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Sustainability of Social Enterprises from Practitioner's Perspective

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship is essential for Malaysia's economic growth and sustainable development, as it addresses social and environmental issues. While existing literature often emphasises financial-related factors affecting sustainability, this study has conducted in-depth interviews with four accredited social enterprises to identify equally important key sustainability factors. The findings have revealed essential themes, which are empowerment, steadfast intention, resilience, and strategic thinking. These insights provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse factors, enabling Malaysian social enterprises to maintain their positive impacts beyond merely financial considerations.

Keywords: Sustainability; Accredited Social Enterprises; Determinants; Qualitative

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1.0 Introduction

Social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in driving economic growth and promoting inclusion. It is because this sector significantly contributes to socioeconomic development by creating social value and addressing pressing social and environmental challenges (Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, 2022). As the emergence of social enterprises remains in its infancy in Malaysia (Singh & Gaur, 2018), the present goal is to promote social-enterprise expansion. This sector's long-term viability and sustainability are essential for enabling social enterprises to thrive and maintain their effectiveness. Consequently, social enterprises are positioned to contribute meaningfully to national development and promote shared prosperity (Mas Ervina Samsuddin, Mohd Fairuz Md Salleh, & Mohd Hanafi Azman, 2023).

The facet of sustainability in the field of social enterprise is significant and constantly receives prominent interest among researchers. Nevertheless, it has been discussed more effectively and needs well-developed discussions (Kulshrestha, Sahay, & Sengupta, 2022; Petison & Kantabutra, 2023). Besides, its classification of knowledge is also limited, which disrupts the advancement of research (Jayawardhana, Fernando, & Siyambalapitiya, 2022; Kulshrestha et al., 2022). These issues have led to inadequate empirical findings that halt the field's contributions to various aspects and stakeholders (Kulshrestha et al., 2022). Thus, achieving sustainability in social entrepreneurship is a pertinent construct to explore and pursue (Mohammed Faiz Kamaludin, 2023).

This study investigates the determinants of sustainability among social enterprises by exploring the subject area from the perspectives of accredited social enterprises in Malaysia. To achieve the research objectives, the most relevant informants for the required perspectives would be the accredited social enterprises, which have been certified by the government's accreditation

programme to ensure their sustainability and growth in Malaysia. These are the recognised and high-performing social enterprises acknowledged by the government for meeting specific requirements and criteria outlined.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability in Social Entrepreneurship

The concept of sustainability in commercial businesses differs from that in social entrepreneurship, as the latter prioritises the creation of social value and benefits over economic objectives or private gains (Estrin, Mickiewicz, & Stephan, 2016; Oliński & Mioduszewski, 2022; Weerawardena, McDonald, & Mort, 2010). While commercial businesses grow with the main strategic objective of profit maximisation and delivering shareholder value (Fernández-Guadafío & Diez, 2024), maintaining these dual social and economic missions within a single organisation for social enterprise presents significant challenges due to the need to navigate potential conflicts and tensions between these competing logics in the current, dynamic environment (Eiselein & Dentchev, 2020; Gali, Niemand, Shaw, Hughes, Kraus, & Brem 2020; Jayawardhana et al., 2022; Lee, Zhang, Dallas, & Chin, 2019; Mikołajczak, 2020; Oliński & Mioduszewski, 2022; Park & Kim, 2020).

2.2 Mission Drift

Social enterprises often prioritise sustaining responsibilities to care for their beneficiaries and financial stability by managing costs and optimising earnings (Akinboade, Taft, Weber, Manoko, & Molobi, 2021). Strategies are employed to address these conflicts (Hengst, Jarzabkowski, Hoegl, Bednarek, Chung, Furnari, Hanh, & Koch, 2020); however, over time, this socioeconomic tension can lead to mission drift where the enterprises' focus diverges from their intended purposes. Such drift may occur due to trade-offs made by the social enterprises in their efforts to reconcile conflicts, potentially resulting in inconsistencies between their intended goals and actual outcomes (Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014). As social enterprises are primarily driven by the fulfilment of their social missions and the solution of societal issues rather than by financial gains, this commitment to social impact, while ensuring economic viability, has positioned sustainability as a fundamental aspect of their existence (Akinboade et al., 2021; Gupta, Chaucan, Paul, & Jaiswal, 2020; Hota, Subramanian, & Narayanamurthy, 2019; Jayawardhana et al., 2022). Indeed, the ability to balance social and financial objectives by achieving sustainability is critical to avoid mission drift (Jones et al., 2021). This has been supported by other scholars who believe that sustainability is firmly established within social enterprises (Gali et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020).

