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Social enterprises as agents of development policy alignment: Insights from South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 and Africa's Agenda 2063

Robert Mutemi Kajiita *, Simon Murote Kang'ethe

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, Humanities & Social Science, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa

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Abstract

Social enterprises are increasingly recognized as pivotal mechanisms for advancing sustainable development, with an emphasis on South Africa and selected examples from other African contexts. Both South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063 articulate comprehensive, ambitious strategies to transform Africa's socioeconomic landscape, with a strong emphasis on poverty eradication, employment creation, inclusive growth, and long-term human development. Positioned at the intersection of social purpose and entrepreneurial innovation, social enterprises possess institutional and operational attributes that can contribute to these development agendas. This study critically examines how social enterprises align with the core objectives of South Africa's NDP 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Drawing on a narrative literature review, the analysis indicates that social enterprises can support implementation of both policy frameworks through several pathways: employment and social value creation; expanded access to education and skills development; affordable healthcare provision; economic inclusion and poverty reduction; gender equality and social inclusion; and techno-social innovation. The paper offers a policy alignment mapping rather than an impact evaluation. The study concludes that social enterprises offer adaptable and context-responsive models that resonate with both national and continental priorities, and that their contribution depends on enabling policy and ecosystem conditions.

Keywords: Social enterprises; South Africa; National Development Plan 2030; Agenda 2063; Poverty alleviation; Employment; Inclusivity

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* Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* rkajiita@wsu.ac.za

1. Introduction

A sustained and critical discourse continues to shape the South African and broader African development landscape regarding viable, transformative, and sustainable pathways for realizing the ambitions articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063. The continent, and South Africa in particular, continues to grapple with entrenched and multifaceted socioeconomic challenges—including pervasive poverty, high unemployment, and persistent inequality—that have been extensively documented in contemporary scholarship (De Lannoy et al., 2020; Folarin, 2021; Francis and Webster, 2019; Kwenda et al., 2021; Mago, 2019; Meyer and Mncayi, 2021; Zizzamia, 2020). In response to these systemic constraints, successive development strategies have been conceptualized and implemented, culminating in the current long-term frameworks: South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Both frameworks seek to chart a coherent trajectory toward sustainable development through inclusive economic growth, employment expansion, and comprehensive social transformation (African Union Commission, 2015; National Planning Commission, 2012).

However, the realization of these transformative ambitions requires the participation of diverse developmental actors beyond the state. Among these, social enterprises have gained prominence for their distinctive capacity to integrate social impact objectives with entrepreneurial logics, thereby generating innovative and context-responsive solutions to structural development challenges (Dzomonda, 2020; Bansal et al., 2019; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025; Maseno and Wanyoike, 2020; Tortia et al., 2020). The foundational philosophies and hybrid operational models of social enterprises position them as strategic catalysts capable of accelerating progress toward the aspirations embedded within both NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063.

Accordingly, this study investigates the role of social enterprises within the context of these two policy frameworks, with particular emphasis on their potential to contribute to long-term and inclusive development outcomes in South Africa and across the African continent.

2. Contextualization of the study

2.1. An overview of South Africa's National Development Plan 2030

Since the inauguration of democratic governance in South Africa in 1994, the government has tested various development plans and programs to overcome poverty, unemployment, inequality, and other apartheid-related social ills. These programs and plans include the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA), The New Growth Path, and the current National Development Plan 2030 (the living document plan). The mantra for the NDP 2030 is 'Our Future - Make It Work', perhaps indicating the failures of previous programs and plans, hence the clarion call to make this one work.

The South Africa National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 is a comprehensive policy framework designed to address the country's critical socioeconomic challenges. Launched in 2012, the NDP 2030 aims to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 by uniting South Africans, unleashing the energy of its citizens, growing an inclusive economy, building capabilities, enhancing the state's capabilities, and leaders working together to solve complex problems (National Planning Commission, 2012). While developing this NDP 2030, South Africa acknowledged that its development status prior to 2012 would not achieve the objectives of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality. This plan envisions a South Africa where everyone feels free yet bound to others; where everyone embraces their full potential, a country where opportunity is determined not by birth, but by ability, education, and hard work. Nonetheless, realizing such a society will require transforming the economy and strategic efforts to build the country's capabilities. Henceforth, to eliminate poverty and reduce

inequality, the economy must grow faster and in ways that benefit all South Africans (National Planning Commission, 2012). In summary, by 2030, South Africa aims to be a society with the following:

- Reduced poverty and inequality (measured by income, access to services, and opportunities).
- An inclusive economy that creates jobs and fosters entrepreneurship.
- Improved quality of life through education, healthcare, housing, transport, and safety.
- A capable and developmental state driven by accountability and citizen participation.

