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Innovation, Sustainability, and Social Entrepreneurship: A Bibliometric Review of Global Research Trends (2015–2025)

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Abstract: Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical mechanism for addressing complex societal and sustainability challenges, yet the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of the field remain fragmented. This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of global social entrepreneurship research published between 2015 and 2025 using 12,438 Scopus-indexed documents. Bibliometric indicators including publication growth, citation performance, productive authors, institutions, countries, journals, and keyword co-occurrence networks were analyzed using VOSviewer. The findings reveal a substantial and sustained increase in research productivity, particularly following the global adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The United States, Germany, India, and the United Kingdom emerged as the most influential contributors, while leading journals demonstrated strong interdisciplinary integration across entrepreneurship, sustainability, and innovation studies. Thematic analysis identified social innovation, digital transformation, governance, sustainability, and hybrid business models as dominant and emerging research fronts. Co-authorship and country collaboration networks further indicated the growing internationalization of the field, although significant regional imbalances persist. The study contributes to the literature by providing an updated intellectual and thematic mapping of social entrepreneurship research during a decade characterized by rapid digital and sustainability transitions. The findings offer valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and innovation practitioners seeking to understand future directions in social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and sustainable innovation management.

Keywords: Sustainability Innovation, Strategic Management, Social Enterprise, Innovation Management, Vosviewer.



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A. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship (SE) is widely understood as the process through which mission-driven individuals or organisations employ entrepreneurial behaviours to generate social value, particularly by addressing problems of exclusion, marginalisation or environmental degradation (Abu-saifan & Drayton, 2012; Kumar & Yadav, 2023; Monteiro et al., 2022; Raman et al., 2025). While sharing common ground with commercial entrepreneurship—such as opportunity recognition, resource mobilisation and innovation—social entrepreneurship is distinguished by its primary objective of creating social impact rather than simply financial returns (Mohammadi, 2024; Monteiro et al., 2022; Raina, 2018; Sampaio, 2024). Over recent years, the importance of SE has grown substantially. As traditional state and market mechanisms increasingly struggle to address persistent global challenges such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, social entrepreneurship is seen as a complementary mode of change that can deliver scalable solutions in contexts of limited institutional capacity (Mohammadi, 2024; Puspita, 2022; Raina, 2018).

The relevance of social entrepreneurship is further underscored by its alignment with the global agenda exemplified by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With their launch in 2015, the SDGs signalled an amplified focus on inclusive and sustainable growth, decent work, inequality reduction and environmental protection. Social entrepreneurship plays an essential role in this agenda by enabling hybrid organisational forms that bridge business logic with social missions—thus making it a critical connector between the private, public and non-profit sectors (Cruz-sandoval & Carlos-arroyo, 2022; Pérez-barea, 2025; Satar et al., 2023). Within the academic literature, SE occupies a boundary-spanning space: it draws on business and entrepreneurship scholarship (for example research on new venture creation, innovation and firm growth), while simultaneously engaging with social innovation literature (which emphasises novel solutions for societal problems), development studies and

sustainability science (Raina, 2018; Sampaio, 2024).

Recent scholarship increasingly positions social entrepreneurship within broader innovation ecosystems, where collaboration among universities, governments, industries, and civil society actors facilitates entrepreneurial sustainability, social innovation, and technology transfer processes (Gerli et al., 2021). In parallel, knowledge diffusion theories emphasize the importance of collaborative networks and inter-organizational linkages in accelerating the dissemination of entrepreneurial knowledge, innovation capabilities, and sustainable practices across institutional and geographical boundaries (Gifford et al., 2021). Moreover, the rapid expansion of digital entrepreneurship and digitally enabled innovation systems has transformed how social enterprises mobilize resources, create social value, and scale impact through digital platforms and networked collaboration mechanisms (Misra & Wilson, 2023). Simultaneously, hybrid organizing theory has gained growing attention in explaining how social enterprises integrate social missions with commercial logics while balancing financial sustainability and societal impact (Battilana, 2018; Doherty et al., 2014). Furthermore, contemporary research on sustainable innovation transitions highlights the increasing convergence between innovation studies, social innovation, and sustainability transition frameworks in addressing complex global challenges and supporting transformative societal change (Havas et al., 2023).

