

# An Exploratory Study on Business Ethics Practices Among Accredited Social Enterprises in Malaysia

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## Abstract

An introduction of ethics into the theory of entrepreneurial passion is indeed inevitable because of its unique contribution to knowledge, motivation, and behavior. The lack of a specific ethical behavior framework handicapped various possible contributions made by social entrepreneurship to the society or economy. To be meaningful for practitioners, business ethics must be grounded in the reality of experience. This might be of help for social entrepreneurship practitioners to extend its impact to the fullest. Ethical behavior presents a positive predictor of entrepreneurial actions and innovation. Moreover, values and ethics can have positive effects on entrepreneurial passion. In fact, entrepreneurial attributes and qualities of young entrepreneurs can be promoted by ethics. Furthermore, the importance of the ethical factor in the development of social entrepreneurs' intentions can be better conceived by studying its effect as a function of the projects created by the sector of activity.

## Introduction

In Malaysia, economic activities are generated by micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), hawkers, cooperatives, franchise chains, start-ups, social enterprises as well as online businesses. The landscape of MSMEs has grown considerably since 2016 until 2021. Based on the latest data from Malaysia Statistical Business Register (MSBR) published by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia (DOSM), there were altogether 1,226,494 MSMEs in 2021 which accounts for 97.4% of overall establishments in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Official Portal, 2020).

The Malaysian government introduced The National Entrepreneurship Policy (NEP) that acts as a long-term key strategy for Malaysia to become an outstanding entrepreneurial nation by 2030. This policy will be the catalyst for Malaysia to be a united, prosperous, and dignified nation. The NEP 2030 will reinforce and enhance existing initiatives and programmes to boost entrepreneurial activities in Malaysia and it discusses the current entrepreneurship achievements as well as issues and challenges faced by entrepreneurs in creating a conducive

entrepreneurship ecosystem. The policy also allocated specific focus on social entrepreneurship and introduced a diverse range of entrepreneurship development programmes to support the development of entrepreneurs by helping to create resilient and sustainable enterprises (Kementerian Pembangunan Usahawan, 2021).

Over the past few years, awareness and acceptance about social entrepreneurship has grown steadily. In Malaysia, social entrepreneurship is an emerging field that has garnered increasing interest, both practically and theoretically (Rahim, 2020). A social enterprise is basically a business wanting to create an impact for society and the environment by maximising profits which benefits both society and the environment (Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, 2020). It is an entity that achieves a social mission by using a business model and typically it combines the elements of NGOs and for-profit companies.

To further support social entrepreneurship growth, the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC) introduced the Social Entrepreneurship Accreditation (SE.A) to verify the status of a social enterprise to enable them to access various support systems and opportunities to expand their businesses (Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, 2020). Figure 1 shows the list of criteria for accreditation purpose while Figure 2 shares the benefits from the accreditation. To date, there are only 29 SE.A recognized by the government and this figure consists of only 7% out of the total registered Social Enterprise in Malaysia (Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC), 2015).

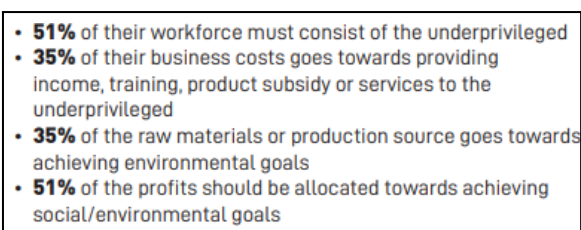
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- **51%** of their workforce must consist of the underprivileged
  - **35%** of their business costs goes towards providing income, training, product subsidy or services to the underprivileged
  - **35%** of the raw materials or production source goes towards achieving environmental goals
  - **51%** of the profits should be allocated towards achieving social/environmental goals

Figure 1: Criteria for accreditation (Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC),2015)

The criteria for SE.A witness and require the social enterprise to always consider and commit towards fulfilling the needs of the beneficiaries and eventually solving social problems. Social enterprise expected to be inclusive (Adeleye et al., 2020), transparent (Kemp & Dunlop, 2014; Osorio-Vega, 2019), and accountable (Kemp & Dunlop, 2014) to shareholders and beneficiaries. It should practice fair compensation and returns, responsible and transparent with inclusive equity just governance (Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC), 2015). These characteristics are also common variables associated with ethical business conduct.

