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Issues and Challenges Faced by Social Entrepreneurs in Sustaining the Agricultural Sector

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Abstract

The need for the welfare of farmers and sustainable agricultural supply chains has become increasingly urgent in a market that often prioritizes profit over environmental and social concerns. Consequently, agricultural entrepreneurship through the role of social entrepreneurs in driving innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives is seen as a viable solution to address social issues among farmers and environmental challenges. In the effort to strengthen the welfare of farmers and the contributions of the agricultural sector, social entrepreneurs encounter various issues and challenges. A qualitative study was conducted with eight informants to explore the issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in advancing their social missions to enhance the well-being of small farmers. The study revealed that a lack of understanding among farmers regarding the role of social entrepreneurs, limited capital and funding resources, insufficient government support, as well as challenges in marketing agricultural products and value chains are the primary obstacles hindering the comprehensive development of social enterprises. Furthermore, the absence of specific policies and regulations, inadequate infrastructure and access to technology, along with the level of knowledge and professional attitudes of social entrepreneurs, also pose significant challenges to the growth of social entrepreneurship. Therefore, stakeholders need to establish a more effective social system through collaborative strengthening in developing sustainable supply chains and value practices. This will enhance management effectiveness and create a conducive environment for social entrepreneurs to implement agricultural social entrepreneurship missions that positively impact farmers and communities, ultimately fostering an inclusive and sustainable agricultural sector.

Keywords: Agricultural Sector, Farmers, Social Entrepreneurs, Social Entrepreneurship, Social Mission.

Introduction

The agricultural sector frequently faces various issues and challenges, particularly for smallholder farmers, including low production scales, limited technology application, decreasing quality and size of farms, threats from climate change, labour shortages, and an aging farmer population (1, 2). Farmers also experience low income levels due to rising input costs, production affected by pest and disease outbreaks, declining soil fertility, and climatic uncertainties that create abiotic stress (3). Farmers face challenges such as a lack of capital, limited access to funding and financial resources, insufficient knowledge regarding quality inputs, low usage of data and technology, weak marketing methods, and limited value chain production (4). These constraints pose high risks to productivity, growth, operational sustainability, and the well-being of farmers. Additionally, various current constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and weaknesses in the management and effectiveness of the national agricultural system exacerbate issues faced by smallholder farmers. To bridge this gap, social entrepreneurship through the involvement of social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector represents the best solution, as they act as agents of change for agricultural development and economic transformation. Social entrepreneurship is a viable alternative method for enhancing and strengthening social welfare through citizen-centric approaches within business models. These organizations integrate social missions aimed at addressing poverty, social inequality, environmental degradation, and the lack of access to essential services faced by communities (5, 6). This social mission has opened avenues for social entrepreneurs to create value by innovatively combining resources to generate social value, exploring and exploiting opportunities to develop new solution for achieving financial sustainability

