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BRIDGING THE INTENTION–IMPACT DIVIDE IN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF VENTURE CREATION PATHWAYS, ENABLING CONDITIONS AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is being increasingly advocated as a business pathway towards sustainable social impact and higher-education institutions have started to heavily invest in cultivating their students' social entrepreneurial intention. However, the body of literature that helps to understand how intention becomes an operating enterprise and then tangible and sustainable social change is not well integrated into management and entrepreneurship and nonprofit journals. This review compiles that literature and aims to identify pathways, enabling conditions and outcome measures linking social entrepreneurial intention to sustainable social impact. A systematic literature review was performed using the PRISMA protocol. A search of Scopus and Web of Science was conducted for peer-reviewed articles between January 2015 and June 2025, resulting in 2,028 records after de-duplication, screening and full-text appraisal, 67 studies were chosen for analysis using descriptive and thematic synthesis. The findings reveal five themes in the literature: intention-to-action conversion, resource mobilisation and business venture formation, hybrid business-model design, impact measurement and scaling, and ecosystem-level enabling conditions. The point of the evidence is that intention alone is a weak predictor of venture creation unless it is accompanied by self-efficacy, opportunity recognition and institutional support, and that sustained impact requires business-model coherence and that measurement systems are used to learn about, and not merely for reporting. The review provides an integrated intention to impact framework, and a structured future research agenda for longitudinal designs, standardised measures of impact and evidence from the emerging economies. The framework provides a foundation for educators, incubators and policy makers to develop an intervention that goes beyond intention formation to impact realization.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Social Entrepreneurial Intention, Sustainable Social Impact, Systematic Literature Review, Hybrid Business Models, Impact Measurement, Future Research Agenda

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship is no longer just an addition to the body of management research and practice but is now a recognised genre with its ow n journals, conferences and degree programmes. It's an idea that is simple yet challenging: the possibility of generating social value by applying business approaches that is durable, scalable, and financially sustainable Dees (1998), Austin et al. (2006), Mair and Noboa (2006). Governments have done so by providing various legal structures, such as the community interest company and the benefit corporation; impact investors have been pouring increasing amounts of capital into mission-driven

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ventures; and universities have integrated social entrepreneurship into their curricula in the hope that their students would create social enterprises Battilana and Lee (2014), Doherty et al. (2014). So there is a lot of evidence in the field, but that evidence is spread out in compartments that are not very connected.

Two of the compartments are particularly well developed. Firstly, the antecedents of social entrepreneurial intention. Many studies based on the theory of planned behaviour Ajzen (1991) and social cognitive theory Bandura (1997) have been conducted to investigate the factors that influence the intention to adopt a social venture, typically students Mair and Noboa (2006), Hockerts (2017). The second topic is about the effect of the social venture after the creation: how are hybrid organisations a balance between mission and margin; how do they measure and report social impact; and how do they scale their model to impact more people? Ebrahim et al. (2014), Bacq and Eddleston (2018), Rawhouser et al. (2019). In between these two compartments sits a relatively limited literature on conversion, the ways in which a prospective social entrepreneur brings about resources, builds a business, creates a viable business model, and, ultimately, sustains impact over time.

The gap is relevant for both theory and practice. In theory, the intention literature focuses on creating a venture and the impact literature focuses on the existence of a venture, with the process between the two under-specified. From a practical perspective, the universities and incubators that manage to build intention have few empirical data-driven ideas regarding what to do next and policy makers supporting social enterprise programmes have no sense of which enabling conditions actually translate into action. Recent reviews have mapped the field bibliometrically, or summarised the debates around its definition Bacq and Janssen (2011), Saebi et al. (2019), Gupta et al. (2020), Hota et al. (2020) and in our previous work, we reviewed the contribution of social entrepreneurship to sustainable social impact at the field level. But no one has structured the evidence as a full continuum from the individual's intention to his or her sustained impact at a venture level.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current paper aims to fill this gap with a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed management and entrepreneurship publications from 2015 to 2025. It is to summarize the accumulated knowledge on the way from social entrepreneurial intention to sustainable social impact, determine the possible social entrepreneurial intention to sustainable social impact conditions and derive an integrated framework and research agenda. The following four research questions are used to guide the review:

RQ1. What is the descriptive profile of the empirical literature that links social entrepreneurial intention, venture creation and social impact?

RQ2. Through which pathways and mechanisms is social entrepreneurial intention converted into operating social ventures?

