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TITLE

Navigating institutional voids: how social entrepreneurs enhance higher education in Africa? The case of Uganda

AUTHOR

Hélène N’KODIA
helene.nkodia@monaco.edu

AFFILIATION

International University of Monaco (IUM)
Le Stella, 14 Rue Hubert Clarissi 98000 Monaco
certification@monaco.edu

ADVISORS

Giovany CAJAIBA-SANTANA
Professor at International University of Monaco
gcjaiba@ium.monaco.edu
Belachew GEBREWOLD
Professor at MCI Innsbruck
Belachew.Gebrewold@mci.edu

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SUMMARY

This study explores how social entrepreneurs, most particularly in Uganda, navigate institutional voids to enhance higher education. Business activities are often hindered by institutional voids. However, these voids also have the capacity to drive social innovation. Thus, social entrepreneurs play a critical role in developing their community and achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education (SDG4). Despite the increasing interest for social entrepreneurship in research, there is a need for studies focusing on the lived experiences in non-Western environments, especially in higher education. Employing an ethnographic single-case study and multiple research methods, this research intends to identify the social mechanisms used by social entrepreneurs to overcome institutional constraints and the most important resources they mobilize to compensate for remaining institutional gaps. The findings emphasize the potential of social entrepreneurship to foster sustainable development in resource-constrained settings, providing insights into how to encourage social change and improve higher educational outcomes.

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ABSTRACT

Institutional voids significantly shape the entrepreneurial landscape in developing countries. In Africa where they prevail, they particularly exacerbate social challenges. Yet, while they present major challenges to business activities, they also encourage innovation. Thus, challenging institutional environments provide opportunities for social entrepreneurs to address pressing social issues and contribute to the development of their communities. Despite the potential role they could play in driving social change, the intersection of institutional voids and social entrepreneurship remains under-researched. Knowledge about personal stories taking place in non-Western contexts and in the specific sector of higher education is very limited. This study seeks to fill this literature gap by exploring how social entrepreneurs evolving in institutionally-constrained environments navigate institutional voids, overtake social issues and enhance higher education. This research intends to identify social mechanisms by which social entrepreneurs bring institutional change and create social value. The strategies social entrepreneurs use to overcome institutional constraints, as well as the resources they must mobilize to compensate the institutional deficiencies they face, and how their contributions align with global development goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education (SDG4), will be presented.

Adopting an exploratory qualitative approach rooted in an ethnographic single-case study, this research employs multiple methods to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences, challenges and strategies of social entrepreneurs contributing to higher education in Uganda. Finally, this study underscored the potential of social entrepreneurship to foster sustainable development in resource-constrained environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

The absence or weakness of formal institutions is referred to as institutional voids (IVs) (Mair & Marti, 2009). IVs, characterized by a lack of regulatory, legal and infrastructural systems (Doh et al., 2017) have a significant impact on the entrepreneurial landscape. In developing countries where they are particularly persistent (Ebrashi & Darrag, 2017; Liedong et al., 2020), these institutional deficiencies present critical challenges to business activities. However, despite their constraining nature, IVs also encourage non-state actors to step-in (Titeca & De Herdt, 2011), innovate and bring solutions to social issues. For this reason, the dual role of IVs became particularly important in understanding the mechanisms of entrepreneurship in resource-constrained environments, notably in Africa. African contexts marked by inadequate institutional frameworks amplify social challenges and simultaneously provide fertile ground for social entrepreneurial initiatives (Farhoud et al., 2023; Urban & Kujinga, 2017).

While the effect of IVs on entrepreneurial activities have been examined by several scholars (Doh et al., 2017; Su et al., 2017), most existing research focuses on Western contexts and formal enterprises, with relatively little emphasis on social entrepreneurship in Africa (Eijdenberg et al., 2019). The growing recognition for social entrepreneurs being agents of change (Weerakoon, 2024), able to address the most critical issues and tackle social problems, makes this gap even more significant. They are acknowledged for their potential to drive transformative change in crucial sectors (Tapsell et al., 2010), such as higher education. Social entrepreneurs aligning their initiatives with local and global development goals can address remaining issues, especially those related to the access and quality of higher education in areas facing IVs. Additionally, the strategies and mechanisms through which social entrepreneurs navigate IVs to generate social value and drive the development of higher education remain insufficiently examined, particularly in non-Western contexts (Weerakoon, 2024).

