



## Impact of Entrepreneurial Ecosystem on Sustainable Social Enterprises – A Mixed-Methods Research

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**Abstract:** The main objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by social entrepreneurs concerning the social entrepreneurial ecosystem that exists in India and suggest policy recommendations to create an enabling environment for budding social entrepreneurs. In the Indian context, there is a dearth of studies related to the entrepreneurial ecosystem. A country's start-up environment is crucial to ensure enterprises are sustainable in the long term, which contributes tremendously to the economic growth of a country. It follows a mixed-methods approach which combines qualitative and quantitative analysis. For qualitative analysis, data has been collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews of founders and co-founders of 12 social enterprises having a Pan-India presence. The coding process was followed to identify the themes and the shared essence of what all of them had in common was identified. Quantitative analysis was conducted for data triangulation through stakeholders' analysis concerning the themes identified from qualitative analysis to develop a structured equation model using Smart PLS. 205 responses were collected from various stakeholder groups including customers, donors, government associates and others through a structured questionnaire. The findings suggest that the Indian scenario for the availability of finance and implementation of policies has made a lot of progress in the past few years but still, there is a long way to go. Finance is not easily available as banks require collateral security and private partners contribute towards social enterprises with their agenda to be satisfied. Follow-up action on policies formulated is necessary. Marketing mechanism needs to be strengthened through communication and awareness about the products and services offered and the social impact they create, social media platforms if utilized effectively can prove to be very effective. Support facilities in the form of infrastructure connecting distant villages need improvement, training and communication through incubators and accelerator programs have proved to be very effective. Universities in collaboration with government agencies can set up incubation centres providing the required support to the students thereby inculcating in them a social entrepreneurial culture which can help in building specialised human capital willing to work in social enterprises.

### Introduction

In every economy, a section of society does not even have access to the basic amenities of life. The provision of basic facilities to them in the form of food, clothing, shelter, education for children and employment opportunities to sustain themselves and their families is

crucial for the balanced growth of an economy. Social enterprises and their founders, termed social entrepreneurs, work in this regard to create an impact by addressing the concerns of society in an organized manner. The report released by the World Economic Forum in 2024 on "The State of Social Enterprise: A



Review of Global Data” in collaboration with Bertelsmann Foundation highlighted that out of 10 million global enterprises, 3.5 million belong to India & China. They have successfully created 200 million jobs across various sectors. Nations have started attempting to integrate sustainability principles with their policies and at the same time, enterprises are considering practices that positively impact sustainability (Mehra, 2024). For instance, when they function while keeping environmental risks in view, it enables them to gain a competitive advantage in the long run (Mehra, 2024).

In 1972, Banks introduced the term “Social entrepreneur” concerning management, highlighting Robert Owen's work in this field of study (Banks, 1972). Social entrepreneurship is defined as an activity where the intentions of an entrepreneur are to create a social impact and sustainability is given equal importance. “Social” refers to the well-being of people and communities belonging to the society, and “sustainable” refers to the well-being of keeping environmental issues in view and ensuring that future generations are not deprived of environmental resources. Both the terms are related to each other and create public value (Johnson and Schaltegger, 2020). Practising sustainability through the creation of social wellness has a positive impact on financial incentives for enterprises (Verma and Bharti, 2023).

It is when innovation is put into practice in the form of non-profit institutions, co-operatives, community institutions, for-profit enterprises or hybrid models wherein the main motive is to sustain in the long run. For this purpose, various income generation strategies are executed to bring about social as well as environmental changes (Mair and Rathert, 2020; Farhoud et al., 2023). In developed economies, prioritizing social issues is practised and the area is extensively worked upon. There is a lot of scope in emerging economies to adapt to the practices of developed countries using their own innovation and creative abilities and identify their relevance in the development of their economy (Sengupta and Sahay, 2018). Micro-enterprises enable the growth of rural and urban areas through community empowerment by providing jobs and livelihood, education, awareness etc. (Moirangleima, 2016; Bharti and Verma, 2023).

