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Social entrepreneurship in Africa: A systematic multilevel literature review

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a systematic multi-level literature review of research on social entrepreneurship in Africa. Our review focuses on work from the last decade, since the first issue of the *Africa Journal of Management* was published, and the widely cited *Academy of Management Perspectives* paper “Social entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa” by Rivera-Santos et al (2015). Through analysis of 128 papers in 35 journals, patterns in research on social entrepreneurship in Africa are revealed and critically discussed, including insights on the field’s growth, where work is being published, who is writing it, and the role of African based scholars. Saebi et al’s (2019) multilevel multistage social entrepreneurship framework is also used to classify existing work, and critically identify those aspects of the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship in Africa that have received more and less attention. Finally, these analyses are synthesized to identify opportunities for future scholarship.

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Introduction

It is ten years since the first issue of the *Africa Journal of Management* (AJOM) was published,¹ and the widely cited *Academy of Management Perspectives* paper by Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) “Social entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa”. In their work, Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) argued that social entrepreneurship in Africa was understudied, reflecting wider limitations in then management scholarship on Africa, and a paucity of work showcasing the “*unique attributes of Africa that can be shared*” (Zoogah & Nkomo, 2013, p. 19). It was in response to these kinds of limitations that AJOM was founded, and the Africa Academy of Management movement initiated. In their work, Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) argued and demonstrated empirically the significance of African environmental (contextual) factors for social entrepreneurship. In so doing, they highlighted the valuable insights African data and research on Africa could bring to social entrepreneurship and wider business

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scholarship. Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015, p. 82) paper ends calling for more social entrepreneurship research on Africa, and for “researchers to better integrate African insights into Management theories”. In this review paper, we examine whether and how this has occurred over the intervening years and explore prospects for future scholarship by conducting a systematic multi-level literature review.

Our systematic review focuses on the last decade, since the publication of Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015) work, and these wider developments in global business and management scholarship i.e. the first Africa Academy of Management Conference in 2013, the first issue of the *Africa Journal of Management* in 2015. We recognize that the practice of social entrepreneurship in Africa, as well as literature examining it precedes this time. For instance, African cooperatives and informal communal venturing have existed and been studied for many years (e.g. Hamer, 1981; Holmén, 1990; Schwettmann, 1993). Similarly, fair trade in Africa can be traced back more than 20 years (Tallontire, 1999, 2000), whilst microfinance as a form of social entrepreneurship proliferated in Africa from the 1990s onwards (Buckley, 1997; Fidler & Webster, 1996). The late 2000s and early 2010s further saw landmark studies on the Social and Solidarity Economy in Africa supported by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and Belgian government (Fonteneau, 2011; Steinman, 2010; Steinman & van Rooij, 2012). Finally, from this time there were also growing analyses of African social enterprise cases, often as part of wider geographically focused social enterprise research (e.g. Kerlin, 2009; Thompson & Doherty, 2006). To us, however, it was studies like that by Rivera-Santos et al. (2015), alongside factors like the founding of AJOM, that gave a platform and ushered in more concerted study of social entrepreneurship in Africa, moving it to the mainstream of (social) entrepreneurship and broader management scholarship.

For our systematic literature review we analyze 128 papers from 35 established international entrepreneurship and wider business and management journals. Journals were included based on their presence and rank of 2* or above – emphasizing higher quality contributions – in the “Entrepreneurship and small business management” field of the *Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) 2024 Academic Journal Guide*. Selected other journal outlets thematically pertinent to the review focus were also included e.g. *The Social Enterprise Journal*, *the Africa Journal of Management*, etc. This selection was based on our judgement as experienced scholars in the field – a full detailed methodology is provided later in the paper.

Our analysis reveals important patterns in publishing on social entrepreneurship in Africa. We shed light on the field's development, the geographical focus of existing work, who is writing about social entrepreneurship in Africa, and the roles being played by African based scholars in shaping conversations and the field's development. Our review further considers the methodologies deployed, theoretical lenses used, and the types of contributions claimed. Moving beyond this more descriptive analysis we then draw upon Saebi et al.'s (2019) framework of *social entrepreneurship as a multistage and multilevel phenomenon* to classify existing literature according to how it addresses different aspects of the framework. For instance, whether and how studies examine social entrepreneurship in Africa at the pre or post formation stage, at micro (individual social entrepreneur), meso (social entrepreneurial teams and social enterprise organizations), or macro (societal impact and context) levels, as well as where work is multi-

level. In so doing, we review the field more conceptually compared to previous efforts (e.g. Littlewood et al., 2022). Finally, and synthesizing these assessments we identify opportunities for future scholarship.

Academic attention on social entrepreneurship in Africa has blossomed over the last decade (e.g. Argiolas et al., 2024; Busch & Barkema, 2021, 2022; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021; Cieslik, 2016; Claeys, 2017; Holt & Littlewood, 2015, 2017; Littlewood & Holt, 2018a, 2018b; Mirvis & Googins, 2018; Savaget et al., 2025; Sottini et al., 2022; Uzuegbunam et al., 2024, etc.) responding to the call of Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) and others, but also spurred by perceptions that social entrepreneurship offers new possibilities for addressing some of Africa's intractable sustainable development challenges (Littlewood & Holt, 2018c; Seelos & Mair, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2023). In academia, policy and practice connections are increasingly being made between social entrepreneurship and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa (for instance Cau & Ciambotti, 2023; Nwauche & Claeys, 2024). These point to a practical need and imperative to better understand social entrepreneurship in Africa, and the state of our knowledge about it, further justifying this literature review's attention.

Reflecting growing research on social entrepreneurship in Africa, previous efforts have been made to review the state of the field. For example, the special issue editorial in the *Africa Journal of Management* by Littlewood et al. (2022), or Farhoud et al.'s (2023) more critical and indigenous African perspective. Our paper builds on these valuable reviews but is also distinct in several respects. First, it adopts a more systematic and quantitative approach. Second and uniquely, it deploys a multilevel lens, drawing upon the framework of Saebi et al. (2019), which is used to assess the state of the research field on social entrepreneurship in Africa. Finally, and combining these appraisals it systematically identifies future directions for scholarly enquiry across multiple levels.

This systematic literature review paper makes several important contributions. It quantitatively unveils key patterns and trends in research on social entrepreneurship in Africa, delineating what we know, how we know it, and crucially where there are gaps, problems, and possibilities for further work. These insights then extend in a more conceptual direction through the application of the Saebi et al. (2019) framework. This latter approach is novel and offers a more fine-grained perspective compared to previous papers and reviews e.g. by distinguishing work focused on pre or post formation, and at the micro, meso, macro or across multiple levels. Our thorough, systematic, multilevel analysis provides fertile ground for future research.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we explain the methodology for our systematic review. This is followed by presentation and critical discussion of our analysis of patterns in scholarship on social entrepreneurship in Africa since 2015. We then introduce the Saebi et al. (2019) multistage multilevel social entrepreneurship phenomenon framework, before deploying this to assess the state of the field. Finally, these analyses are synthesized to identify important opportunities for further research.

Methodology

A systematic approach was adopted to review literature on social entrepreneurship in Africa. This first entailed a high-level assessment identifying patterns and trends in the field.

Secondly, a more focused analysis was undertaken deploying Saebi et al.'s (2019) multi-level social entrepreneurship framework. Below we explain in more detail how this occurred.

Journal Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The first step in our review was to identify those journals to include and exclude. The Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) 2024 *Academic Journal Guide* was used to make these decisions. The CABS Academic Journal Guide has been used in this way for many other systematic reviews in (social) entrepreneurship and wider business and management e.g. Zorzini et al. (2015), Nabi et al. (2017), Littlewood and Khan (2018), Soundararajan et al. (2018), Theodoraki et al. (2022), Almeida and Gonçalves (2024), etc. In our review we included those journals present and ranked 2* or above in the "Entrepreneurship and small business management" field of the CABS list. This cut-off was made to focus on work published in higher impact international journals, that are known for publishing work of a high quality, that is original, rigorous, significant, and has the potential to advance the field. Such an approach has been adopted in other systematic literature reviews e.g. Baldacchino et al. (2015), Zahoor et al. (2020).

We recognize that there are limitations with this approach i.e. some relevant work in lower, unranked – perhaps non-business and management – journals might be excluded, as well as outputs like book chapters, reports, etc. It might also be that some scholars working on social entrepreneurship in Africa target lower ranked journals for their research, due to different institutional expectations, limited resources and time, lack of experience, even the adoption of more indigenous methodologies and perspective that may run counter to conventions in mainstream outlets (Momanyi et al., 2025). Thus, there is the possibility for some important and particularly African contextualized contributions to be missed. Nevertheless, we think it is necessary to focus on these "higher quality" outlets, with the goal that our paper can offer guidance for more African led social entrepreneurship research to appear in these kinds of journals in the future.