Notably, the NDP 2030 is anchored by the following core pillars: economy and employment, which target a growth rate of 5% or higher per year to create 11 million jobs by 2030; and Education, Training, and Innovation, which aims to strengthen innovation, research, and development for a knowledge-based economy. The other core pillars are health, targeting universal access to quality healthcare; infrastructure, among other things focused on closing the infrastructural gaps that hinder inclusive growth; human settlements and spatial justice to accelerate the integrated, well-located settlements with affordable housing and efficient public transport; and social protection pillar to ensure a minimum standard of living through social security and safety nets, and protect vulnerable groups including children, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Additionally, the other pillars are governance and accountability, which, among other targets, aim to deepen democracy and citizen engagement; nation-building and social cohesion to spearhead unity across racial, cultural, and class divides; and build active citizenship and shared responsibility for development. Finally, the environment and sustainability pillar promotes the use of natural resources responsibly and balances development needs with ecological protection (National Planning Commission, 2012).

While the achievement of the objectives of the National Development Plan requires progress on a broad front, three priorities stand out, which are creating employment through faster economic growth; improving the quality of education, skills development, and innovation; and building the capability of the state to play a developmental, transformative role (National Planning Commission, 2012). In summary, the NDP 2030 is a blueprint for South Africa's transformation, striking a balance between economic growth, equity, and sustainability. It emphasizes that development is a collective responsibility that requires collaboration among government, business, labor, and citizens. Social enterprises, which often operate at the intersection of these areas, are increasingly seen as catalysts for achieving the NDP's objectives.

2.2. An overview of the African Union's Agenda 2063

From a Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance perspective, Agenda 2063 offers a robust framework for addressing past injustices and realizing the 21st-century aspirations of the African people, as reflected in the slogan '*the Africa we want*' (African Union Commission, 2015). Agenda 2063 is the African Union's strategic framework aimed at transforming Africa into a global powerhouse of the future. It serves as a 50-year blueprint (from 2013 to 2063) for inclusive and sustainable development across the continent. The framework seeks to actualize the Pan African vision of *"an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena."* (African Union Commission, 2015).

Launched in 2015, the African Union's Agenda 2063 is envisaged around seven key aspirations:

- A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development
- An integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance.
- An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law
- A peaceful and secure Africa
- An Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values, and ethics
- An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.

- Africa as a strong, united, and influential global player and partner.

For this study, we have focused on two aspirations: aspiration one and aspiration six. Under the first aspiration, the framework envisions eradicating poverty within one generation and building shared prosperity through the social and economic transformation of the continent, while driving its own development through sustainable and long-term stewardship of its resources (African Union Commission, 2015). Of great interest under this aspiration is the creation of structurally transformative economies that generate shared growth, decent jobs, and economic opportunities for all.

The Agenda 2063 envisions that African countries will be amongst the best performers in global quality of life measures, to be attained through strategies of inclusive growth, job creation, increasing agricultural production; investments in science, technology, research and innovation; gender equality, youth empowerment and the provision of basic services including health, nutrition, education, shelter, water and sanitation (African Union Commission, 2015).

Aspiration six aims for a continent where all citizens are actively involved in decision-making in all aspects of development. It envisions Africa as an inclusive continent where no child, woman, or man will be left behind or excluded on the basis of gender, political affiliation, religion, ethnic background, locality, age, or other factors (African Union Commission, 2015). Notably, the Agenda 2063 further envisions women's empowerment in all spheres, with equal social, political, and economic rights, including the rights to own and inherit property, sign contracts, register and manage businesses. Importantly, rural women will have access to productive assets: land, credit, inputs, and financial services (African Union Commission, 2015).

Moreover, the Agenda envisions that all forms of systemic inequalities, exploitation, marginalization, and discrimination of young people will be eliminated, and youth issues mainstreamed in all development agendas. Consequently, youth unemployment will be eliminated, and Africa's youth guaranteed full access to education, training, skills, and technology, health services, jobs and economic opportunities, recreational and cultural activities, as well as financial means and all necessary resources to allow them to realize their full potential (African Union Commission, 2015).

Finally, under aspiration six, youth and women are envisaged as pathbreakers of the African knowledge society, making significant contributions to innovation and entrepreneurship. The creativity, energy, and innovation of Africa's youth shall be the driving force behind the continent's political, social, cultural, and economic transformation. Therefore, Agenda 2063 envisions a continent free from poverty and inequality, with all citizens playing a central role in realizing this vision by addressing key issues such as youth unemployment, gender inequality, and inadequate healthcare and education systems.