Nations are focussing on achieving Sustainable Development Goals and the role of social enterprises in achieving SDGs has been recognised by them. SDGs focus on the need to use the expertise available in the local regions of the country and their ability to adapt themselves to the circumstances and come out with innovative solutions. There is a need to reflect on issues

thoroughly and theoretically (Singh, 2023). They can balance the financial outcomes and social impact, bringing positive societal and environmental changes. This makes lasting improvements in the various domains of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, making it attractive for self-sustaining enterprises and increasing their number at the same time (Singh, 2023).

In the year 2023-24, a report issued by Global Entrepreneurship Monitor highlighted India as one of the best countries in the world to take up entrepreneurial activity. Since the early 2000s, India has witnessed a massive growth in the number of social enterprises that are working for society to eliminate social stigmas from the communities in a phased manner. This way, they can contribute to the economic growth and development of the country (Ambati, 2019). Under section 135 of The Companies Act, 2013, a provision was made for Corporate Social Responsibility, which made it mandatory for companies to contribute a portion of their profits towards social causes. It was considered a breakthrough for Indian social entrepreneurs as the regulation tremendously benefited them.

An interplay of various factors like cultural & societal norms, policies & regulations, infrastructure facilities etc. that work together and create an environment for entrepreneurs to function together is termed an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Roundy, 2017). It plays a crucial role in the economic growth of a country. The four studies on ecosystems which have been studied the most are business (Moore, 1993), innovation (Adner, 2006), entrepreneurial (Isenberg, 2010; Malhotra et al., 2023) and knowledge (Catala et al., 2023). Ecosystem studies for not-for-profit enterprises, cooperatives and social enterprises have hardly been conducted. It has been interesting to study how external elements can help institutions grow and increase their market activity (Farhoud, 2023).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem model suggested by Isenberg in 2011 constituted six domains in the form of Policies, Finance, Support, Human Capital, Culture and Markets (Gąsiorek, 2019; Gawel, 2019). They all work together and affect each other's functioning. The efficiency of one impacts the performance of another category of factors. Scholars are paying a lot of attention to the term ecosystem and entrepreneurial ecosystem (Qian and Acs, 2023). Despite having a lack of consensus on the meaning of the term, globally policymakers have incorporated the concept in their policies and practices (Catala et al., 2023).

There is a lack of research on the ecosystem that exists in India concerning social enterprises. This study aims to

**Table 1. Sample for qualitative study.**

Social Enterprise	Sector	Year of Inception	Places of Operation
SE1	Governance, Education, Child & Youth Development	2012	Delhi, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu
SE2	Crafts, Employment, Textiles	2015	Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra
SE3	Education, Child & Youth Development, Employment, Gender, Human Rights	2010	Gurgaon, Bhiwadi, Hyderabad
SE4	Employment, Livelihood, Rural Communities	2016	Delhi, Meghalaya
SE5	Communication, E-Commerce, Rural BPO	2011	Delhi – NCR, Bijnore, Western Uttar Pradesh
SE6	Child & Youth Development, Women Empowerment, Health, Vocational Training	2011	Delhi, Kashmir
SE7	Waste Management, Environment	2010	Delhi - NCR
SE8	Technology, Energy, Environment	2014	Delhi, Hyderabad, Coimbatore, Calicut, Noida
SE9	Child & Youth Development, Education	2017	Delhi
SE10	Mentoring, Training, Youth Development	2007	Bangaluru, Hyderabad, Delhi, Mumbai, Pune
SE11	Health, Empowerment, Awareness	1991	Delhi
SE12	Communities, Governance, Technology, Capacity Building	2015	Delhi, Lucknow, Nagaland

identify the domain-specific ecosystem challenges that Indian social entrepreneurs face and how an improvement can improve the performance of these social entrepreneurs, making them sustainable in the long term. The research aims to suggest effective policy recommendations to ensure the future performance of the ecosystem is effective and improved.

### Materials and Methods

Mixed-methods research has been followed for the study. It is suitable in cases where different perspectives need to be studied (Andrew and Halcomb, 2012). The social entrepreneurial ecosystem has different stakeholders like founders, donors, customers, investors, government etc. whose perspective needs to be studied while studying about the ecosystem. In planning mixed methods procedures, the four important aspects that have been taken into consideration are listed below:

#### Timing

In any research, the researcher needs to focus on the timing of qualitative and quantitative data collection. It can be either in phases, known as sequential data

collection or it can be gathered at the same time, known as concurrent (Creswell, 2009). In the current study, first, qualitative data has been collected followed by quantitative data. Therefore, sequential data collection has been followed.