Partly in response to the above issues, selected wider journal outlets were also added to the systematic review based on the authors' assessment that these were journals where important or a significant number of papers on social entrepreneurship in Africa had been published in them over the last decade. For example, the *Social Enterprise Journal* is a CABS 1* journal and thus would have been excluded from our core search, yet it is the oldest social enterprise field journal and an outlet where much has been written on social entrepreneurship in Africa. Similarly, the *Africa Journal of Management* would have been excluded based on our core search criteria but is a key home for African focused management scholarship, and recently featured a special issue on social entrepreneurship in Africa (Littlewood et al., 2022). Top general management journals like the *Academy of Management Journal* and *Journal of Management Studies* would also have been excluded from our main search criteria, yet papers on social entrepreneurship in Africa have now appeared in them (e.g. Shantz et al., 2020), and it is important to recognize such work when considering the development of the field. Journals addressing social issues in management like the *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Business & Society*, etc. have also welcomed papers on social entrepreneurship in Africa, including some top-cited contributions, therefore their inclusion was considered necessary. Overall, we recognize that our selection of these additional journals

has an element of subjectivity and judgment, which could be considered a limitation of this review, nevertheless, these decisions were made based on the authors' years of involvement in the field, extensive discussion amongst the team, and as mentioned were guided by our sense of outlets where influential and a significant number of papers on social entrepreneurship in Africa had been published over the last decade. Based on the above criteria and processes, 35 journals were included in our search.

- Journals 2* and above in CABS List "Entrepreneurship and small business management": *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, Journal of Business Venturing, Strategic Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, Family Business Review, International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research, International Small Business Journal, Journal of Small Business Management, Small Business Economics, Entrepreneurship Research Journal, International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business, International Review of Entrepreneurship, Journal of Business Venturing Insights, Journal of family business strategy, Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Journal of Small Business And Enterprise Development, Journal of Social Entrepreneurship, Venture Capital.*
- Wider selected journals: *Social Enterprise Journal, Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Perspectives, Africa Journal of Management, British Journal of Management, Business & Society, Business Strategy and the Environment, California Management Review, Global Strategy Journal, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Business Research, Journal Business Venturing, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of World Business, Strategic Management Journal.*

The review covered the period 2015–2024. The year 2015 was selected as the starting point for the review because it was the year of the first issue of the *Africa Journal of Management*, the year Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015) seminal paper "Social entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa" was published, and it was from this point that we as scholars perceived an uptick in publishing and interest on social entrepreneurship in Africa. The Web of Knowledge and Scopus databases were used in identifying papers from these journals, results were cross checked to ensure no relevant papers were omitted.

Paper Selection and Analysis

The selection of papers was conducted based on keywords searches. Keywords included, terms associated with social entrepreneurship e.g. social entrepreneur, social innovation, etc., as well as commonly identified social enterprise organizational forms e.g. fairtrade, Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE), etc., which were combined with Africa or specific African countries e.g. "South Africa", "Zambia", etc. The precise keyword strings are presented below:

"Social entrepreneurship" OR "social enterprise*" OR "social entrepreneur*" OR "hybrid organization*" OR "hybrid organisation" OR "social business*" OR "social innovation" OR "social economy" OR "solidarity economy" OR "social venture*" OR "cooperative*" OR "fairtrade" OR "fair trade" OR "microfinance" OR "micro-finance" OR "micro-credit" OR "base of the pyramid" OR "bottom of the pyramid" OR "WISE" OR "community enter*" OR "community-based organ*" OR "community based organ*".

Intersected with:

"Africa" OR "Algeria" OR "Angola" OR "Benin" OR "Botswana" OR "Burkina Faso" OR "Burundi" OR "Cameroon" OR "Cape Verde" OR "Central African Republic" OR "Chad" OR "Congo" OR "Comoros" OR "DRC" OR "Djibouti" OR "Egypt" OR "Equatorial Guinea" OR "Eswatini" OR "Eritrea" OR "Ethiopia" OR "Gabon" OR "Gambia" OR "Guinea" OR "Ghana" OR "Ivory Coast" OR "Kenya" OR "Lesotho" OR "Liberia" OR "Libya" OR "Madagascar" OR "Malawi" OR "Mali" OR "Mauritania" OR "Mauritius" OR "Morocco" OR "Mozambique" OR "Namibia" OR "Niger" OR "Nigeria" OR "Rwanda" OR "São Tomé and Príncipe" OR "Sao Tome" OR "Senegal" OR "Seychelles" OR "Sierra Leone" OR "Somalia" OR "Sudan" OR "South Sudan" OR "South Africa" OR "Swaziland" OR "Tanzania" OR "Togo" OR "Tunisia" OR "Uganda" OR "Zambia" OR "Zanzibar" OR "Zimbabwe".

Articles, Review Articles, Early Access, and Editorial Materials only were included. Only articles in English were included.

For the analysis, two members of the team checked each article by reading the title, abstract, and keywords to select only those clearly related to social entrepreneurship in Africa. In most cases, the exclusion of articles was straightforward, in other instances it involved more subjective judgment. Any differences of opinion between the two team members were resolved by a third. Through this process 10 articles were removed, resulting in a final dataset of 128 papers.

Analysis of the papers followed a consistent systematic approach. The objective was to identify key patterns and trends in publishing on social entrepreneurship in Africa, before more specifically categorizing work according to the Saebi et al. (2019) framework of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon – see in-depth explanation of this framework later in the paper. For the first part of this analysis, a template was shared amongst the research team for identifying key characteristics of the papers e.g. country focus, methodology, type of contribution claimed, publication year, etc. This was combined with the use of the Bibliometrix software (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), which helped to aggregate citation data and construct knowledge maps to discern the field's evolution (Zupic & Čater, 2015). This bibliometric analysis enabled us to pull out publication trends over the last decade (2015–2024) i.e. to identify the most cited articles and journals, where work was being produced, the nature of collaborations occurring in the field, etc.

In the second part of the analysis, we classified papers according to their key foci based on the Saebi et al. (2019) theoretical framework. In this framework there are 23 components (see Table 4 later in the paper). Each paper was assigned to one of these components. For consistency, this classification was performed entirely by one member of the research team and then reviewed by a second. Where there was disagreement a third team member was consulted. Applying Saebi et al.'s (2019) framework allowed us to identify what aspects of the social entrepreneurship in Africa phenomenon have received more and less scholarly attention, in terms of levels, stages and more specific constructs and mechanisms.

A Systematic, Multilevel, and Multistage Review of Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Patterns in Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

The first stage of our analysis identified various patterns and trends in research on social entrepreneurship in Africa.

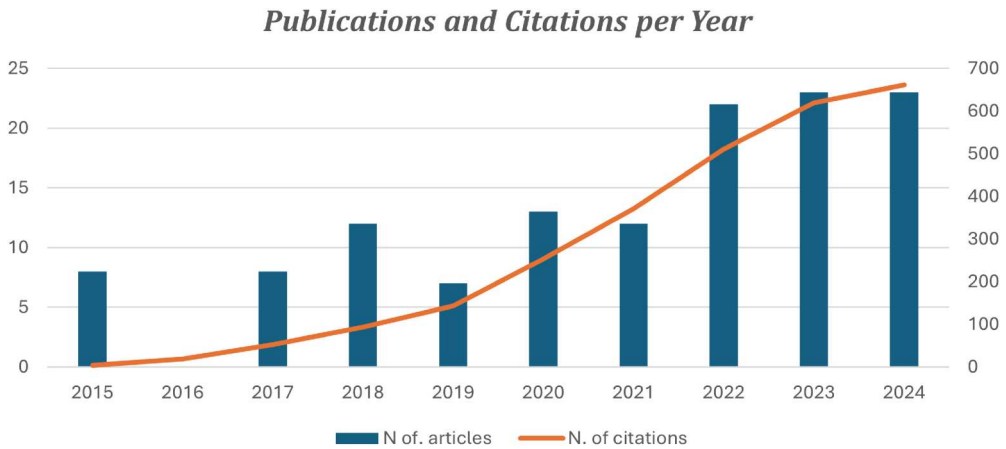


Figure 1. Publications and citations.

Publications and citations

Figure 1 presents a combined graph of publications and citations per year for research on social entrepreneurship in Africa. From this graph, we can see how the research field has grown over the last decade, with citations reaching 661 in 2024. The number of publications per year is also strong, recorded as 23 per year in 2022–2024.

Amongst these publications, the most prominent are presented in Table 1, where we can see the relevance of Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015) germinal paper with a total of 168 citations, followed by Littlewood et al. (2018) with 152 citations. These key papers particularly address topics of context and its significance in African social entrepreneurship, the strategies adopted by social entrepreneurs and enterprises in Africa, and social entrepreneurial intentions and opportunity recognition at the individual level in Africa.