In the meantime, sustainability is also regarded as a scope in defining the criteria of social enterprises and their purpose of existence (Jayawardhana et al., 2022). In this notion, social missions are traded as the main priority (Ketprapakorn & Kantabutra, 2019). Hence, long-term sustainability stands as a vital element for social enterprises to achieve their missions (Henderson, Steiner, Mazzei, & Docherty, 2020). However, limited studies have attempted to investigate how this can be retained in social enterprises (Jayawardhana et al., 2022) while the fact that understanding what drives social enterprises towards sustainability is essential and requires additional studies (Mohammed Faiz Kamaludin, 2023).

3.0 Research Methodology and Data Analysis

3.1 Qualitative Approach and Case Study

This study is considered qualitative and exploratory as it has investigated the determinants of sustainability among social enterprises by exploring the subject area from the perspectives of the accredited social enterprises. Case-study research is an appropriate qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon (Yin, 2018) and subsequently reveal the determinants of sustainability within a real-world context. The accredited social enterprises have served as the cases for this study. The qualitative data have been gathered using in-depth interviews and document reviews. Creswell and Poth (2018) have expressed that there is no answer for how many cases that should be included but have suggested no more than four or five cases.

In a qualitative study, a researcher serves as a primary instrument to collect data through a range of methods available, including interviews that use open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Complementing the interview data is the evidence derived from a comprehensive review of relevant documents (Yin, 2018). This is because utilising a wide range of evidence sources is more convincing and accurate as arguments supported by multiple sources are considered superior in quality (Yin, 2018). Additionally, data triangulation from multiple sources also enables a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon studied, enhancing the validity and credibility of the findings while mitigating the risk of over-reliance on potentially subjective interview quotes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1.1 Interview Method

The interview method involves data generated through direct interactions with selected participants who have experienced the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers have interviewed four accredited social enterprises selected via purposive sampling in this study. The interviews have been conducted at the participants' premises according to their scheduled timings. Each interview has lasted 45 to 90 minutes and has been audio-recorded with permission. All the participants have been informed about the nature of the investigation and volunteered to contribute. An important ethical consideration has been ensuring the anonymity of the participants to protect both their identities and the organisations with which they are associated. Hence, the informants have been called TC1, IP2, PL3, and KK4.

3.1.2 Document-Review Method

Document review utilises the increasing accessibility of diverse document types through Internet searches, making it particularly advantageous for examining and interpreting complex research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Morgan, 2022). The comprehensive nature of documentation is essential in the data-collection process of qualitative research (Yin, 2018). This study has examined evidence from webpages and social-media documents to gather valuable information and relevant data. Specifically, it has utilised the organisations' official websites (coverage spans from 1 to 2 years) and social-media platforms like Instagram and Facebook (coverage spans from 6 months to 1 year).

3.2 Data Analysis

All audio-recorded interviews have been transcribed verbatim to capture the “emerging patterns, categories, subcategories, themes, and concepts” (Saldana, 2009). Meanwhile, the documents have also been reviewed to understand the content. The data have been systematically analysed and interpreted to develop a robust concept explaining the observed patterns and dynamics across the four cases, facilitating comparative analysis to identify primary themes. Initial codes aligned with the research objectives have also been generated, leading to the emergence of patterns and themes that have offered new insights into the research questions. Each theme has been refined, named, and summarised to articulate a coherent central idea and maintain a consistent narrative throughout the dataset.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Descriptions of Informants

Table 1 below presents the accredited social enterprises, which have been selected based on convenience, accessibility, and geographic proximity to foster a more extended and less structured relationship with the participants (Yin, 2018).