#### Weighting

According to Creswell, the second aspect that needs to be considered is the weightage or the priority that is to be given to qualitative and quantitative research. The current study is an exploratory study, so more weight has been given to qualitative research. It was more focused on generating themes in the qualitative data collected.

#### Mixing

How the data is mixed in a study has received considerable recent attention (Creswell and Clark, 2007). The process is known as integrating. For the study, data has been integrated to conclude the results of the research at the interpretation stage.

#### Theorizing or Transforming Perspectives

The process of theorizing is to bring theories, frameworks and hunches to the inquiries of the

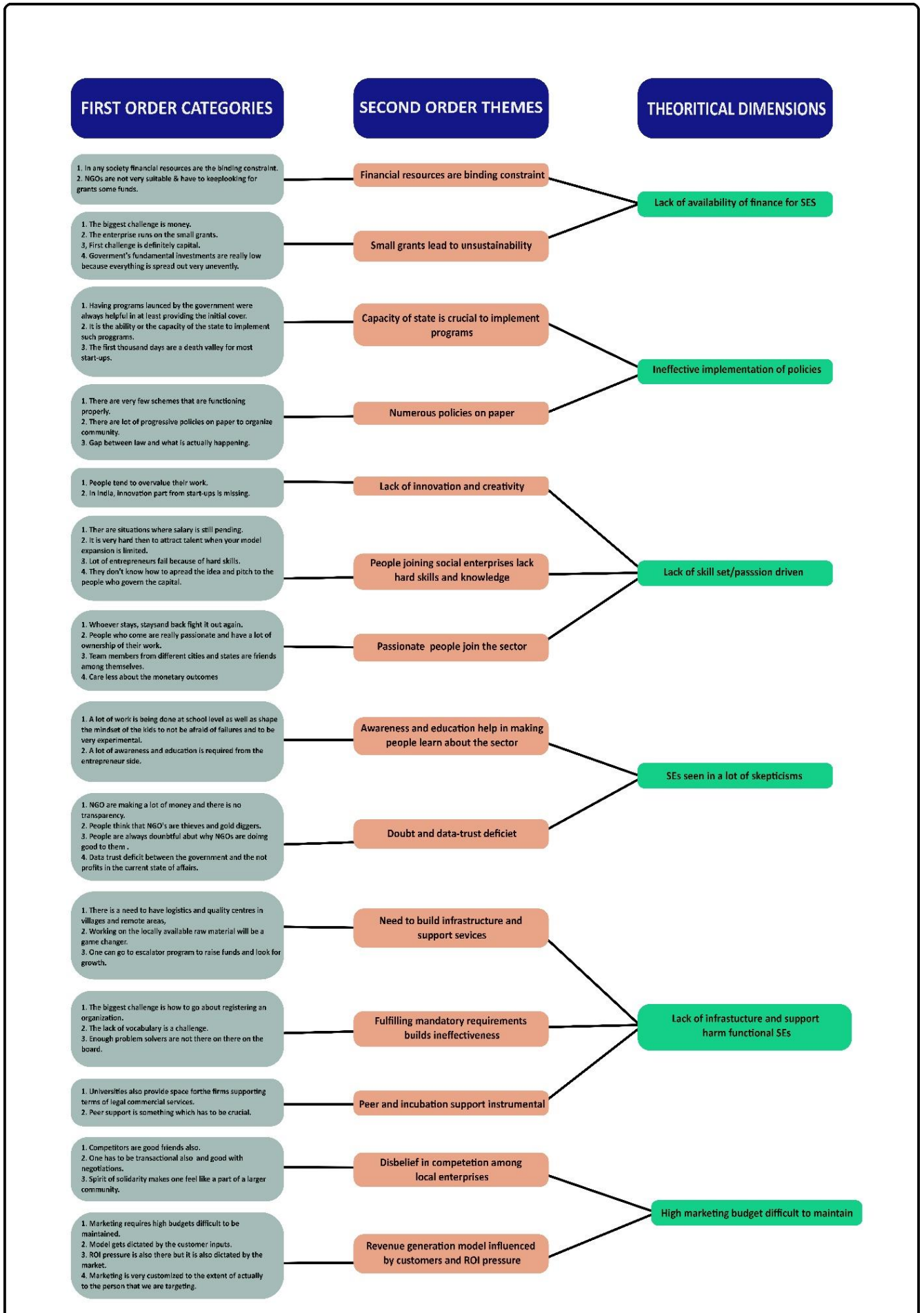


Figure 1. Mapping the Indian Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystem.