2.3. Social enterprises as drivers of national and continental development

The social entrepreneurship paradigm is premised on three interrelated concepts: social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, and social entrepreneurs. This section outlines these concepts and examines how social enterprises influence development and foster wealth creation, aiming to achieve positive social transformation in South Africa, Africa, and globally.

The term social entrepreneurship is broadly defined as a theoretical and practical paradigm focused on identifying social factors contributing to poverty, marginalization, and exclusion (Abdul Kadir and Mhd Sarif, 2016). It involves entrepreneurial activities with a dominant social mission aimed at creating social value and achieving social change (Lorenzo-Afable et al., 2025; Pangriya, 2019; Stevens et al., 2015). This field has garnered increasing attention for its potential to mitigate complex social and environmental issues and drive transformative shifts towards social justice (Godwin et al., 2022). It represents a process of perceiving opportunities to create social value and establishing organizations to pursue these goals (Macke et al., 2018). The literature discourse often grapples with defining social entrepreneurship's theoretical boundaries, yet a

consensus is emerging on its core purpose: to blend economic efficiency with social purpose (Petrella and Richez-Battesti, 2014).

Social entrepreneurs are the key actors driving social entrepreneurship. They are widely regarded as change agents who implement direct interventions through innovative solutions designed to address the needs of populations experiencing social problems (Gertner, 2023). Motivated primarily by a social mission, these individuals integrate diverse forms of knowledge and practice to advance sustainable social change (Macke et al., 2018). Although pro-social motives are often central, research suggests that personal interests may also play a role in the establishment of social enterprises (Nidhin, 2024). Empirical evidence further indicates that early life experiences—such as childhood exposure to social entrepreneurial activities or parental involvement in similar initiatives—can positively shape an individual's inclination to engage in social entrepreneurship (Dickel et al., 2020).

A social enterprise is an organization that operates within the framework of social entrepreneurship, serving a social or environmental mission while often generating revenue to ensure financial viability (Hoefer and Sliva, 2016). Social enterprises refer to hybrid organizations that balance a social mission with commercial goals, often reinvesting a significant portion of their surpluses back into their mission (Armstrong and Grobbelaar, 2022). Social enterprises are seen as efficient and effective mechanisms for creating social value by addressing societal problems, exploiting complementarities with commercial activities, and providing better prices or quality to disadvantaged customers (Gertner, 2023). They are distinct from traditional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and conventional commercial enterprises, although the distinctions can sometimes be blurred (Galvin and Iannotti, 2014). From an institutional standpoint, the World Bank Group defines social enterprises as privately owned entities—whether for-profit, non-profit, or hybrid—that employ business strategies to fulfill social goals (Navarrete Moreno and Agapitova, 2017).

Literature offers several perspectives on the defining traits of social enterprises, many of which establish the philosophical underpinnings of social entrepreneurship (Dassah and Ngatse-Ipangui, 2019; Kajiita, 2022; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025; Waghid, 2019). According to Mandyoli et al. (2017), the seven core features of transformative social enterprises include a social mission, value creation, value capture, innovation, reinvestment of profits, measurable impact, and market-oriented operations. These can be grouped into two overarching themes: the pursuit of social value and the fulfillment of market-based needs. Hence, social enterprises function as mission-driven organizations that use market mechanisms to achieve social objectives. Considering South Africa's persistent challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Plagerson et al., 2019; Rogan and Reynolds, 2019), such enterprises play a pivotal role as agents of social change and transformation toward a more just and inclusive society (Kajiita, 2022; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025). Notably, the World Bank recognized South Africa as a continental leader in advancing social entrepreneurship, particularly within the Southern African region (Navarrete Moreno and Agapitova, 2017). The recognition by the World Bank highlights the significance of examining social enterprises within the South African context.

Social enterprises, whether structured as organizations or business entities, operate within the broader framework of social entrepreneurship, which encompasses the processes and ideologies that institutions and businesses adopt to achieve both social and economic objectives (Esau and Tengeh, 2022; Meyer and Sroka, 2021). According to the literature, social entrepreneurship operates through a dual approach that encompasses input transformation and transformation-output activities, signifying the interdependence of value chains within social enterprises (Farinha et al., 2020; Manyaka-Boshielo, 2017; Meyer and Sroka, 2021; Urban and Gaffurini, 2018). The input dimension involves marketing efforts directed at mobilizing resources and creating financial mechanisms that attract investments into social enterprises, while the output dimension focuses on developing products and services that address customer needs sustainably and ethically through fair trade principles (Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021; Yunus, 2008). This dual framework differentiates

social enterprises from traditional for-profit and non-profit entities within the context of wealth creation and distribution. Considering South Africa's pressing socioeconomic issues such as unemployment, inequality, and poverty, alternative development models like social enterprises are gaining prominence (Esau and Tengeh, 2022; Gordon, 2017; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2025; Littlewood and Holt, 2018; Urban and Kujinga, 2017a, 2017b).