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(7, 8), stimulating long-term economic growth (5) and promoting inclusive national growth (9). Sustainability elements emerge when the assistance provided builds the potential and self-reliance of the target communities in the long term. The outputs generated by the social entrepreneurship process have the potential to enhance competitiveness, quality of life, economic empowerment, and social innovation for target communities (10). This context of social entrepreneurship aligns with the concept of Creating Shared Value (CSV) developed by Porter and Kramer, which aims to establish businesses that generate economic value while also benefiting society (11). Through its social mission, CSV is capable of addressing the needs and challenges faced by communities. In the agricultural sector, CSV initiatives include enhancing agricultural productivity, improving biodiversity, marketing, and improving the lives of farmers as well as local communities. This approach transcends traditional corporate social responsibility, which focuses solely on maximizing profit and often neglects the element of shared value. In contrast, CSV places greater emphasis on integrating social value within core business strategies (11). The dimensions that shape this concept of social value include (i) social value-added, ensuring that the target group benefits efficiently, (ii) empowerment and sustainable social change for the target group, (iii) social innovation to transform existing practices or introduce new ones to increase productivity, and (iv) systemic change to eradicate unproductive practices within the community (12). It can be seen that social enterprises offer an innovative business model that reduces costs while providing robust value for money, in addition to offering higher quality services and products that are more profitable (10). In the agricultural sector, social enterprises are uniquely positioned to address complex challenges and create transformative outcomes. By leveraging innovative approaches, community engagement, and inclusive business models, social enterprises drive sustainable practices, empower local communities, and foster market relationships, particularly for smallholder farmers (13, 14). Consequently, social entrepreneurs have the potential to find solutions to these community issues through job creation (employing low-skilled workers), social and employment integration, providing social services, and improving quality of life, including combating poverty and social exclusion (10,15,16), environmental conservation (including energy use and recycling), and access to credit and financial services (5,17). The organization's outcomes will focus on social and/or environmental impact rather than financial returns (5,17). The success of social entrepreneurs is not only measured by profit but also by the social impact achieved within the community (16,17). Social entrepreneurs significantly impact the economic development of communities and nations through their role in generating new ideas and innovations and being responsible for reforming existing businesses (18,20). Furthermore, social entrepreneurs also act as change agents for the social economy; enhancing cooperative networks with other social entrepreneurs, providing social entrepreneurship training to youth, monitoring program participants' performance, and fostering an understanding of social responsibility that is culturally and environmentally sensitive (21). Occasionally, social entrepreneurs may lack financial resources, but strong social networks can facilitate access to funding (10). Based on the need to address issues in the management and marketing of agricultural produce, social entrepreneurship in agriculture clearly has the potential to create social impact within farming communities. However, in striving to fulfilled this social value, social entrepreneurs face challenges that threaten their resilience and their ability to continue social entrepreneurship efforts aimed at assisting farming communities. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in sustaining the viability of agricultural social enterprises aimed at improving the welfare of farming communities. The social entrepreneurs involved in this study are pioneers in agricultural social entrepreneurship within the research area, affected by various issues related to agricultural management and marketing. Thus, as pioneer in agricultural social entrepreneurship, it is crucial to examine the various issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in order to formulate strategies that enhance their resilience and sustainability.

Issues and Challenges of Social Entrepreneurs

The complexities within the culture and mentality of the population, especially in rural areas, present challenges for social entrepreneurs in transforming the mindsets of farmers and local residents toward fostering an entrepreneurial spirit (2,22). The social perspectives of farmers, personal characteristics, and gender, age, and motivation levels significantly influence this transformation. Furthermore, the shift from family farming to agricultural entrepreneurship places additional pressure on farmers (20). A significant challenge for social entrepreneurs is to establish relationships and gain the trust of the community, leading to engagement based on innovative working conditions (20,23). This is compounded by the fact that farmers and communities, particularly in rural areas, often have limited skills and mindsets (6), low accessibility to information, and constrained job opportunities (22). Additionally, land organization for diverse crops requires an interdisciplinary approach involving a network of stakeholders with shared objectives to ensure sustained social benefits for the target group. Consequently, social entrepreneurs need to possess self-confidence and effective planning to earn the trust of farmers, communities, and investors, alongside adhering to efficient business and investment ethics (22). Moreover, social entrepreneurs must persuade stakeholders and investors who often perceive smallholders and rural residents as unskilled, untrained, and lacking an entrepreneurial mindset (22). Social entrepreneurs also face constraints in accessing formal training to enhance their entrepreneurial, business management, financial, marketing, and research and development skills (24). A lack of experience in management and marketing further hampers social entrepreneurs' ability to survive and sustain their initiatives (2). Access to finance and markets is a primary determinant of the sustainability of social enterprises (13, 16, 23). Most social entrepreneurs operate as individual entities, making it challenging to raise sufficient capital at the initial stages of their ventures (5). Support mechanisms from financial institutions are relatively limited compared to commercial enterprises, primarily due to the assumption that social enterprises are not profitable and pose risks regarding loan repayment (16). The public's lack of awareness and understanding of the concept and social impact of social entrepreneurship presents a challenge for social entrepreneurs to sustain their operations. Some stakeholders, including investors and government agencies, view their activities merely as social work (2). Moreover, profit and social missions are often seen as mutually exclusive; profit motives may overshadow the primary objectives of social missions (5). This situation places social enterprises in a disadvantageous position, resembling grant-based or charitable endeavours rather than fulfilling social missions and addressing the needs of target groups. As a result, some social entrepreneurs cease operations due to inadequate financing, attempting to ensure that existing resource flows are sufficient (16). However, social enterprises that maintain good interactions and networks with government bodies but lack financial resources will face challenges related to funding and infrastructure development, ultimately leading to environmental imbalances (13, 23). This situation hampers the adoption of high-tech and sustainable agricultural practices, limits resource optimization, impedes decision-making improvements, strengthens market access and relationships, and compromises quality standards within enterprises found that social entrepreneurs often encounter market access issues and price competition with conventional, non-sustainable agricultural businesses that may offer lower market prices (13,14). Therefore, support from agencies is crucial. Consequently, achieving comprehensive social impact is hindered as activities cannot scale up in terms of community engagement, training and skill programs, market access, maintaining quality standards, and Research and Development (R&D) (14). Social entrepreneurs can create new opportunities through innovation and resource mobilization. Adaptations must be made based on the specific community or market in ways that governmental programs often find challenging to achieve (25). Social entrepreneurs should have unfettered access to private resources in the form of cash donations, in-kind contributions, volunteer time, social investments, and income generated from their business activities. The success of social enterprises heavily depends on supportive