According to Clark et al (2018) social entrepreneurship is an ethical alternative to business. In their 2016 study on ethics as a discursive practise, Dey and Steyaert explored how social entrepreneurs can become ethical subjects while critically and creatively questioning the standards set by authority. In spite of the large and diverse body of research that has been done on social entrepreneurship, the theoretical development of the ethics of social entrepreneurship is still in its early stages (André & Pache, 2016; Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019; Chell et al., 2016; Dey & Steyaert, 2016). Further study regarding business ethics practices is vital and aligned with the Global Sustainable Goals Development (SDG) in creating decent

work and economic growth through higher levels of productivity, job creation and technological innovation (UNDP, 2023).

### *Background of the Study*

Social entrepreneurship is a phenomenon driven by passionate entrepreneurs who seek to innovate, create, and sustain social value within an economy (Canestrino et al., 2020). It has the potential to solve pressing social and environmental issues, such as education outcomes, access to healthcare, or youth unemployment and being characterized as typically inclusive, transparent, and accountable to shareholders and beneficiaries.

Moreover, in the setting of social enterprise, moral emphasis is that differentiated social enterprise from conventional business entities and in this social context, it extends to environmental and social-action organizations in which ideal moral and greater elevation of ethical values are considered to have more acceptability than in other forms of for-profit businesses. However, in the narrative of social enterprise or social entrepreneurship conceptualization, these notions are given little recognition as well as in academic research on the sector (Bull et al., 2010). Although the notion of social entrepreneurship has been around since the 1950s, it is only within the past decade that social entrepreneurship research has become a major and influential literature stream. However, the rapid growth of social entrepreneurship research, the emerging nature of literature, and the fact that social entrepreneurship builds on different disciplines and fields including ethics as a subject matter have led to a rather fragmented literature without dominant frameworks (Saebi et al., 2019a).

### *Ethics*

Ethics in general can be described as the set of moral conceptions and rules of conduct of the society (Boussema & Belkacem, 2022) and this issue is often overlooked particularly in the nature of social enterprises and must be problematized (Chell et al., 2016). In fact, ethics is a predecessor of social innovation (Boussema & Belkacem, 2022). In addition, business ethics is one of the newest and fastest-growing scientific areas (Stavrova, 2020). Ethics, based on management point of view, is part of the leadership spectrum and becomes a vital element in the decision-making process where social entrepreneurs as a leader in their organization should be responsible for their actions (Pasricha & Rao, 2018).

### *Business Ethics*

Over the past decade governments, academics and practitioners have begun to place greater emphasis on social entrepreneurship. At the same time, these concepts act as a vehicle to provide ready solutions to economic woes. Having said this, business ethicists should focus less on abstract concepts and relationships and rather more on giving guidance. They need to avoid making normative pronouncements and guidelines must be grounded in practitioners' experiences and informed by reflecting on in-depth conversations with them. However, the progress made in social entrepreneurship research has not been matched by a robust analysis from the ethics perspective (Cornelius et al., 2008) and little attention is given to the study of the role of values and ethics in stimulating passion for innovation among social entrepreneurs (Boussema & Belkacem, 2022). Sengupta & Lehtimäki (2022) argued that ethics should be studied by looking at the relational practices that are common among social entrepreneurs. There has been a considerable gap in our understanding of ethical implications in relation to opportunity recognition, scaling social entrepreneurship, measuring social contribution as well as the market mechanism (Chell et al., 2016). Business and ethics, in fact, are inseparable

and have a strong relation (Hassan, 2016). A comprehensive ethical behavior framework derived from extensive research in a context of social entrepreneurship should be an ideal solution to the issue discussed and this must be able to critique, explain and assess in the same way as it is done to other forms of organizations (Chell et al., 2016).

To be meaningful for practitioners, business ethics must be grounded in the reality of experience (Macklin & Mathison, 2018). This might be of help for social entrepreneurship practitioners to extend its impact to the fullest. Ethical behavior presents a positive predictor of entrepreneurial actions and innovation (Murtaza et al., 2014). Moreover, values and ethics can have positive effects on entrepreneurial passion. In fact, entrepreneurial attributes and qualities of young entrepreneurs can be promoted by ethics (Boussema & Belkacem, 2022). Furthermore, the importance of the ethical factor in the development of social entrepreneurs' intentions can be better conceived by studying its effect as a function of the projects created by the sector of activity (Boussema & Belkacem, 2022). An introduction of ethics into the theory of entrepreneurial passion is indeed inevitable because of its unique contribution to knowledge, motivation, and behavior (Boussema & Belkacem, 2022). The lack of a specific ethical behavior framework handicapped various possible contributions made by social entrepreneurship to the society or economy (Chell et al., 2016).