In the last decade, the scholarly interest in social entrepreneurship has accelerated markedly. This proliferation is driven by both theoretical and practical forces: researchers seek to deepen understanding of SE's mechanisms, performance measurement and scaling, while practitioners and policy-makers look to social ventures as vehicles for achieving sustainability targets and inclusive development.

Despite the rapid expansion of social entrepreneurship scholarship, existing bibliometric studies remain fragmented in scope, often focusing on limited time periods, regional contexts, or isolated thematic dimensions such as entrepreneurial ecosystems or sustainability.

Consequently, insufficient attention has been given to the global intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and collaborative dynamics of the field during the post-SDG era characterized by accelerated digital transformation and sustainability transitions. Addressing this gap, the present study provides a comprehensive bibliometric mapping of social entrepreneurship research from 2015 to 2025, identifying emerging themes, influential actors, collaboration patterns, and evolving innovation trajectories within the global research landscape.

Bibliometric methods enable systematic quantification of publication trends, mapping of authorship and institutional collaboration networks, and visualization of thematic shifts and knowledge clusters over time. Such mapping provides scholars with a macroscopic view of the field's development, identifies core and peripheral actors, and reveals potential research opportunities and gaps.

In response to these observations, this study examines the following specific objectives:

1. To analyze the annual growth of publications and citation impact in social entrepreneurship research.
2. To identify the most productive countries contributing to global social entrepreneurship scholarship.
3. To determine the leading institutions involved in publishing research on social entrepreneurship.
4. To examine the top journals that frequently publish work in this field.
5. To evaluate authorship patterns in terms of research output and citation influence.
6. To highlight the most prolific authors contributing to social entrepreneurship research.
7. To analyze the most frequently used author keywords to identify dominant and emerging research themes.

B. Methods

A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify relevant studies on social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and social innovation. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database in the 3rd of November 2025 using the keywords "social entrepreneurship" OR "social

entrepreneur*" OR "social enterprise*" OR "social innovation" OR "sustainable entrepreneurship" OR "impact entrepreneurship". The search covered publications from 2015 to 2025. The initial query returned 16,602 documents.

To ensure thematic relevance, the search was refined to include subject areas most closely aligned with social entrepreneurship and its applied domains "Social Sciences, Business, Management and Accounting, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, Environmental Science, Decision Sciences, and Multidisciplinary". Further filtering was applied to include only journal articles, reviews, book chapters, and conference papers, which represent the most reliable and validated sources of scientific knowledge. This refinement excluded editorials, notes, and other non-peer-reviewed outputs, ensuring that the dataset reflects rigorously vetted scholarship. The results were then restricted to works at their final publication stage, and published in English, resulting in a refined dataset of 12,438 documents for bibliometric analysis.

VOSviewer (version 1.6.19) was used to visualize bibliometric networks and thematic clusters (Jan & Ludo, 2010; Van Eck et al., 2010). Applying a minimum threshold of occurrences for keywords and links for co-citation clusters; these parameters were determined based on sensitivity testing and prior literature (Opeoluwa et al., 2022). Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA-based workflow for the search strategy and screening process.

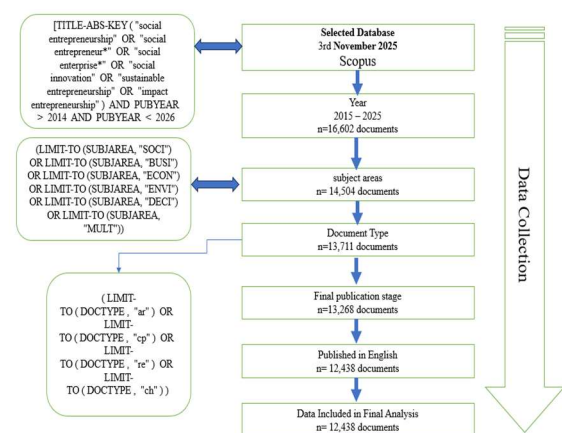


Figure 1. PRISMA-Based Workflow of the Search and Screening Process.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Publication Trends