RQ3. Which venture-level and ecosystem-level conditions enable social ventures to generate impact that is sustained over time?

RQ4. How is sustainable social impact conceptualised and measured in this literature, and what does that imply for future research?

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 explains the protocol used for conducting a review, the search for literature, the criteria for eligibility and the method used for quality appraisal and synthesis. The descriptive profile of the studies included, five thematic clusters that emerged, the integrated intention-to-impact framework and the future research agenda and implications for educators, practitioners and policy makers are presented in Section 3. Section 4 concludes.

METHOD

REVIEW DESIGN

A systematic literature review was selected over a narrative review due to the large and wide-ranging scope of the field, as well as the potential for selective citation. The review process followed the evidence-based approach to management research proposed by Tranfield et al., 2003 and the search and selection process was reported according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020 statement Page et al. (2021). Both authors agreed to the protocol before starting to search, which included the databases, the search string, the eligibility criteria, the appraisal instrument and the extraction template, as described below.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection were chosen since they provide the vast majority of the journals in management, entrepreneurship and nonprofit fields and because they are capable of Boolean searching. Three concept blocks were used: a social entrepreneurship block, an intention or venture-creation block and an impact block. The words in each block were connected with OR and used in title, abstract and keyword. The last search was run on 30 June 2025 and it was restricted to journal articles in English, published from January 2015 onwards. Table 1 summarises the search strategy.

Table 1

Table 1 Search strategy applied to Scopus and Web of Science

Element	Specification	Scopus	Web of Science
Concept block 1	"social entrepreneur*" OR "social enterprise*" OR "social venture*" OR "hybrid organi?ation*"	—	—
Concept block 2	intention* OR "venture creation" OR "new venture" OR "start-up" OR founding OR "opportunity recognition" OR "resource mobili?ation"	—	—
Concept block 3	"social impact" OR "social value" OR "impact measurement" OR scaling OR sustainab*	—	—
Fields searched	Title, abstract, author keywords	TITLE-ABS-KEY	TS
Document type	Journal article	ar	Article
Language and period	English; 1 January 2015 to 30 June 2025	—	—
Records retrieved	Before de-duplication	1,286	742

Note. Wildcards (* and ?) follow the syntax of each database. Search executed on 30 June 2025

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The criteria for inclusion and exclusion were established prior to the start of the process and applied uniformly at the title/abstract and full text levels Table 2. To develop linkages between the constructs, a key inclusion criterion was that a study needed to cover at least two contiguous phases within the intention to impact sequence – such as intention and venture creation, or venture design and impact outcomes – so that the review could address linkages between constructs and not just stand-alone constructs. Studies limited to one stage, e.g., cross-sectional surveys of intention only with no reference to what happens next, were not included as there have been many such studies that have already been reviewed. Only conceptual papers reporting original empirical material were included, and influential conceptual papers were included as background for the discussion.

Table 2

Table 2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Book chapters, conference papers, theses, editorials, grey literature
Period and language	2015 to June 2025; English	Before 2015; other languages
Focus	Social entrepreneurship, social enterprise or hybrid venture as the primary object	Commercial entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, philanthropy without a venture
Sequence coverage	Addresses at least two adjacent stages: intention, action or venture creation, venture design, impact	Single-stage studies (e.g., intention only, impact reporting only)
Evidence base	Original empirical data (qualitative, quantitative, mixed) or systematic evidence synthesis	Purely conceptual or opinion pieces
Quality	Appraisal score of at least 7 of 12 (see Table 3)	Score below 7

STUDY SELECTION

A total of 2,028 records were found in the two searches. Following the removal of 611 duplicates with the reference-management software and manual checking, 1,417 unique records were screened by both authors independently by reading the title and abstract. In 84 cases there were disagreements which were settled by discussion. The majority of the records (1168) were excluded due to screening – primarily because the study focused on commercial entrepreneurship, did not consider social enterprise as a form of entrepreneurship, or did not report on any outcomes beyond intention. A total of 249 reports were requested to be retrieved but 6 of these reports were not retrieved in full text. The remaining 243 reports were read in full and 176 of these were excluded due to the following reasons: 68 reported no social-impact outcome; 41 were conceptual reports with no empirical foundation; 39 did not focus on a venture-level analysis; and 28 did not meet the quality criterion. There were 67 studies available for synthesis. The selection flow is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

