

ENTREPRENEURIAL SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES: ADDRESSING RESEARCH GAPS THROUGH A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are pressing sustainable development needs, yet entrepreneurship and innovation research in SIDS contexts is fractured and Western-centric. This article responds to such necessary research gaps by conducting a systematic literature review to identify conceptual, methodological, contextual, and intersectional gaps in the literature. Finding shows the need for a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial behavior. To address this, this article proposes an Entrepreneurial Social Innovation (ESI) Framework, consolidating insights from theories of Effectuation, Resilience, and multilevel approaches, to provide an integrated model incorporating informal, digital, and gender-sensitive practices tailored for SIDS, and focusing specifically on the Maldives. This framework develops theoretical knowledge of hybrid value creation in fragile contexts. It offers policymakers and practitioners a model to follow in order to foster context-relevant sustainable development in SIDS.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Sustainable Economic Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The essential of sustainable development globally has deepened in the Anthropocene, marked by climatic uncertainty, environmental damage, and structural inequality. Among the most vulnerable to these converging crises are Small Island Developing States (SIDS), whose trajectories of development are constrained by geographical isolation, limited natural capital, narrow economic foundations, and heightened exposure to climate change. Conventional development paradigms, founded largely on linear growth and orthodox economic institutions, have proven inadequate to the complex realities that face SIDS. As a counterresponse, scholars and policymakers increasingly promote the critical need for non-conventional, locally adapted solutions, particularly those involving entrepreneurship and innovation as pathways to inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable futures. Entrepreneurship and social innovation are increasingly recognized to be critical engines of sustainable development. They offer tools of economic diversification, social integration, and environmental flexibility, especially in settings where formal institutions are thin or patchy. Yet, while these disciplines have transformative potential, existing theory and scholarship often fail to register the lived experience and institutional complexities of SIDS. Classic entrepreneurial paradigms tend to emphasize formality, growth, and technological scalability, which may overstate or fail to capture the informal,

place-bound, and resource-constrained entrepreneurial patterns widespread in island contexts.

The Maldives a dispersed island nation in the Indian Ocean is an intriguing example to resist prevailing theorization of entrepreneurship and social innovation in the context of sustainable development. Since tourism and foreign products are heavily reliant on most SIDS, including the Maldives, including that they are exposed to external shocks and environmental uncertainty. However, digital mediations-enabled microenterprises and locally anchored adaptation approaches suggest that there are rich, albeit under-theorized in mainstream knowledge, dynamic innovation systems. These realities require a theoretically driven, synthetically derived, and context-sensitive combination of how entrepreneurship is addressing sustainable development in SIDS. This paper aims to address this need by conducting a systematic literature review and creating an integrated theoretical framework of entrepreneurial social innovation that is specifically suited to the Small Island Developing States context. The study, which uses the Maldives as a case study, integrates various theoretical viewpoints, such as Schumpeterian innovation, Effectuation, resilience, the Triple Bottom Line, the circular economy, and multilevel causal mechanisms, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how entrepreneurship contributes to sustainability transitions.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. Conceptually, it establishes an integrated model that obliterates the binary opposition between social and commercial entrepreneurship through an emphasis on the hybrid and adaptive nature of entrepreneurial practice in precarious island economies. In practice and at the policy level, the model offers a framework for creating locally targeted, inclusive development policies that acknowledge the capacity and unofficial structures of marginalized actors. Additionally, the article decolonizes entrepreneurship studies and makes international research more applicable to local realities by establishing the analysis within the Maldivian context. The remaining part of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the systematic review process. Section 3 gives a detailed literature review, discussing the intellectual foundations of entrepreneurial social innovation and outlining the synthesised framework developed through the review. Section 4 gives a summary of the current status of entrepreneurship research in SIDS, both geographically and thematically. Section 5 offers research and policy recommendations. Section 6 explains the limitations of the study, while Section 7 offers insights on how social entrepreneurial innovation can be applied more broadly to sustainable development in SIDS.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology as the primary research design to explore the intersection of social innovation and entrepreneurship towards building sustainable development in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with particular reference to the Maldives. The employment of an SLR is methodologically the correct approach since it can deliver a comprehensive, open, and reproducible synthesis of academic evidence as available, facilitating the critical identification of trends, patterns,

and gaps in research within a multidisciplinary and fragmented setting. Compared to narrative reviews, the SLR systematic process makes it possible to strictly acknowledge the literature. It enables the development of an integrated theoretical framework with conceptual depth and empirical grounding. The present research applies the SLR to achieve three major aims: first, to systematically scan and review scholarly literature on the roles of entrepreneurship and social innovation in sustainable development for SIDS; second, to disentangle and map conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps that currently constrain the field; and third, to construct a new theoretical model of Entrepreneurial Social Innovation (ESI) that takes account of empirical context in the Maldives and potentially replicable in other SIDS. To accomplish this, the review followed a six-step process: (1) defining the scope of review and research questions; (2) developing the search strategy; (3) identification and screening of relevant studies with inclusion and exclusion criteria; (4) data extraction and synthesis; (5) theme synthesis of findings; and (6) theoretical integration to develop the ESI framework. The review was guided by three precise research questions that aimed to organize the question and link the literature synthesis to framework development.