*Traditional Ethical Theory and Contemporary Ethical Theory*

Social enterprises have been stated to be market-driven and all the values based on the organisation's moral approach – do what is right and wrong in the real situation. The moral approach in the organisation can determine the difference of ethical theories applied based on the issues focused by them. Ethical theories consist of traditional and contemporary ethical theories. Those two bigger philosophical positions can assist researchers in analysing any business issues. Traditional ethical theories focus more on absolutist nature such as right and wrong are objective qualities that can be rationally determined, and on the other hand, contemporary ethical theories focus more on the relativist position, meaning that there are no absolute moral truths. Based on this idea, morality is said to depend on how a person makes decision that might be influenced by factors like culture and experience (Doherty et al., 2011). For summary information refer to the table below;

Table 1

*List of Traditional Ethical and Contemporary Ethical Theories*

Traditional Ethical Theory	Contemporary Ethical Theory
Consequentialist Theories – Egoism, Stakeholder, Utilitarianism	Virtual Ethics and Feminist Ethics
Non-consequentialist Theories – Deontology and Kant, Right, Justice	

The scope of this study is confined to the business ethics practiced by accredited social enterprise in Malaysia. The word accreditation refers to a certification program known as Social Enterprise Accreditation or SE.A. While the business ethics cover the practices by social enterprise in their day-to-day operations and activities in achieving its social mission and financial stability.

**Problem Statement**

The notion of the social enterprise has gained prominence in both popular and academic texts in recent years (Wang et al., 2015) as it potentially solves various challenges in society. Social entrepreneurship focuses on solving social problems whilst generating revenue to ensure future sustainability (Akinboade et al., 2021). It aims to strike a balance between economic benefits, ecological sustainability, and social equity as opposed to placing a priority on profits (Bhatt, 2022).

The virtue and moral character of the entrepreneur and the enterprise, as well as their concern and commitment in the social domain, are key aspects of social entrepreneurship (Wang et al., 2016). Additionally, social enterprises are described as ethical versions of entrepreneurship activities due to their transformative social agenda (Haugh & Talwar, 2016). This leads to the notion that social entrepreneurship is reflective of ethical practices (Dey and Steyaert 2016). Research into the ethical concerns raised by social entrepreneurship, unfortunately, is in its infancy at this point (Chell et al., 2016a; Gupta et al., 2020).

The fact that social entrepreneurship is combined with a young and largely fragmented field of knowledge (Gawell, 2013). In addition, the rapid growth of social entrepreneurship research, the emerging nature of literature, and that social entrepreneurship builds on different disciplines and fields including business ethics as a subject matter have led to a rather fragmented literature without dominant frameworks (Saebi et al., 2019; Gupta et al.; 2020). Also, the claim that ethics and morality are fundamental to social entrepreneurship and the rhetorical proposition that SE is about "trading for a social purpose" raise the question of why ethics is absent from policy discussion (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019).

Social entrepreneurs' featured hybridity in terms of the ethical choice of economic system and social value orientation (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019). As evidenced by the findings from previous research, the morality of social entrepreneurship can be inferred from their ability to pursue and maintain a healthy natural balance between two competing goals, namely economic and social objectives, in their initiatives (André & Pache, 2016; Bacq et al., 2016). Those two competing goals were able to become strategic plans in their business operation (Social Business Model) (Hassan & Daud, 2019). The values highlighted in this study somewhat reflect the gist of scholarly findings on the ethics practices and motivations (ethical inputs) among social entrepreneurship concerning economic exchange, organizing principles, legal form, and social value orientation result in the formation of social entrepreneurship (ethical outputs) (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019).

People may have different context of the sources and elements of morality, but everyone has agreed that it is the highest priority for all to practice certain moral values. Indeed, morality and ethical values are worldwide subjects preached either based on individual perspective, experience, or religion influence. The issue is thus not a lack of moral ideals; rather, it is a disparity between what is preached and what is practiced (Aydin, 2020). Hence, this study is conducted to explore this issue and to propose a proper framework that is eventually able to fill the gap and benefit those practitioners, especially social entrepreneurs.

