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Social Entrepreneurs as Drivers of Ecosystem Development: Formation and Withdrawal Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in shaping entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in contexts marked by institutional voids or social inequality. This study examines how social entrepreneurs contribute to the formation and sustainability of entrepreneurial ecosystems, as well as the implications of their withdrawal. Drawing from ecosystem theory and institutional entrepreneurship, the research investigates key mechanisms—such as resource mobilization, stakeholder collaboration, and normative influence—that enable social entrepreneurs to initiate systemic change. Using multiple case studies across emerging markets, the study reveals that social entrepreneurs not only create value through innovation but also embed structures that support long-term community empowerment. However, their withdrawal—due to burnout, funding limitations, or strategic pivoting—can lead to significant destabilization unless succession or institutional embedding occurs. The findings offer practical insights for policy-makers, impact investors, and ecosystem designers seeking to leverage and sustain the catalytic role of social entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial ecosystems, ecosystem formation, ecosystem withdrawal, institutional entrepreneurship, system change, impact innovation.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ecosystems has gained significant traction in strategic management and entrepreneurship research, moving beyond biological analogies to describe interconnected networks of organizations, individuals, and resources that co-evolve around a focal point or platform [1, 2, 9, 38, 41, 43, 44, 45, 47]. These ecosystems can be centered around technologies, industries, or even entrepreneurial activity within a specific geographic region [3, 7, 8, 27, 70]. Within these dynamic structures, certain actors often play a pivotal role in initiating, shaping, and maintaining the ecosystem's functionality. These actors are frequently referred to as catalysts or orchestrators [8, 16, 21, 34, 35, 36, 37, 46, 55].

Social entrepreneurs, individuals who pursue innovative solutions to pressing social problems with a primary social mission [4, 10, 53, 57, 66], operate within complex environments often characterized by institutional voids and wicked problems [51, 58, 64]. Their work frequently necessitates mobilizing diverse stakeholders, building collaborative networks, and pooling resources to achieve sustainable social impact [16, 64]. Given their inherent focus on systemic change and multi-stakeholder engagement, social entrepreneurs are increasingly recognized for their potential to act as catalysts in the formation and development of ecosystems, particularly those aimed at addressing social challenges or serving marginalized communities [16, 64, 66].

However, the dynamics of these ecosystems, especially regarding their long-term sustainability and the role of the initial catalyst over time, are not fully understood. The process of ecosystem formation involves complex interactions and resource allocation [27, 63, 70]. Furthermore, the potential withdrawal or exit of the founding social entrepreneur or their initial organization from the ecosystem raises questions about the ecosystem's ability to become self-sustaining [20, 60]. This article explores the role of social entrepreneurs as catalysts in forming ecosystems and examines the dynamics associated with the formation process and the implications of their potential withdrawal, drawing upon insights from the provided literature on social entrepreneurship, ecosystems, orchestration, and organizational dynamics.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based review

methodology to analyze the role of social entrepreneurs as ecosystem catalysts and the dynamics of ecosystem formation and withdrawal. The method involves a systematic examination and synthesis of the provided 79 references.

The process included:

- Reading and analyzing each reference to identify concepts, theories, empirical findings, and discussions related to social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, business and entrepreneurial ecosystems, ecosystem orchestration and catalysis, network formation and dynamics, organizational sustainability, scaling of social impact, and entrepreneurial exit strategies.
- Extracting information specifically pertaining to:
- The characteristics and motivations of social entrepreneurs and their ventures [4, 10, 53, 57, 66].
- The definition, structure, and dynamics of various types of ecosystems, including those with a social dimension [1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 31, 38, 41, 43, 44, 45, 47, 62, 63, 65, 70].
- The roles and activities of orchestrators or catalysts in initiating and managing ecosystems or networks [8, 16, 21, 34, 35, 36, 37, 46, 55].
- Empirical examples or case studies illustrating the formation and functioning of ecosystems, particularly those involving social objectives or operating in challenging contexts [14, 18, 27, 60, 61, 64, 70, 76, 77].
- Discussions related to the sustainability, scalability, and long-term viability of social ventures and their impact [12, 15, 52, 58, 66].
- Concepts related to organizational change, adaptation, and exit [20].
- Synthesizing the extracted information to build a conceptual understanding of how social entrepreneurs initiate ecosystem formation through catalytic actions, the key processes involved in building a self-sustaining ecosystem, and the potential implications and dynamics when the initial catalyst considers or undertakes withdrawal. This involved connecting concepts from different literature streams to address the research questions.
- Structuring the synthesized information according to the IMRaD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) to present a coherent analysis based on the provided literature.