- RQ1: What are the most significant theoretical frameworks and empirical studies of entrepreneurship and social innovation in SIDS as identified in scholarly literature?
- RQ2: What are the key conceptual, methodological, and contextual research gaps in the existing literature on entrepreneurial social innovation for sustainable development in SIDS, and in particular concerning informal, digital, and gender-sensitive practices?
- RQ3: How can one construct a theoretical framework integrating entrepreneurial social innovation to address these identified gaps and induce sustainable development in the unique context of SIDS, with special focus on the Maldives?

The search approach utilized a multi-database approach to have the widest available coverage and cross-disciplinary relevance. These databases include Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, EBSCOHost, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. These were chosen for their extensive indexing of literature related to entrepreneurship, innovation research, development theory, and regional analysis. The following search strings were created using Boolean logic: ("Small Island Developing States" OR SIDS OR Maldives) AND (entrepreneurship OR "social innovation" OR "social entrepreneurship" OR "sustainable entrepreneurship" OR "impact entrepreneurship") AND ("sustainable development" OR resilience OR "digital entrepreneurship" OR gender OR "community-based innovation").

The review period was 2000-2025 to get evolving discourses post-Millennium Development Goals and in the SDG implementation period. The initial search yielded 1201 articles, which were put through a multi-stage screening process. Duplicate removal reduced the number to 736 unique records. Titles and abstracts were checked for relevance to the research questions and shortlisted to 150 articles. These were subsequently full-text screened using the following inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles in English, with a conceptual, theoretical, or empirical focus on

entrepreneurship and/or social innovation, and with contextual relevance to SIDS or transferable insights from analogous geographies. Exclusion criteria were non-peer-reviewed writings, technical reports containing no analytical substance, or studies aimed at high-income, industrialized contexts. After thorough screening, 95 articles were synthesised in the overall analysis. The information from each article was systematically drawn out, including authorship, year, theoretical lens, methodology, geographic context, and key findings. RQ1 and RQ2 were then addressed through qualitative thematic synthesis, which was carried out by identifying cross-cutting concepts and emergent themes. Research gaps were determined through iterative comparison, mapping underrepresented themes, conceptual inconsistencies, and theoretical limitations. Finally, to address RQ3, extant theoretical frameworks like Schumpeterian innovation, Effectuation, Resilience, Triple Bottom Line, Circular Economy, and multilevel/causal mechanism models were syncretically integrated into an overarching ESI framework that is contextualized to SIDS environments. Theoretical development focused on context embeddedness, systemic interdependencies, and hybrid entrepreneurial forms; it was substantive and reconstructive rather than additive. Throughout the exercise, ethical standards were upheld, and every source that was cited was impartially examined.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Key Concepts and Definitions

Entrepreneurship and social innovation have long been theorized in separate theoretical realms. **Entrepreneurship**, predicated on early economic theorists Cantillon and Schumpeter, is generally defined as an organizational process involving risk-taking, opportunity discovery, and value creation through innovation (Hébert & Link, 1989; Long, 1983; Gartner, 1988; Covin & Slevin, 1991). Contemporary literature goes on to advance this understanding to encompass diverse organizational forms and missions like nonprofit, internet, casual, and community entrepreneurship (Priyadi & Mulyani, 2024; Diandra & Azmy, 2020). Typologies like digital entrepreneurship (Lamine et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2022), inclusive entrepreneurship (Baskaran et al., 2019; Bakker & McMullen, 2023), and sustainable entrepreneurship (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018; Bonfanti et al., 2024) have been developed to capture this pluralism, especially required for SIDS where innovation stems from informality and necessity. On the other hand, **social innovation** is a systemic approach to meet unmet social needs with a focus on inclusivity, sustainability, and co-creation with stakeholders (Ziegler, 2017; Foroudi et al., 2020; Zapata-Aguilar, 2024). Social innovation involves the development of novel solutions that build social value, empower communities, and create systemic change (Merlin-Brogniart et al., 2022; Dionisio & Vargas, 2020). Social innovation often occurs outside of institutions and is linked with collective happiness, ecological stewardship, and inclusive governance (De Souza João-Roland & Granados, 2020; Sampaio & Sebastião, 2024).