Authors and Collaborations

We found that the most prominent authors in the field are international scholars based outside of Africa, including Littlewood D. (6 papers), Holt D. and Ciambotti G. (5 papers), Kimmitt J. and Rivera-Santos M. (3 papers). It is also the case that most corresponding authors are international scholars, based in the UK, USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, rather than scholars located in Africa. This is very visible in Figure 2. In Africa, only

Table 1. Most cited papers.

First author	Year	Journal	Citations	Citation per Year
Rivera-Santos M.	2015	Academy of Management Perspectives	167	16,70
Littlewood D.	2018	Business & Society	149	21,29
Urban B.	2017	International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research	142	17,75
Busch C.	2021	Strategic Management Journal	100	25,00
Shantz A. S.	2018	Journal of Business Venturing	100	14,29
McMullen J. S.	2017	Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal	98	12,25
Lashitew A. A.	2020	Journal of Business Ethics	96	19,20
Kolk A.	2018	Business & Society	93	13,29
Maksimov V.	2017	Journal of World Business	71	8,88
Ghalwash S.	2017	Social Enterprise Journal	69	8,63

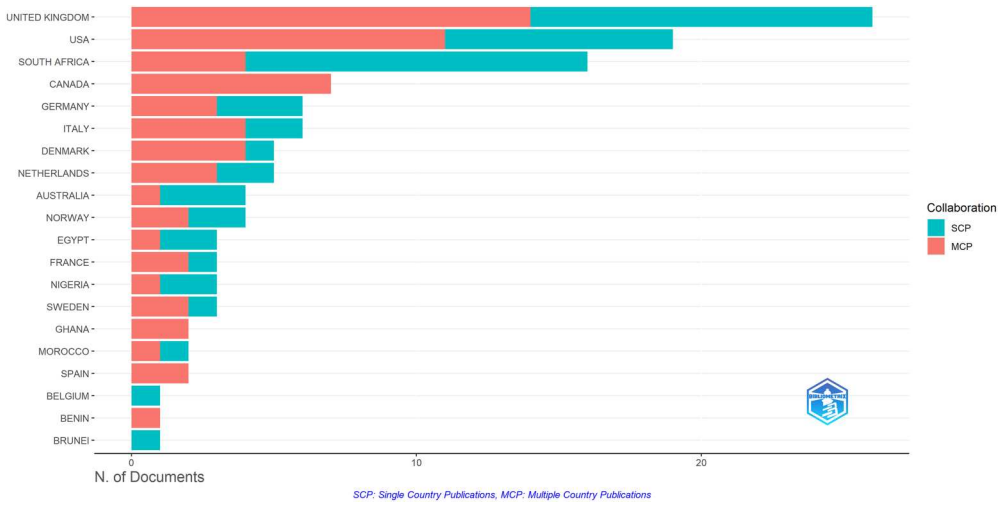


Figure 2. Country location of corresponding author.

South Africa has a significant number of corresponding authors, followed by Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, and Benin. Whilst we recognize that African scholars may be working outside of the continent and contributing to the field’s development from these locations, and also that non-African and non-African based scholars can make valuable contributions to the field, these findings raise critical questions of knowledge production, about African scholars roles in research teams, and about the perspectives, theories, methodologies, epistemologies being deployed or not e.g. more indigenous approaches.

Figure 3 identifies country involvement in scientific production. This continues the trend above, showing how Sub-Saharan Africa is comparatively less involved in the production of research and knowledge about social entrepreneurship in Africa than say the UK or US. It also showcases that there is little or no involvement from scholars in many

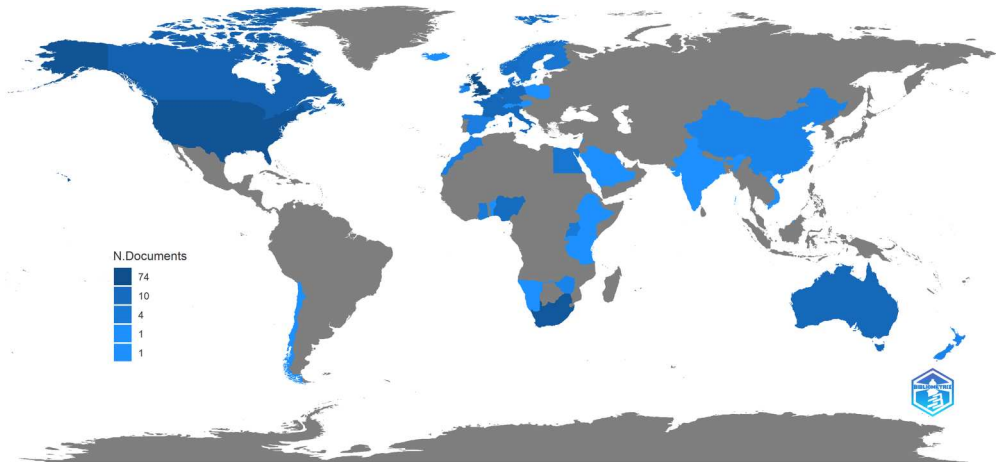


Figure 3. Country location of scientific production.

individual African countries, at least in terms of the conversations in these high-level international entrepreneurship and wider business and management journals.

Further analysis of authorship suggests that research on social entrepreneurship in Africa is collaborative. The 128 papers have 309 authors, with only 10 single authored works. The number of co-authors per document is 2.85, meaning that teams of scholars are usually undertaking research. Such collaborations are cross-country, as illustrated in the “Country collaboration map” (Figure 4), where it’s possible to recognize collaborations mainly between scholars in the US, UK, and other countries outside Africa. Fewer connections are noted between external scholars and those in Africa. We think this is again a challenge for the field and its development e.g. works may lack deep local and contextualized African knowledge and perspectives, which can potentially lead to partial or significant misunderstanding, as well as the dominance or imposed use of existing theoretical and analytical lenses and perspectives from the global “North” to explain African social entrepreneurship phenomena. It might further lead to exogenous identification of pressing research questions [the irony is not lost given the composition of our author team], prevailing definitions, and wider worldviews about what social entrepreneurship is and its potential in Africa. We found limited evidence of collaborations across Africa e.g. between scholars in South Africa and Kenya or Nigeria. We again think more of this kind of work is needed for the field’s development, for sharing practical and policy implications, and importantly for Africans to gain further ownership of current and future conversations and the field’s research agenda.

Journals and Foci

Turning next to outlet journals for research on social entrepreneurship in Africa, our analysis revealed that the 128 articles have been published in 27 journals. Table 2 reports the most relevant journals, with the *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* and *Social Enterprise Journal* highest with respectively 21 and 15 publications. With 9 papers, the *Africa Journal of Management* has also been a significant outlet for this type of research, including its 2022 special issue on the topic (Littlewood et al., 2022).

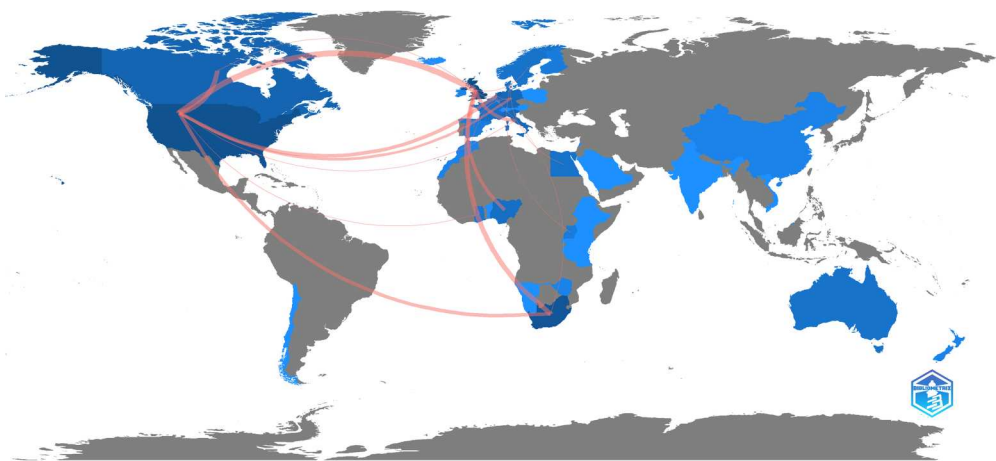


Figure 4. Map of collaborations.

Table 2. Journals with most papers.