Philosophically, Kajiita and Kang'ethe (2025) connect social entrepreneurship with socialist ideals, arguing that social enterprises value human autonomy and collective empowerment. They further indicate that the products and services of social enterprises embody the competencies and aspirations of their members, while aiming to reduce inequality, exploitation, alienation, and inefficiency in traditional market systems (Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025). In South Africa, social enterprises are often understood through an African communitarian lens, emphasizing collective well-being, shared resources, and mutual responsibility (Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2021, 2025; Kajiita, 2022). This perspective reflects both a welfarist philosophy and a commercial innovation strategy tailored to respond to market limitations (Navarrete Moreno and Agapitova, 2017; Littlewood and Holt, 2018; World Bank Group, 2017). Like socialist thinkers, social entrepreneurs advocate for equality, democracy, personal freedom, self-fulfillment, and community cohesion (Kajiita, 2022; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025). These ideals underscore the ethical obligation individuals have to support and care for others. This sentiment aligns with Cohen (2009, p. 34), who insists that people should "care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and care that they care about one another." Further, this embodies the essence of Ubuntu, an Afrocentric philosophy that Africans are encouraged to uphold and reinforce (Kang'ethe, 2023, 2024).

Consequently, South Africa's growing commitment to social entrepreneurship reflects its potential to tackle the deep-rooted issues of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and exclusion, which are legacies of historical injustices (Gordon, 2017; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a; Kajiita, 2022; Littlewood and Holt, 2018; World Bank Group, 2017). This underscores that social enterprises are fundamentally guided by philosophies aligning social purpose with market viability, creating both economic and societal value. Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises are primarily driven by social entrepreneurs, who can be categorized as social bricoleurs, social engineers, and social constructionists (Smith and Stevens, 2010). Social bricoleurs collaborate closely with communities to identify and address local challenges such as access to water, food, or internet, by transforming underutilized local assets into productive ventures that generate income and community wealth (Mandyoli et al., 2017).

Social engineers, by contrast, tackle broader systemic problems, such as inequality and poverty, by reconfiguring institutional structures to create more socially efficient systems, exemplified by Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank's microfinance model (Khandker, 1996; Zahra et al., 2009). Meanwhile, social constructionists focus on creating social value through opportunity-driven innovation, recognizing that individuals shape their realities and developmental paths according to their needs (Manyaka, 2015; Khandker, 1996; Zahra et al., 2009). In South Africa, emerging social entrepreneurs operate across diverse sectors, such as agriculture, health, technology, and textiles, highlighting the multifaceted nature of social entrepreneurship and its potential to advance inclusive socioeconomic development (Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b; Kajiita, 2022).

Generally, therefore, social enterprises are defined, conceptualized, and contextualized within the framework of a process, institution, and an individual. Aligning with that framework, therefore, social enterprise is described as the process of identifying, evaluating and exploiting opportunities to create social value that can occur within or across the non-profit, private for-profit and public sectors, and involves innovative hybrid organizations that engage in 'the dual mission of financial sustainability and social purpose (Doherty et al., 2014; Hlady-Rispal and Servantie, 2018). Investors in social enterprises prioritize social value

over economic value, even as they seek innovative ways to diversify and sustain their revenue streams (Navarrete Moreno and Agapitova, 2017; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2021, 2025). With these ideals, social enterprises are critical drivers of national and international development plans; hence, the need for research studies like this.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a narrative literature review, which serves as a comprehensive summary and synthesis of existing research on a specific topic (Chong and Plonsky, 2023). This methodological approach enables researchers to provide an overview of the current state of knowledge, identify gaps in the literature, and establish a foundation for further research (Rozas and Klein, 2010). Unlike systematic reviews, traditional reviews allow for a broader, more subjective exploration of the topic and for the interpretation of findings within emerging themes. Given the limited research on the alignment of social enterprises with development visions and policies, such as the NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063, a narrative review was employed.

The process began with the formulation of a research question: how do social enterprises align with the South African NDP 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063? This was followed by an exploration of the literature to gain an overview and identify broad themes. As such, the researchers carefully and critically analyzed the South African NDP 2030, the African Union Agenda 2063, and the literature on social enterprises.

Literature on social enterprise was retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, with a primary focus on studies from South Africa and the African continent. Studies published between 2010 and 2025 were prioritized to provide a wide scope of analysis. Some of the key terms used in the search were 'social enterprise in South Africa', 'social enterprise and NDP 2030', 'social enterprise and Agenda 2063', 'social enterprise and inclusivity', and 'social enterprise and empowerment.'