In contrast with an oppositional approach of dealing with these fields, this study assumes an integrated conceptualization of entrepreneurial social innovation, one which admits that social effect and systemic transformation can emerge from a wide variety of

entrepreneurial action commercial, informal, digital, or mission-based (Schramm, n.d.; Zahra & Wright, 2015; Dias, 2023; Gasparin et al., 2021). This vision is particularly pertinent in SIDS like the Maldives, where environmental exposure, poor institutional capacity, and a thin base of economy necessitate adaptive and hybrid entrepreneurial capabilities that integrate social, economic, and environmental objectives. Finally, the third pillar of the theoretical framework is **Sustainable Economic Development (SED)**. SED is a sustainable development approach emphasizing sustainable flourishing in the long term by balancing economic vibrancy, social harmony, and ecological sustainability (Espinosa et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024; Dima et al., 2024). Stepping away from GDP-alone models, SED emphasizes resource efficiency, intergenerational equity, and co-governance (Basheer et al., 2022; Gong et al., 2023; Hanley, 2024). This multilateral framework is most relevant to SIDS, where systemic risk and climate vulnerability require development pathways that are inclusive, adaptive, and regenerative (Kaur, 2019; Yin et al., 2023).

3.2 Review of Existing Theories

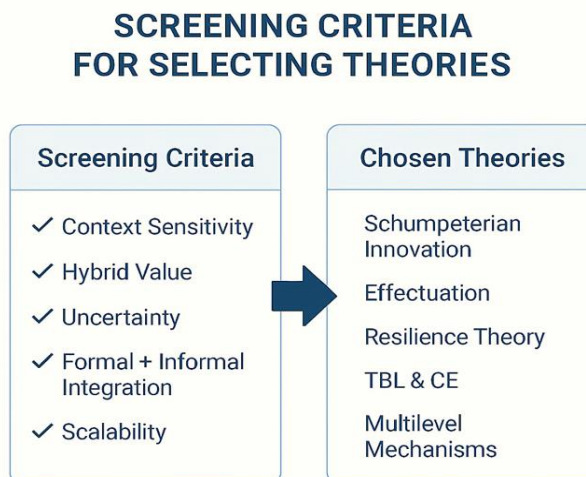


Figure 1: Screening criteria of Chosen Existing Theories

Figure 1: Chosen Existing Theories, in the above shows the screening criteria for theory selection in entrepreneurship for SIDS. Screening Criteria include Context Sensitivity-adaptability to vulnerable ecosystems; Hybrid Value-economic, social, and environmental performance; Uncertainty-management of resource and market uncertainty; Formal + Informal Integration-applicability to varying business forms; and Scalability-applicability at micro, meso, and macro levels. These filters ensure that only the most context-relevant theories are left for consideration. Based on the screening, on the right, the Chosen Theories were Schumpeterian Innovation theory, Effectuation theory, Resilience Theory, Triple Bottom Line & Circular Economy, and Multilevel Mechanisms. These comprise the conceptual foundation for building context-sensitive understanding and frameworks suitable for Entrepreneurship development in SIDs.

Schumpeterian Innovation Theory identifies innovation as an entrepreneurial, dynamic process of creative destruction a process by which old systems are displaced by new and superior substitutes (Aghion, 2016; Callegari, 2018; Śledzik, 2013). Entrepreneurs, according to the theory, are agents of change that disrupt equilibrium and initiate structural change (Malerba & McKelvey, 2020; Audretsch et al., 2022). Even as the theory relates well with productivity-led innovation in the industrialized nations, its application in SIDS is limited. The traditional concepts of patent filings and R&D expenditures fail to capture the informal or community-based innovations common in island economies (Windrum & García-Goñi, 2008). Also, its enterprise-oriented approach is devoid of the conceptual framework of socially embedded entrepreneurship or non-market motivation, which are fundamental in SIDS environments (Robert & Yoguel, 2016; Cantner & Vannuccini, 2018).

Effectuation Theory is developed by Sarasvathy (2001), offers a process model of entrepreneurial behavior under conditions of uncertainty. Entrepreneurs begin from means at hand who they are, what they know, and whom they know and co-create ventures through iterative learning, stakeholder participation, and adaptive experimentation (Kerr & Coviello, 2020; Matalamäki, 2017). The theory is highly applicable in environments like the Maldives, where environmental uncertainty, inadequate infrastructure, and availability constraints limit formal planning (Dwivedi & Weerawardena, 2018; Semaan, 2020). Key principles like low-cost loss, applying contingencies, and stakeholders' precommitment are resonant with entrepreneurial behavior in informal and peripheral environments (Palmié et al., 2018; Dutta & Packard, 2024). However, the emphasis by the theory on individual agency has been criticized for failing to sufficiently emphasize institutional forces, power dynamics, and collective action (Dias et al., 2019; Kitching & Rouse, 2020).