To bridge these theoretical gaps, this study will uncover the social mechanisms by which social entrepreneurs act on IVs to create social value. To do so, this study aims to explore how social entrepreneurs operating in institutionally-constrained African contexts navigate IVs, not only to address major social problems, but also to contribute to the growth of higher education. The goal of this research is to answer the following research questions: (a) What strategies do social entrepreneurs use to navigate institutional voids and enhance higher education in Uganda to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4? (b) What are the resources social entrepreneurs must gather or mobilize to compensate for institutional voids in Uganda and achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4?

An exploratory qualitative approach rooted in an ethnographic single-case study will be used to investigate the challenges and opportunities social entrepreneurs face, as well as the strategies they use. Multiple qualitative methods, including direct observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, will provide a nuanced understanding of how social entrepreneurs engage with IVs to drive positive social change and contribute to the overall development of their communities. This investigation emphasizes the importance of context in shaping social entrepreneurial behavior, highlighting the inadequacy of existing support frameworks for social entrepreneurs operating in Uganda.

This expanded research proposal provides a comprehensive literature review focusing on IVs and social entrepreneurship. Second, it outlines the methodological framework used to conduct this study. Third, it presents preliminary findings on the creative strategies and the different processes social entrepreneurs operating in resource-constrained environments can employ. Finally, this paper discusses the implications for theory and practice, concluding with recommendations for fostering social entrepreneurship in similar contexts.

1.1 The relevance of the research

The relevance of this research lies in its significant theoretical and managerial contributions, particularly at the intersection of IVs, social entrepreneurship and the development of higher education. Theoretically, as it advances the understanding of the dual role of IVs and uncovers how social entrepreneurs navigate institutional challenges, this research deepens the discourse on institutional deficiencies. Moreover, this study enables a better understanding of how social entrepreneurs drive social change in resource-constrained environments. This contributes to the development of the institutional theory and also broadens the scope of social entrepreneurship literature by exploring its effects on higher education. Empirically, the research focuses on the under-representation of social entrepreneurship in the African context and fills a significant literature gap in existing research. The exploration of the unique challenges and innovative strategies of social entrepreneurs operating in Africa enriches the understanding of how social entrepreneurs adapt and succeed in contexts marked by IVs. Practically, this study offers guidance to social entrepreneurs seeking to address social challenges, especially those aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal related to Quality Education (SDG4). It also provides recommendations to policymakers willing to promote supportive environments that encourage social entrepreneurial initiatives. Ultimately, this research highlights the potential of social entrepreneurship to enhance higher education, drive social development in Africa and address remaining global challenges.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & KEY LITERATURE STREAMS

2.1 The relevance of the institutional theory

The institutional theory has been commonly employed in entrepreneurship research to explain how entrepreneurs create or reshape institutions to address institutional challenges (Bruton et al., 2010; Ebrashi & Darrag, 2017; Liedong et al., 2020). This theoretical perspective explains the influence of institutions on entrepreneurial behaviors, particularly individuals' capacity to adapt to or to shift their institutional environments (Greenwood et al., 2008; Su et al., 2017).

Contexts in which institutions operate are particularly significant for the institutional theory (Dart, 2004; Pacheco et al., 2010) since they shape social entrepreneurship intentions (Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Urban & Kujinga, 2017). To understand how institutions influence entrepreneurial activities, contexts have to be considered as they create both challenges and opportunities that might emerge (Stephan et al., 2015; Urbano et al., 2010). Existing research mainly focused on institutional influences in developed regions. However, knowledge on personal stories and innovative strategies social entrepreneurs employ is limited in resource-constrained contexts (Eijdenberg et al., 2019), justifying the exploration of the creative ways of doing social entrepreneurship in challenging institutional environments.

2.2 Institutions shaping social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship represents a relatively small segment of the business landscape (Sud et al., 2009). However, it is seen as a very effective solution to pressing social issues, particularly in areas facing IVs (Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Bonfanti et al., 2024; Weerakoon, 2024). IVs are characterized by weak or absent regulatory frameworks, inefficient judicial systems, bureaucratic inefficiencies and harmful social norms (Desa, 2012; Doh et al., 2017). In African contexts, market-unfriendly regulations and corruption are seen as direct threats to social entrepreneurship (Pindado et al., 2023). In Uganda most particularly, scholars have identified insufficient formal support structures, limited access to finance, weak policy environment, limited social capital support and inadequate educational services and training as the most critical institutional barriers (Abaho et al., 2017). The

lack of sufficient funding, robust policies and strong networks connecting them to stakeholders, funders and policymakers deeply impact Ugandan social entrepreneurs and their initiatives (Turyakira et al., 2024). Prevailing IVs make it difficult for social entrepreneurs to access skilled human capital, financial resources and raw materials (Ciambotti et al., 2021). As a result, their assets and intellectual property are vulnerable to theft or exploitation (Brenes et al., 2019).