After the search, literature filtering, and quality evaluation were done. While systematic reviews apply unified standards for filtering and a strict evaluation process for study quality, traditional reviews may filter literature based on the author's interests and evaluate quality through qualitative description rather than strict, unified standards (Chong and Plonsky, 2023; Gusenbauer and Gauster, 2025). This flexibility allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the findings.

After gathering, screening, and evaluating the literature for quality, the synthesis of themes and concepts was conducted by summarizing core findings and identifying primary areas studied based on the previous literature, without necessarily following a rigid protocol for study selection or quantitative synthesis. The overall findings were presented thematically, and a subsequent discussion aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and identify possible gaps. This study contributes to the debate on the need for development actors and policies to adopt and promote inclusive, equity-based, and people-centered investment models.

However, some limitations ensue, including a focus on the two developmental frameworks: the South African NDP 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063. Moreover, as this is a narrative review, the interpretations are context- and expertise-based and may not be generalized to other contexts. As such, there is a need for future empirical studies on the subject.

4. Findings

Table 1 presents a thematic mapping of how social enterprises align with selected priorities in NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063. The themes come from a narrative synthesis of the two policy documents and the peer-reviewed

literature described in Section 3. The paper does not treat cited examples as causal proof. Instead, it uses them to illustrate where the literature and the policy texts converge, and where gaps and constraints remain.

Table 1. Policy alignment matrix linking NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063 to social enterprise roles

Shared priority theme	NDP 2030 link (pillar/priority)	Agenda 2063 link (aspiration/goal)	Social enterprise role (mechanism)
Employment and livelihoods	Jobs / inclusive economy	Aspiration 1	Direct employment; enterprise support; market access
Education and skills	Education / training / innovation	Aspiration 1 + Aspiration 6	Training, apprenticeships, youth support
Health access	Health	Aspiration 1	Primary care delivery; affordable access models
Poverty and inclusion	Social protection / inequality	Aspiration 6	Inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities
Innovation and technology	Innovation / R&D	Aspiration 1	Digital skills; service delivery innovation

Globally, South Africa notwithstanding, social enterprises are strategically positioned to advance key development priorities outlined in frameworks such as the South African NDP 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063. The reviewed literature indicates that social enterprises strongly support the shared goals of NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063, particularly in areas such as job creation, reducing inequality, enhancing inclusivity, strengthening education and skills development, alleviating poverty, and fostering innovation that drives social transformation. The following themes allude to this observation.

4.1. Jobs and social value creation

High unemployment rates in Africa, including South Africa, are significant obstacles to transformative social and economic development. As such, one of the priority objectives of NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063 is to create jobs and address the high unemployment rate. Literature indicates that social enterprises and the holistic ecosystem of social entrepreneurship play a significant role in creating jobs, especially for marginalized groups such as women, youth, and people with disabilities (Akinboade et al., 2023; Dzomonda, 2021; Gupta et al., 2020; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2025; Saebi et al., 2019; Torres and Augusto, 2020). The 2020 British Council survey of social enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) describes their contribution to creating job opportunities in three distinct ways, which are providing education by running schools or working with young people to give them the skills they need to gain and create decent jobs; directly creating jobs themselves, providing employment or self-employment opportunities; and supporting entrepreneurship either by enabling others to start enterprises or supporting existing businesses to increase the quality and quantity of jobs they provide (Richardson et al., 2020).

To contextualize these findings, the survey revealed that 78% of social enterprises prioritised job creation, compared with only 27% of profit-oriented businesses. Furthermore, 73% of social enterprises intentionally employed individuals from low-income communities, whereas only 56% of profit-first enterprises did so (Richardson et al., 2020). Across sub-Saharan Africa, social enterprises are estimated to have created between 28 million and 41 million direct jobs, underscoring their substantial contribution to regional employment (Richardson et al., 2020). These trends suggest that, in the absence of social enterprises, many of the individuals they employ would likely remain unemployed or be confined to precarious and exploitative labour conditions.