policies, a specific regulatory framework, and legal compliance mechanisms. This is crucial to avoid uncertainties and complexities regarding compliance with legal regulations, eligibility criteria, and accountability (5). In Malaysia, the lack of legal definitions and recognition of social enterprises as distinct entities creates issues regarding regulation, funding allocation, and support from agencies (26). Sole proprietorship and partnership registration are considered the most affordable and straightforward means to start social enterprises, but they do not guarantee the same tax benefits and government incentives that non-profit organizations or charitable bodies receive. Conversely, social enterprises face significant risks of legal non-compliance if they engage in commercial activities to generate limited income for sustaining operations and social impact (26). Furthermore, this situation contributes to unethical practices in the sector, driven by corruption and nepotism (2). Social entrepreneurs also face complexities stemming from policies, regulations, and intricate land ownership systems that hinder comprehensive development. As a result, it is challenging to expand social activities and measure the social impacts achieved, alongside difficulties in establishing partnerships and collaborations with governmental bodies, corporations, and non-governmental organizations (5). The government is perceived as still not recognizing their true potential in addressing social issues. Additionally, existing regulations and policy implementations that do not focus on social enterprises hinder the vision and development of social enterprises (16). Social entrepreneurs encounter infrastructure-related issues, including the provision of amenities, internet connectivity, transportation and road connectivity (23), electricity supply, and low mobile technology skills (2). Access to information, as well as communication and technology (ICT), is crucial for promoting and enhancing the involvement of small farmers and communities in agricultural entrepreneurship (22). Therefore, social entrepreneurs face challenges in delivering information, providing training, and offering ongoing support and assistance, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure and educational resources are lacking (14). Most social enterprises struggle with a lack of business strategies, resulting in uncompetitive product marketing (20). This is due to their mission's focus on social needs. Consequently, this has somewhat hindered the development of actual products or services offered by social enterprises. This situation also obstructs the formulation of appropriate business strategies to compete in a market dominated by commercial enterprises (2). Moreover, social entrepreneurs often begin their operations without a business background, leading many to lack management skills essential for strategic planning and financial management, thereby creating challenges in fundraising (2). Social entrepreneurs also face challenges in attracting talented, committed, hardworking, and dedicated individuals. This is due to the absence of significant land holdings and the low contribution of the agricultural sector to the economy, which diminishes individual interest in joining the agricultural sector. Additionally, attracting workers focused on social benefits is difficult as most individuals prioritize personal gains (2). Therefore, various incentives, including training, must be offered to youth to increase their participation in agricultural entrepreneurship (2, 20). The literature review demonstrates that social entrepreneurs remain burdened by various issues and challenges that hinder the development of the social enterprises they operate. These include building relationships and trust within the community regarding the approaches and innovations implemented (2,20,22,23); constraints in accessing formal training (24); lack of knowledge and skills (2,6,22); lack of funding and limited access to finance and markets (2,13;1416,20,23), and inadequate infrastructure (2,14,22,23). Policy and legal barriers related to social entrepreneurship also pose significant challenges that impact the sustainability of social entrepreneurs (5,16,26). Fundamentally, the existence of social entrepreneurs with broad social missions has the potential to make a significant impact on solving social issues, particularly those affecting marginalized and vulnerable groups, as well as addressing poverty and environmental concerns. However, is it sufficient to focus solely on the social impact achieved by the community through social entrepreneurship without examining the issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in exploring opportunities and