**Research Objectives**

RO1: To explore the understanding of business ethics practice among social entrepreneurs

RO2: To investigate the main challenges that social entrepreneurs face when practicing business ethics.

RO3: To propose the best practice of business ethic framework for social entrepreneur

*Research Questions*

In this study, the researchers attempt to provide answers for the following questions: RQ1: How do social entrepreneurs define business ethics practices?

RQ2: How have the challenges faced by social entrepreneurs influenced business ethics practices?

RQ3: How should social entrepreneurs effectively practice business ethics?

**Research Design**

This concept paper will propose research design information, population and sampling technique as well as an instrument for data collection as stated in Table 2. From that, it will proceed to explore the understanding of business ethics practice among social entrepreneurs, followed by a process to investigate the main challenges that social entrepreneurs face when practicing business ethics. Lastly, to propose the best practice of the business ethic framework for social entrepreneurs.

This section also provides detailed information on the research methodology. In figure 2, researchers propose the framework phases to explore the business ethics practices Among accredited social enterprises in Malaysia.

Table 2

*The Flow of Research Methodology*

<b>Research objectives</b>	<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
To explore the understanding of business ethics practice among social entrepreneurs	How do social entrepreneurs define business ethics practices?	The data obtained directly from primary and secondary data and Literature Review or previous studies	Content Analysis a) Explore b) Descriptive c) Comparison
To investigate the main challenges that social entrepreneurs face when practicing business ethics	How have the challenges faced by social entrepreneurs influenced business ethics practices?		
To propose the best practice of business ethic framework for social entrepreneur	How should social entrepreneurs effectively practice business ethics?	The suggestion from previous studies and practical reports by experts.	



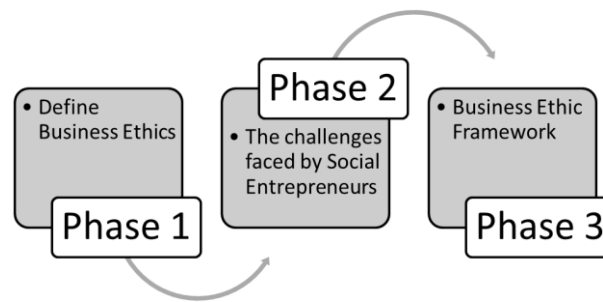


Figure 2: The Framework to Explore the Business Ethics Practices Among Accredited Social Enterprises in Malaysia

#### *Manual Primary Data Collection*

Manual data collection started with transferring all the data to Atlas.ti software and all inputs will be extracted from the content analysis process by developing nodes or themes. The analysis objectives must align with the research objectives. The manual or protocol was considered as part of the analysis process. The process analysis involves Explorations Analysis, Descriptive and Comparison Analysis to answer RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3.

#### **Conclusions**

The distinction between social companies when they are specifically focused on fixing social concerns while being profitable comes from the fact that, as was previously said, they differ in terms of aim and objective. The most crucial features of social entrepreneurship can be deduced to be ethical behaviours, which are particular to its day-to-day management and operations. Despite this, they nevertheless encounter challenges when attempting to balance the two diametrically opposed corporate objectives of for-profit and for-social-benefit. And researchers believe that because of these distinguishing characteristics, social entrepreneurs will always be the dominant force in the world of entrepreneurship. The researchers anticipated being able to suggest a viable business ethics practise framework for SE at the conclusion of this study. The business ethics practise framework's goal is to aid social entrepreneurs have open accountability to their beneficiaries and shareholders. Their dual-core objectives should be followed in this practise.

By referring to Figure 2, this study was designed to develop a framework for business ethics practice among social entrepreneurs in Malaysia by identifying the main challenges that social entrepreneurs face when practicing business ethics. In the end, this concept paper also plans to highlight the best practice of business ethic framework for social entrepreneurs in future. The researchers posit the initial components of the business ethic framework were aligned with the vital elements in the previous ethical theories (Traditional Ethical and Contemporary Ethical Theories). Therefore, this study will contribute to the interesting area for future research and references. Finally, it is hoped that the business ethic practices framework will endure the existence of social enterprise in this country. The researchers also presume the outcome of this study will assist authorities to attain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in many areas because of social enterprises' nature of the business operation and their social mission.

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