Collectively, these findings highlight the significant potential and demonstrated capacity of social enterprises to support the realisation of key objectives within South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063, particularly in relation to reducing unemployment and expanding access to decent work opportunities. Notably, the British Council survey further reported that registered small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across sub-Saharan Africa employed an average of two people, whereas social enterprises employed an average of 21 individuals (Richardson et al., 2020). This comparison highlights the significant and intentional role that social enterprises play in promoting job creation and generating social value across the continent.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines decent work as work that sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives, and involves work opportunities that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace, social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives (International Labour Organization, 2025). Based on this definition, most work opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa do not yet fit the standard of decent work. Thus, both NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063 aspire to promote decent work. Literature indicates that decent work encompasses more than just income and job security; it also fosters self-esteem, social identity, and a sense of belonging within society (ILO, 2025). Conversely, unemployment is associated with adverse outcomes such as loss of social status, reduced access to social networks, and feelings of disempowerment, which may contribute to social exclusion and disengagement from public institutions. As such, social enterprises are playing a critical role, both directly and indirectly, in enhancing good citizenship and good governance in South Africa and Africa at large through social and economic emancipation (Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b).

4.2. Accelerating access to education and skills development

Another priority area for the South African NDP 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063 is improving the quality of education and expanding access to skills development. While examining the operations of social enterprises in South Africa and worldwide, this vision is supported by providing school materials and access to children in underprivileged communities (Maseno and Wanyoike, 2020). For instance, according to a 2020 survey by the British Council, 50% of social enterprises reported providing training and development for their staff five times a year, compared to 26% of purely commercial businesses (Richardson et al., 2020). This highlights that social enterprises are indeed driving a strategic and transformative agenda that aligns smoothly with the critical aspirations of the NDP 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063.

Moreover, investment in education is widely regarded as one of the most effective long-term measures that South Africa and other African countries can undertake to create the conditions for increasing the number of decent jobs, addressing inequality, and reducing poverty (Fauzi et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2020). This is possible through private schools operating on a social enterprise model, which facilitates access to high-quality education where public education is inadequate (Ko and Liu, 2021). High-quality education and training ensure that South Africans possess the skills necessary to create jobs and drive the country's and the continent's visionary development plans.

4.3. Enhancing access to quality healthcare

The NDP 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063 envision universal access to quality healthcare for all people. Social enterprises in the healthcare sector, such as *Unjani Clinics*, provide affordable and accessible healthcare services in underserved communities, helping to bridge the gap in public health services. This aligns with Richardson et al.'s (2020) findings, which indicate that 44% of social enterprises in their study aimed to improve community welfare, compared to 10% of commercial businesses.

4.4. Drivers of economic growth and poverty alleviation

The literature synthesis indicates that social enterprises align with the broad aspirations of Agenda 2063 and NDP 2030 by driving inclusive growth, fostering innovation, and promoting people-centered development (Folarin, 2021; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b, 2025; Manyaka-Boshielo, 2017; Meyer and Sroka, 2021; Zizzamia, 2020). Collectively, these studies indicate that social enterprises play a crucial role in creating sustainable livelihoods by focusing on economic inclusion and supporting marginalized communities (Ndlovu and Lefera, 2024). Social enterprises like M-KOPA, which provide affordable solar energy solutions in East Africa, help alleviate energy poverty while promoting economic growth by enabling households to save on energy costs (Maseno and Wanyoike, 2020). According to Richardson et al. (2020), sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) needs to create between 600 and 800 million jobs by 2050 to keep pace with the growing population, and this is where the role of social enterprises becomes indispensable.

Notably, the compounding challenges on employment in South Africa and Africa at large are the quality of jobs created. A 2020 survey by the British Council reported that many jobs fell short of the ILO's definition of 'decent work' (Richardson et al., 2020). This is because some workers are paid below the minimum wage, and many lack job security or safe working conditions (Richardson et al., 2020). Even though low-paid employment can mitigate extreme poverty, in the context of job creation and improving people's well-being, the ambition should be to create decent jobs with a sustainable living wage that caters to basic needs and development aspects of life. This is critically important for stimulating the local economy and creating more jobs within local ecosystems.

In spearheading the achievement of NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063, social enterprises play a crucial role in supporting other businesses to scale up and venture into social impact investment (Akinboade et al., 2023; Barnard, 2019; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2021; Islam, 2020). For instance, some social enterprises have become instrumental in supporting the business trajectories, such as business ideation and incubation, growth, and development (Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020b, 2025). The Clothing Bank in South Africa is a notable example of a social enterprise that trains approximately 1,000 women annually to become self-employed traders and establish small to medium-sized businesses. Other examples include Solar Sister in Nigeria, which trains women to become green-tech entrepreneurs. FRAISEN, a social enterprise in Senegal, aims to train over 10,000 youth in strawberry farming by 2025. Kuza, operating in Kenya and Mozambique, has focused on 'agripreneurs' to support 525,500 farmers (Richardson et al., 2020). In the context of growing the economy and alleviating poverty, each of these social enterprises could employ a small number of people directly, but has excellent potential to create thousands to millions of jobs by supporting self-employment, new business start-ups, and business growth. This observation aligns with the literature that the real contribution of social enterprise is in the people it provides jobs for, such as people from poor communities or underserved sections of the population, that is, women, youth, and people with disabilities (Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021; Hockerts, 2017; Sinclair et al., 2018; Urban and Kujinga, 2017a, 2017b).