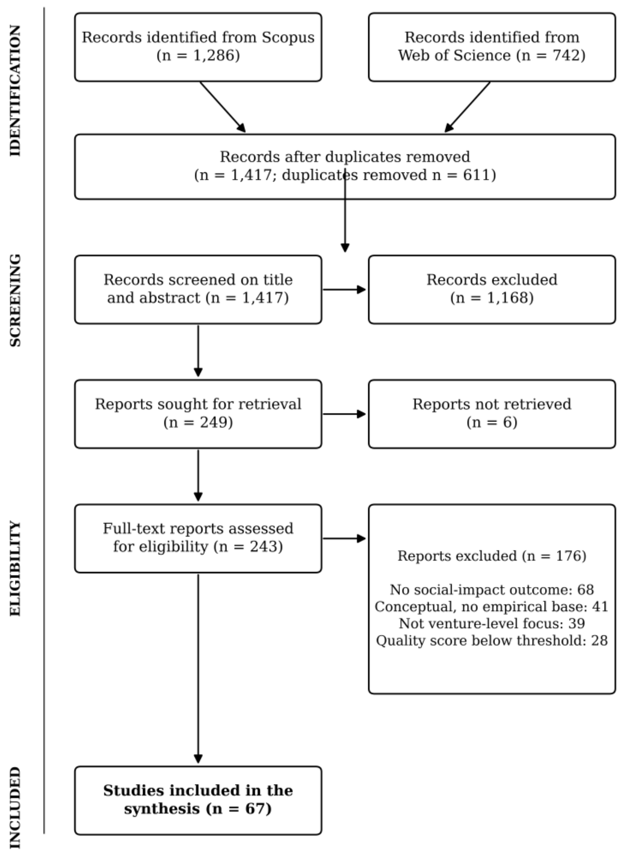

Figure 1 Study Selection Flow Diagram

QUALITY APPRAISAL

A single appraisal instrument was used, as the studies included in the analysis used different designs which made an adaptation from the mixed-methods appraisal approach from previous management reviews necessary. Clarity of research question, appropriateness of design, sampling or case selection, rigor of data analysis, the outcome of social impact and limitations were each scored from 0 (absent) to 2 (fully met). Each study was scored by both authors with a Cohen's kappa of 0.81 for strong interrater reliability. The studies with scores less than 7 out of 12 were omitted. The results of the 67 studies included are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Table 3 Quality appraisal scores of included studies (n = 67)

Appraisal criterion	Score 2 (n)	Score 1 (n)	Score 0 (n)
Clarity of research question	58	9	0
Appropriateness of design	51	16	0
Adequacy of sampling or case selection	39	26	2
Rigour of data analysis	44	21	2
Social impact treated as explicit outcome	36	27	4
Transparency of limitations	47	18	2
Total score (mean = 9.6; range 7 to 12)	—	—	—

DATA EXTRACTION AND SYNTHESIS

For every study, the bibliographic information, country and/or region, sector, theoretical perspective, research design, sample and/or cases, stage and/or stages in the intention-to-impact sequence covered, mechanisms and/or conditions identified, impact construct, and impact measurement were recorded in a structured extraction template, along with the main findings. It was tested on ten studies and improved before being applied to all studies. The synthesis was carried out in two steps. To answer RQ1, a descriptive analysis of the literature was made based on year, journal, region, design and stage coverage. A thematic synthesis then inductively coded the extracted mechanisms and conditions, clustered codes into higher-order themes by comparing them iteratively, and mapped each theme onto the sequence of intention to impact, answering RQ2 to RQ4. Qualitative analysis software was used to code the data and the second author to audit it. The extraction sheet is included as supplemental material as is the coding frame.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE OF THE LITERATURE

The 67 studies included in this review are summarised in Table 4. The number of publications increased steadily over time: 41 of the studies (61 per cent) were published since 2020, which reflects the maturation of the field and the increase of venture-level data. The studies were distributed between 29 journals, and four of these journals represented 34 studies: Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Social Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, and Journal of Business Venturing. This focus reinforces the fact that it is primarily in entrepreneurship and business-ethics scholarship that the “intention-to-impact” discussion takes place, not in the non-profit or public administration literature.