**Table 2. Items and Constructs.**

Constructs	Items	Statements
Social Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Variables		
Accessible Finance & Policy Structure	F1	Availability of Finance
	F2	Ease of Starting Social Enterprise
	F3	Effective implementation of policies
Human Capital	HC1	Attractive job profile
	HC2	Attractive Salaries
	HC3	Role of education in creating successful social entrepreneurs
Markets	M1	Quality of products
	M2	Social Media Ad Campaigns
	M3	Competition
Support	S1	Availability of Advisors and Mentors
	S2	Availability of Professional Services
	S3	Incubation & Peer Network Support
Culture	C1	Positive Image of SEs
	C2	Research & Innovation Culture
	C3	Success stories & role models
Successful Social Enterprises	SSE1	Community Empowerment
	SSE2	Market Share
	SSE3	Resource Mobilization

researcher and then these are used as a basis for further enquiries. In the current study, the framework that has been used as the basis for inquiries is the Entrepreneurial ecosystem model given by Isenberg (2011). Using the model as the basis, further enquiries have been made related to the domains given in the model. Keeping in view the objectives, primary sources of data collection have been used. An interview technique was followed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of social entrepreneurs related to the Indian ecosystem, followed by a survey method wherein a structured questionnaire was developed to understand the stakeholders' perspectives about the different domains of the ecosystem. Qualitative analysis was conducted through semi-structured interviews with founders and co-founders of 12 social enterprises that have a Pan-India presence. The details of the sample are given in Table 1. Interviews were taken till the point when no new information started coming to the ground and data saturation level was achieved (Guest et al., 2006). The interview protocol was developed with a special focus on objectives and a thorough review of the literature. It was then shared with experts and their suggestions were incorporated. A manual coding process was followed to analyse the interview transcripts, and themes were generated from them. Figure 1 highlights the process of coding followed to identify the themes and theoretical dimensions of the study. Exploratory sequential mixed methods is an approach which combines qualitative and quantitative

data collection and analysis in a sequence of phases (Creswell and Clark, 2018), which was followed for data triangulation.

For the quantitative research, a structured equation model was developed using CB-SEM (Ringle et al., 2024) based on 205 responses collected from stakeholders of social enterprises i.e., the people who are impacted by the functioning of social enterprises. Stakeholders included customers who purchased products from social enterprises, donors who donate in monetary terms or kind towards them, and government associates who are in any way involved in the process of policy formulation. A basic questionnaire was framed following the themes generated from the qualitative analysis and a 5-point Likert scale was applied (ranging from 1 indicating complete disagreement and 5 indicating total agreement). The questionnaire items included:

**Finance & Policy Structure (F)** – 3 questionnaire items included availability of finance, ease of starting a social enterprise and effectiveness of implementation of policies in India.

**Human Capital (HC)** – 3 questionnaire items reflected the attractiveness of jobs in social enterprises, the attractiveness of salaries and the role of education in creating successful social entrepreneurs.

**Markets (M)** - 3 questionnaire items include the quality of products offered by social enterprises, effectiveness of social media ad campaigns and competition among social entrepreneurs.