As illustrated in Figure 2, the annual output of publications in the field of social entrepreneurship showed a clear and consistent upward trajectory from 2015 to 2024. Beginning with approximately 600 documents in 2015, the volume rose steadily to around 900 by 2018, then accelerated sharply between 2019 and 2021, reaching over 1,400 documents, highlighting a period of intensified scholarly activity that aligns with the era of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The peak output around 1,500 documents in 2024 suggests that social entrepreneurship has matured into a widely studied multidisciplinary domain. The slight dip observed in 2025 likely reflects indexing delays or the fact that data collection occurred in November 2025, when some publications from the year had yet to be indexed, rather than indicating an actual decline in research activity. These patterns mirror the findings of previous bibliometric analyses, which also document heightened publication growth in recent years for this domain (Coronel-pangol et al., 2023; İrengün, 2025).

The accelerated growth of publications after 2015 can also be interpreted within the broader context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which significantly expanded global scholarly attention toward inclusive innovation, sustainability, and social value creation (George et al., 2021; Prakash et al., 2025). The post-SDG era encouraged stronger interdisciplinary integration between entrepreneurship, sustainability transitions, and innovation ecosystem research, thereby increasing academic interest in socially oriented entrepreneurial models. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a substantial shift in entrepreneurship research priorities, particularly toward resilience, digital entrepreneurship, and technology-enabled social innovation, as organizations increasingly relied on digital platforms and collaborative innovation mechanisms to address emerging societal challenges (George et al., 2021; Kamaludin et al., 2021). In parallel, growing sustainability-transition discourse further reinforced the importance of social entrepreneurship as a transformative mechanism for achieving long-

term environmental and social objectives through innovation-driven and digitally enabled solutions (Krlev & Dey, 2020; Sottini et al., 2025). The observed growth reflects not only increased academic interest but also a shift in the field's underlying dynamics. Initially focused on foundational concepts, social entrepreneurship research appears to have moved into applied and contextual phases, exploring themes such as social innovation, impact measurement, and digital transformation, consistent with earlier literature (Aziza et al., 2023; İrengün, 2025). This transition indicates that the field is no longer emerging but is consolidating, with broader thematic diversity and deeper engagement in practical and policy-relevant issues. The upward trend in publication volume signals a healthy and growing research domain, but it also invites reflections on saturation, geographical distribution, and the need for comparative and emerging-market studies, themes that merit further analysis in the subsequent sections.

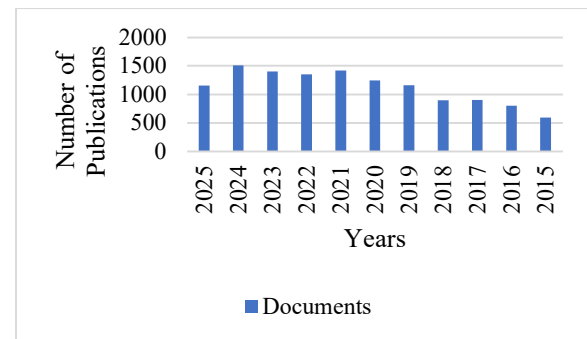


Figure 2. Annual Distribution of Social Entrepreneurship Publications (2015–2025)

2. Institutional Contributions

Figure 3 identifies the top 10 educational institutions contributing to the literature on social entrepreneurship over the period 2015–2025. Notably, Universitat de València (Spain) leads with approximately 100 publications, followed closely by Glasgow Caledonian University (UK) and Politecnico di Milano (Italy), each contributing around 95 publications. Together, these three European institutions highlight the strong centre of gravity of social-entrepreneurship research in Europe.

Beyond Europe, institutions like Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico) and KU Leuven (Belgium)

also feature among the top contributors, underscoring that high-productivity institutions are not confined to a single geographic region. However, the predominance of European institutions suggests that the “centre of gravity” for social-entrepreneurship publication remains strongly European in this dataset.