Despite posing significant challenges, these institutional deficiencies also create opportunities for social innovation (Cherrier et al., 2018; Ge et al., 2019; Liedong et al., 2020). The dual role of IVs is highlighted by scholars who present them as both barriers and catalysts for entrepreneurial initiatives (McCarthy & Puffer, 2016).

Europe and North America are the regions leading in social entrepreneurship research. By opposition, the lack of research activity in African countries makes it an interesting continent for growth and exploration (Farhoud et al. 2023; Miah et al., 2024; Rwehumbiza & Hyun, 2024). Africa has unique socio-economic and political contexts. Inadequate institutional frameworks force social entrepreneurs to adopt innovative strategies and turn institutional challenges into opportunities (Argiolas et al., 2024; Maseno & Wanyoike, 2022; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015).

Addressing institutional voids is critical for the empowerment of social entrepreneurs as robust institutions are essential for the success of their initiatives (Barasa et al., 2017).

2.3 Social entrepreneurs as change agents

Sub-Saharan Africa creates many opportunities for social enterprises to emerge and reflect “institutional variability and constraints” (Maseno & Wanyoike, 2022, p.4). This context is a fertile ground for social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs often emerge from the communities they aim to improve (Rwehumbiza & Hyun, 2024). These actors are motivated and willing to address resource-scarce environments they evolve in to create lasting social impact (Stephan et al., 2015; Zahra et al., 2009). Rather than accepting institutional failures, they create or transform institutions to meet the local needs of their communities (Battilana et al., 2009; Brenes et al., 2019). To succeed, social entrepreneurs rely on building legitimacy and mobilizing resources within their communities, mostly through collaborative networks and partnerships (Chipp et al., 2019; Matus-Ruiz et al., 2024).

While previous literature has paid limited attention to the skills needed in “engaging with communities as a response to institutional constraints” (Eijdenberg et al., 2019, p. 428), several scholars suggested strategies to strengthen legitimacy and trust with communities in such contexts. To implement institutional change, social entrepreneurs can get support from diverse stakeholders and mobilize human and financial resources to uphold their initiatives (Pacheco et al., 2010). Social entrepreneurs willing to create change and solve social issues must be resourceful and leverage social, political and financial capital to navigate IVs (Ebrashi & Darrag, 2017; Su et al., 2017). Furthermore, the ability, or the absence of institutional support, community engagement and partnerships facilitate or constrain the success of their initiatives. By adapting to weak institutional environments, social entrepreneurs enhance leadership and trust with their communities, increasing their ability to mobilize critical support and resources and generate social impact (Nakpodia et al., 2024).

2.4 Higher education as a focus for social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship can play an important role in African development (Nega & Schneider, 2014). By providing educational opportunities to underserved populations and empowering marginalized communities (Pache & Chowdhury, 2012; Urban & Kujinga, 2017), it brings “positive social change that can influence the overall development of the community” (Nwauche & Claeyé, 2024, p. 7). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs) were adopted by countries from around the world in 2015. Social entrepreneurship has the potential to play a role in the achievement of these Goals (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). Thus, many social entrepreneurs engage in educational initiatives that aim to equip people with knowledge and skills necessary to improve their circumstances (Miah et al., 2024). Higher education in Africa participates in the creation of a skilled society (Nkomo, 2015) and is a crucial driver of social progress, justifying the focus on this specific sector to generate multiple benefits to the general public (González García et al., 2020; Zickafoose et al., 2024). However, access and quality of higher education in Africa are major remaining challenges (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Evans et al., 2021; Mbiti, 2016). Social entrepreneurs have the potential to address these challenges and to contribute to a more inclusive and quality education (De Herdt & Titeca, 2016; Maseno & Wanyoike, 2022).