Journal	Articles
Journal of Social Entrepreneurship	21
Social Enterprise Journal	15
Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	12
Africa Journal of Management	9
International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research	8
Journal of Business Venturing	8
Journal of Business Ethics	7
Business Strategy and the Environment	6
Entrepreneurship and Regional Development	6
Business & Society	5

If we consider the journals cited in paper reference lists, it is also possible to identify that research on social entrepreneurship in African contexts often draws its theoretical roots from papers in top international journals, even though these still seem to be difficult outlets for such research to be published in. The most cited journals are *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (445), *Journal of Business Venturing* (426), *Academy of Management Review* and *Academy of Management Journal* (respectively 292 and 284 times). The *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* have been cited 274 and 162 times respectively. The most cited article is the seminal work by Mair and Marti in 2006 in the *Journal of World Business* (40 times), followed by Austin et al. (2006), and Rivera-Santos et al. (2015), both cited by 32 articles. Interestingly, two research methods articles, Eisenhardt (1989) in the *Academy of Management Review* and Gioia et al. (2013) from *Organizational Research Method* are cited respectively 30 and 27 times, suggesting a high focus and adoption of qualitative methodologies in research. This may indicate that research on social entrepreneurship in Africa is still relatively emergent, requiring more exploratory studies to build theory that can later be tested with quantitative approaches.

Our analysis of methodological approach supports this view, where we find 75 papers principally adopting a qualitative methodology, 41 a quantitative approach, 3 deploy mixed methods, and 9 are review or conceptual pieces. Perhaps reflecting this and when we turn to key contribution type, we find that 88 papers focus their contributions on theory building versus only 24 on theory testing. Of the remaining papers, 13 seem to make more of an empirical contribution, 1 a methodological contribution, and 2 are literature reviews.

The final aspect of our analysis concerns extant literature's geographical foci. As illustrated in Table 3, research on social entrepreneurship in Africa has focused particularly on a small number of countries, notably Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, and to a lesser extent Tanzania and Uganda. This is perhaps unsurprising given earlier analysis identifying author locations. However, it raises questions about comprehensiveness, inclusion, and recognition of Africa's heterogeneity and national and sub-national contextual variations in social entrepreneurship phenomena. For instance, less has been written about social entrepreneurship in North Africa, in Francophone Africa, in smaller African countries, island states, and African states experiencing extreme challenges e.g. conflict/post conflict, authoritarianism, etc. Whilst we do not advocate for some kind of descriptive research agenda e.g. examining social enterprise models in all 54 African states, we do feel that if future research can look beyond these relatively well studied settings, this could help to expand our understanding and theorizing of the phenomenon and its related constructs.

Table 3. Country focus of research on social entrepreneurship in Africa.

Country focus	No. of papers
Multicountry study	27
Ghana	18
South Africa	18
Kenya	14
Nigeria	11
Tanzania	6
Uganda	6
Egypt	5
Morocco	3
Zambia	3
Benin	2
Cameroon	2
Rwanda	2
Zimbabwe	2
Burundi	1
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1
Eswatini	1
Ethiopia	1
Malawi	1
Mozambique	1
Namibia	1
Senegal	1
Sierra Leone	1
Angola; Botswana; Burkina Faso; Cape Verde; Central African Republic; Chad; Comoros; Congo; Cote d'Ivoire; Djibouti; Equatorial Guinea; Eritrea; Gabon; Gambia; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Lesotho; Liberia; Libya; Madagascar; Mali; Mauritania; Mauritius; Morocco; Niger; São Tomé and Príncipe; Seychelles; Somalia; South Sudan; Sudan; Togo; Tunisia.	0 ^a

^aSocial entrepreneurship phenomena in these countries may be examined as part of multi-country studies.

To conclude, our analysis suggests that current research on social entrepreneurship in Africa is mainly conducted by international scholars, or African scholars based outside of the continent, with still limited collaboration with and across Africa. It is often published in social entrepreneurship journals, perhaps suggesting difficulties in the analytical or theoretical generalizability of results to contribute to broader scholarly conversations in entrepreneurship and the wider management discipline. Despite positive trends in terms of a growing paper numbers, much work remains qualitative, exploratory, focused on theory building, and restricted to a limited number of (already well-studied) geographical contexts in Africa, suggesting there remains significant scope for future work and contributions as the field matures. In the next section we continue to critically unpack the research field drawing upon the Saebi et al. (2019) framework.

Levels and Stages in Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

The Saebi et al. (2019) Framework

What social entrepreneurship is has been and remains a longstanding subject of academic debate (Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Choi & Majumdar, 2014; Nicholls, 2010; Saebi et al., 2019, etc.). Despite many contributions on this over the years, scholars continue to assert that

social entrepreneurship is “an essentially contested concept” (Choi & Majumdar, 2014, p. 372), and that it remains difficult to distinguish social entrepreneurship from other similar phenomena e.g. corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainable entrepreneurship, even commercial entrepreneurship, etc. (Austin et al., 2006; Huybrechts & Nicholls, 2012). These are also challenges for practice, especially with the advent of more “purposeful” venturing (George et al., 2023) and increasingly sophisticated corporate sustainability engagements. To overcome these challenges and provide a more comprehensive conceptualization of social entrepreneurship, Saebi et al. (2019) developed their framework depicting social entrepreneurship as a multilevel multistage phenomenon. Figure 5 illustrates this framework adapted for ease of interpretation.

Saebi et al.’s (2019) framework is inspired by writing on multilevel research and theorizing, most notably “Coleman’s boat” (Coleman, 1990; Cowen et al., 2022), which offers a heuristic for theorizing inter and intra level causal relationships. Coleman’s (1990) original boat covered two levels – macro and micro. It acknowledged the significance of single level mechanisms and associations e.g. at either the macro or micro levels, but also stressed the importance of interaction between levels, for instance how micro (individual) level agents, mechanisms and effects, through aggregation and “transformational mechanisms” undergird higher macro (societal/ institutional) level associations. In turn, it was posited that macro (societal/institutional) level facets influence agents, mechanisms and effects at the micro (individual) level, through processes of contextualization or “situational mechanisms”.

Saebi et al. (2019) expand the two level “boat” to three levels – micro, macro and meso. Their micro level is concerned principally with individual social entrepreneurs, the macro level with societal/ institutional aspects, and the meso level with organizations e.g. the social enterprise (and entrepreneurial teams). Saebi et al. (2019) further delineate the preformation and post-formation stages of social entrepreneurship – the former

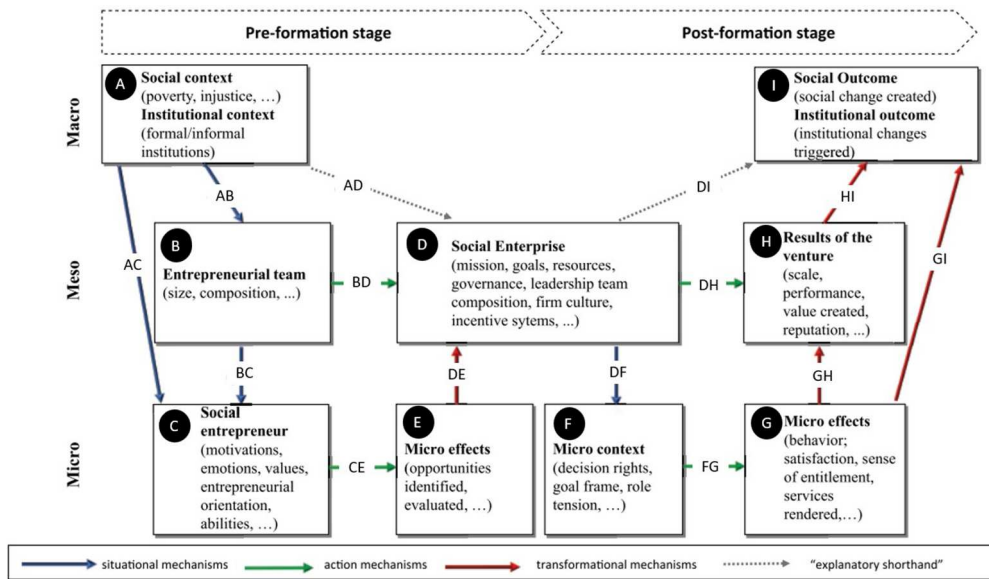


Figure 5. Adapted Saebi et al. (2019) of social entrepreneurship as a multistage, multilevel phenomenon.

Table 4. Categorization using the adapted Saebi et al. (2019) framework.