solving social problems? Therefore, this paper explores the issues and challenges faced by pioneer of social entrepreneurship in research area, particularly in their efforts to contribute social value, especially to farming communities. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of more effective social entrepreneurship strategies to address the social problems faced by farmers and surrounding communities.

Methodology

A qualitative study using purposive sampling was conducted, selecting participants who met specific criteria, namely, those who are leaders in agricultural social entrepreneurship within the study area. The justification for selecting the informants is based on their background as pioneer of agricultural social enterprises in the research area. As a result, eight informants who met the criteria were chosen as study subjects. All of them are farmers facing several issues, particularly in crop management, difficulties in finding farm workers, and marketing agricultural produce. Consequently, they sought solutions by implementing social enterprises to address the challenges they faced, while also helping other small farmers facing similar problems. Thus, the information gathered is significant, as the informants are key figures in agricultural social entrepreneurship within the study area. An interview protocol was used to ensure that the questions posed to the study subjects were organized and structured. Semi-structured questions related to the informants' backgrounds and their enterprises, as well as the issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in maintaining the sustainability of their agricultural social enterprises, were asked. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the farms managed by the participants in order to obtain narratives from social entrepreneurs about the issues being studied. One key advantage of semi-structured interviews is the opportunity they provide for researchers to obtain contextual information and gauge participants' reactions to the questions posed. This interview format allows for the exploration of emergent topics through the dynamic interaction between the researcher and participants, thereby adding depth to the data. Furthermore, the iterative development of more focused and robust questions facilitates direct engagement with participants. All face-to-face interviews were conducted at mutually agreed-upon locations, selected to ensure an environment conducive to meaningful dialogue. This setting not only enabled participants to express themselves authentically but also provided the researcher with the opportunity to observe non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, further enriching the understanding of the participants' perspectives and emotional responses to the issues discussed. Field interviews also enabled the use of observational methods to examine the operations of the social enterprises in practice. As a result, triangulation was applied, involving interviews, observations, field notes, audio recordings, and photographs, to validate and provide evidence regarding the issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in maintaining the sustainability of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. The social entrepreneur narratives were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns, providing valuable insights into the research issue. This interpretive approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how the informants make sense of their roles in the social entrepreneurship initiatives they lead.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative study involved eight informants who are farmers and also serve as social entrepreneurs. All informants are male, and their duration of involvement in the agricultural sector is less than ten years. This indicates that their engagement is still considered new within the agricultural field. Their participation as social entrepreneurs are also recent, with less than five years of experience (Table 1). Nevertheless, the dedication and self-motivation to assist other small-scale farmers facing operational challenges in agriculture are evident from the interviews and observations conducted in the field.

Table 1: Profile of Informants (Social Entrepreneurs)

Social entrepreneur (SE)	Age (Years)	Involved in agriculture (years)	Involved as social entrepreneur (years)
SE 1	34	2019	2020
SE 2	30	2019	2020
SE 3	33	2018	2020
SE 4	38	2016	2022
SE 5	35	2015	2018
SE 6	32	2018	2020
SE 7	36	2018	2022
SE 8	31	2020	2022

Issues and Challenges Faced by Social Entrepreneurs in Expanding Social Enterprises

The increasingly unstable global socioeconomic conditions have given rise to various social issues among the population. Consequently, social entrepreneurship represents a new global concept that employs business models and activities to enhance resources and apply them to address social issues such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, environmental problems, and other factors contributing to the decline in quality of life (27). Findings from the study conducted on eight social entrepreneurs (informants) reveal that limited understanding of the role of social entrepreneurs, lack of capital and funding resources, insufficient government support, and marketing issues are the primary challenges undermining the operations of social entrepreneurship in agriculture.