2.5 Strategies for navigating IVs

The coping mechanisms employed in developing countries facing weak or completely absent supportive institutions was the focus of several scholars (Doh et al., 2017; Mair & Marti, 2009). They examined who steps in and builds missing institutions when the government fails to act. In such contexts, the coalition of non-state actors provides essential basic public services (Titeca & De Herdt, 2011). According to Stephan et al., (2015), resource-scarce environments, in which social problems are abundant, motivate social entrepreneurship. To compensate institutional constraints, social entrepreneurs employ different strategies including collective action, networks, resource mobilization and stakeholder engagement (Chipp et al., 2019; Ge et al., 2019; Pacheco et al., 2010). In fact, previous research suggests that successful social entrepreneurs proactively create their own value networks made of companies that share a similar social vision. These organizations focus on assessing their resource needs and implementing strategies to maintain their operations (Mair & Schoen, 2007). When building resilient ecosystems, family, community leaders, educational organizations and private enterprises play a significant role in supporting social entrepreneurs (Bozhikin et al., 2019). Community networks and social bonds allow social entrepreneurs to navigate institutional challenges. By developing high-quality relationships with local actors, social entrepreneurs enhance their ability to mobilize the needed resources for their activities (Ciambotti et al., 2021; Nakpodia et al., 2024). Community involvement and collective interests were also presented as driving forces for institutional change in Mair et al., (2012)'s social capital model. These strategies emphasize the fact that social enterprises do not operate in isolation (Brenes et al., 2019; Ghalwash et al. 2017; Sud et al., 2009).

Gupta et al., (2020) noted that “social entrepreneurs face multi-dimensional challenges during the entire life cycle of the organization” (p. 220), many of which result from resource scarcity. Entrepreneurial bricolage is one critical strategy used to cope with weak or completely absent supportive institutions and garner resources (Mair & Marti, 2009). The concept of bricolage refers to the reconfiguration of already existing resources at hand for new purposes. A typology of social entrepreneurs was developed by Zahra et al., (2009). These authors described social bricoleurs as entrepreneurs who rely on available resources and adopt strategies to address social needs. This approach enables them to undertake major efforts and find solutions to complex problems using a sustainable approach (Bacq et al., 2015) and “the innovative use and combination of resources to pursue opportunities to catalyse social change and/or address social needs” (Mair and Marti, 2006, p. 37). Presented as “the most appropriate approach to consider social firms operating in an environment characterized by institutional constraints” (Janssen et al., 2018, p. 450), bricolage rejects limitations imposed by institutional settings and encourages adaptability. Defined as “making do with what is at hand” (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 329), bricolage can serve as a mechanism for resource mobilization and institutional change (Desa, 2012; Di Domenico et al.,

2010). Its adaptive and improvisational behaviors offers a strategic advantage to social entrepreneurs in constrained environments, enabling them to strengthen their social impact (Bacq et al., 2015; Baker & Nelson, 2005; Ciambotti et al., 2023).

Navigating IVs effectively implies engaging with local stakeholders to build trust and legitimacy and implement innovative solutions (Matus-Ruiz et al., 2024; Nwauche & Claeyé, 2024). Additionally, social entrepreneurs need to gather valuable resources, such as social, political and financial capital to succeed (Su et al., 2017). These coping strategies set the stage for an examination of how African social entrepreneurs, particularly those who operate in higher education in Uganda, respond to IVs and generate social innovation.

2.6 Implications for African social entrepreneurs

New insights into how IVs can be navigated with are provided by the work of African social entrepreneurs in higher education (Urban & Kujinga, 2017). They approach IVs as “opportunity spaces” (Matus-Ruiz et al., 2024) and foster innovation and societal impact. However, their success depends on the support of various stakeholders. A robust ecosystem and concerted efforts are needed to drive social change and development in Africa (Visser, 2011).