Letter	Description	Level of analysis	Stage	No. of papers	Letter	Description	Level of analysis	Stage	No. of papers
A	Social / institutional context	Macro (societal/ institutional)	Pre-formation	1	BC	Entrepreneurial team/collective influences individual social entrepreneurs	Multi-level	Pre-formation	1
B	Entrepreneurial team	Meso (organization)	Pre-formation	0	BD	Entrepreneurial team/collective affect new social enterprises	Meso (organization)	Multi – stage	2
C	Social entrepreneur	Micro (individual)	Pre-formation	2	CE	Social entrepreneurs and micro effects e.g. how they identify, evaluate, exploit opportunities	Micro (individual)	Multi – stage	25
D	Social enterprises	Meso (organization)	Multi-stage	12	DE	Micro effects and social enterprises	Multi-level	Multi – stage	4
E	Micro effects e.g. opportunities identified	Micro (individual)	Multi-stage	1	DF	Social enterprise features informing the micro context	Multi-level	Multi – stage	4
F	Micro context e.g. decision rights	Micro (individual)	Multi-stage	0	DH	Social enterprise characteristics and their relationship to the results of the venture	Meso (organization)	Multi – stage	34
G	Micro effects e.g. behavior, satisfaction	Micro (individual)	Post-formation	0	DI	The role of social enterprises in social/ institutional outcomes and change	Multi-level	Multi – stage	9
H	Results of venture e.g. scale, TBL performance, etc.	Meso (organization)	Post-formation	0	FG	Micro context affecting the behavior of individuals in the social enterprise	Micro (individual)	Multi – stage	6
I	Social and institutional outcomes and change	Macro (societal/ institutional)	Post-formation	1	GH	Individual level micro effects aggregating to affect the performance of a social enterprise	Multi-level	Post-formation	0
AB	Social/ institutional context influences meso level entrepreneurial teams/ collectives	Multi-level	Pre-formation	0	GI	Individual level micro effects aggregating to affect social/ institutional outcomes and change	Multi-level	Post-formation	0
AC	Social/ institutional context influences individual social entrepreneurs	Multi-level	Pre-formation	8	HI	Results of the social venture/ ventures affecting social/ institutional change and outcomes	Multi-level	Post-formation	2
AD	Social/ institutional context influences social enterprise emergence	Multi-level	Multi-stage	13	None of the above e.g. review papers				3

relating to the creation of new hybrid business models to address societal needs in new or existing firms, the latter concerned with how the new firm or organizational unit creates social value (pp. 82). Across these levels and stages, Saebi et al. (2019) unpack the social entrepreneurship phenomenon identifying different interactions and mechanisms between constructs.

Explaining Figure 5 further and proceeding alphabetically, box **A** relates to the (macro level) social/institutional context in which (African) social entrepreneurship occurs, and social entrepreneurs and enterprises emerge. Box **B** focuses on social entrepreneurial teams (meso level) recognizing that social entrepreneurship is often a collective or communal endeavor. This may be especially the case in Africa given strong communitarian values present on the continent e.g. Ubuntu (Lutz, 2009; Woermann & Engelbrecht, 2019). Box **C** is concerned with the individual (micro level) social entrepreneur, their motives, orientations, characteristics, etc., whilst box **D** straddles pre and post formation and relates to the (meso level) social enterprise, its mission, resources, activity areas, etc. Moving back to the micro level, box **E** refers to micro effects like the types of opportunities identified by (African) social entrepreneurs, whilst box **F** relates to the micro level context experienced by individual (African) social entrepreneurs and employees in their social firms, this in turn affects behaviors in their established ventures (**box G**). The final two boxes **H** and **I** are concerned with the (meso level) results of social enterprises in terms of their scaling, performance, value creation, etc., (**box H**), and macro level outcomes at the social or institutional level i.e. the change engendered by social entrepreneurs and enterprises (**box I**).

Saebi et al.'s (2019) framework further conceptualizes different interactions and mechanisms between constructs in social entrepreneurship. Some are conceived as more *situational mechanisms* (**AB, AC, BC, and DF**) i.e. the downward influence of, for instance, institutional/social context (macro level) on organization (meso level) factors or the individual (African) social entrepreneur (**C**). Others are perceived as *action mechanisms* (**BD, CE, DH, and FG**) that occur within one level of analysis and relate to things like how individual (African) social entrepreneurs identify opportunities (**CE**), or how entrepreneurial team dynamics affect the characteristics of new (African) social enterprises (**BD**). The third type of mechanism are *transformational* (**DE, GH, GI, and HI**), and link lower level constructs with higher ones, for instance how results achieved at one level may, through aggregation, affect upwards another e.g. how the micro-effects of individuals in a social enterprise, its leaders, staff, impact the venture's results (**GI**), or how social enterprise ventures can individually or collectively impact society and institutions – positively or negatively (**HI**).

In the following sections we deploy Saebi et al.'s (2019) multilevel multistage framework to map and critically discuss scholarship on social entrepreneurship in Africa. The 128 papers published in 35 journals were assessed and categorized first according to their level(s) of analysis, secondly their stage focus, and finally which specific aspects of the framework they principally address. This combined analysis and categorization is summarized in Table 4 above.

Levels of Analysis in Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Much extant literature on social entrepreneurship in Africa focuses mainly at one level, whether individual (micro level – 34 papers), organizational (meso level – 48 papers), or societal/institutional (macro – 2 papers). At the individual level, examples might include

Mgueraman and El Abboubi (2024) who investigate student social entrepreneurial intentions in Morocco, Nilsson et al.'s (2022) examination of social entrepreneurs' resource mobilization in Cape Town, South Africa, or Griffin-El's (2021) work on social entrepreneurs' compassion. University students are frequently studied in such work (e.g. Mgueraman & El Abboubi, 2024; Otache et al., 2024; Peter et al., 2024). However, whilst they may provide a ready sample, we would caution that there are limitations in focusing on them, for instance whether and how student social entrepreneurial intentions translate into actual behaviors outside of educational/university settings, as well as the generalizability of findings e.g. to non-student populations.

Over the last decade, organizationally focused work has similarly blossomed. For instance, Erdiaw-Kwasie and Abunyewah (2024) examine sustainable value creation in Ghanaian hybrid organizations, Ciambotti and Pedrini (2021) conceptualize the hybrid harvesting strategies of social ventures in Kenya, whilst various studies focus on social business models using waste (Charles, 2021; Holt & Littlewood, 2017). Often such work has focused on assessing relationships between the social enterprise and its results or outcomes e.g. scaling, value creation, etc.

Finally, we classified only two studies as focusing predominantly at the societal /institutional (macro) level. In one, Rosenberg et al. (2018) examine sustainable business practices across the Burundian coffee sector, whilst the other by Mafukata et al. (2015) examines factors affecting the societal impacts of micro finance adoption. Overall, we found that to-date at least in business and management scholarship, there remain few studies examining social entrepreneurship in Africa applying predominantly macro lenses. For instance, assessing national, cross national or continental trends and impacts of African social entrepreneurship, policy for social entrepreneurship in Africa, making use of big secondary and statistical data – if such data exists – and adopting macroeconomic perspectives. Perhaps more examples of such work can be found in other disciplines e.g. economics, development studies, politics but were excluded due to our search criteria. Alternatively, this may be an avenue for future research, where management scholars might engage in fruitful conversations and collaborations with researchers from other disciplines.

In total 41 papers were identified as adopting more clearly multilevel perspectives. One example is recent work by Uzuegbunam et al. (2024) who apply a historical macro/meso lens to study how traumatic historical shocks – the African slave trade – shape the emergence of and dynamics in community-based enterprises across geographic regions in Africa. Others are Thorgren and Omoredede's (2018) micro/meso research on the passion of social entrepreneur leaders in Nigeria and how this relates to social enterprise organizing and outcomes, and the widely cited work by Littlewood and Holt (2018a) focusing on the intersection of the environment, social entrepreneurs, and enterprises in South Africa.

We would, however, caution that the depth of multilevel engagement and theorizing in of these papers remains relatively shallow. Papers tend to focus on simpler dynamics like the relationship between social/institutional context (macro) and social enterprises (meso) or entrepreneurs (micro), or on how social enterprises (meso) generate (largely positive) outcomes in society and affect institutions (macro). Whilst this is beginning to change, especially as research on social entrepreneurship in Africa appears more frequently in top business and management journals and the demands often associated with this e.g. Shantz et al. (2020), Castellanza (2022), Delichte et al. (2024), Savaget et al. (2025), etc., this can go further.

Stages in Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Continuing our application of the Saebi et al. (2019) framework, we found that much work on social entrepreneurship in Africa is multistage straddling pre and post formation or at least is difficult to pin to one or the other. As shown in Table 4, 110 papers were identified as multistage, 12 principally focused on preformation, 3 mainly concerned with post-formation, and 3 others without a clear stage focus – they are literature reviews. The methodology for this allocation focused on identifying those aspects of the Saebi et al. (2019) framework each paper was principally concerned with (see Table 4). For example, preformation work by Simmou et al. (2023) studying social entrepreneurial intentions amongst students (as previously indicated there are numerous student focused papers e.g. Rambe and Ndofirepi (2021), McIntyre et al. (2023), Simmou et al. (2023), Maziriri et al. (2024), Mguerman and El Abboubi (2024), Peter et al. (2024), etc.) or Bucci and Marks (2022) study of social entrepreneurial learning in a South African incubator. An example of post-formation focused work might be Bote et al. (2024) examining rationalization strategies amongst frontline workers in a microfinance social enterprise organization in Cameroon.