Limited Understanding of Farmers Regarding the Role of Social Entrepreneurs

One of the biggest challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector is the lack of understanding among farmers regarding the role and benefits that social entrepreneurship can offer. Social entrepreneurship in agriculture involves innovative solutions to longstanding agricultural problems, such as inefficient farming practices, difficulty in accessing markets, and environmental sustainability issues. However, many farmers are still unaware of the potential of social enterprises to benefit them. Among the benefits that can be provided are increased productivity through modern technology and enhanced market access via digital platforms. This lack of awareness is often due to communication gaps and ineffective engagement by social entrepreneurs, as well as farmers' limited understanding of the concept of social entrepreneurship and Creating Shared Value (CSV). Additionally, some farmers may be sceptical of new approaches due to traditional thinking or resistance to change. The study identified that gaining trust and establishing strong relationships with small-scale farmers and the community is among the challenges faced by social entrepreneurs. The conventional mindset regarding agricultural practices, low skill levels concerning current technologies and innovations, as well as a lack of understanding of social enterprise concepts and the role of social entrepreneurs pose significant challenges for the informants in transforming the mindsets and perspectives of small-scale farmers towards agricultural entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs must first demonstrate success, gain trust, and establish influence among farmers so that the benefits of social entrepreneurship can be disseminated within the small farming community. This is supported by several researchers that emphasize the need for a shift in the mindset of farmers and local residents towards fostering an entrepreneurial mentality (2,22) and highlight the importance of building relationships and gaining community trust for engagement in innovation and operational activities (20,23). Additionally, the prevalence of low skills, lack of training, and absence of an entrepreneurial mindset are noted (6, 22). Statements from informants illustrate this issue:

> "…It is difficult to explain to farmers about the operations of social enterprises. We assist small farmers in marketing their produce. They want cash every day, while we have our own payment terms, which is weekly. We are not yet familiar with market prices

because we are not sellers; we are merely transporters seeking markets for their produce. But they do not want to understand" (SE 3).

"…First, we want to increase the number of beneficiaries; we want more people to benefit. From there, we will gain greater trust from the farmers and the community" (SE 1).

"…Convincing older farmers to use technology and good SOP practices in cultivation are quite challenging. I first conduct research on SOPs, fertilizers, and so on. I will share with others after proving profitability. Then, older farmers will believe and have confidence in the technology that attempt to introduce to them" (SE 4).

Lack of Capital and Funding Resources

Access to capital is a critical challenge for social entrepreneurs, particularly in the agricultural sector, which requires significant initial investment for infrastructure development, technology adoption, and operational management. Social enterprises in agriculture often face difficulties in securing adequate funding due to the perceived high risks and low returns associated with the sector, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, rural areas are often linked to issues of poverty and market instability. Financial institutions are frequently reluctant to provide loans to agricultural social entrepreneurs due to the uncertainty in return expectations and the lack of collateral. The shortage of capital and limited access to financing resources hinder social entrepreneurs from expanding operations, adopting modern technologies, or developing new markets. Limited capital and funding resources have hindered social missions and the overall achievement of social impact for target groups (14,16). Interviews revealed that all informants invested their personal savings and incurred debts to ensure continuous funding for social operations, especially during the initial stages of social enterprise operations. This stems from their intrinsic motivation to assist farmers and communities burdened by operational and marketing issues, as well as the lack of funding resources. Statements from informants include:

"…I use my own capital because I intend to help the community and farmers. I don't take loans because I am worry that I won't be able to pay back the loan and salaries. I rely more on rolling my own capital. The income is not substantial" (SE 2).

"…Our initial funding was shared among the team. Then, transportation costs and truck rentals to the wholesale market forced us to incur debts with the truck owner. The farmers profit more than we do" (SE 7).

"…To obtain capital, I pawned my wife's gold to buy baskets for marketing vegetables. At that time, no agency was willing to help. Once we succeeded, numerous offers came from agencies" (SE 4).