4.5. Agents of gender equality and inclusivity

The South African NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063 aspire for an equitable and inclusive society. Literature on social enterprises shows that they contribute to gender equality by empowering women through education, entrepreneurship, and access to financial services (Gupta et al., 2020; Hlady-Rispal and Servantie, 2018; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b; Lortie et al., 2017). Moreover, the 2020 British Council survey indicated that social enterprises employ a proportionally higher number of women than the private sector across countries (Richardson et al., 2020). This was demonstrated by 41% of social enterprises having a woman in charge compared to only 27% purely commercial businesses. Moreover, the report indicated that 57% of social enterprises paid their highest-paid worker above the defined living wage for that country, and 76% would give at least one month's notice before making an employee redundant, compared to only 61% of purely

commercial businesses (Richardson et al., 2020). These statistics indicate the unique commitment of social enterprises to driving equality and inclusiveness, hence improving the living standards of the people they serve.

Empowerment constitutes a fundamental principle in advancing equality and inclusivity. Existing research demonstrates that social enterprises play a pivotal role in supporting youth through mentorship initiatives aimed at enhancing employability and facilitating the development of entrepreneurial ventures (Ashraf et al., 2019; Hidalgo et al., 2021; Lang and Fink, 2019). A notable example is the *ZuluGal* Retro Art Company, a South African social enterprise that works with individuals living with disabilities and special educational needs by equipping them with craft-based skills that enable sustainable income generation (Richardson et al., 2020). Through such targeted interventions, social enterprises contribute meaningfully to broader national and continental agendas promoting inclusivity, empowerment, and the realization of a more equitable society.

4.6. Engineers and incubators of techno-social innovation

To align with advances in technology development, Agenda 2063 and NDP 2030 emphasize the role of technology in Africa's and South Africa's development strategy. In pursuit of technology advancement, social enterprises like Andela, which trains software developers in Nigeria and Kenya, align with this vision by equipping African youth with the skills needed to participate in the global digital economy. Notably, other social enterprises are advocating for and providing technology modules in early education systems to train in core skills such as coding and entrepreneurship (Richardson et al., 2020; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2020b). These steps ensure that the current generation in Africa is techno-savvy, driving sustainable and transformative innovations that support national, regional, and global development agendas.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the growing significance of social enterprises as complementary actors within Africa's evolving development landscape. Situated at the intersection of social purpose and entrepreneurial innovation, social enterprises occupy strategic spaces where state and market mechanisms have historically struggled to produce inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Their contributions across multiple domains—employment creation, human development, poverty reduction, gender equality, and technological innovation—strongly align with the transformative ambitions articulated in South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The findings indicate that social enterprises can effectively contribute to both frameworks by addressing shared priorities such as unemployment, inequality, and access to basic services (Dzomonda, 2020; Folarin, 2021; Francis and Webster, 2019; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025; Mseleku, 2022; Meyer and Sroka, 2021; Wakefield et al., 2020). In South Africa, the roles, activities, and investments of social enterprises smoothly align with the NDP's focus on economic inclusion. At the same time, at the continental level, they contribute to the broader goals of Agenda 2063 by promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and people-driven development (Bansal et al., 2019; Farinha et al., 2020; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2025; Maseno and Wanyoike, 2020). This is possible because social enterprises are purpose-driven and deliberate in generating social impact, aligning with national, regional, and international development agendas, such as the NDP 2030 and the Agenda 2063. A study by Kajiita and Kang'ethe (2025) demonstrates that philosophies within social enterprises provide a moral compass, innovation, leadership, and investment framework for addressing the daunting socioeconomic challenges in South Africa and beyond, as well as the aspirations envisioned in the NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063. Therefore, the social enterprise, aware of the limitations of traditional development paradigms, provides alternative pathways for socioeconomic advancement (Doherty and Kittipanya-Ngam, 2021; Esau and Tengeh, 2022; Tortia et al., 2020). However, although social enterprises may outperform traditional enterprises in creating jobs with stronger social returns, their capacity remains modest

when assessed against the structural scale of unemployment across the continent. In this sense, their role is catalytic rather than transformative in isolation, pointing to the need for integrated development systems capable of scaling inclusive employment.