Resilience Theory roots in ecological systems research (Holling, 1973), is increasingly being used to explore how individuals, organizations, and groups respond to crisis and change (Walker & Cooper, 2011; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Resilience in entrepreneurial contexts determines the capacity to persevere, adjust, and develop in adversity (Korber & McNaughton, 2017; Anwar et al., 2021). This is particularly true for SIDS, where fragility is both ecological and socio-economic (Mayar et al., 2022; Marazziti et al., 2024). Entrepreneurship resilience tends to be articulated in the form of informal, relational, and digital approaches that build adaptive capacity at community and individual levels (Awad & Martín-Rojas, 2023; Olan et al., 2025). Though it has some points in its favor, the theory is usually imprecise with regard to entrepreneurial mechanisms and undertheorizes institutional and systemic dynamics (Smith et al., 2022; Gao, 2025).

In order to go beyond conventional entrepreneurship perspectives, ideas such as the **Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and the Circular Economy (CE)** integrate economic performance with social and environmental objectives. Elkington's (1994) TBL framework bases its measurement of organizational value creation on three dimensions: social justice, environmental responsibility, and economic sustainability (Slaper & Hall, 2011; Oliveira et al., 2020).

This means that business leaders should prioritize community involvement, inclusive operations, and sustainability over profit (Nogueira et al., 2023; Sargani et al., 2020). TBL is enabled by the CE model, which encourages regenerative, looped systems that increase resource reuse and decrease waste (Rada, 2023; Kanda et al., 2021). Principles of reuse, recycling, remanufacturing, and system redesign are especially relevant for resource-constrained SIDS (Rodias et al., 2020; Lichtenthäler & Neligan, 2023). However, in practice, such models are difficult to implement where infrastructure is lacking, where informality is predominant, and where measurement tools are poor (Satar, 2022; Tiuncika & Bormane, 2024). Most CE applications are still biased towards high-income contexts (Suchek et al., 2022), hence non-generalizable to small island economies like the Maldives.

Multilevel and Causal Mechanism Frames provide a more active perspective on entrepreneurship in complex systems by analyzing how micro (individual), meso (organizational/community), and macro (institutional/policy) levels interact (Katou et al., 2020; Salanova et al., 2021). These types of approaches are especially beneficial in SIDS, where entrepreneurial outcomes are imbued with local traditions, relationally-based trust, and policy contexts (Leo et al., 2020). Causal mechanism approaches complement this by articulating the processes such as legitimacy-building, network mobilization, or social diffusion through which inputs (such as training or funding) are translated into development outcomes (Zhou & Yamamoto, 2020; McGowan et al., 2023). Such models enable context-sensitive analysis of "what works, for whom, and under what conditions." Nevertheless, many of the existing studies do not apply these models in a systematic way, failing to be explicit at analytical levels or discounting mediating mechanisms (Schmitt, 2020; Rodriguez-Lopez et al., 2022). The promise of such methods remains unrealized in entrepreneurship studies in SIDS.

3.3 Identified Research Gaps

Conceptual Gaps: According to this research, Informal, digital, and gender-responsive entrepreneurship are addressed conceptually as discrete topics, while the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative (PPSDI, 2022) discovers that informality accounts for over 30% of GDP across the Pacific islands, and women are disproportionately engaged in survivalist enterprises. Also, Western-oriented frameworks dominate, in the view of Pounder and Gopal (2021), often failing to consider institutional realities outlined by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2021): SIDS' geographical isolation and small market size restrict economies of scale; import dependence and trade costs create structural barriers; low institutional capacity and disarticulated policies hinder entrepreneurial support coordination; and vulnerability to external shocks, for example, climate events or tourist volatility, undermines stability. Thematic elaboration is absent in hybrid entrepreneurship with social, economic, and environmental value, although the International Trade Centre (ITC, 2023) highlights its role in resilience. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024) highlights integrating digital innovation into consolidated frameworks. Addressing these gaps requires SIDS-specific, context-sensitive frameworks.

Gaps in methodology: Methodological gaps: SIDS studies are methodologically driven by qualitative case studies and participatory approaches, having a tendency to obtain rich local detail but otherwise being largely descriptive (Dan & Shimizu, 2022; Rytönen et al., 2023; Freitas, 2024). While such studies provide valuable information, they rarely contain comparative or longitudinal analysis, limiting understanding of island-level or time-based trends (Rytönen et al., 2023; Freitas, 2024). There are mixed-method approaches, as with the application of scientometric analysis in combination with case studies to align entrepreneurship with sustainable development goals (Raman et al., 2024), but these are rare. There is a persistent, clear methodological shortfall: requests for additional comparative, longitudinal, and holistic studies to provide evidence-based, generalizable conclusions to support policy and practice in SIDS.