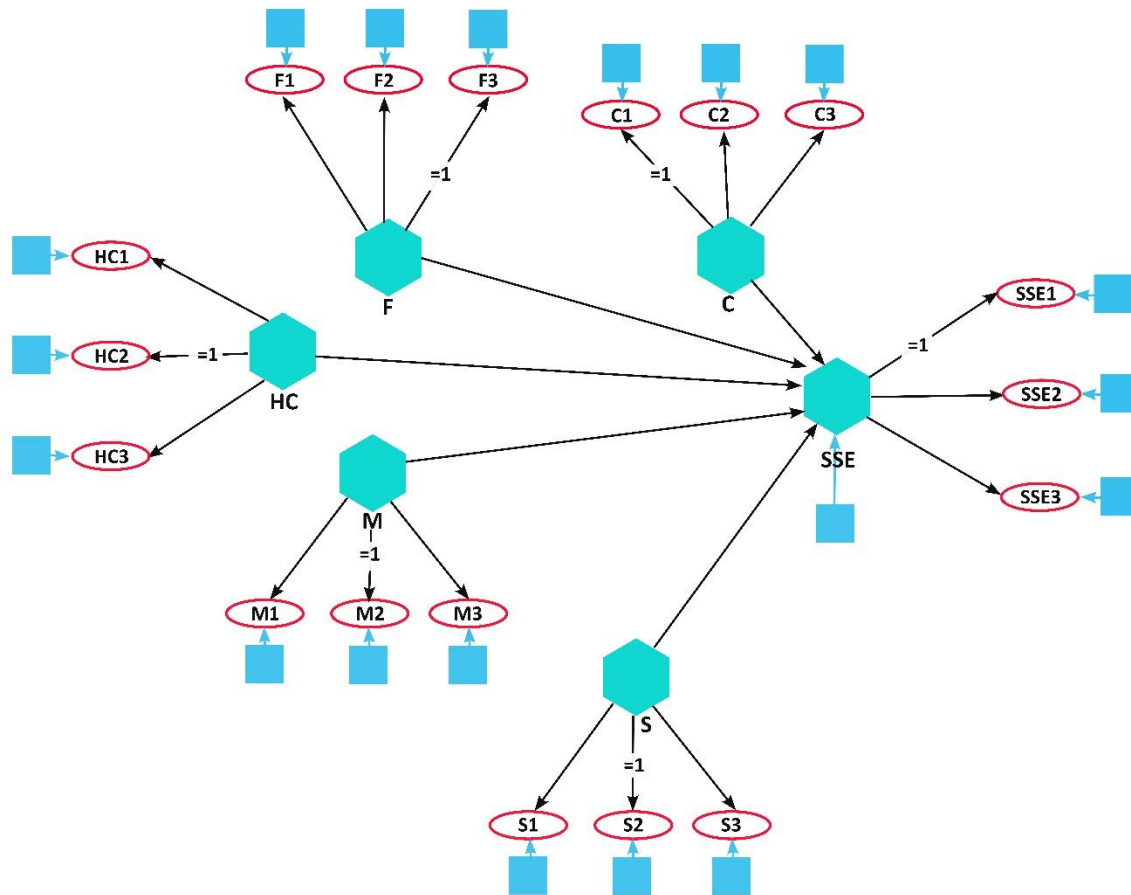


Figure 2. Structured Equation Model using Smart PLS (Source: Ringle et al., 2024).

**Support (S)** – 3 questionnaire items include the availability of advisors and mentors, the availability of professional services like legal and commercial help, the effectiveness of incubation centres, and peer network support.

**Culture (C)** – 3 questionnaire items reflect a positive image of social enterprises, research and innovation culture and success stories and role models.

**Sustainable Social Enterprises (SSE)** – 3 questionnaire items include community empowerment, market share of social enterprises and resource mobilization.

Structured equation modelling has been used for multivariate data analysis to test the relationships between multiple variables and to test a theory using Smart PLS software (Bagozzi, 1980). Covariance Based – Structured Equation Model has been used as it is appropriate for theory testing (Barclay et al., 1995). A hypothesis has been formulated, and a model has been created to test relationships between dependent and independent variables for empirical data collected through questionnaires. A model generated based on more than 200 responses is considered to be appropriate for testing through SEM (Kline, 2005). Referring to Figure 2, in the estimated model, different paths suggest the impact of each of the domains on sustainable social enterprises. Paths 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 indicate the impact of culture (C),

finance & policy structure (F), human capital (HC), markets (M) and support (S) on sustainable social enterprises (SSE) respectively.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the model-fit statistics, the model is found to be a good fit. Table 2 reflects the Goodness-of-fit statistics. The value of the chi-square statistic was found to be 182.759. The value of chi-square divided by degrees of freedom of 1.406 where value below 3 is considered to be good (Shi and Maydeu-Olivares, 2020), favourable root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of 0.044 where value below 0.07 is considered to be good (Shi and Maydeu-Olivares, 2020) and goodness-of-fit index (GFI) value of 0.913, ideally (GFI) ranges between 0 and 1 and the common threshold is 0.9 (Hair Jr et al., 2017a). The value of the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) above 0.9 (for small samples it is 0.95) is considered to be a good model fit (Bentler, 1990; Hair et al., 2020). The CFI value of this research is coming out to be 0.95 (Dash and Paul, 2021). The values suggest that the overall model is a good fit, indicating how well the proposed model aligns with the observed data. It highlights that the relationship between ecosystem and sustainable social enterprises is well explained and established through the model, which is the main focus of the study. It suggests

that if the ecosystem is strengthened, it will eventually lead to economic growth through the eradication of social issues.