No	Social Enterprise	Industry	Description of Activities	Beneficiaries
1	Case 1-TC1 (Founder)	Waste management	Teaching carpentry and woodworking skills using recycled pallets and pine wood to provide for youths from low-income families.	Youth
2	Case 2-IP2 (Founder)	Bakery	Offering a whole-rounded entrepreneurship ecosystem for women's economy and income generation.	Women
3	Case 3-PL3 (CEO)	F&B	Offering employment, capacity building, and microentrepreneurial opportunities.	Marginalised community
4	Case 4-KK4 (Founder)	Healthcare	Providing systems that support early childhood development.	Parents, children

Sources: Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC) and social enterprises' websites

4.2 Emergence of Themes

Table 3 below displays the extracted evidence for all the cases, organised according to each theme that has revealed the determinants of sustainability. It presents findings from the interview sessions (IV) and document reviews (DR). The findings have been triangulated using two distinct sources of evidence by confirming the validity of the information obtained to ensure the reliability and credibility of the study.

The main questions asked in the interview sessions have been “What do you do to ensure the sustainability of your enterprise?” and “How do you perceive sustainability?”. Probing questions have been posed to guide the sessions effectively towards the intended objectives. Meanwhile, the document reviews have involved analysing all the relevant media coverage and social-media postings. As a result, a total of four (4) themes have emerged, namely, empowerment, steadfast intention, resilience, and strategic thinking.

Determinant/ Informant	Extracts from Interview (IV)	Review from Document (DR)
Empowerment Theme		
Case 1-TC1-IV	I bring that mindset to those who train with me, and then [they are] able to open their own businesses. We have trained people until they can be independent. They know how to do it... how to find it (sources).	Case 1-TC1-DR Participants are empowered with their equipment and encouraged to complete the assignment independently, fostering a sense of ownership and self-reliance.
Case 2-IP2-IV	I have some of them here. Kak Rara, Kak Iziana. Now, I find them to be like community leaders. They can train others. For me, when you see a success story, it's not when the participant[s] can achieve that consistent income only. It is when they empower	Case 2-IP2-DR Beneficiaries sell self-made cakes and cookies confidently on corporate platforms after being graduated [from] and empowered by the academy.

others. They can also teach. You change other people for the better.

Case 3-PL3-IV	We are investing the money from the grant to train 10 entrepreneurs from scratch. We're sharpening and expanding their skills in this cloud kitchen so [that] they can run the entire kitchen on their own after the third year. The bigger picture is for them to run it over 10 years. For 1 year, we will monitor them; after the third year, we will just hand over the kitchen to them.	Case 3-PL3-DR	Trusting others to navigate independently, equipped with the skills and experience [is important], as this will ultimately be valuable for enhancing their lives.
Case 4-KK4-IV	Even for children with no issues, we still provide early education to the parents. We advise them [that] this is what you should do at this age (children), and suggest ways to stimulate [a] more engaging play. They appreciate this guidance.	Case 4-KK4-DR	Doctors empower the parents to explore and discover the children's strengths and imagination, fostering a collaborative growth journey.

Steadfast Intention Theme			
Case 1-TC1-IV	<p>The tender was received last year. However, this company didn't want to use recycled wood to make furniture for their farm workers. The company offered, but it didn't align with sustainability. I'm willing to decline. I want to sustain what I aim to do.</p> <p>We should avoid unsustainable practices and stick to our principles. If we stop trying to reduce carbon emissions, we should, at least, consider why it matters.</p>	Case 1-TC1-DR	The noble intention to educate and enhance skills for the community's benefit while supporting the SDGs for a better environment reflects a commitment to positive change.
Case 2-IP2-IV	So, [you should] have the right intention. At the end of the day, you must be resilient.	Case 2-IP2-DR	Exhibiting a solid and unwavering commitment to their purposes and goals, remaining determined and dedicated to achieving objectives, and being undeterred by challenges.
Case 3-PL3-DR	As an entrepreneur, it's essential to think ahead. Our successful business model not only sustains itself but also inspires others, helping them [to] generate income and become leaders.	Case 3-PL3-DR	Being driven by noble intentions to assist others through creative and sustainable methods, providing the resources to improve their lives, and aiming to create lasting positive change.
Case 4-KK4-DR	We sustain ourselves through clinic income, focusing on social impact rather than profit. Without profits, we offer sponsorships to support our mission. We observe [a] significant progress in committed patients, [which] benefit[s] their families, and [we] believe [that] support is essential, regardless of our financial limitations.	Case 4-KK4-DR	Recognising the hardships caused by disparities and inequalities in the community and empathising with underprivileged families, thus, remaining committed to improving this situation.