Contextual and Geographic Disparities: Contextual and Geographic Variations: Uneven entrepreneurial study concentration exists in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Caribbean and Asia-Pacific regions. The Caribbean, and particularly the Commonwealth Caribbean SIDS, is researched very comprehensively in literature, with studies analyzing both past as well as more contemporary entrepreneurship trends and their transformative effects on the regional economies (Amorós, Poblete, & Mandakovic, 2019; Minto-Coy, 2023; Best, Lassalle, & Nicolopoulou, 2024; Pounder & Gopal, 2021). Likewise, the Asia-Pacific, particularly the Pacific Islands, is represented well, with studies typically focused on tourism and hospitality entrepreneurship (Booth, Chaperon, Kennell, & Morrison, 2020; Sengupta & Sahay, 2017).

Indian Ocean SIDS such as Seychelles and Mauritius, for example, are of particular note in being under-represented. While new work aims at Blue Economy entrepreneurship in Seychelles and a few studies do not cite Mauritius concerning digital nomadism and climate resilience, they are far less covered in these fields (Foley et al., 2022; Senaratne, Zimbhoff, & Stevens, 2021). As the Maldives is an island country in the Indian Ocean, literature shows there is very limited academic research connected to its entrepreneurial ecosystem; hence, this stresses the significance of a focused research study on the Maldivian environment to ensure frameworks and policy recommendations are successful and relevant.

Sectoral gaps: Entrepreneurship research in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) reveals high sectoral focus within tourism and hospitality industries, reflecting its economic relevance (Booth, Chaperon, Kennell, & Morrison, 2020). Digital entrepreneurship is increasing, particularly among Caribbean women utilizing technology for business innovation (Best, Lassalle, & Nicolopoulou, 2024). Blue Economy entrepreneurship plays a growing role in the Indian Ocean, as is exemplified by Seychelles (Senaratne, Zimbhoff, & Stevens, 2021). Gaps in sectors remain, though: manufacturing, renewable energy, and advanced digital platforms are underresearched (Booth et al., 2020). Overwhelmingly, research has remained within conventional industries, which limits knowledge of possibilities for innovation in diverse and sustainable sectors in SIDS.

Intersectional and Policy Gaps: Intersectional and Policy Gaps: Small Island Developing States (SIDS) entrepreneurship studies have intersectional gaps with minimal research into how geography, age, class, and gender intersect to shape entrepreneurial challenges and opportunities (Best, Lassalle, & Nicolopoulou, 2024; Spann, 2021). Entrepreneurship by women is studied in isolation without considering systemic inequalities or intersectional forces.

There are policy gaps as well: tourism, Blue Economy, and social enterprise are matters of policy concern, but support frameworks are fragmented and unevenly spread across locations (Senaratne, Zimbhoff, & Stevens, 2021; Foley et al., 2022). There is a need for a harmonized, inclusive policy that addresses structural inequalities, builds supportive environments, and instills intersectional thinking in entrepreneurship strategy in SIDS.

3.4 The Integrated Theoretical Framework of Entrepreneurial Social Innovation

As a way to address the limitations pointed out above, this study proposes the Entrepreneurial Social Innovation (ESI) Framework for Sustainable Development in SIDS as an integrated conceptual model that synthesizes the main points of the theories reviewed and incorporates them into a framework directed towards island economies such as the Maldives.

This approach's central claim is that entrepreneurship in SIDS should be viewed as hybrid adaptive processes that integrate ecological sustainability, social solidarity, and economic sustainability rather than as rigid formal/informal or economic/social dualisms.

The strategy builds directly on the following: Schumpeter theory for the explanations of disruption and transformation, but reframes innovation to include digital and community-led forms of adaptation; Effectuation to highlight resource-scarce agency, improvisation, and stakeholder co-creation in uncertain times; Resilience theory to climate change to explain how entrepreneurship creates systemic capacity for renewal and adaptation; CE and TBL to infuse entrepreneurial aspirations into circularity, equity, and sustainability; and Multilevel and causal mechanism approaches to map how interventions at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels co-produce sustainable impacts.

The framework also explicitly includes informal entrepreneurship, gendered digital innovation strategies, and ecosystem-level dynamics, thereby providing a comprehensive lens to study innovation beyond formal measurement or enterprise typologies. In the Maldives, this framework enables analysis of how women's digital microenterprises construct community resilience, how tourism dependence generates entrepreneurial niches as well as risks, and how uneven digital infrastructure can lock in or accelerate innovation.