In terms of collaboration or clustering, the concentration of top institutions in Europe suggests that many of the high-output institutions may share collaborative networks, common thematic interests, or regional funding environments that favour social-entrepreneurship research. This clustering effect aligns with prior bibliometric research that observed institutional networks becoming more cohesive as a field matures. The dominance of European institutions in the top-10 suggests that social entrepreneurship research has strong roots in European academic and policy frameworks—perhaps due to the integration of sustainability agendas, social innovation funding and European Union policies.

The prominence of European institutions may also reflect the strength of European innovation ecosystems, where interconnected collaborations among universities, industries, governments, and innovation agencies are strongly supported through initiatives such as Horizon Europe and the European Innovation Ecosystems programme (European Commission, 2025). These policy-driven funding mechanisms encourage interdisciplinary research, knowledge exchange, and socially oriented innovation activities aligned with sustainability-transition objectives and sustainable governance structures (Khymych, 2026). Furthermore, the integration of sustainability governance frameworks within European research systems has strengthened institutional support for social entrepreneurship, particularly in areas related to green transition policies, inclusive innovation, and digital transformation strategies (ERRIN, 2025).

This pattern indicates a research gap: non-European regions (for example Africa, South Asia, Latin America) may still be under-represented in institutional productivity, even if they are of strong social-entrepreneurial interest. Therefore, highlighting this regional density and imbalance makes an important contribution—pointing not only to which institutions lead but

also to geographic patterns in the field’s development.

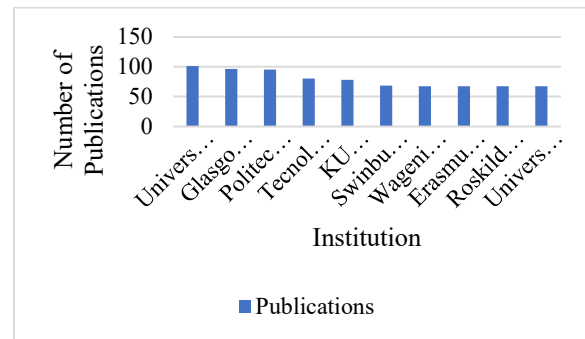


Figure 3. Top 10 Contributing Institutions in Social Entrepreneurship Research (2015–2025)

3. Most Influential Journals

In Table 1, the top ten journals publishing work in social entrepreneurship between 2015 and 2025 are presented, with notable productivity and citation-impact differences. *Sustainability* (Switzerland) leads the list with 578 articles and a CiteScore of 7.7, and its most-cited article garnered 249 citations. The *Journal of Cleaner Production* stands out with the highest CiteScore of 20.7 despite fewer documents (125), and its most-cited article has 435 citations. The *Journal of Business Research* published 91 documents with a CiteScore of 25.3 and its top article has 486 citations, signalling high influence.

These results suggest that although a few journals publish many articles, the highest impact is not always found in the highest-volume outlets. Furthermore, social entrepreneurship research is bridging disciplines: journals like *Sustainability* emphasise environmental and social themes, *Journal of Cleaner Production* emphasises sustainability and green business models, and *Journal of Business Research* emphasises high-impact management scholarship. Previous bibliometric works similarly identify *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* and *Sustainability* as core outlets in this domain (Coronel-pangol et al., 2023; Kaushik, 2023). The presence of these diverse journals indicates that the field of social entrepreneurship is not isolated in one narrow discipline but engages business, management, sustainability science and ethics.

The implication is that for authors aiming to publish in this field, targeting journals with both strong productivity and higher citation impact

offers strategic advantage. At the same time, the field might benefit from more balanced participation in journals outside Europe and beyond sustainability-branded outlets. By understanding which journals dominate both quantity and impact, this study can inform researchers about where to publish, and funders or institutions about where the scholarly conversation is most active.