For construct reliability and validity among latent constructs based on the developed questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha test is used. The value of Cronbach alpha should be at least 0.7, although a score between 0.6 and 0.7 is also acceptable to establish reliability which is achieved in the case of the current study. Discriminant validity has been measured through the HTMT ratio given in Table 5 and reflected through the graph (Roemer et al., 2021). It indicates whether there is a strong relationship that exists between constructs. If the HTMT value comes below 0.90, discriminant validity is considered to be established (Hair et al., 2022). In the current study, the HTMT values below 0.9 indicates a strong relationship between constructs used to study the social entrepreneurial ecosystem. It indicates a strong interplay between various domains and strengthening one will lead to improvement of performance in others and so on.

**Table 3. Modification Indices.**

Construct Validity & Reliability	
	Cronbach's alpha (standardized)
<b>C</b>	0.733
<b>F</b>	0.691
<b>HC</b>	0.884
<b>M</b>	0.702
<b>S</b>	0.714
<b>SSE</b>	0.703

**Table 4. Construct Validity and Reliability.**

Modification Indices	
	Estimated model
Chi-square	182.759
Number of model parameters	41.000
Number of observations	205.000
Degrees of freedom	<b>130.000</b>
ChiSqr/df	<b>1.406</b>
RMSEA	<b>0.044</b>
RMSEA LOW 90% CI	0.028
RMSEA HIGH 90% CI	0.059
GFI	0.913
TLI	0.941
CFI	0.950

**Table 5. Heterotrait – Monotrait Ratio (HTMT).**

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)					
	C	F	HC	M	S
C					
F	0.045				
HC	0.085	0.070			
M	0.091	0.111	0.241		
S	0.118	0.318	0.031	0.229	
SSE	0.118	0.264	0.162	0.486	0.426

**Table 6. Path coefficients reflecting results of hypothesis testing**

Path coefficients				
	Parameter estimates	Standard errors	T values	P values
<b>M -&gt; SSE</b>	0.320	0.089	3.596	0.000
<b>S -&gt; SSE</b>	0.378	0.089	4.259	0.000
<b>F -&gt; SSE</b>	0.141	0.081	1.730	0.085
<b>C -&gt; SSE</b>	0.104	0.074	1.391	0.166
<b>HC -&gt; SSE</b>	0.012	0.048	0.249	0.803

**H<sub>1</sub>: Markets have a positive impact on the success of social enterprises.**

Based on the p-value, at 1% and 5% significance levels, it can be concluded that Markets have a significant positive impact on the success of social enterprises. The quality of products plays a crucial role in their success. If they do not compromise on the quality of their products, it will pave the way for sustainable growth. Markets compete using various social media tools to advertise their products and targeting the right audience plays a critical role. They have also been successful by collaborating with bigger brands. If proper fund allocation is made towards social enterprises, it will enable them to spend considerable money stretching their marketing budgets. Most of the social enterprises do not believe in competition. Their common belief is that looking at the social stigmas prevailing in India, if all of them work together, they will be able to contribute towards the removal of only a proportion of community problems that exist in the country. Therefore, collective efforts are necessary.