It hence enables empirically informed, policy-relevant analysis. Lastly, the ESI Framework answers the conceptual fragmentation, methodological limitations, and geographic prejudices identified in the literature. It offers a theoretically robust, empirically refined, and policy-relevant tool to understand and cultivate entrepreneurial social innovation in SIDS.

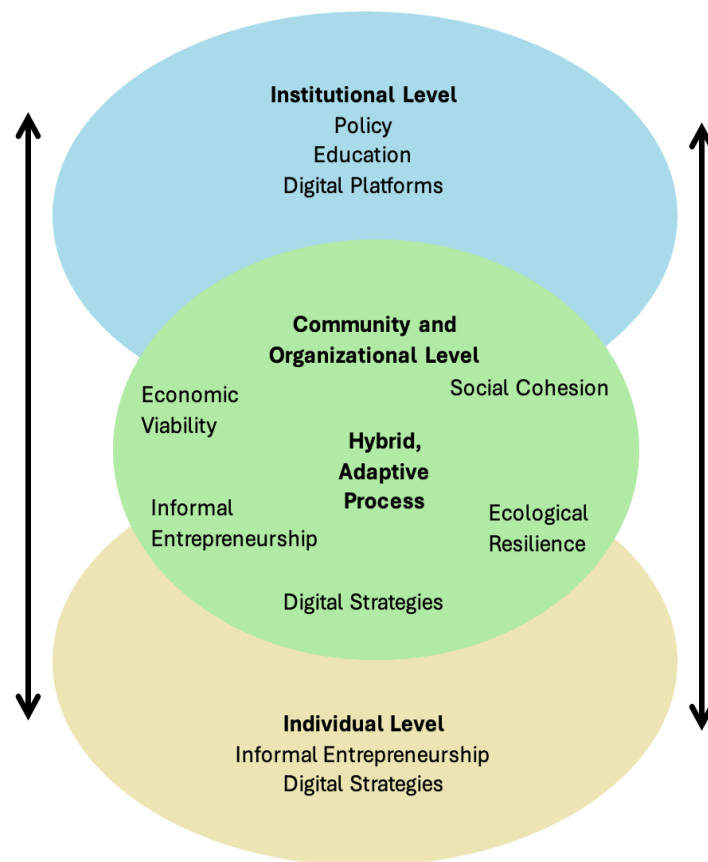


Figure 2: The Integrated Theoretical Framework of Entrepreneurial Social Innovation

The Entrepreneurial Social Entrepreneurship (ESI) Framework in *Figure 2* outlines how SIDS' sustainable development emerges from interconnected processes through three levels: individual, community/organizational, and institutional. Digital strategies and informal entrepreneurship are the forms of grassroots innovation and agency at the individual level. These processes funnel into the community level where economic sustainability, social cohesion, and ecological resilience are brought about by hybrid, adaptive processes. This is the field of collective action against structural vulnerabilities of SIDS. The institutional level comprises policy, education, and digital infrastructure macro drivers that empower or limit local innovation.

Two-way arrows indicate feedback loops: innovations at the individual and community level influence policy since entrepreneurial potential is conditioned by institutional conditions. The framework integrates key ideas of Schumpeterian, Effectuation, Resilience, TBL/CE, and multilevel/causal mechanism theories. It aims for hybrid value creation and informal systems as legitimate, strategic components of sustainable development. Rooted in the Maldivian environment, it provides a scalable, inclusive framework for theory, policy, and practice in SIDS.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comprehensive literature review outcome, the identified gaps in research are considered critical, and the proposed Entrepreneurial Social Innovation (ESI) Framework. This section delivers direct recommendations for the advancement of sustainable development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), namely in the Maldives context. These recommendations are crafted to initiate action across multiple levels, policy, practice, and research shorter directly to the hybrid entrepreneurial dynamics, institutional constraints, and development priorities addressed throughout this analysis. By doing this, the comprehensive ESI framework is transformed into theoretically informed, contextually sensitive, and practicable practices.

4.1 Policy Recommendations

Integrated ESI and Blended Value Generation Support

Governments and intergovernmental organizations must build policy environments that embrace entrepreneurial social innovation as a valid and necessary method of sustainable development. That involves abandoning binary policy dichotomies between commercial and social entrepreneurship for promoting hybrid ventures that produce economic, social, and environmental value simultaneously. Policy tools would incorporate the creation of trans-ministerial task forces, incentive schemes such as blended-value tax credits, and micro-funding schemes for TBL-based ventures. Recognition of such hybrid actors' innovative capacity is required to align entrepreneurship policy with general objectives of sustainable economic development (Espinosa et al., 2021; Zahra & Wright, 2015).