Lack of Government Support

Government support is a key factor in the success of social enterprises; however, social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector often face challenges in obtaining strong support from the government. The lack of incentives for social entrepreneurs to operate in agriculture, such as tax rebates, subsidies, and access to grants, has limited the growth potential and sustainability of social enterprises. Bureaucratic barriers, such as complicated application processes and long approval times for funding or regulatory changes, further hinder social entrepreneurs from capitalizing on available opportunities. Moreover, the lack of trust and support from agencies regarding the ability of social entrepreneurs to address social issues among smallholder farmers has significant implications for the vision and mission of social entrepreneurship. The government support is crucial for the sustainability of social entrepreneurs (13, 14, 16, 23). The study reveals that agencies only provide support and assistance after success has been achieved. At the initial stages of the enterprise, social entrepreneurs struggle with insufficient capital. Furthermore, they perceive that issues related to production and marketing operations are often overlooked by agencies, forcing them to invest their own funds to assist farmers in managing their planting and marketing operations. They believe that agencies will only help once results have been demonstrated or in response to major issue such as flooding in the

area. This perspective is illustrated by the statements of the informants:

> "…Agencies will help once results are evident. In the early stages, they do not provide assistances, but they send us for training. I feel that agencies lack of staff. All farmers manage by themselves at the beginning. Therefore, as social entrepreneurs, we will provide advisory services to these small farmers based on our knowledge and experience to prevent their losses" (SE 7).
>
> "…There is some assistance, but not much. We only received it because of the floods. If not due to the floods, we wouldn't have received anything. Agencies provide little help in terms of marketing. They only want to see high yields from farmers. But when farmers produce a lot, they only provide less help in marketing. Farmers are stuck in terms of selling their produce" (SE 2).
>
> "…Agencies are not very helpful. As social entrepreneurs, we provide a lot of assistance to farmers regarding farm operations and marketing" (SE 4).
>
> "…Agencies will assist only if there is a significant impact from the results. At that time, many agencies come offering help" (SE 5).
>
> "…There are many bureaucratic hurdles" (SE 5).
>
> "…Farmers indeed expect the best assistance and services from the government, but there are numerous bureaucratic obstacles. I understand that agencies also have other priorities" (SE 2).

Issues in Marketing Agricultural Products and Value Chains

The majority of smallholder farmers lack direct access to profitable markets. In fact, smallholders often face difficulties in accessing markets due to logistical issues, transportation costs, as well as challenges in storage and packaging. Inefficiencies in supply chain management can result in lower-quality agricultural products and spoilage, leading to financial losses for farmers. In this context, social entrepreneurs face the challenge of developing effective marketing strategies that connect farmers to broader and more profitable markets. Furthermore, fragmented value chains and weak relationships between farmers, suppliers, and buyers hinder the potential for collaboration and the creation of greater value. The research findings indicate that the majority of small farmers face challenges in marketing their agricultural products, including the informants who are social entrepreneurs. In attempting to address marketing issues, they inadvertently began assisting other small farmers and became increasingly involved in social entrepreneurship. As social entrepreneurs, the informants establish market relationships and develop value chains to ensure their initiatives are viable and capable of resolving social issues within the small farming community. Therefore, the development of marketing strategies and value-added products must align with management skills and strategic planning by social entrepreneurs (2,20). Addressing marketing issues and enhancing value chains based on the concept of Creating Shared Value can improve and strengthen the livelihoods of farmers. This emphasis can help overcome unproductive agricultural management practices (11, 12).

> "…The main challenge is marketing. Finding wholesalers who can buy small farmers' produce at reasonable market prices is difficult. Therefore, we try to assist and train farmers not only to be producers but also to become wholesalers, so they can cover profit margins to increase their income" (SE 3).
>
> "…Agencies purchase agricultural products at low prices and pay farmers within a month. We buy at higher prices and pay directly to farmers' accounts within a week at most. This makes farmers happier to work" (SE 6).
>
> "…We need to have many contacts to grow. Furthermore, wholesalers must agree to take all grades of produce, either A, B and C. Otherwise, marketing becomes challenging" (SE 8).