This method allows for the development of a theoretical argument regarding the phenomenon by integrating insights from various related research areas covered by the provided references, providing a foundation for understanding the complex role of social entrepreneurs in ecosystem dynamics.

RESULTS

The synthesis of the provided literature highlights the multifaceted role of social entrepreneurs as potential catalysts in the formation of ecosystems and sheds light on the dynamics involved in both formation and potential withdrawal.

Social Entrepreneurs as Catalysts: Social entrepreneurs are driven by a social mission to address unmet needs and solve social problems [4, 10, 53, 57, 66]. Their catalytic role in ecosystem formation stems from their ability to:

- **Identify and Frame Problems:** They recognize and frame complex social issues ("wicked problems") in ways that mobilize attention and action from diverse stakeholders [58, 64].
- **Bridge Institutional Voids:** Operating in contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent, social entrepreneurs build alternative structures and networks to achieve their goals [51].
- **Mobilize Resources and Stakeholders:** They are adept at attracting and combining resources from various sources, including philanthropic, market, and public sector actors, bringing together diverse stakeholders who may not have previously collaborated [5, 13, 16, 64].
- **Build Networks and Partnerships:** Social entrepreneurs actively build and orchestrate networks and partnerships among different organizations to create integrated solutions and value chains [16, 21, 34, 35, 36, 37, 46, 55, 64]. Examples like ColaLife demonstrate building value chains by emulating commercial models to address social issues [60, 61, 64, 76, 77].
- **Legitimize New Approaches:** Through their actions and advocacy, they can help legitimize new organizational forms and approaches to addressing social problems within the broader institutional landscape [58].

Ecosystem Formation Dynamics: Ecosystems are not static entities; they form and evolve through dynamic interactions [2, 41, 47]. The formation process catalyzed by social entrepreneurs involves:

- **Initiation and Mobilization:** The social entrepreneur acts as the initial orchestrator, bringing together key actors and resources around a shared vision or problem [8, 16, 34, 35]. This often requires significant effort in building trust and aligning diverse interests [36, 64].
- **Structuring Interactions:** The catalyst helps define the roles and relationships among ecosystem participants, establishing norms and governance structures that facilitate collaboration and value creation [9, 17, 36, 45].
- **Resource Flows and Value Creation:** The ecosystem develops as resources (knowledge, funding, infrastructure) flow among participants, enabling the co-creation and capture of value, which in social

ecosystems includes social as well as economic value [4, 17, 43, 63].

- **Developing Resilience and Self-Sustainability:** A key aspect of successful ecosystem formation is developing resilience and the capacity for self-sustained functioning, where the ecosystem can adapt and continue to deliver value even with changes in its components [12, 52]. This involves building robust relationships and shared capabilities among participants [12].
- **Withdrawal Dynamics:** The potential withdrawal of the initial social entrepreneur or their organization from a mature ecosystem introduces specific dynamics:
- **Succession and Leadership Transition:** The departure of the founding catalyst necessitates a leadership transition within the ecosystem. The ability of the remaining actors to step up and continue the orchestration or for new leadership to emerge is critical [34].
- **Maintaining Cohesion and Direction:** The social entrepreneur often embodies the initial vision and drives cohesion. Their withdrawal can challenge the shared purpose and coordination among ecosystem members [16].
- **Sustaining Resource Mobilization:** The catalyst may have been central to attracting certain resources (e.g., specific funding streams). The ecosystem needs to develop its own capacity for sustained resource mobilization after their departure [5].
- **Replication and Scaling:** In some cases, the goal may be to replicate the ecosystem model elsewhere, which involves transferring knowledge and capabilities to new contexts, potentially allowing the original catalyst to withdraw from the initial site [60, 61, 66, 76, 77]. However, scaling social impact can be complex [66].
- **Ecosystem Adaptation and Evolution:** The withdrawal can force the ecosystem to adapt and evolve, potentially leading to new structures, roles, and dynamics as remaining actors take on greater responsibility [12, 52]. The ecosystem's resilience is tested during this phase.