Structural Institutionalization and Empowerment of Informal and Digital Entrepreneurship

Instructed by Effectuation Theory's emphasis on leveraging accessible means in risky situations (Kerr & Coviello, 2020), SIDS governments are incentivized to create and expand informal and digitally enabled microenterprises. This entails regulatory innovation Tiered registration systems, streamlining taxation frameworks, and mobile licensing platforms that minimizes administrative expense without compromising the informal action's flexibility. Support should further extend to microfinance tailored to informal players and investment in digital skills training transmitted through social media platforms already used by the majority of Maldivian women and youth (ILO, 2023; Fernandes et al., 2022). Such measures acknowledge the legitimacy of informal entrepreneurship as a strategic and innovative response to systemic constraints.

Targeted Support for Women and Youth Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship education must adopt an intersectional framework overtly to address the synergistic marginalizations of women and youth in SIDS. Policymakers must go beyond symbolic inclusion to design context-specific interventions such as digital literacy for young mothers in remote atolls, or mobile childcares around entrepreneurship centers. Incubation and co-working spaces should be designed with flexible timing, transport

connectivity, and women leader mentoring by similar socio-cultural backgrounds (Baskaran et al., 2019; PPSDI, 2022). These projects solve the under-theorization of intersectionality in entrepreneurship theory and directly confront structural inequalities in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Building Resilience and Circular Economy Principles

Because of the ecological vulnerability of SIDS, development must deal with resilience and circularity. Governments can provide funding sources and technical support programs for cleantech start-ups, waste-to-energy firms, and regenerative agribusinesses. Entrepreneurs working on ecological restoration, marine species biodiversity, and zero-waste tourism need to be positioned as both conservationists and economic actors that generate blended value (Dantas et al., 2022; Suchek et al., 2022). This kind of intervention combines entrepreneurial action with long-term adaptive capacity to enhance both economic diversification and ecological sustainability.

Investment in Digital Infrastructure and Capacity Building

Digital infrastructure must be recognized as the foundation for SIDS entrepreneurial ecosystems. Investment in broadband connectivity to dispersed islands should be augmented by human capital approaches to address digital exclusion, particularly among women, rural youth, and informal sector workers. Public-private partnerships between telecom operators and education ministries must be established to offer modular, context-specific digital skills training programs, thereby enabling inclusive access to digital entrepreneurship possibilities (UNDP, 2024; Kanda et al., 2021).

4.2 Practical Implications for Practice

SIDS entrepreneurs are urged to nurture an intentional mindset of combined value creation, knowing that social and environmental responsibility are not add-ons but core to long-term sustainability particularly in precarious island contexts. Practitioners must shift away from sole success measures to collaborate with community-based innovation systems that mobilize indigenous knowledge, informal networks of trust, and ecologies of local resources. Civil society groups and local leaders can be catalytic agents in assisting such ecosystems through offering collaborative platforms, peer-to-peer mentorship, and access to funding and policy forums. NGOs, in particular, need to stand not as service providers but as facilitators of the ecosystem connecting under-served entrepreneurs with market and institutional resources (Gasparin et al., 2021).

4.3 Future Research Directions

There is an urgent call for empirical research to experiment with and calibrate the ESI framework built in this study. Mixed-methods longitudinal research is employed to follow the evolving interactions among entrepreneurial action, institutional arrangements, and sustainability effects over time. Such research has to be situated in SIDS-specific settings—beginning with the Maldives to validate the conceptual claims advanced in this book and increase their transferability. The literature is thin on how informal and digitally enabled microenterprises function as resilience mechanisms in SIDS. Ethnography and

participatory action research participatory are needed to uncover the social logics, innovation pathways, and relational capital behind these practices (ILO, 2023). The study would transcend the theoretical exclusion of such actors and offer subtlety for theory and policy. Also, Cross-regional comparisons between the Indian Ocean, Caribbean, and Pacific regions would illuminate both similar and differing dynamics of entrepreneurial social innovation.

Employing a common analytical framework, research can develop typologies of innovation ecosystems and inform tailoring of interventions to particular geopolitical, ecological, and cultural settings (UNCTAD, 2023; Freitas, 2024). Moreover, an In-depth examination of SIDS' policies concerning entrepreneurship remains inadequate. Multilevel and causal mechanism theory would need to be employed by researchers to trace the connections by which interventions like digital grants or microfinance programs affect entrepreneurial outcomes across different demographic groups and regions (McGowan et al., 2023; Rodriguez-Lopez et al., 2022). This would provide the "missing middle" between program design and actual impact, enabling evidence-based policy innovation.