Lack of Infrastructure and Access to Technology

The lack of infrastructure for agriculture, particularly in rural areas, includes basic facilities such as roads and electricity supply, as well as limited irrigation systems, making social enterprise operations less efficient. Furthermore,

access to modern agricultural technology is restricted due to high preparation and management costs, as well as a lack of technical support. Social entrepreneurs in agriculture require access to appropriate infrastructure and technology to enhance productivity, sustainability, and resilience to environmental challenges. The study found that social entrepreneurs face issues related to inadequate infrastructure and access to technology, as well as a lack of adaptation to developments in social media technology. This situation adversely affects the development and management of crops. Moreover, the dissemination of information, training, other services, and promotion are also hindered by these issues. Access to technology and infrastructure is crucial for information dissemination, skill development, and enhancing the engagement of small farmers in agricultural entrepreneurship (2, 14, 22, 23). Furthermore, the government's ineffectiveness in delivering high-quality public services directly impacts the development of social entrepreneurship (16).

> "…We need to be proficient in social media. At my age in my 30s, it is indeed challenging to adapt to social media technologies like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. I took a course to deepen my understanding of social media. Only then can our business compete with others" (SE 5).
>
> "…The challenge is in using technology. Implementing smart farming is quite costly, and I need to apply it to other small farmers as well. The infrastructure is insufficient. So, I use semi-mechanical methods" (SE 1).
>
> "…The dissemination of information is quite limited due to inadequate technology networks and infrastructure in rural areas" (SE 1).

Absence of Specific Policies and Regulations

Social enterprises prioritize social and environmental impact alongside economic returns, exposing them to distinct challenges that hinder the sustainability of social entrepreneurship. Existing regulations often fail to support the dual mission of these social enterprises. In fact, weak legal frameworks can result in issues such as land ownership, access to resources, and workers' rights not being adequately protected. The lack of clear legal frameworks creates uncertainty, preventing investors and stakeholders from engaging with agricultural social enterprises. The research demonstrates that policies and regulations that do not specifically address social entrepreneurship have somewhat undermined the operations of social enterprises. The incoherent and insignificant policies and regulations regarding social enterprises have hindered the development of social entrepreneurship in agriculture (2), alongside non-compliance with legal regulations, oversight, funding distribution, and agency support (5,26). This can be observed in the statements of the informants:

> "…Agencies appear to be more business-oriented. There are no specific policies and regulations for social enterprises" (SE 2).
>
> "…Farmers are greatly affected by marketing issues. Act 141 is very powerful concerning cartels and middlemen. However, agencies only act as regulators. Agencies should be involved in operations; only then will farmers' issues be alleviated" (SE 3).

The Need for Social Entrepreneurs to Enhance Knowledge and Professional Attitudes

The level of professional skills, technology, entrepreneurship, and capacity development is fundamental for social entrepreneurs to bring about social change and innovation within the community. Farmers, especially small rural farmers and the elderly, generally possess low skill levels and limited access to information and technology. Furthermore, gaining farmers' trust in social entrepreneurship and the latest practices and technologies in agriculture is a challenge for social entrepreneurs. Additionally, demonstrating effective social impact is essential to gain trust, support, and assistance from government and private agencies, particularly in terms of funding, training, and infrastructure. Therefore, social entrepreneurs must prove their knowledge, advantages, and effectiveness in achieving social impact to succeed in social enterprises. Therefore, there is a need to improve professional attitudes in terms of work ethics, management practices, and strategic planning. Social entrepreneurs need

to enhance their entrepreneurial and management skills through formal training (24). This aims to boost their self-confidence in effective planning, thereby increasing trust among farmers, communities, and investors (20).

> "…It is essential to have knowledge and certification. Only then will farmers trust us" (SE 4).
>
> "…Knowledge is very important. I attend many paid courses and learn from friends. Only then are farmers interested in what we are doing" (SE 5).
>
> "…Even if I don't conduct large programs, my programs have impact, figures, numbers, and a good track record. When gaining the trust of agencies, they begin training with us. I have no capital, but could demonstrate the benefits to higher authorities. From there, agencies agree to provide funding assistance. Moreover, many institutions began offering support for the programs and training that we organize" (SE 1).
>
> "…When talking about crop management, farmers are sceptical. Therefore, we also need to attend courses, enhance our knowledge, share on Facebook, and be approachable. Only then will farmers and the community trust what we do" (SE 4).
>
> "…As social entrepreneurs, we need to change our mindset; we must automate, have SOPs, train staff and teams, so that this social enterprise can grow. We cannot do it alone" (SE 5).