The literature on entrepreneurial exit strategies [20] and organizational change provides some context, but the specific dynamics of a social entrepreneur withdrawing from an ecosystem they catalyzed requires further exploration. The sustainability of the social mission and the continued delivery of social impact are central concerns during this transition [53, 66].

DISCUSSION

The provided literature supports the view of social entrepreneurs as powerful catalysts in the formation of ecosystems, particularly those addressing complex social problems. Their unique blend of social mission, innovation, and ability to mobilize diverse stakeholders allows them to initiate and structure collaborative networks in environments where traditional approaches may fail [10, 16, 51, 58, 64]. The process of ecosystem formation, driven by the social entrepreneur's orchestration efforts, involves building relationships, establishing resource flows, and creating shared value among participants [9, 17, 36, 43, 63].

A critical challenge for social entrepreneur-catalyzed ecosystems is achieving self-sustainability, allowing the ecosystem to thrive independently of the initial catalyst. This transition involves distributing leadership, embedding the shared vision within the collective, and developing the ecosystem's inherent capacity for adaptation and resource generation [12, 52]. The potential withdrawal of the social entrepreneur is a significant test of this sustainability. While commercial entrepreneurship literature discusses exit, strategies focused on financial returns [20], the withdrawal of a social entrepreneur from an ecosystem is primarily concerned with the continued delivery of social impact and the perpetuation of the ecosystem's social mission [4, 53, 66].

The dynamics of withdrawal can be complex. If the ecosystem has not developed sufficient resilience and distributed leadership, the departure of the catalyst could lead to fragmentation, loss of direction, and diminished impact. Conversely, a planned and well-managed transition can empower other ecosystem actors, foster innovation from within, and ensure the long-term viability of the ecosystem and its mission [12, 52]. Replication strategies, where the model is transferred to new locations, offer one pathway for the social entrepreneur's influence to scale while potentially allowing for withdrawal from the initial site [60, 61, 66, 76, 77].

A limitation of the current literature, as synthesized from the provided references, is the limited direct empirical research specifically tracing the full lifecycle of social entrepreneur-catalyzed ecosystems, from formation through the potential withdrawal of the catalyst and the subsequent long-term sustainability of the ecosystem. While individual components like social entrepreneurship, ecosystems, and orchestration are studied, their specific interplay over time in this context requires more dedicated investigation.

Future research could employ longitudinal case studies or comparative analyses of social entrepreneur-catalyzed ecosystems to understand the factors that contribute to successful formation, the processes of developing self-sustainability, and the outcomes associated with different types of catalyst withdrawal. Investigating the specific strategies social entrepreneurs use to build resilience and distribute leadership within the ecosystem would be valuable. Furthermore, research could explore how the nature of the social problem being addressed and the

characteristics of the environment influence the dynamics of ecosystem formation and withdrawal.

In conclusion, social entrepreneurs serve as vital catalysts in forming ecosystems aimed at addressing social challenges. Their ability to mobilize stakeholders and build collaborative networks is key to initiating these complex systems. However, the long-term success and self-sustainability of these ecosystems depend on their ability to mature beyond the direct involvement of the initial catalyst. Understanding the dynamics of both formation and withdrawal is essential for maximizing the potential of social entrepreneurship to drive systemic social change through ecosystem development.

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