**H<sub>2</sub>: Support has a positive impact on the success of social enterprises.**

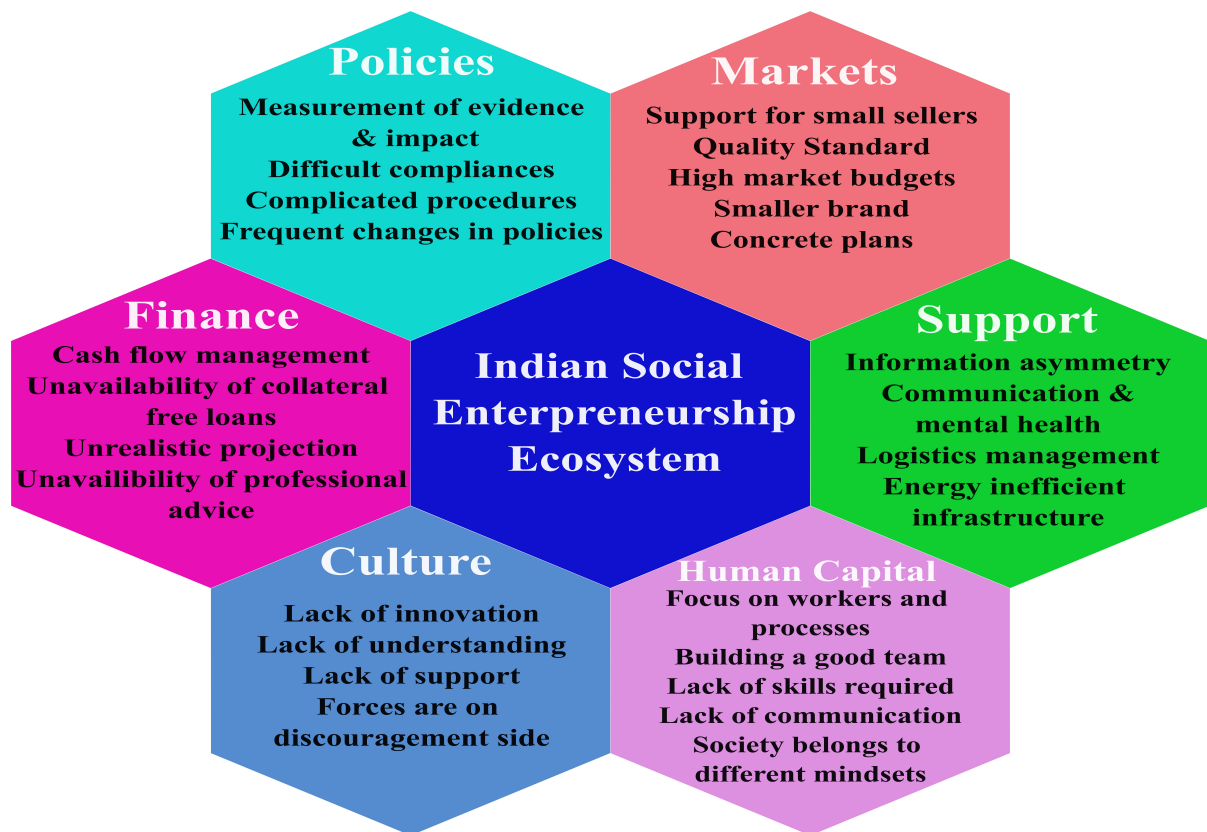
Based on the p-value, at 1% and 5% significance levels, it can be concluded that Support has a significant positive impact on the success of social enterprises. Social enterprises grow if backed by a proper support

system. Professional services like legal and commercial services, incubation centres, belief in innovative and creative ideas and the role of advisors and mentors can play a pivotal role in the success of social enterprises. If effective training programs are implemented, they will help further the horizons of people interested in learning entrepreneurship. Collaboration between the public and private sectors working towards the establishment of infrastructure facilities and more at those villages and parts of states that are remote, distant, and not much worked upon enables the growth of sustainable enterprises.

related to the availability of finance are complicated, for instance, banks need collateral security to grant loans, which is difficult for them to arrange. Relaxation of these policies and implementation of alternatives where collateral-free loans are made available. Banks need to have a more friendly and welcoming approach towards entrepreneurs that would help address finance-related problems to some extent.

**H4: Human capital has a positive impact on the success of social enterprises.**

Based on the p-value, at 1% and 5% significance levels, we can conclude that human capital has an



**Figure 3. Challenges of the Indian Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystem.**

**H3: Accessible finance & policy structure have a positive impact on the success of social enterprises.**

Based on the p-value, at a 10% level of significance, it can be concluded that accessible finance & policy structure significantly positively impact the success of social enterprises. Finance is crucial for sustainable social enterprises, however, they struggle to get finance and even if they get access to it, it remains insufficient. It is never easy to start a social enterprise as a lot of expenditure is required while setting up e.g., place of operation and logistics need to be taken care of. Policies

insignificant impact on the success of social enterprises. People tend to be inclined towards attractive salaries and job profiles, which are common in corporate sector jobs. However, they fail to observe the same in the case of social sector jobs. Education in the field of entrepreneurship is required at the school and college levels to enhance their skills and risk-taking abilities. The availability of finance can have a major impact on their capacity to bear expenses like salaries. There is also a need to provide the founders with mental health, communication and mentor support.