Conclusion

The economic impact of innovation initiatives and entrepreneurship is still not fully clear. Thus, a paradigm shift in the agricultural system from a production-based economy to multifunctional agriculture through intensive approaches, innovation, and industrialization needs to be considered by social entrepreneurs and supported by stakeholders.

The strengthening of collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including institutional entities, private sector organizations, and social entrepreneurs, is an effective initiative for creating a more effective social system that promotes the welfare of smallholder farmers and local communities. This support network ecosystem will provide a platform for networking between social entrepreneurs, the government, and the private sector, enabling them to share knowledge, technologies, and business opportunities. This collaboration will enhance efficiency, create a more conducive environment for smallholder farmers in terms of agricultural management, marketing, income generation, and resilience. Ultimately, this will foster a prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable society, promoting the development of a sustainable food and agricultural supply chain with high social value. Clearly, addressing the issues and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in agriculture will contribute to the creation of an agricultural entrepreneurship ecosystem that aligns with the concept of Creating Shared Value.

Recommendation

To ensure the sustainability of social entrepreneurs and to cultivate and enhance the growth of social entrepreneurship in Malaysia, it is essential to establish a robust social entrepreneurship ecosystem.

The government must create a conducive social entrepreneurship environment by establishing clear and specific policies related to social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector. Emphasis should be placed on providing tax incentives, exemptions, or rebates for social entrepreneurs in recognition of their contributions to the social and economic welfare of the community. Furthermore, the government should draft legislation that provides protection and guarantees the rights of social entrepreneurs, particularly concerning land ownership, workers', rights, and access to sustainable agricultural resources and technologies. The issue of funding shortages among social entrepreneurs can be addressed by creating dedicated funds through government agencies and encouraging collaboration with financial institutions to offer low-interest loans or moratoriums, especially for newly established social enterprises. The government should also provide education and training to social entrepreneurs to enhance their knowledge and skills in agriculture and entrepreneurship, including business management and the use of agricultural technologies. To further strengthen social entrepreneurship involvement, the government could offer grants to support training and capacity development in sustainable agriculture and green

technologies. Additionally, the government must invest in essential infrastructure to support agricultural development and create e-commerce platforms to facilitate the widespread marketing of agricultural products.

To ensure the sustainability and success of social entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurs should focus on sustainable agricultural practices, such as organic farming, community-based agriculture, and the use of green technologies. This focus is crucial to ensure that the products produced offer social benefits to local communities, create employment opportunities for those in need, and promote the production of nutritious food. To achieve this, social entrepreneurs must continuously improve their knowledge of the latest technologies and modern agricultural techniques that can enhance productivity and reduce environmental impact. Additionally, developing innovative and effective marketing channels, such as digital marketing (e-commerce), social media marketing, and direct marketing to consumers or communities, should be strengthened. Building a strong brand that emphasizes social and environmental values in their products can attract consumers who are sensitive to social and environmental issues. Strengthening networks and collaboration through supply chain strategies can enhance and solidify long-term partnerships between social entrepreneurs, farmers, suppliers, and marketers. This collaboration will reduce competition, improve product quality and productivity, and result in cost savings in management.

Stakeholders such as the private sector and the community also play a crucial role in empowering social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector. Technical support, training, and financial assistance through funds or grants for long-term financing or partnerships in sustainable agricultural projects should be prioritized. Stakeholder involvement is essential for driving innovation in the social agricultural sector and introducing new technologies that can improve agricultural yields and minimize environmental impact. Support for marketing programs through retail networks and online platforms (e-commerce) can expand market reach. Furthermore, community development through education on the importance of sustainable agricultural practices and social agricultural products can raise awareness about the long-term benefits of supporting social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector.

Abbreviations

Nil.

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Author Contributions

Study design and data collection: Nazahah Rahim & Rosmiza MZ. Analysis and written of the manuscript: Rosmiza MZ.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have disclosed no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

The written informed consent forms were signed by all the subjects participating in the study.

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