Most of the designs were qualitative (31 studies) and typically either multiple case studies of ventures over time or in-depth studies of a single venture. Twenty-four studies were quantitative, mostly survey based structural models, eight were mixed method, and four were evidence syntheses. There were only eleven studies in which data were gathered over time (longitudinal); and only seven studies followed the same individuals from intention to venture formation. Geographically, the largest contributions came from Europe (24) and North America (15), followed by South and South-East Asia (13), Sub-Saharan Africa (8) and Latin America (4) and Oceania (3). The coverage of the various stages was uneven: 29 studies connected intention with stage 2: action, or stage 3: venture creation; 33 studies connected stage 2: venture design with stage 3: impact; and only five studies entered three or more stages. This distribution confirms the differential that inspired the review and that has implications for the research agenda in Section 3.4.

Table 4

Table 4 Descriptive profile of the included studies (n = 67)

Dimension	Category	n	%
Publication period	2015 to 2019	26	38.8
	2020 to June 2025	41	61.2
Research design	Qualitative (case study, grounded theory, ethnography)	31	46.3
	Quantitative (survey, structural equation modelling, panel)	24	35.8
	Mixed methods	8	11.9
	Evidence synthesis	4	6.0
Temporal design	Cross-sectional	56	83.6
	Longitudinal (two or more waves)	11	16.4
Region	Europe	24	35.8
	North America	15	22.4
	South and South-East Asia	13	19.4
	Sub-Saharan Africa	8	11.9
	Latin America	4	6.0
	Oceania	3	4.5
Stage coverage	Intention to action or venture creation	29	43.3
	Venture design to impact	33	49.3
	Three or more stages	5	7.5
Dominant theoretical lens	Theory of planned behaviour or social cognitive theory	21	31.3

Institutional theory or institutional logics	17	25.4
Resource-based, bricolage or effectuation	14	20.9
Stakeholder or legitimacy theory	9	13.4
Other or no explicit lens	6	9.0

Note. Percentages are calculated on n = 67 and may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

The thematic synthesis resulted in five themes that collectively follow the flow from intent to influence. Each theme, its mechanisms and representative sources are summarized in Table 5, and are discussed in turn below.

Table 5

Table 5 Thematic Synthesis of Mechanisms and Enabling Conditions

Theme	Constituent mechanisms and conditions	Studies (n)	Representative sources
1. Intention-to-action conversion	Social entrepreneurial self-efficacy; perceived feasibility; opportunity recognition; prior exposure and role models; implementation intentions	22	Hockerts (2017), Bacq and Eddleston (2018), Kruse (2020), Mair and Noboa (2006)
2. Resource mobilisation and venture formation	Bricolage; effectual reasoning; team composition; early legitimacy; access to hybrid finance	19	Desa and Basu (2013), Weerawardena and Mort (2006), Shaw and Carter (2007)
3. Hybrid business-model design	Mission-margin coherence; dual value propositions; governance safeguards; management of institutional logics	24	Battilana and Lee (2014), Santos et al. (2015), Smith et al. (2013), Doherty et al. (2014)
4. Impact measurement and scaling	Theory of change; measurement for learning versus accountability; scaling breadth, depth and replication	21	Ebrahim et al. (2014), Bacq and Eddleston (2018), Rawhouser et al. (2019), André and Pache (2016)
5. Ecosystem-level enabling conditions	Institutional voids and regulation; incubators and universities; impact investment; cultural legitimacy	18	Stephan et al. (2015), Mair et al. (2012), Nicholls (2010), Zahra et al. (2009)

Note. Studies May Contribute to more than one theme; Counts therefore Exceed 67.

THEME 1: INTENTION-TO-ACTION CONVERSION

The first and most consistent result is that social entrepreneurial intention as defined by Mair and Noboa (2006) and confirmed by Hockerts (2017), accounts for a relatively low percentage of subsequent social venture creation behaviour. The conversion rates in the studies following, which followed individuals over time, ranged between 12 and 27 per cent within two to three years, and the strongest predictors of conversion were not the affective antecedents of intention, empathy and moral obligation, but the cognitive and contextual antecedents of intention: social entrepreneurial self-efficacy, perceived feasibility, and prior direct exposure to social ventures through work, volunteering or educational activities Bacq and Eddleston (2018), Kruse (2020). This is consistent with the theory of planned behaviour where perceived behavioural control is the antecedent most proximal to action Ajzen (1991), and social cognitive theory which suggests that self-efficacy influences persistence despite challenges Bandura (1997). Opportunity recognition was cited as the immediate motivator of action by several studies, implying that intention is present until a person sees a concrete, yet solvable, social issue and a potential solution. Programmes that integrated project-based learning with in-class content were found to have significantly higher conversion rates than programmes involving only business plan competitions or in-class lecture content alone, which confirms our previous analysis of the importance of education in intention formation.