4. Most Productive and Influential Authors

In Figure 4, the list of the top-15 most prolific authors in social entrepreneurship research during 2015-2025 is presented. Author "Roy, M.J." leads with 35 publications, followed by Authors "Teasdale, S." and "Ratten, V." with 29 and 27 documents respectively. Furthermore, the co-authorship visualization map in **Figure 5** illustrates the collaborative relationships among authors contributing to the field under study. Each node represents an author, while the links between nodes indicate co-authorship connections. The size of the nodes corresponds to the author's publication frequency or total link strength, reflecting their level of influence or productivity in the research network (Eck & Waltman, 2014).

Table 1. Top 10 highly productive journals on social entrepreneurship in the years (2015–2025)

No.	Journal	Doc.	Cite Score	Most Cited Article (Reference)	Time Cited	Publisher
1	Sustainability (Switzerland)	578	7.7	Lessons for responsible innovation in the business context: A systematic literature review of responsible, social and sustainable innovation practices.	249	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI)
2	Social Enterprise Journal	221	4.7	The role of institutional and stakeholder networks in shaping social enterprise ecosystems in Europe	83	Emerald Publishing
3	Journal of Social Entrepreneurship	219	8.1	The Effect of Experiential Social Entrepreneurship Education on Intention Formation in Students	138	Routledge
4	Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	140	0.5	Kaarvan Crafts Foundation: embracing digital literacy for women empowerment	11	Emerald Group Holdings Ltd.
5	Journal of Cleaner Production	125	20.7	Doing business in a green way: A systematic review of the ecological sustainability entrepreneurship literature and future research directions	435	Elsevier Ltd
6	Voluntas	114	5.3	Fundamentals for an International Typology of Social Enterprise Models	297	Springer New York LLC
7	Journal of Business Ethics	96	14.4	Mapping the Intellectual Structure of Social Entrepreneurship Research: A Citation/Co-citation Analysis	312	Springer
8	Journal of Business Research	91	25.3	Social entrepreneurship research: A review and future research agenda	486	Elsevier Inc.
9	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	83	26.4	Transformative social innovation and (dis)empowerment	431	Elsevier Inc.
10	Proceedings of the European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship, ECIE	78	0.9	Social innovation and networks in rural territories: The case of EPAM	9	Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited

The different colors represent distinct clusters, which correspond to groups of authors who frequently collaborate with each other, signifying thematic or institutional research communities (Cobo et al., 2011).

From the map, Michael J. Roy, Vanessa Ratten, and Marthe Nyssens appear as central, suggesting that they serve as key connectors in the field, often collaborating with multiple clusters. This indicates their significant influence in shaping the intellectual structure and research directions within the domain (Donthu et al., 2021). The presence of several moderately connected clusters, such as those led by Barraket Jo, Ziegler Rafael, and Wittmayer Julia M., reveals the existence of specialized subfields or regional research groups that contribute distinct perspectives to the literature (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

Overall, the network demonstrates a moderately connected research community, where collaboration is evident but still segmented into thematic or geographical clusters. This pattern

suggests an evolving research field with increasing opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-institutional cooperation.

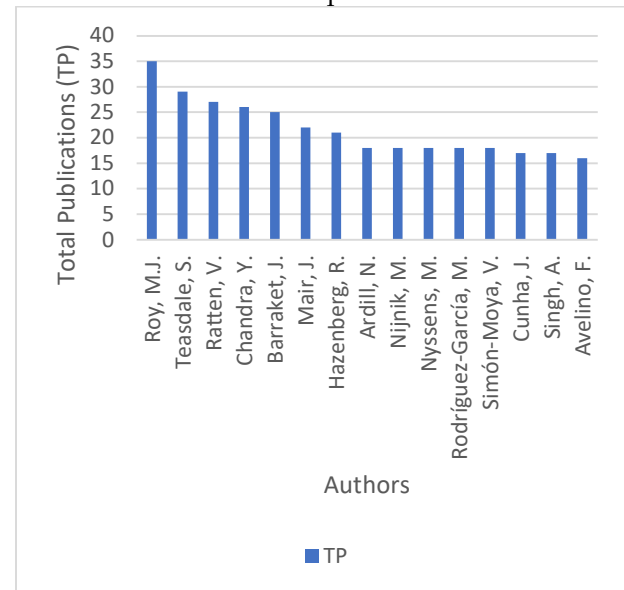


Figure 4. Most Productive Authors in Social Entrepreneurship Research (2015–2025).

sustainability, social enterprise, entrepreneurship, digital social innovation, governance, and social value, which together reflect the multidimensional nature of the field.