Resilient Theme			
Case 1-TC1-IV	<p>At first, we actively searched for the excess wood discarded by the factories. We were indeed engaged in challenging undertakings.</p> <p>Like when I went there alone that day, we need to be ready. What am I going to do when collaborating with this person? I want to collaborate to avoid all kinds of problems.</p>	Case 1-TC1-DR	Despite a messy start, losing direction, and trial and error, they have managed to sustain their efforts and move forward. They have gradually become known in the community through numerous collaborations and networking.
Case 2-IP2-IV	I'm being as much as I can. I'm investing time and effort. So[,] that's my role. I must make sure to pitch to corporate[s] all the time. For a week, I pitch like, maybe, 2 to 4 times. Ya, I guess, just keep rolling. Even when I started with 5 and now only 2 left. But I guess I just must do it (pitching and networking) because that's the only way I can survive the platform. I think, naturally, when you [become] a founder, you want to grow.	Case 2-IP2-DR	Being dedicated to ensuring the ongoing success and sustainability of its enterprise by continually pursuing the most effective strategies.
Case 3-PL3-IV	If we just sit comfortably, we can't go anywhere. Within that platform, opportunities, and grants, you want to keep yourself more and more and reach the international level.	Case 2-IP2-DR	Having begun with a simple, small-scale idea of helping people, but as they were progressing, they were able to empower individuals through capacity-building efforts, leading to more impactful outcomes.

Case 4-KK4-IV	[We're] still struggling to get everyone on board, but something must be done, so[,] I started small. It took 7 years try[ing] to get funding, but I couldn't get any. However, we have still managed to survive for four years now.	Case 3-PL3-DR	Despite the challenges ahead, they have remained dedicated to this important journey, guided by their compassion and belief in the power of community.
Strategic Thinking Theme			
Case 1-TC1-IV	I'm partnering with an academic institution appointed by the government to help increas[ing] the number of individuals in this skills sector. There're government allocations to support this initiative. For corporate purposes, we need to penetrate the market first so that people can see what we do. [Only] then[,] we can promote it as a corporate gift, especially[,] since there're always corporate training sessions that require them.	Case 4-KK4-DR	Utilising various strategies to raise awareness of the intended goals, making the message accessible for the community to understand.
Case 2-IP2-IV	Honestly, baking is not a very special product. It's quite a competitive market. But we have an extensive R&D process, [and] we try innovative recipes. [We] make it different a bit, and find what's trendy. We set up this training centre, did renovations, [and] bought more machines. [We also] invested in a more proper bakery. We also kept it (grant) for working capital.	Case 2-IP2-DR	Employing a variety of strategies to deliver the most significant possible impact, and seeking innovative and adaptable approaches to create meaningful change.
Case 3-PL3-IV	Our team has expanded its operations beyond F&B services, including mentoring and coaching for micro-entrepreneurs. [We] aim to empower them through digital transformation and economic empowerment, helping them [to] become more self-sufficient and beneficial in their endeavours.	Case 3-PL3-DR	Developing a systematic set of strategies with well-managed focus and clear expectations to ensure a greater impact.
Case 4-KK4-IV	I'm trying to develop it as a one-stop centre for parents to come and get health, nutrition, and responsive caregiving, such as parent support, safety, and protection from social welfare, like early learning education opportunities.	Case 4-KK4-DR	Employing diverse strategies, innovative approaches, and various educational methods to deliver service and impactful change.

Source: Developed for this study

5.0 Discussion

This section elaborates on the four (4) key sustainability factors that have emerged as the determinants of sustainability among social enterprises from the perspectives of the accredited social enterprises in Malaysia.

