrath, 2024; Achi, 2024; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). For instance, financial slack amplifies the effect of an entrepreneurial mindset on performance, while institutional ambiguity constrains resource access and increases mission drift risks.



(Source: Barraket et al., 2019; Ciambotti, 2021; Urban & Bukula, 2022; Ji & Konrath, 2024; Ko & Liu, 2024; Borchartd et al., 2024; Brown & Neyme, 2025; Jewer et al., 2024; Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Achi, 2024; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022; & Liu et al., 2021)

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Resources for Sustainability of Social Enterprises

Conclusion and Future Studies

This study develops an integration-resources-based understanding of social enterprise sustainability and growth. The synthesis of fragmented literature indicates that sustainability is influenced by the strategic arrangement of financial, human, relational, legitimacy, technological, and institutional resources. However, resource possession alone does not guarantee outcomes. The findings emphasize the pivotal functions of resource orchestration capabilities such as bricolage, dynamic capabilities, and business alliance formation. These capabilities convert diverse resources into enduring social impact, economic sustainability, and organizational resilience. Sustainable social enterprises are characterized more by coherent resource alignment under constraints than by resource abundance.

Future research should empirically test the proposed framework, particularly the mediating role of resource orchestration and the moderating effects of institutional environment, financial availability, and uncertainty. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how resource bundles evolve across organizational life cycle stages. A comparative cross-country study would further clarify how institutional context shapes resource effectiveness. Finally, future work should investigate complementarities and substitution effects among resource types as well as micro-level mechanisms. For example, leadership cognition and identity signalling that influence resource access and sustainability pathways.

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