Looking at the keyword clusters: one cluster gathers around themes like *innovation, digital social innovation, technology, smart city*, indicating a strong interest in how digital and technological solutions are being leveraged for social entrepreneurship. Another cluster centres on *sustainability, social value, circular economy and governance*, showing how social entrepreneurship is linked to environmental and policy-oriented research. A further cluster is about *education, entrepreneurial skills, and human capital*, pointing to the academic push to build capacity in the field. These thematic groupings mirror those found in studies which highlighted innovation, business models, and ecosystem policy as key pillars in social entrepreneurship research (Trabskaia et al., 2023).

The increasing prominence of digital social innovation reflects a broader transition toward technologically mediated entrepreneurial ecosystems, where digital platforms, smart

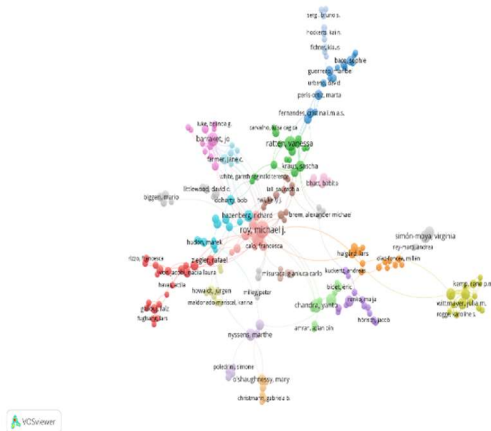


Figure 5. Co-Authorship Network Visualization in Social Entrepreneurship Research

5. Keyword Co-occurrence and Thematic Analysis

In the network visualisation of author-keywords that shown in **Figure 6**, the term “social innovation” appears as the most prominent, indicating its central role in the research landscape of social entrepreneurship. Close behind are high-frequency terms such as

governance, and sustainability-oriented innovation increasingly shape social value creation. These trends align with the notion that social entrepreneurship is evolving from primarily value-creation and development models into more complex, digitally-enabled and environmentally-embedded models (Ryszko, 2021; Sampaio, 2024).

This keyword co-occurrence analysis demonstrates that social entrepreneurship research has matured into a multidisciplinary field with convergent themes of innovation, sustainability, governance and digitalisation. At the same time, the identification of newer keywords points to frontier topics that are still under-explored – presenting promising avenues for future research in areas like digital social entrepreneurship, hybrid business models, and smart-city-embedded social enterprises.

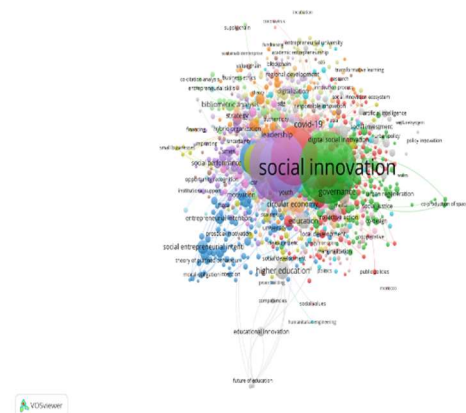


Figure 6. Keyword Co-Occurrence Network in Social Entrepreneurship Research.

6. Country and Regional Collaboration

Figure 7 illustrates several important patterns within the country collaboration network. The largest nodes correspond to the United States, Germany, India, Australia, and Italy, which means these countries publish the most in the dataset and function as major research hubs in social entrepreneurship. Second, the thick and dense connecting lines between these hubs – and extending out too many other countries – indicate strong cross-country collaboration, especially among established research nations. Third, the dominance of North American, European and key Asian countries suggests the field remains anchored in these regions; at the

same time, the presence of Asian countries like India and Australia shows that non-European/North American regions are increasingly active. Finally, though fewer, there are nodes representing developing-country contributions – a sign that the research community is beginning to broaden internationally, though those countries remain on the periphery compared to the core hubs.