### **H5: Culture has a positive impact on the success of social enterprises.**

Based on the p-value, at 1% and 5% significance levels, we can conclude that culture has an insignificant impact on the success of social enterprises.

The perception that the general public has in their mind concerning social enterprises. There is a data trust deficit among them and NGOs, for instance, are believed to be making a lot of money, which is not true. Risk-taking and innovation culture from the start-ups is missing. People do not understand the role of a social entrepreneur in general. Leaders considered role models must be encouraged to spread positivity related to social enterprises so that they are taken seriously and more and more people come forward and extend help to them.

### **Conclusion**

Strengthening the social entrepreneurial ecosystem requires dedicated efforts towards each domain. Measures attempting to ease of generation of finance for social entrepreneurs have been proposed through the provision of collateral-free loans by banks. Furthering the digitisation process in the banking sector will enable beneficiaries like artisans located in remote areas to get the benefits of credit link schemes and fulfil formalities without facing any delay.

Culture in India concerning social enterprises does not radiate positivity. There is a data trust deficit about social enterprises' role among the general public. It is proposed that awareness campaigns demonstrating clarity and importance of the role and objectives of social enterprises must be conducted. The innovation and creativity part of start-ups is missing. It can be improved through the creation of innovation and research culture by including entrepreneurship education in school and higher education curriculum. People should consistently provide support to social enterprises, and it should not be short-term or temporary.

It is proposed that professional advice related to legal and commercial matters, financial advice, soft skills etc. should be freely available to budding social entrepreneurs. It is expensive to hire professionals who can provide these services. Therefore, if centralized services are made available, they will have real-time suggestions. Launching helpline systems where mental health practitioners can provide guidance and advice and help entrepreneurs cope with risky situations can prove to be beneficial.

Policies are proposed to be formulated based on evidence and impact. If simplified, Entry and exit procedures will relax the complicated compliances.

Policies should be formulated for the long-term and any short-term changes must be well researched looking at the impact they will make on the current social enterprises and avoided to the extent possible.

Consistent support from customers belonging to various categories is required for small sellers. Collaboration with bigger brands is proposed to enhance the quality of products and create an image that will be sustained in the long term. Using effective techniques for promoting products and services targeted at the beneficiaries like using social media tools, which they are most inclined towards can improve the overall reach to the markets.

Over the years, training and incubation centres have proved to be an extremely effective model of communication and assistance for social-impact-making enterprises. The model is proposed to be developed further so that they can collaborate with educational institutions and provide support to students' innovative ideas, build an innovation and research culture, and make them understand the importance of service providers. There is a need to work on logistics management, setting up delivery centres, electricity lease lines, and telecommunication and internet facilities, especially in the remote areas where they function. Energy-efficient infrastructure needs to be developed to eradicate the negative consequences of energy-inefficient infrastructure on the health and safety of individuals. It is further suggested that communication coach, mental health support and mentor support be provided to budding social entrepreneurs to improve their ability to present their pitch and improve their risk-taking ability.

### **Limitations and future scope of research**

As a limitation of qualitative research, findings cannot be generalized. As the sample size is limited to the point where data saturation has been achieved, generalisability for Pan-India studies might not be achieved. Stakeholders' perspectives mapped through a structured equation model are limited to the findings of qualitative research. They can be studied through different lenses and angles. The study opens various avenues for further research in the field of social entrepreneurship. The ecosystem comprises different domains that function together to build an environment that is entrepreneur-friendly. A domain-specific detailed study can be conducted to identify areas and opportunities available to future entrepreneurs. Some sectors in which social enterprises are creating a significant impact have not been covered. A detailed sector-wise study can be conducted to identify the challenges and opportunities concerning

specific sectors that can enhance their environment and adversities.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

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