THEME 2: RESOURCE MOBILISATION AND VENTURE FORMATION

Once action starts, the literature identifies a “founders' capital constrained” process of founding, with social entrepreneurs seldom having access to the same amount of capital as commercial entrepreneurs. The idea of bricolage, or making do with what is available and recombining, became the overarching founding logic Desa and Basu (2013), and sometimes it included an effectual logic that begins with available means instead of predetermined ends. A mission-oriented founder and a sector or commercial skills member made up founding teams as opposed to the other two types that created ventures quicker and lived longer. Early legitimacy, through endorsement from reputable members of the community, university or incubator affiliation, or a small grant from a well-known funder, often served as a gateway to additional resources Shaw and Carter (2007), Weerawardena and Mort (2006). Hybrid finance (capital that tolerates sub-optimal returns for a commitment to social performance) was not available evenly and this was the most commonly cited reason for stalled or failed startups.

THEME 3: HYBRID BUSINESS-MODEL DESIGN

The most important theme was the design of the venture itself. The social enterprises are hybrid organisations that integrate both social-welfare and commercial logics Battilana and Lee (2014), and it was found that the studies included in this research agreed that the coherence of the integration of those two logics is what makes the difference with respect to the sustainability of impact. Ventures that relied on a commercial revenue stream linked to their social mission, such as working with the beneficiaries they were aiming to serve, or selling products that actually brought social benefit from their use, were less likely than others to experience mission drift Santos et al. (2015), Doherty et al. (2014). Under financial stress, governance safeguards (asset locks, representation of beneficiaries on boards, explicit mission statements) moderated, but did not stop, financial drift. Analysis of the institutional-logics perspective revealed that tensions between commercial and social needs emerged when there was a conflict, and these tensions were documented as the ventures continued to exist and were not resolved once but treated as paradoxes which needed to be managed Smith et al. (2013). The design of the business model is thus not a founding choice only, but a continuous factor that shapes impact sustainability.

THEME 4: IMPACT MEASUREMENT AND SCALING

Twenty-one studies were reviewed on defining, measuring and expanding the social impact of ventures. The proof was chilling. Less than 33% of the ventures studied had any formal theory of change; and most of them provided output measures like beneficiaries reached, instead of outcome measures like changes in beneficiary welfare Rawhouser et al. (2019). Ebrahim et al. (2014) posited that the reason for measuring should be based on the governance and strategy of the venture, and the studies they included confirmed the corollary – that ventures that used impact measures internally to adapt their operations over time improved over time, while those that measured primarily for funders did not. The literature identified three modes of scaling: scaling breadth (reaching more beneficiaries); scaling depth (improving outcomes of existing beneficiaries); and scaling through model replication or open-sourcing the model André and Pache (2016), Bacq and Eddleston (2018). Greater scale was linked to greater dilution of impact (as a result of the lack of corresponding organisation), indicating that in order to achieve sustainable social impact, the quality of the outcomes must be maintained as scale increases, not achieved through scale alone.

THEME 5: ECOSYSTEM-LEVEL ENABLING CONDITIONS

The last theme was about things outside of the venture and the person. Comparative studies indicated that institutional support (legal forms, procurement preferences, tax incentives) are a key driver of social venture creation, and where institutional voids exist, they are filled by the informal institutions of community norms, religious institutions and kinship networks Stephan et al. (2015), Mair et al. (2012). Legitimisation (18 studies), networks and early funding (18 studies) were identified as functions of universities and incubators; and the programmes that were most successful continued to support firms beyond the formation stage. As impact investment grew, the amount of hybrid finance grew as well, and the pressure to demonstrate results, impact and in short timeframes areas which some ventures found to be incompatible with deep and slow social change Nicholls (2010). Cultural legitimacy of the social enterprise form – that is, whether individuals are willing to take action on intention and customers to pay a premium on products, nearly moderated every relationship in the sequence Zahra et al. (2009).