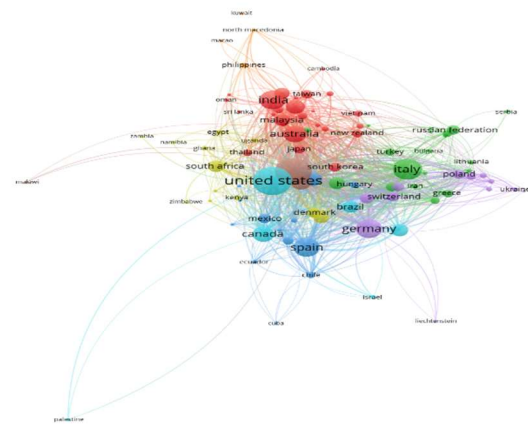


Figure 7. Country Collaboration Network in Social Entrepreneurship Research.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings suggest that policymakers and practitioners should strengthen innovation support systems that enable social enterprises to scale their societal impact, particularly in regions with limited institutional and entrepreneurial capacity (Dees, 1998). Developing targeted training programs in social innovation, digital entrepreneurship, and impact measurement can further enhance the competencies and sustainability of social entrepreneurs across diverse contexts (Bornstein & Davis, 2010). In addition, collaborative governance models integrating government agencies, civil society organizations, universities, and private-sector actors may improve the effectiveness of socially oriented innovation ecosystems and cross-sector partnerships in addressing complex societal challenges (Mair & Martí, 2006).

For future research, greater scholarly attention should be directed toward underrepresented regions to capture more inclusive perspectives on social entrepreneurship, local innovation

ecosystems, and region-specific sustainability challenges (HAACK et al., 2021). Comparative and cross-country studies are also needed to examine how institutional, cultural, and economic differences influence the development and long-term sustainability of social enterprises. Furthermore, emerging themes such as digital social innovation, hybrid business models, platform-based entrepreneurship, and post-pandemic entrepreneurial transformation require deeper empirical investigation to better understand their long-term implications for social value creation and sustainable innovation processes (Kaushik, 2023).

D. Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the global evolution of social entrepreneurship research between 2015 and 2025, highlighting the rapid expansion, diversification, and increasing interdisciplinary nature of the field. The findings demonstrate a substantial rise in scholarly productivity, particularly following the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reflecting the growing recognition of social entrepreneurship as a strategic mechanism for addressing complex societal, environmental, and sustainability challenges. Emerging themes related to social innovation, digital entrepreneurship, sustainability transitions, governance, and hybrid business models further indicate that the field has evolved beyond traditional social enterprise perspectives toward more innovation-driven and digitally enabled approaches.

The study also reveals significant geographical and institutional disparities, with research productivity and collaboration networks remaining heavily concentrated in Europe and North America. This imbalance highlights the need for broader inclusion of underrepresented regions to better capture diverse entrepreneurial contexts, local innovation ecosystems, and region-specific sustainability challenges. In addition, the increasing prominence of digital social innovation and collaborative entrepreneurial ecosystems suggests promising directions for future research, particularly in understanding how technology-enabled and hybrid organizational models contribute to long-

term social value creation and sustainable development.

By mapping the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and collaborative dynamics of the field, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the contemporary social entrepreneurship research landscape. The findings provide valuable implications for researchers, policymakers, and innovation practitioners seeking to strengthen sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems and socially oriented innovation strategies. As social entrepreneurship continues to evolve within rapidly changing digital and sustainability-transition environments, stronger interdisciplinary and international collaboration will remain essential for advancing both theoretical development and practical societal impact.

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Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study are sourced from the Scopus database, comprising a total of 12,438 documents related to social entrepreneurship research from 2015 to 2025. The metadata used for bibliometric analysis are available upon reasonable request from the authors.

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