According to Abaho et al., (2017), proactive behaviors enable social entrepreneurs to achieve greater growth. These authors affirm that social entrepreneurs operating in Uganda enhance their chances of experiencing growth by developing and implementing strong entrepreneurial orientation practices.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH & METHODS USED

3.1 Qualitative methodology

Qualitative research produces impact on the field by generating new theories or elaborating existing ones (Gehman et al., 2018). This research employs an exploratory qualitative methodology to investigate how social entrepreneurs enhance higher education in Uganda. The choice of this methodological approach was prompted by the foundation of the institutional theory emphasizing the interaction between actors and their institutional contexts (Bruton et al., 2010). This framework aligns with the aim of this study which is to explore how social entrepreneurs actively engage with challenging institutional environments to enhance higher education. Social entrepreneurship operates within dynamic and context-specific frameworks, especially in regions marked by IVs. Weak institutional support, bureaucratic inefficiencies and socio-economic challenges particularly influence these contexts (Brenes et al., 2019). To uncover these institutional complexities and explore the processes used by social entrepreneurs, an exploratory research is well-suited and allows a focus on lived experiences, strategies and behaviors (Rwehumbiza & Hyun, 2024). In addition, the under-representation of social entrepreneurship in Africa makes an exploratory approach even more relevant to this study. Limited insights into the mechanisms enabling social change in such contexts are highlighted in existing literature (Weerakoon, 2024).

Building on an ethnographic single-case study, this research focuses on LeadMinds Africa, a social enterprise promoting higher education in Uganda.

Ethnography and case study are two of the “most popular qualitative research approaches” (Suryani, 2013, p. 117). An ethnography enables an immersion in the daily practices, strategies and lived experiences of social entrepreneurs and is also context-sensitive (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gephart Jr, 2004; Siggelkow, 2007; Thomas, 2011). The goal of ethnography is to understand the relationship between people and their social environment (Harwati, 2019). Context becomes particularly critical to better understand under-researched social phenomena (Gehman et al., 2018) making qualitative

research even more meaningful in emerging markets (Bradley et al., 2007; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019).

Situated in the African context, this study ensures the geographic diversification of the predominantly Western-centric research in social entrepreneurship (Farhoud et al., 2023). Its aim is to address the specific dynamics of social entrepreneurship in environments impacted by IVs and to examine the innovative and adaptive strategies to cope with them.

As Littlewood and Holt (2018) emphasize “given the emergent nature of the field of research on social enterprises and the SDGs, and the need for theory development, in-depth case study work focusing on particular social enterprises would also be valuable” (p. 12). By employing a qualitative ethnographic single-case study, this research answers this call for an in-depth and context-specific insights into social entrepreneurial practices in Africa.

The case study research enables to better understand the dynamics within an organization. It also generates relevant topics and theories that are applicable in real-world settings (Eisenhardt, 1989). “A single case can be a very powerful example” (Siggelkow, 2007, p. 20) to illustrate how social entrepreneurship addresses institutional challenges and contribute to higher education. Understanding processes and concepts is the principal objective of the case-study research (Woodside & Wilson, 2003).

LeadMinds Africa was deliberately selected as a case due to its demonstrated impact on the improvement of access and quality to higher education in Uganda. The combination of ethnographic immersion with the single-case study design allows an in-depth and context-sensitive exploration of the realities of social entrepreneurial action in Africa, as well as the adaptive strategies and social impact in such emerging market contexts.

3.2 Data collection methods

Multiple qualitative research methods are employed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of social entrepreneurial activities (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2003; Goulding, 2005). The use of an ethnographic immersion into the everyday operations of LeadMinds Africa allows the exploration of the influence institutional contexts have on its activities (Gephart Jr, 2004). As Creswell (2013) emphasized “in an ethnographic study, the investigator collects descriptions of behavior through observations, interviewing, documents, and artifacts” (p. 162). This is why, for this study, data was collected from these diverse methods.

Direct observations of the daily interactions and processes taking place at LeadMinds Africa provide insights into how IVs are navigated and what resources are the most needed to overcome these challenges.

To gather different perspectives and uncover motivations, challenges and strategies, founders, co-founders, employees and beneficiaries of LeadMinds Africa, as well as community members, were interviewed. These different group of participants were selected to capture how LeadMinds Africa navigates IVs and enhances higher education.

- Founders and co-founders shape the vision and strategic direction of LeadMinds Africa.
- Employees are actively involved in the development and operations of LeadMinds Africa.
- Former or current students know about the impact of LeadMinds Africa.
- Community members are familiar with the initiatives of LeadMinds Africa, its impacts and outcomes.

Participating in meetings and community events enables a better understanding of the role played by networks in collaborative processes and decision-making dynamics. In addition, analyzing internal documents such as reports, communications and other relevant materials allows the contextualization of the goals, practices and impact of LeadMinds Africa. Finally, to ensure transparency and rigor throughout the data collection process, field notes, recorded observations,

photos and videos are used (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Triangulation, validity and reliability of findings are ensured by the integration of various data sources (Tracy, 2010).