5.1 Empowerment

The informants have proudly shared their positive impacts on their beneficiaries, aiming to empower them to become independent and move forward. Some (i.e., IP2 and PL3) have trained the beneficiaries to join their teams, enabling those who have once faced similar challenges to assist others. This empowerment has boosted the beneficiaries' confidence and transformed their lives positively. It is clear that empowerment indicates and evaluates the effectiveness of social enterprises in addressing problems experienced by their beneficiaries (Pareja-Cano, Valor, & Benito, 2023) and is considered a fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of its social goals (Al-Shami, Razali, & Rashid, 2018). By demonstrating tangible impact through their interventions, the informants have sustained their existence as the social enterprises. Their proven ability to empower the beneficiaries and facilitate positive change has garnered support in financial resources and non-financial assistance, such as moral support and other beneficial forms of aid. This support, in turn, has enabled the informants to continue their impactful work and expand their reach, creating a virtuous cycle of a sustainable social impact.

5.2 Steadfast Intention

Essentially, the intention to pursue endeavours in the social field like social enterprise reflects the extent to which individuals feel a sense of responsibility for addressing social issues and helping underprivileged communities, based on values and norms they believe are essential (Hockerts, 2018). Despite their challenges, the informants have remained steadfast in their commitments to their original intentions and missions. Despite facing financial struggles, KK4, for example, has remained focused on its mission. This unwavering dedication has given them unique experiences that foster resilience and clarity of purpose. By witnessing the tangible impact of their efforts, they have confirmed that their intentions are honest, achievable, and impactful. This realisation has enhanced their motivation to strive for sustainability, renewing their determination to continue their efforts. This cycle of impact and inspiration has propelled them forward and guided them towards a sustainable future where their social enterprises can thrive and create lasting change in their communities.

5.3 Resilient

In general, resilience refers to a process where entrepreneurs develop and capitalise their skills and resources to effectively deal with challenging environments, helping them to adapt and maintain their functions throughout adversity (Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, & Shepherd, 2017). Social enterprises must embrace challenges, such as opportunities for growth and exposure to good things, dedicating themselves to others, being willing to take on odd jobs, always thinking ahead, and never giving up. In the case of TC1, they have begun by using bare hands and limited tools to collect wood excess from factories just to ensure that work was commenced. Hence, it is understood that social enterprises must work hard and think several steps ahead while dreaming for growth and allowing noble intentions to drive them even if achieving their goals may take longer. These qualities will help them to positively sustain their endeavours, allowing them to continue making a meaningful difference in their communities (Hoegl & Hartmann, 2021).

5.4 Strategic Thinking

Strategy is the primary determinant for a business's future direction and sustainability. However, it is even more critical for social enterprises to navigate their dual missions of social and economic goals. To fulfil their social missions, social enterprises are now increasingly applying various strategic and managerial practices that help to ensure long-term sustainability (Sabella & Eid, 2016). This necessitates a strategic approach that is innovative but also impactful and sustainable (Putri Mega Desiana et al., 2022). Hence, social enterprises require a distinct mindset and unique thinking compared to traditional businesses. The intention behind this strategy must be centred on the well-being of beneficiaries, ensuring that their needs are met and their lives are improved. These strategies are well-managed and continuously enhanced to ensure that social enterprises remain sustainable in achieving their dual missions. It is obvious that all the informants have consistently demonstrated these qualities as they have strategised their moves and approached their missions innovatively.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study proves that social enterprises can draw upon a diverse range of contributing factors beyond merely financial considerations to sustain, allowing them to cultivate greater capacity and opportunities for growth. The investigation has primarily gathered data from the owners, founders, co-founders, and top management of the social enterprises, which might have limited the scope of insights by excluding the perspectives of employees and volunteers who could provide a valuable real-world context relevant to sustainability. To address these limitations, future research should involve a broader spectrum of participants, including employees, volunteers, and beneficiaries, to deepen and enrich the understanding of sustainability from multiple viewpoints. Apart from that, replicating this study across various categories of social enterprises will further enhance the comprehensiveness of insights, with beneficiaries' perspectives offering particularly valuable information as the recipients of the social enterprises' benefits. As a result, a non-financial sustainability model for social enterprises would be developed through consistent research.

Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study addresses gaps in the literature by providing a multifaceted understanding of sustainability in social enterprises. It offers a foundation for future research to delve deeper into other equally important non-financial factors, potentially leading to a comprehensive model. Other critical areas for further investigation stemming from this research include core competencies and impact-driven initiatives social enterprises implement.

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