In the Saebi et al. (2019) framework, the social enterprise is positioned centrally, straddling pre and post formation i.e. it is born in the formation stage, and grows, creates value and outcomes for society, etc., after formation. This partly explains why many papers might be classified as multistage using our approach. Examples of such work are that of Claeys (2017) and Bignotti and Myres (2022) who respectively develop social enterprise and entrepreneuring typologies in South Africa, or Desa et al.'s (2023) multi-country study examining social enterprise resource mobilization. Nevertheless and overall, our review suggests a need for more work explicitly on the post-formation stage of social entrepreneurship in Africa, on more mature African social enterprises, on internal dynamics and working environments within established African social enterprises, on how African social entrepreneurs make decisions for their ventures e.g. how and whether to go international, how and whether results translate into long term outcomes and societal/institutional change (positive and negative), and even on failure of African social enterprises. Future research using more longitudinal designs, as well as ethnographic and historical approaches applied to long-standing ventures might provide rich insights on these topics.

Constructs and Mechanisms in Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Applying Saebi et al.'s (2019) framework once more and connecting with its specific constructs and mechanisms (Figure 5), it is firstly evident that research on social entrepreneurship in Africa is unevenly focused. Significant attention has been given to topics like the impact of social and institutional context/factors on the emergence and activities of African social enterprises (**AD**) (Bignotti & Myres, 2022; Littlewood & Holt, 2018a; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015; Siwale & Kimmitt, 2019; Uzuegbunam et al., 2024, etc.). An example of such work would be that by Bignotti and Myres (2022) who quantitatively examine a sample of 400+ South African social enterprises to identify their contextually informed social business models. Relationships and mechanisms between African social entrepreneurs and micro effects (**CE**) are similarly well studied i.e. the antecedents of their individual social opportunity recognition (see Maziriri et al., 2024; McMullen & Bergman, 2017; Otache et al., 2024; Urban, 2020; Wach et al., 2023). We have previously

discussed the substantial existing work on topics like African students' social entrepreneurial intentions (Maziriri et al., 2024; Mgueraman & El Abboubi, 2024). How and why social enterprise characteristics, strategies, systems, etc., translate into results e.g. scaling, multiple value creation, positive/negative relationships with stakeholders, etc. (DH), has also received considerable examination (e.g. Chinyamurindi et al., 2023; Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021; El Ebrashi & El-Batawy, 2024; Nakpodia et al., 2024; Neuberger et al., 2023). For instance, Ciambotti and Pedrini (2021) explore the "hybrid harvesting strategies" adopted by Kenyan social enterprises which enable their social value creation.

Other constructs and mechanisms of social entrepreneurship in Africa are, however, less studied. For example, little work has examined social entrepreneurial teams (B) in Africa, how they influence social enterprise characteristics (BD), and how they work dynamically with social entrepreneurs (BC). Similarly, fewer studies have examined more internal dynamics in African social enterprises, the post formation micro context (F) and how this affects individual behaviors e.g. of social entrepreneurs but also staff, volunteers, service users, etc. (FG) and through aggregation the results of the social venture (GH). Overall, this points to a need for more post formation micro-level research especially considering varied actors, human and non-human, and their interactions in the micro-organizational environment. For inspiration, social enterprise researchers might turn to sources like the "micro foundations" movement in management and its subdisciplines e.g. strategy (e.g. Felin et al., 2015).

Our analysis reveals interesting trends in the 'sophistication' of work on social entrepreneurship in Africa over time. Towards the beginning of our review period, we found that work was more likely to focus more on one aspect of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon e.g. the social enterprise (D) with 12 papers so categorized. For instance, Rwamigabo (2017) offers a categorization of social enterprises in Rwanda and their main features, whilst Gupta et al. (2015) use cases from South Africa to consider the key capabilities social enterprises need to tackle complex societal challenges while overcoming resource constraints and institutional voids.

This finding is consistent with other reviews and analysis of the research field's early period (i.e. Littlewood et al., 2022), where work often focused on single cases, and was frequently positive e.g. Thompson & Doherty (2006). This was a wider trend in social entrepreneurship scholarship (Mair & Martí, 2006; Seelos & Mair, 2005) and practice at the time (Drayton, 2010). More recently, in social entrepreneurship research there has been a critical turn (Ahsan, 2020; Bull, 2008; Dey et al., 2023; Dey & Steyaert, 2012a, 2012b). Whilst we found some evidence of more critical perspectives amongst the papers reviewed e.g. Salia et al. (2018), Shantz et al. (2020) and this exists more widely e.g. Siwale et al. (2021) examining the failure of African hybrid microfinance organizations, we still think there is scope for critical perspectives to be further applied e.g. power dynamics in social entrepreneurial processes, networks and ecosystems, unintended negative consequences from social entrepreneurship, the exclusion of individuals from social entrepreneurial opportunities, social enterprise failures, etc.

Saebi et al. (2019) distinguish between *situational*, *action formation*, and *transformational* mechanisms in the social entrepreneurship phenomenon. Our analysis reveals more and less attention given to these different types of mechanisms in extant literature. As discussed earlier, much research on social entrepreneurship in Africa is predominantly single level,

accordingly and in general, *action formation* mechanisms e.g. how the characteristics of a social enterprise influence its performance (**DH**), or how social entrepreneurs identify and evaluate opportunities (**CE**) are relatively well studied. Some *transformational* mechanisms, particularly **AC** and **AD** or how social/institutional contextual conditions influence African social entrepreneurs and enterprises have also received significant attention. For instance, examinations by Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) and Littlewood and Holt (2018a) on the influence of “environment” on social entrepreneurship in Africa and South Africa more specifically. It is also the case that even where these mechanisms are not the principal focus of a paper, that work on social entrepreneurship in Africa is still often mindful and recognizes the significance of contextual factors in understanding the phenomenon. For instance, Kwasi Nuer et al.’s (2022) paper in the *Africa Journal of Management*, examining varied and negotiated understandings of “ownership” in a social venture and with its local stakeholders, which drawing upon richly contextualized case study research in Northern Tanzania amongst the Maasai.

The overall and even increasing attention given to context in social entrepreneurship research on Africa might be understood in terms of wider developments in the entrepreneurship field and the rise of contextual perspectives (e.g. Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2024; Welter, 2011). But also responds to those earlier statements by Zoogah and Nkomo (2013), Rivera-Santos et al. (2015) and others, about Africa’s unique attributes and their potential to relax or challenge our previous theoretical assumptions.

Of the three types, *transformational* mechanisms (**GI**, **GH**, **DE** and to a lesser extent **HI** and **DI**) are the least studied. These mechanisms are focused upwards and concern things like how micro effects, the behaviors of the social entrepreneur, employees and wider stakeholders in the social enterprise e.g. the board, volunteers, affect the results of the venture at the meso level. An example might be, how committed and engaged employees or volunteers could enable an African social enterprise to scale, to survive shocks, to address opportunities, etc. Conversely, challenging relationships with internal stakeholders, issues of distrust, disfunction in governance, might have negative performance outcomes for African social enterprises, and need to be better understood. More work is needed examining the **GH** *transformational* mechanism, and the **GI** mechanism which relates to how the micro effect behaviors described above ultimately have implications for society, and the social/institutional change social entrepreneurs and their ventures pursue. For example, what does it mean for impact if an African social enterprise’s employees are happy, committed and supported, or conversely if they are dissatisfied, suffering burnout, distrustful, etc.

Two final points. First, whilst we categorized several works as **DI** or **HI** e.g. principally concerned with relationships between African social enterprises and social/institutional change, or specific results or outcomes of African social enterprises and social/institutional change, there often remained limits to the comprehensiveness and criticality of such impact focused discussions e.g. recognizing that there can be unanticipated even negative outcomes of social entrepreneurship. We think there is scope for further enquiry of African social enterprises and their impacts, especially using larger datasets. Second, and perhaps reflecting a limitation of the Saebi et al. (2019) framework, our analysis found growing work examining relationships between African social enterprises and their ecosystems and similar constructs (e.g. Atiase et al., 2019; Busch & Barkema, 2022; Leger et al., 2024; Savaget et al., 2025; Sottini et al., 2022). Yet such work is difficult to categorize. We see this as a kind of *transformational* mechanism but describing this work as

social or institutional change (II) might not entirely fit. Thus, it may be that this final post-formation outcome construct of African social entrepreneurship needs expanding to recognize these wider types of activities and impacts.

Where Next for Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa?

Through our analyses, we see various opportunities, needs and questions for future scholarship. To structure these discussions, they are considered in turn at different levels and for multilevel research on social entrepreneurship in Africa.