To ensure a richer and more representative understanding of the diverse stakeholder experiences, attention will be paid to diversity, in gender, age, and socio-economic background. Individuals who have limited knowledge about LeadMinds Africa's initiatives and programs will be excluded from the research as their perspectives may not meaningfully reflect the focus of this research.

3.3 Data analysis

This research will employ thematic analysis throughout data analysis (Flick, 2014). This rigorous process will allow the identification of patterns, themes and relationships within data. Both inductive and deductive coding will be applied to ensure rigor and credibility within collected data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The software MAXQDA will serve to the coding of data collected from direct observations, interviews and documents. This approach guarantees that the findings are structured and meaningful, contributing to a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon.

This methodological approach will capture the complexity of social entrepreneurship within environments characterized by IVs and provide insights into the solutions employed to address the remaining constraints in higher education in Uganda.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The following section highlights empirical findings of this research. Extant literature and early interviews informed these preliminary findings. The analysis of interviews already conducted reveal that social entrepreneurs adapt to IVs by developing informal networks, partnerships and community engagement. These initial findings emphasize the importance of social capital in mitigating institutional gaps.

4.1 Motivations for social entrepreneurship

Participants who identify as social entrepreneurs describe social entrepreneurship as “the ability to create viable business that solve current problems”. They are motivated by the opportunity to start a business they believe in, assist their countries and communities by creating business opportunities for local people. One of the participants listed his intentions. He wants to bring new and innovative ways of thinking in solving problems. Participants are willing to improve their community and have a positive impact on people's lifestyle. One interviewee articulated his intent to act as “a change maker”. These findings align with Cherrier et al.'s (2018) work, which noted that “social entrepreneurship tends to start with small, localized initiatives but often hopes to provide solutions to complex and large-scale societal problems” (p. 2). Social entrepreneurs often start with localized initiatives before ultimately addressing broader societal problems.

Social entrepreneurs advocate for ecosystems favoring dialogue and collaboration with their peers. They identify “strategic partnerships” and “strategic collaborations” with organizations sharing common values and local civil society as very impactful for their initiatives. They all highlighted the need for spaces and platforms that encourage the exchange of ideas and past experiences. This idea reinforces the need for collective efforts as critical means to address challenges related to higher education.

4.2 Contributions to higher education

Social entrepreneurs perceive higher education as very important to create opportunities and address social challenges, particularly in Africa. They define higher education as a “source of opportunity

for a better life”. All participants recognize the institutional gaps and the major barriers in higher education in Africa, with affirmations such as “Africa is still lagging behind”. They also consider that the skills currently transferred to students do not enable them to close institutional gaps. Social entrepreneurs view human capital development as a critical factor to the success of their initiatives. Continuous learning, and knowledge transfer are needed to overcome barriers. According to these participants, human capital development initiatives include programs designed to move from “theory to practice” to help beneficiaries acquire practical competences. Mentorship or tutoring is another means to engage directly with students, providing them clear examples of success and “someone you can look up to”.

4.3 Key success factors

Finally, participants identified critical factors for the success of their social entrepreneurial initiatives. They emphasized that social entrepreneurship requires mental strength, resilience and focus. To succeed, social entrepreneurs have to be “passionate, purposeful and intentional”. In addition, innovation is essential to balance time, cost and quality when pursuing their initiatives. One of their most critical challenges is convincing communities to embrace change and foster higher education contributions.

These preliminary findings highlight the capacity of social entrepreneurs to act as agents of change. They use local expertise to foster collaboration and address IVs to advance social development (Zahra et al., 2009). Their contribution to higher education is an illustration of the innovative approaches they employ to share knowledge and create sustainable solutions to remaining social problems.

Collective action and resource mobilization are among the key strategies social entrepreneurs can use to achieve institutional change (Pacheco et al., 2010). Stakeholder support, human or financial resources, can be leveraged to strengthen their initiatives and implement meaningful institutional change. These findings reinforce the arguments suggested by Ciambotti et al., (2021) who highlighted the importance of social ties, informal networks and community engagement for social entrepreneurs. Local relationships and external support are particularly valuable for those operating in resource-scarce environments.