5. LIMITATIONS

Although this research applies a theoretically grounded and systematic methodology to address the fragmentation in the literature pertaining to entrepreneurial social innovation in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), it is nonetheless marred by some methodological and contextual limitations. It is important to identify such limitations for appropriate interpretation of the findings and for guiding future research to empirically test and refine the conceptualized Entrepreneurial Social Innovation (ESI) Framework. Even though the search of literature was systematic and exhaustive in approach, the study was restricted to a specific collection of academic databases and included peer-reviewed English-language articles only.

It is thus conceivable that studies pertinent to the study published in languages other than English or in grey literature i.e., policy briefs, regionally focused, practitioner reports, or local governmental documents, had been excluded. This limitation is particularly pertinent to SIDS, where much of the nuanced, practice-based understanding will be found outside conventional scholarly publications. For that reason, even though the review synthesises a broad base of scholarly literature, certain locally based knowledge will be under-represented.

The review is also grounded in a qualitative synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical literature. It does not contain original empirical information, nor does it apply statistical techniques to test or quantify relations among variables. Hence, the produced framework should be understood as a conceptual contribution and not as an empirically tested one. It's worth lies in theory-building and agenda-setting, rather than predictive or explanatory utility in the immediate sense. Subsequent empirical studies must thus be employed in testing the assumptions of the framework and verifying its applicability in various SIDS contexts.

Although both stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria, along with a systematic screening and coding approach, were employed, thematic synthesis and gap identification always involve some interpretive judgement. The identification of conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps and theoretical integration depends on the researcher's analytical vision and subjectivity. Although both transparency and methodological rigour were maintained, this interpretive element involves a degree of subjectivity inherent within qualitative reviews.

While the ESI Framework strives for greater universalism across SIDS, the empirical basis of the study in the Maldivian case logically constrains its theoretical development. The Maldives is a particularly instructive case that captures many of the structural challenges and innovative responses characteristic of SIDS. Yet the unique socio-political, geographical, and cultural factors of the Maldives, such as its Islamic state systems, dispersed island terrain, and tourism-based economy, do not necessarily hold fully for other SIDS elsewhere in the Pacific, Caribbean, or African regions. Accordingly, while the framework contains transferable concepts, applicability elsewhere will require further contextual fine-tuning.

The integrated framework developed in this study focuses specifically on the intersection of entrepreneurship, social innovation, and sustainable development. It does not aim to capture the full spectrum of activity within any of these domains independently. For instance, it excludes purely commercial entrepreneurship, large-scale corporate innovation, or sustainability initiatives that are not entrepreneurially driven. This narrow scope ensures conceptual consistency but limits generalizability to development or innovation discourses that do not involve entrepreneurial agency.

Finally, as a theoretically derived model, the ESI Framework is subject to the shortcomings in conceptual theorizing. While it is grounded in a systematic review of the literature and addresses clearly specified research requirements, its internal workings, causal relations, and multi-level dynamics remain to be empirically confirmed. Without this, its generalizability remains provisional. Its next step must then be to empirically test the postulated relationships within the framework, to determine if it can explain, and to iteratively refine it on the basis of context-variant evidence across the range of varied SIDS.

6. CONCLUSION

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are facing heightened vulnerability in the Anthropocene era, struggling with climatic threats, economic uncertainty, and social inequalities. While there has been growing interest in entrepreneurship and innovation as catalysts for sustainable development, literature thus far is fragmented, Western-centric, and insufficiently attentive to SIDS' contextual specificities. This article sought to transcend these weaknesses by carrying out a systematic review of the literature and developing an integrated theoretical framework for Entrepreneurial Social Innovation (ESI) for the unique conditions of SIDS, more precisely the Maldives.

The review identified four general categories of gaps: conceptual (compartmentalized and growth-driven frameworks), methodological (overdependence on descriptive case studies, under-theorization of informal and digital entrepreneurship), contextual (geographic and cultural biases), and intersectional (insufficient focus on gender, class, and informality). These findings demand a paradigmatic change in theorizing and support for entrepreneurial activity in SIDS.

The ESI Framework incorporates insights from Schumpeterian innovation, Effectuation, Resilience, Triple Bottom Line, Circular Economy, and multilevel causal mechanisms. It offers a holistic, multi-level model that embraces blended value creation, informal and digital solutions, and inclusive strategies.

The framework theoretically contributes by bringing together scattered research threads and grounding them in SIDS realities. Practically, the model offers a roadmap to development and policy stakeholders who wish to encourage resilience, equity, and sustainability. The model challenges existing assumptions and emphasizes context-sensitive entrepreneurship as the way towards transformation. Entrepreneurial social innovation must be at the heart of how SIDS reimagine development in the face of uncertainty, fragility, and change going forward.

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