Like the founding principles of social enterprises, both the NDP 2030 and the Agenda 2063 are people-centric, pro-empowering, and pro-innovation. Social enterprises and their concomitant ecosystem support these principles by committing to prioritizing the well-being of the communities they serve (Akinboade et al., 2023; Fowler et al., 2019; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2021), promoting ownership and inclusivity through active partnerships and collaborations (Canestrino et al., 2020; Coker et al., 2017; Lang and Fink, 2019), and embracing technology to advance services and products for social good (Adro and Fernandes, 2021; Fauzi et al., 2022; Torres and Augusto, 2020). However, for social enterprises to actualize the aspirations of these national and regional development plans and Agendas, a supportive ecosystem is critically necessary through policy, research, and corporate engagements (Cardella et al., 2021; Coker et al., 2017; Sahasranamam and Nandakumar, 2020; Seda and Ismail, 2020). This is imperative because relying on non-state actors for essential public services without deliberate integration risks normalizing state withdrawal and resulting in fragmented service ecosystems.

The NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063 seek to transform the socioeconomic well-being of South Africa and Africans, respectively. Literature on social entrepreneurship in South Africa and across the African continent (Akinboade et al., 2023; Dzomonda, 2020; Esau and Tengeh, 2022; Maseno and Wanyoike, 2020; Meyer and Sroka, 2021) has evidenced that social enterprises create producers, employees, employers, consumers, and income, hence creating avenues for economic inclusion, transformative, and sustainable development. Notably, social enterprises facilitate the creation and circulation of wealth within local communities through value generation, value capture, value sharing, and value retention, all of which favor the redistribution of resources towards equality and inclusive development (Chandra, 2017; Kajiita and Kang'ethe, 2020a, 2021, 2025). These values are critical in building resilience against socioeconomic shocks and adverse social change. Nonetheless, a critical question remains: can these enterprises generate employment at the scale required to meet NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063 targets? Despite literature indicating the creation of about 41 million jobs in SSA, the projected need for up to 800 million additional jobs by 2050 suggests a gap that social enterprises alone cannot bridge. This underscores the importance of situating social enterprises within a broader developmental ecosystem rather than treating them as substitutes for state intervention.

6. Limitations

This study uses a narrative synthesis, so it does not estimate effect sizes or test causal impacts. Several claims in Section 4 draw on literature evidence, including the British Council survey reporting. Such sources rely on self-reported organizational data and vary in sampling and country coverage. The paper, therefore, treats these data as indicators of potential patterns rather than definitive measurements of development impact. Future research can extend this mapping using comparable outcome indicators and country-level datasets.

7. Conclusion

The findings highlight the growing prominence of social enterprises as complementary actors within Africa's evolving development architecture. From a development policy perspective, social enterprises appear to occupy strategic spaces where state and market mechanisms have struggled to generate inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Their contributions to job creation—particularly for marginalized groups—demonstrate the potential of hybrid organizations to mitigate labour market exclusion and advance the employment ambitions of NDP 2030 and Agenda 2063. However, despite notable achievements, the scale of

unemployment across the continent indicates that social enterprises cannot, on their own, meet the structural demand for decent jobs. Their impact could best be understood as catalytic rather than transformative in isolation.

Similarly, the role of social enterprises in promoting access to education, skills development, and healthcare aligns with human development approaches that emphasize expanding individual capabilities. By filling gaps left by under-resourced public systems, these enterprises enhance community well-being and strengthen local resilience. Yet this raises broader policy questions about the long-term implications of relying on non-state actors to deliver essential services. Concerningly, overreliance on non-state actors may unintentionally normalize state withdrawal unless accompanied by deliberate policy frameworks that integrate and support social enterprises within public systems.

In economic inclusion and poverty alleviation, social enterprises contribute meaningfully through value chain development, entrepreneurship support, and innovative service provision. These interventions resonate with the structural transformation agenda of Agenda 2063. Nonetheless, entrepreneurship-driven models risk shifting structural burdens onto individuals without addressing systemic constraints such as unequal market access or infrastructure deficits. Their success, therefore, hinges on enabling environments shaped by state capacity, policy coherence, and coordinated developmental governance.

The analysis further shows that social enterprises advance gender equality and social inclusion by intentionally empowering women, youth, and persons with disabilities. While this aligns with policy commitments to equity and inclusive growth, sustained progress requires broader structural reforms that extend beyond organizational-level interventions. Finally, the contribution of social enterprises to techno-social innovation positions them as important actors in Africa's digital transformation. However, without inclusive digital policies and infrastructural investment, such innovation may benefit only a limited segment of the population.

In conclusion, the findings highlight social enterprises as essential yet insufficient drivers of long-term transformation. They offer flexible, context-responsive mechanisms that reinforce national and continental development goals, but their impact could be maximized only within supportive policy ecosystems that integrate state, market, and civil society roles.

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