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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ecosystem parameters and resilience of community-based social enterprises in a South African township: The case of Soweto

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Abstract

Many social enterprises (SEs) in South African marginalized resource-constrained townships face significant obstacles that hinder their ability to sustainably contribute to community development. However, others survive and thrive. What explains their resilience and impact? Drawing on data from qualitative interviews and literature, this paper interrogates how SEs navigate challenges and contribute to community development in Soweto. Findings suggest that the regulatory environment, cooperation and co-production with (local) government, partnerships with corporates, and philanthropic activities of community members and foundations are the core ecosystem factors shaping SEs' sustainability and impact. The paper contributes to the understanding of how social enterprises in marginalised urban contexts navigate and utilise these ecosystem factors, emphasising the importance of tailored policies and collaborations in the ecosystems for fostering community resilience.

Keywords: Social Enterprises; ecosystem; resilience

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the dynamic interplay between community-based social enterprises and urban community resilience, with a specific focus on Soweto Township in Johannesburg, South Africa. In South Africa, about a quarter of the population, especially working-class people, live in townships and informal settlements (Ngwenya & Zikhali, 2018). These settlements are characterised by multiple challenges of marginality, including high unemployment rates, crime, informality, low educational attainment and poor health services. Social enterprises (SEs) have emerged to address these challenges through job creation, social progress and empowerment of marginalised populations (von Bergmann, 2018; Moreno & Agapitova, 2017). However, these organisations also face many challenges which hinder their ability to sustainably contribute to the development and resilience of these urban communities (Wessels & Nel, 2016). Nonetheless , some of these organisations survive, while others thrive, despite many knocks. What explains this resilience, and what type of contributions do they make to urban marginalised communities in South Africa?

This study explores the role of SEs in Soweto community development by focusing on understanding the key ecosystem parameters critical for the resilience and sustainability of these organisations in marginalised urban settings. Utilising an exploratory qualitative approach, the paper applied a constructive grounded theory method to gain deeper insights and understanding of these issues (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Key parameters for a supportive ecosystem for SEs identified include the legal/regulatory environment (tax incentives), cooperation and co-production arrangements with (local) government, social responsibility partnerships with corporates, and philanthropic activities of community members (including volunteering and reciprocal support) and foundations. Consequently, we argue that SEs that effectively leverage these factors can enhance their resilience, sustainability, and, in effect, their contributions to community development.

In what follows, we first lay out the geospatial and historical context of Soweto and its marginality in urban South Africa. This is followed by a presentation of a review of literature on the role and contributions of SEs to urban community development in South Africa. Thereafter, the paper delves into conceptual issues, especially on SEs resilience and ecosystems. A brief presentation of the methodology employed in this study follows, and thereafter, a presentation of findings and discussion before offering conclusions.

2. Soweto and South African urban spatial marginality: a brief background

Soweto, an acronym for South-Western Townships, is a major township in the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. Its history is deeply intertwined with racial capitalism, characterised by segregation and forced removals of black people during South Africa's colonial era. Specifically, starting with what is today known as Orlando East, Soweto was first established in 1932 as a dormitory township for Black miners under the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act as part of a racial segregation policy to control the movement of Black South Africans into urban areas by designating specific areas for Black residences (Nieftagodien, 2022). Like all other Black townships, it was characterised by poor municipal services, inadequate housing, and overcrowding (Nieftagodien, 2022).

While apartheid was abolished in the early 1990s, its legacy of spatial, economic and infrastructural deprivation for non-white communities remains powerful (Beavon, 2004; Heer, 2019). As a result, the predominantly Black neighbourhoods are physically segregated from the city centre and have much worse social and technical infrastructure than areas previously occupied by whites. Additionally, while urban development is moving in a positive direction, the creation of more integrated urban spaces remains a challenge, and private investment in urban development is still concentrated in Johannesburg's northern areas (Ahmad & Pienaar, 2014).

Municipal and social services also remain highly segregated. In this regard, although Johannesburg ranks highly in terms of educational attainment, this is not uniform as provision is influenced by the city's racially segregated geographical settlements. The best schools are in the former white suburbs. This uneven distribution imposes additional transport costs on those living in distant settlements, such as Region D (which includes Soweto and Diepsloot), which also has the highest illiteracy rate in Johannesburg (Abrahams & Everatt, 2019).

The City of Johannesburg (CoJ) local government has developed and implemented policies to address these inequalities and ensure inclusive development. However, like many other African cities, CoJ invests heavily in flagship projects (such as the Corridors of Freedom or World Cup transformations) rather than on sustainable community development projects, especially in in highly deserving but disadvantaged areas (Pieterse, 2019; Todes, 2014; Zack et. al, 2010). Johannesburg also faces politically motivated interventions in urban governance from the federal

level (Pieterse, 2019), making long-term planning and implementation of reforms to address spatial inequalities difficult. Any change in political leadership potentially jeopardises project implementation. As a result, significant inequalities remain between historically black and white settlements (Malala, 2019).