AN INTEGRATED INTENTION-TO-IMPACT FRAMEWORK

The five themes are brought together in a single framework in Figure 2. The horizontal sequence runs from intention formation, through intention-to-action conversion and venture design and operation, to sustainable social impact. The mechanisms identified in the synthesis are followed in each stage. Ecosystem level enabling conditions form a foundation that serve to inform each step, and ecosystem level impact and venture survival are fed back to the start of the sequence, where success becomes visible and hence the next group of aspiring social entrepreneurs' education, self-efficacy and the cultural legitimacy of social enterprise is shaped.

Figure 2

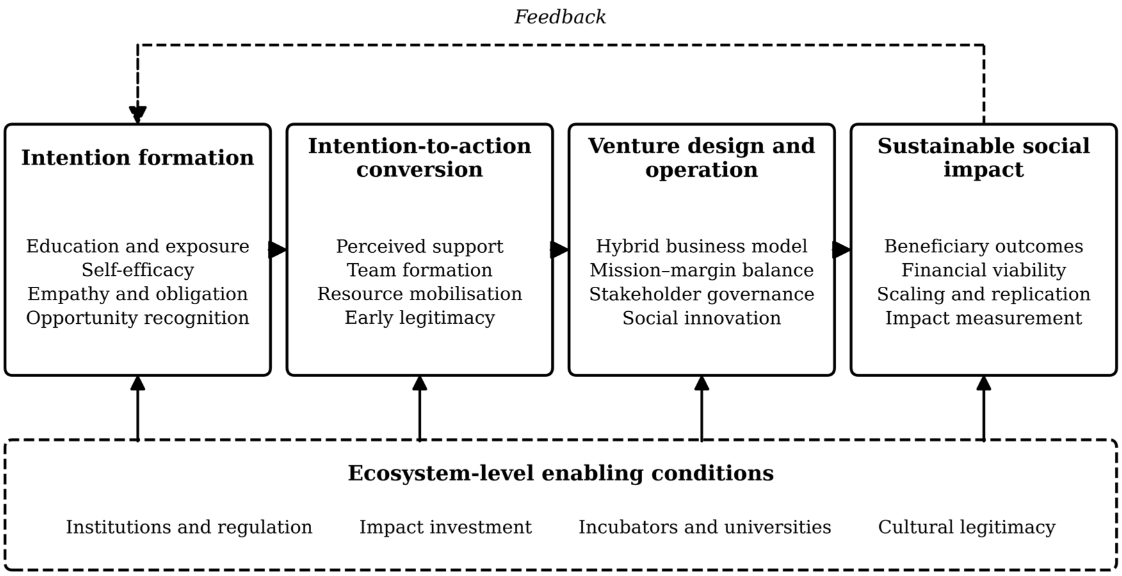

Figure 2 Integrated Framework Linking Social Entrepreneurial Intention to Sustainable Social Impact

The framework implies three claims which have been established in the literature but not stated together. First, there is no automatic sequence, but rather each transition relies on unique mechanisms, meaning that interventions at one transition will not automatically lead to a movement to the next. Secondly, the ecosystem is not background variable; it is an active determinant which can be influenced by policy, education and finance. Third, impact is as much an outcome as it is an input: Ventures that succeed or fail have implications for subsequent intentions and self-efficacy. The recursive property accounts for the higher conversion rates in regions where social enterprise is visible in the community compared to regions with similar stated intentions but few examples.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The synthesis revealed clear gaps which are organised into a research agenda in Table 6. The methodological is the more urgent issue: There are only seven studies that follow people from the intention to start a business to its actual inception, and the field's central causal claim is based on a very limited evidence base. It would also be possible to estimate with confidence conversion rates, timing and predictors in a longitudinal panel design, which enrols students or programme participants at the time of the intention measure and follows them over a period of 5 years or more. The second gap has to do with measurement. Lack of standardised outcome measures makes it difficult to compare results across studies and make meta-analyses; studies which develop and validate outcome measures specific to each sector and which test the learning effect of internal measurement of impact in an experimental manner would be of high value. Third, the geographical bias of the focus on Europe and North America also means that the framework has been applied least in the emerging economies where institutional voids are most severe and where social enterprise is most strongly encouraged. Fourth, the literature has mainly studied education as an antecedent of intention rather than education as an antecedent of venture quality or impact; research that has examined how education (in terms of curriculum design) affects the business models and impact practices of graduates of such education would link the education and the impact compartments directly. Lastly, the predicted feedback loop in the framework has been seen only serendipitously and should be made a specific topic for study via natural experiments and regional comparisons.