5. CONTRIBUTIONS

This research offers meaningful contributions. It advances theoretical knowledge, provides empirical insights and offers practical suggestions at the intersection of IVs, social entrepreneurship and the development of higher education. By focusing on a social enterprise in Uganda, the study addresses global challenges and also highlights the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship in resource-constrained settings.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

By emphasizing the dual role of IVs and by identifying them as both barriers and catalysts to social innovation, this research contributes to the institutional theory. It explores how social entrepreneurs navigate IVs to create social value, providing a better understanding of the mechanisms driving systemic change in challenging environments. This study also extends the literature on social entrepreneurship. The scope of existing research is expanded by the exploration of how social entrepreneurship influences higher education. Consequently, new perspectives on the transformative effects of social enterprises are provided.

5.2 Empirical contributions

The contextualization of social entrepreneurship in Africa addresses the geographic bias in the existing literature. By offering empirical evidence to social entrepreneurship, a field usually centered on Western contexts, this study fills research gaps. The exploration of the evolution and the impact of a social enterprise enhancing higher education in Uganda enriches the understanding of the field and practice of social entrepreneurship in the African context. The identification and the documentation of the methods used to build and develop networks to overcome institutional barriers allows a detailed analysis of real-world practices. Thus, the dynamics of innovation and resilience in environments characterized by IVs are emphasized. Moreover, insights into how social entrepreneurship tackles pressing issues in higher education are provided.

5.3 Practical contributions

This research offers actionable guidance to social entrepreneurs. It equips them with strategies for navigating IVs and driving social change, especially in the sector of higher education. These strategies can inform and encourage other initiatives that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). Additionally, recommendations to create or develop supportive environment encouraging social entrepreneurial initiatives are provided by this research. This study encourages educational institutions and academic leaders to consider partnerships and initiatives that align with social and sustainable development objectives, as it insists on the crucial role social entrepreneurs play in driving the enhancement of higher education.

5.4 Alignment with SDG4

SDG4 focuses on ensuring inclusive, equitable and quality education for all. This Goal positions education as an essential factor of sustainable development. Despite this critical role, in Sub-Saharan Africa both access and quality of education remain major challenges that hinder the achievement of SDG4 (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Darley & Luethge, 2019). This research insists on the important role social entrepreneurship plays in addressing these issues. Social entrepreneurs have the ability to drive innovation, specifically in the higher education sector. By focusing on the context of Uganda, this research insists on how social enterprises participate in the achievement of SDG4 while contributing to broader sustainable development goals.

5.5 Beneficial outcomes of the study

Overall, this research makes contributions to theory, practice and policy. It deepens theoretical understanding of how social entrepreneurship drives the enhancement of higher education in environments facing IVs. This study empowers social entrepreneurs to expand their impact by providing them with recommendations to navigate challenges and mobilize resources. The shared recommendations have the potential to help institutions design policies that foster social entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at developing higher education.

5.6 Limitations

This research relies on very demanding methodological approach and methods. Ethnography requires prolonged immersion within a specific organization while a single-case study requires very focused research efforts (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2003). Constraints such as time and funding could impact this fieldwork. Additionally, getting access to key stakeholders can also be a challenge. The unavailability or unwillingness of interview participants to share honest experiences and feelings could limit the scope of collected data. For this reason, building trust with participants to encourage them to share their stories is crucial from the beginning of the research. To provide comparative

insights, further research could examine other social enterprises engaging in the development of higher education.

6. CONCLUSION

The critical intersection of institutional voids, social entrepreneurship and higher education enhancement in Uganda is addressed in this research. Our understanding of how social entrepreneurs navigate institutional deficiencies to drive social change is deepened. Moreover, by focusing on the African context, this study fills a significant gap in the literature. The ethnographic single-case study employed to research LeadMinds Africa, as well as the multiple qualitative research methods used, help us capture the different strategies and mechanisms social entrepreneurs apply to develop both the access and the quality of higher education in institutionally-constrained environments. This study contributes to the institutional theory. The emphasis on the dual role of institutional voids enables to define them as both obstacles and opportunities for social innovation. Additionally, this study broadens the social entrepreneurship literature by situating it within the higher education sector in Africa. Thus, social entrepreneurs, policy makers and educators can benefit from the practical insights provided, as well as the actionable strategies, to address systemic challenges and encourage social entrepreneurial initiatives. Ultimately, this research insists on the importance of context-sensitive and locally driven solutions. This is why this study aspires to contribute to both scholarly discourse and real-world impact by inspiring future initiatives in similar settings in Africa and beyond.

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