Opportunities in Micro (Individual) Level Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Our analysis revealed the patchy coverage of micro (individual) level research on social entrepreneurship in Africa. Whilst attention has been devoted to African social entrepreneurs, their characteristics, and processes like how they identify and evaluate social entrepreneurial opportunities, there has been less consideration of social entrepreneurs in later stages of their venturing, on actors in social enterprises beyond the social entrepreneur e.g. employees, volunteers, beneficiaries, etc., and on dynamics of the micro-contextual environment in African social enterprises and how this influences varied constituents. Of this micro level work there has furthermore been significant use of student samples with associated limitations.

More work is needed examining different types of African social entrepreneurs and their venturing, going beyond students, but also considering particular and less studied groups of individuals. For example, youth (Alzate et al., 2024) or older (Ratten, 2019) social entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs from different class (Anderson & Miller, 2003), ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Spear, 2010), social entrepreneurs with certain experiences e.g. graduate social entrepreneurs (Nabi & Holden, 2008), women social entrepreneurs etc., (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016). In studying such African social entrepreneurs, scholars might apply relatively underutilized theories and perspectives, for example intersectional theory (Collins, 2015; Qureshi et al., 2023) to help us understand how varied overlapping advantages and disadvantages support or inhibit African social entrepreneurs.

Different identity theories e.g. personal, social, role, etc., singly or in combination, might also be applied to better understand things like how African social entrepreneurs identify opportunities, their motivations and concern for others, how they navigate social and economic tensions in their ventures, and their wider social entrepreneurial behaviors and choices (Pan et al., 2019). In our analysis of patterns in extant social entrepreneurship research on Africa, we found scholars deploying some classical psychological theories, constructs, and approaches e.g. the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) used by Simmou et al. (2023), Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) employed by McIntyre et al. (2023), (entrepreneurial) self-efficacy (Bandura & Adams, 1977) deployed by Rambe and Ndofirepi (2021), etc. Whilst we think there is scope for further and more creative application of these, we encourage African social entrepreneurship scholars to look further afield and consider less utilized psychological theories and perspectives, for instance Construal Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) which might help in understanding the “other-orientation” (Pan

et al., 2019) of social entrepreneurs, across space and time (e.g. Santos et al., 2021), or Four Drive Theory (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002) which could be deployed to unpack what motivates the different behaviors of African social entrepreneurs and wider actors in their venturing.

Given the hitherto limited work on post formation social entrepreneurship in Africa at the micro (individual) level, more work is needed focusing on stakeholders in African social enterprises beyond the social entrepreneur, for instance employees, volunteers (Overgaard & A Kerlin, 2022) – which can sometimes have particular meanings in African contexts different to those in the West (Perold & Graham, 2013) – those involved in governance e.g. board members, donors and investors (Crucke & Knockaert, 2016). Depending on the focus, African social entrepreneurship scholars might also draw theoretical and analytical inspiration from human resource management and employment scholarship e.g. deploying lenses like Human Capital Theory (Roumpi et al., 2020), power/knowledge and a Foucauldian perspective (Dey & Steyaert, 2016), notions of Decent Work (Fonteneau et al., 2011), etc., They might further look to organizational behavior scholarship, applying psychological theories and perspectives, especially those hitherto less used e.g. values frameworks (Chatterjee et al., 2021), social axioms like Ubuntu beliefs (Jaravaza et al., 2025), emotions (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019), social and positive psychology (Stephan & Drencheva, 2017), etc.

Still at the micro (individual) level, African social entrepreneurship scholars might in the future look beyond the social enterprise venture to those it serves, including through selling/providing goods and services (Hibbert et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2024). The marketing activities of African social enterprises (meso organizational level) is an area in need of further attention (Hewitt et al., 2025; Powell & Osborne, 2015), including questions of consumer behavior (micro individual level) (Tan & Cheah, 2025; Tsai et al., 2020). For example, why individuals do or do not buy from African social enterprises, what drives consumer commitment, loyalty, advocacy, etc., how can consumer behaviors be activated and expanded for greater societal impact, are there any negative consequences of this, etc.

Opportunities in Meso (Organizational) Level Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

The largest proportion of papers in our review were categorized as focusing at the meso (organizational) level. Nevertheless, there are limits to what is covered, to the lens applied, and the types of work being undertaken. A first clear gap relates to the role of entrepreneurial teams in African social enterprise formation. As with broader social entrepreneurship research there remains a focus on the “hero” social entrepreneur in many studies (Montgomery et al., 2012), with only limited consideration of the entrepreneurial team, its size, composition, dynamics, interactions with the founder, and the importance of collective or co-social entrepreneurship (Mitzinneck & Besharov, 2019). These types of social entrepreneuring might even be more prevalent in African contexts, given generally strong collective orientations on the Continent (Eaton & Louw, 2000), as exemplified by notions like Ubuntu (Lutz, 2009). More qualitative and quantitative study of teams in African social enterprise formation and operating is needed.

There is a body of work on social enterprises in Africa deploying business model perspectives (e.g. Iddy et al., 2022; Lashitew et al., 2022; Sottini et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there remains scope to further research the micro-foundations of these business

models (Ringvold et al., 2023), and more dynamic social enterprise business model innovation, change and evolution (Tykkyläinen & Ritala, 2021). Similarly, whilst scholars have used Resource-Based View (RBV) perspectives (Barney, 2001) in their work on African social enterprises – for instance El Ebrashi (2018), El Ebrashi and El-Batawy (2024) – we see less use of concepts like dynamic capabilities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) or considering the micro-foundations of African social enterprise resources and capabilities (Bhardwaj & Srivastava, 2024). More divergent strategy perspectives could also be applied e.g. strategy practice lenses (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In extant literature, where perspectives like RBV or business models are deployed, they have been used to consider outcomes like scaling and multiple value creation (El Ebrashi & El-Batawy, 2024), there remains scope for work examining more varied kinds of results/outcomes for African social enterprises e.g. their internationalization efforts (Alon et al., 2020), their reputations (Kwong et al., 2023), their innovation performance (Monroe-White & Zook, 2018), their resilience (Littlewood & Holt, 2018b), etc. What are the antecedents of these, but also where and why might they be positive or negative i.e. when and why do African social enterprise fail? As with the wider field, there is a survivor bias in current scholarship on African social entrepreneurship (Seanor & Meaton, 2008).

Social entrepreneurship in Africa occurs in and encompasses different types of organizations, with this varying geographically and over time. For instance, social enterprises, cooperatives, fair trade, impact and/or purposeful ventures, corporate and more traditional business ventures – that may be indigenous African or multinational (Littlewood et al., 2022). Trading non-profits/NGOs, public sector actors e.g. state owned enterprises, universities might also engage in social entrepreneurship in Africa, with this also frequently occurring through different kinds of partnerships (Pryor et al., 2023; Rwamigabo, 2017). Additionally, there are a huge number of often more informal collective social organizations across Africa (Ashe & Neilan, 2014) e.g. ROSCAs, burial societies, etc., that remain little studied – at least through a lens of social entrepreneurship.

Across these variegated organizational forms different challenges, opportunities, processes, dynamics, and outcomes arise, that require deeper empirical examination and theoretical explication (Anderson et al., 2019). We thus make a general call for more work on varied social entrepreneurial organizing in Africa to tease out these differences, with this also offering a route for African social entrepreneurship research to contribute to wider theory development in entrepreneurship, organization studies, and business and management scholarship.

Finally, whilst it is critical to recognize and study the diversity of organizations in Africa where social entrepreneurship occurs, a common trait across these organizations is their hybridity (Doherty et al., 2014). Hybrid organization lenses have been widely applied in research on social entrepreneurship in Africa (e.g. Ciambotti & Pedrini, 2021; Sydow et al., 2022), nevertheless, there remains scope for their further use (Ciambotti et al., 2025). For example, to consider other forms of African hybrid organization (Littlewood & Holt, 2020), other conceptualizations of hybridity like dualities of formal/informal, local/global, physical/digital, and to go beyond the typical binaries of social versus commercial logics e.g. considering other institutional logics like community, religion, family, etc. Hybrid organization perspectives might also be combined in future scholarship with potentially complementary approaches like paradox thinking (Jay, 2013).

Opportunities in Macro (Societal/Institutional) Level Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Our analysis classified few works on social entrepreneurship in Africa as principally focused on the macro (societal/institutional) level. This is perhaps unsurprising given the nature of the phenomenon, with a critical role for social entrepreneurs (micro/individual level) and enterprises (organizations/meso level). Nevertheless, we think there are some interesting opportunities for future more macro level scholarship in this area.

Firstly, much existing research on social entrepreneurship in Africa focusses at the sub-national level, is qualitative and case study based. Ten years after Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015) quantitative multicounty study, there remain few examples of work using larger datasets, especially that are cross national or cover the entire African continent. High quality secondary data on social entrepreneurship in Africa remains difficult to source, sometime due to limitations in local statistical capacity in African states, but also due to institutional/legal and definitional challenges e.g. what is a social enterprise? In many African states there remains no dedicated social enterprise legal form (Mirvis & Googins, 2018; Svtwa et al., 2025), and even where such forms may exist social enterprises might not choose them. Work using bigger data on African social entrepreneurship is therefore still needed, including at a more aggregate level to identify the (positive and negative) impacts of African social enterprises on sustainable development, even applying more experimental approaches (e.g. Andersson & Self, 2015).

Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015) work was revealing in its identification that African contextual dimensions of ethnic group identity, poverty levels, and colonial history, influence aspects of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon. Attention on how these kinds of macro-level institutional and often historical dimensions affect social entrepreneurship has continued to grow e.g. Uzuegbunam et al. (2024). Nevertheless, there remains scope for more of this kind of work, considering the significance of macro social and institutional context for social entrepreneurship in Africa. Especially, some of the more particular aspects of African contexts, e.g. the continent's high levels of religiosity (Barnard & Mamabolo, 2022), the nature of formal and informal institutional arrangements, including the prevalence of so called "institutional voids" (Khanna & Palepu, 1997; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2015; Webb et al., 2020) the significance of informality in Africa, extended notions of family and associated obligations and support in Africa (Khavul et al., 2009), colonial and post-colonial histories, etc.

The African state is still little considered in the research field, beyond characterizations of "weaknesses" and "voids" that might need to be addressed by social entrepreneurs (see Bothello et al., 2019 for a critique for this perspective). Work examining how African governments, their laws and policies, may enable (or hinder) social entrepreneurship is needed, that might support them in doing more and provide learnings to be shared across the continent and further afield. Such future work could engage with wider conversations on social enterprise policy e.g. Barnard (2019), Choi et al. (2020). Inspired by writing on "political corporate social responsibility (CSR)" (Frynas & Stephens, 2015), and even drawing from politics as a discipline and theories of political economy (Caporaso & Levine, 1992), future research might adopt critical political lenses in studying African social entrepreneurship. For instance, at a macro level considering the rise, growing visibility, and policymaker engagement with social entrepreneurship in Africa in the context

of neoliberalism(s) (Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017), power dynamics between Africa and states/donors in the Global North, the role of actors like big philanthropy (Iheduru, 2024), and social entrepreneurship champion organizations like Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation, etc. (Adeleye et al., 2020). Critical work on the terms by which African actors including social enterprises and their constituents are engaged in global value chains is also needed.

Opportunities for Multilevel Research on Social Entrepreneurship in Africa

Our review identified some existing multi-level research on social entrepreneurship in Africa, with such work increasing over time. We found that relationships between the social/institutional environment (macro) or context and social enterprises (meso) and entrepreneurs (micro) in Africa is quite well studied e.g. Littlewood and Holt (2018a), with scholars often deploying institutional perspectives (for a review of possibilities see Li & Bosma, 2024). Nevertheless, there remain avenues for further research, including examining these dynamics in other African settings moving beyond the well-studied country contexts of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, applying more diverse contextual lenses e.g. geographical and “place-based” approaches (Kimmitt et al., 2024), and greater recognition and integration of sub-national (regional and local) and more Africa specific contextual factors into analysis. There may further be scope to expand the range of institutional lenses drawn upon e.g. going beyond formal/informal (North, 1990) or Scott’s (2008) pillars, and making more use of approaches like institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), institutional entrepreneurship (Garud et al., 2007) and institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012). (New) contextual and spatial perspectives on social entrepreneurship in Africa might also be combined more temporal and historical ones (Bird et al., 1998), which remain hitherto little used.

The wider application of more critical perspectives on social entrepreneurship (Dey & Steyaert, 2012a, 2012b) in Africa that is across and/or multilevel is also overdue. As previously discussed, future work might critically reflect on the drivers of social entrepreneurship’s rise in Africa, which is not politically neutral. What is social entrepreneurship replacing or displacing across different levels? Is it better or worse than alternative approaches to achieving sustainable development? Social entrepreneurship globally has often been criticized for addressing symptoms rather than the root causes of sustainable development challenges (Molderez & Fets, 2023) is this the case in Africa? Future work applying more critical lenses might also reveal those social and environmental issues in Africa that social entrepreneurship is less suitable for addressing, examine cases of social enterprise failure, trade-offs in impact, and/or ethical dilemmas for African social entrepreneurs and enterprises.

Extending this more critical perspective, we think there is a need for African social entrepreneurship scholarship, across levels, to more concertedly embrace indigenous African theories, philosophies, and worldviews. We have previously discussed Ubuntu, but there are many other sources of inspiration, including post and de-colonial perspectives (Childs & Williams, 1997; Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978), African feminist theory (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010), “Ujamaa” (Nyerere, 1987) and pan African ideas, “Africapitalism” (Amaeshi & Idemudia, 2015), etc. African social entrepreneurship scholars might further embrace and apply “Indigenous methodologies” in their work (Chilisa, 2012). Finally, and as

highlighted by our review's pattern analysis, efforts to advance and foreground more indigenous perspectives in African social entrepreneurship scholarship might benefit from more future work being led from Africa, by scholars based at African universities.

A final crosscutting multilevel opportunity for African social entrepreneurship research, relates to technological transformation and particularly the recent advent of artificial intelligence (AI). This has the potential to change (Abad-Itoiz et al., 2025) – for good and ill – how African social entrepreneurs identify, evaluate, and grasp opportunities (micro), how their social enterprise organizations (meso) work, and wider dynamics in African societies (macro) e.g. could AI support African economies in catching up or leap-frogging those in the Global North? On what terms will Africans engage with AI? Will AI create or destroy jobs – a major challenge for the continent given its young growing population? Will it support or undermine democracy in Africa? Contribute or hinder efforts to address the “Climate Crisis?”. And so on. How we research social entrepreneurship in Africa may further be transformed by AI. Including and beyond AI there is a need for future research on social entrepreneurship in Africa to integrate and consider the impact of other recent and upcoming technological transformations, for instance but not limited to Blockchain and decentralized technologies, Extended/Virtual reality, Internet of Things (IoT), Greentech, etc.

Conclusion

Through robust analysis of publishing patterns, and novel application of the Saebi et al. (2019) framework, this literature review provides systematic multilevel insights on the state of research on social entrepreneurship in Africa. In so doing, it offers guidance for new and existing scholars working in the field, helping them to understand where we have gotten to, particularly over the last decade since the first issue of the *Africa Journal of Management* and publishing of Rivera-Santos et al.'s (2015) key work, and where we might go next. It contributes to growing scholarship on social entrepreneurship in Africa but also aims to showcase how existing Africa focused social entrepreneurship research offers valuable empirical and theoretical insights to the wider (social) entrepreneurship field, with many possibilities for such contributions to be extended in the future.

Our review offers implications for policy and practice, both indirectly i.e. through the literature reviewed and its insights, and more directly, for example by highlighting the body of evidence on the significance of contextual factors for social entrepreneurship in Africa, and the role such factors play in organizational outcomes i.e. how and why social enterprises scale (or not), prosper or fail, etc. Recognizing and navigating such contextual factors is practically important for budding social entrepreneurs in Africa, but also those running established ventures. It is further a significant consideration for policy-makers and wider actors designing support for African social entrepreneurship.

In another example, the fact that our review highlights relatively little macro level research on social entrepreneurship in Africa points to a gap in knowledge for evidence-based policy making. Especially if social entrepreneurship is to be catalyzed for positive social change. A further implication might be that despite much rhetoric about social entrepreneurship's transformative potential for sustainable development, this needs more rigorous and critical interrogation, additional research and evidence building, and consideration of those things social entrepreneurship displaces, its unintended

consequences, and questioning whether it is better or worse than alternative approaches to achieving sustainable development. These are important considerations for African policymakers who often have limited resources for local development, as well as wider interested parties e.g. international donors, philanthropists, NGOs developing social entrepreneurial initiatives, social entrepreneurs, etc. Finally, our work raises questions for research funders, university leaders, and social entrepreneurship researchers in the Global North and South, about how to support the field's development, ensure strong indigenous African input reforming prevailing knowledge production systems, and how research on social entrepreneurship in Africa can be more impactful and participatory.

In conclusion, we recognize limitations in our approach e.g. the range of journals covered and those excluded, our focus on papers over the last decade only, the number of keywords used in searches, more subjective elements e.g. classifying papers according to the dimensions in the Saebi et al. (2019) framework, etc. Nevertheless, we have done much to mitigate these issues and to explain and justify our choices. Our work builds on prior reviews and wider literature, we encourage and look forward to reading future additions to the field bringing different perspectives, employing new approaches, and even disputing our assessments. Such work is critical for the further advancement of research on social entrepreneurship in Africa, a project which we are passionate about.

Note

1. The *Africa Journal of Management* was launched in 2014 at the second Africa Academy of Management Conference, but its first issue was published in 2015.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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