Table 6

Table 6 Future Research Agenda Derived from the Review

Gap identified	Proposed research direction	Suggested design and theoretical lens
Weak evidence on intention-to-action conversion	Estimate conversion rates, timing and predictors; test implementation-intention interventions	Multi-wave panel of programme participants; theory of planned behaviour with action-phase models

Non-standardised impact measurement	Develop and validate sector-specific outcome metrics; test whether internal measurement improves outcomes	Delphi study with practitioners; field experiment or difference-in-differences; theory of change
Geographic concentration	Test the framework in emerging economies with pronounced institutional voids	Comparative case studies across South Asia, Africa and Latin America; institutional theory
Education disconnected from venture outcomes	Trace effects of curriculum design on business-model choice and impact practice of graduates' ventures	Alumni tracer studies; mixed methods; social cognitive theory
Feedback loop untested	Examine how visible venture success shapes subsequent intention and legitimacy in a region	Regional comparisons; natural experiments around policy change; legitimacy theory
Scaling and impact quality	Identify organisational capabilities that preserve outcome depth during scaling	Longitudinal case studies of scaled ventures; dynamic capabilities lens

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION, PRACTICE AND POLICY

The review suggests that increasing the intention to learn is merely the first step in reaching the goal of learning. Programmes should contain aspects most related to conversion: project-based problem engagement, problem-focused opportunity recognition training, exposure to practicing social entrepreneurs, and after graduation support. Assessment of programmes' success should be not just intention scores but also venture formation and early impact. The evidence suggests that practitioners and incubators should invest in business-model coherence and business-measurement systems for learning early on, and scale the breadth of the business before building capacity. The ecosystem insights indicate that for policy makers, legal recognition and procurement access, as well as patient capital, can be measured and have an impact on the creation of new ventures as well as their survival; and that, in an institutional void context, support delivered through pre-existing community institutions can be more impactful than through formal institutions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

There are four caveats that should be noted. Only two databases were used and only English language journal articles; this may have missed work that is published in other languages or in books and reports. The criterion of dealing with two consecutive stages, essential to the function of the review, meant that a large single-stage literature was excluded which might be relevant to the framework in an indirect way. High inter-rater agreement was obtained for the quality appraisal instrument, but judgement may have influenced the instrument and could have applied it unevenly to qualitative and quantitative designs. Lastly, thematic synthesis is interpretive: other reviewers may have employed other divisions of mechanisms, and the framework is a structured proposition for testing, not a fixed model.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this review was to bridge two well established but disjointed areas of research: the research on social entrepreneurial intention and the research on social enterprise impact. A systematic search was conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science databases to locate 67 peer-reviewed studies published from 2015 to 2025, which were then appraised for quality and then synthesised thematically. The literature was identified as following a sequence from intention to sustainable social impact, which can be divided into five themes: intention to action conversion, resource mobilisation and venture formation, hybrid business-model design, impact measurement and scaling, and ecosystem-level enabling conditions. Three conclusions follow. First, intention alone is not a strong predictor of venture creation; others factors are as relevant as intention, including self-efficacy, opportunity recognition, early legitimacy and access to hybrid finance, and education programmes which provide these factors are significantly more likely to get people to create ventures than education programmes that do not. Second, the sustainability of impact is determined at the level of venture design, and the coherence between revenue model and mission, the management of institutional tensions and use of impact measurement for learning will decide whether results will endure as ventures scale up. Third, there is a recursive nature and an embeddedness of the process of social entrepreneurship in each of its transitions, as the process of the ventures' successful actions has an impact on forming the ecosystem and the latter, in turn, affects the ventures' success. Third, the process of social entrepreneurship is recursive and regionally embedded, as social entrepreneurship process contributes to the formation of the ecosystem and the ecosystem contributes to the successful positive actions of the social entrepreneurship process. The integrated framework and the research agenda proposed here can provide a shared compass for researchers at various stages along the continuum, and a blueprint for universities, incubators, investors, and governments that aim to make social entrepreneurial vision into a sustainable social outcome. In the field, the next big step will be longitudinal evidence that tracks individuals from intentions to venture creation to measured impact, particularly in the emerging economies where the potential of social entrepreneurship is highest, and where evidence is most limited.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The complete list of studies included, the data extraction sheet and the thematic coding frame will be provided upon request from the corresponding author and will be deposited into a public repository at the time of acceptance.

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None.

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