To fill the gaps left by the government's failure, community-based SEs have emerged, particularly in marginalised communities like Soweto, where, besides their involvement in community development, they also act as a link between people and the government. Additionally, these have helped residents to set up cooperatives and other self-help initiatives (Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015). However, many SEs in these contexts face many challenges and do not survive beyond their three-year mark (Oswald & Tengeh, 2022). A particular challenge for SEs in these marginalised areas such as Soweto is infrastructure (van Vuuren, 2022), which results in their inability to meet or communicate with clients. Other challenges include limited access to professional networks vital for mentoring, funding and aiding access to markets especially for start-ups, limited access to capital, limited innovation and human resources (van Vuuren, 2022; Dzomonda, 2021).

While some of these challenges are not unique to marginalised settlements like Soweto, their impacts are particularly acute in communities with fewer resources and others spatial inequities, as many lack the vital social capitals that more affluent communities have. Indeed, physically, SEs in resource-constrained environments cannot access vital networks without connectivity and transport facilities. Environmental injustice has also been cited as one of the reasons for the failures of SEs in South Africa (Bushe, 2019).

3. Role and contributions of SEs to urban community development

SEs play a crucial role in urban community development (Maxwell et al., 2015; REDF, 2014; Mair & Marti, 2009; Weaver, 2016) by addressing immediate social issues as well as long-term sustainability of communities in multiple ways (Wu et al., 2018);(Wu et al., 2018); Jakubowska & Steiner, 2022; Powell & Osborne, 2020). First, SEs step in to provide services in underserved communities by addressing needs not adequately covered by the public or private sectors and in so doing, improve access to essential services for marginalised populations (Jakubowska & Steiner, 2022; Powell & Osborne, 2020). Second, through their ability to experiment with new technologies, processes, and partnerships, SEs create innovative business models and strategies, that deliver services and offer creative solutions to complex social problems more efficiently and effectively (Powell & Osborne, 2020; Wilson et al., 2009). Third, SEs help increase sustainability in these communities as they generate revenue through their operations and reduce reliance on grants and donations, enabling them to scale their impact and consistently provide much-needed services (Powell & Osborne, 2020). Fourth, SEs often provide services that complement or enhance existing public service provision. Their presence can therefore increase the overall capacity of the system, allowing more people to access the services they need (Wilson et al., 2009).

Recognising the vital role SEs play in economic development and growth, but also their challenges, the CoJ, in partnership with the Gauteng provincial government, have been implementing various projects in support of these organisations and by extension, the communities they serve. In this regard, CoJ has invested resources in township transformation, encouraging citizen participation, and cultivating community self-sufficiency to solve social problems (Scheba & Turok, 2020). For example, in the 2015 financial year, the Gauteng provincial government allocated more than R300 million to support township businesses and cooperatives (South African Government, 2015).

Support from CoJ departments and agencies has led to increased cases of entrepreneurial

citizenship as SEs develop trading and non-trading activities in response to local needs and opportunities. As a result, their activities enhance community ownership and participation in decision-making processes. This local ownership contributes to sustainable development and builds urban resilience by ensuring that the resources, benefits, and profits generated by these organisations remain within the community, resulting in long-term positive impacts (Murray et al., 2010). In addition, these initiatives contribute to job creation, social integration, local industry, social innovation, and cultural preservation.

Despite increasing recognition and support from the government, SEs still face many challenges such as lack of funding, complex tax regulations, and the need to balance social and financial objectives, that threaten their long-term survival, growth, and sustainability (Dzomonda, 2021). Studies show that survival rate of SEs especially in the first five years of existence ranges between 70% and 80% (Masutha, 2015; Adeniran & Johnston, 2011; Claeye, 2017; Wessels & Nel, 2016). Overcoming these hurdles requires, as literature suggests, a supportive ecosystem that includes policies, and targeted investments for social entrepreneurship to thrive (Barki et al., 2020; Diaz Gonzalez & Dentchev, 2020; Mensel et al., 2023; Sauermann, 2023). In what follows, we delve in detail, into these ecosystem factors, by first defining the core concepts of SE resilience and ecosystem, and their relevance to the current analysis.

3.1 Conceptualising social enterprise resilience and ecosystem

While resilience means different things across various disciplines, in this study, it refers to the ability of the SEs to adapt, thrive, and sustain their operations in the face of challenges and changing circumstances (Hurley & Gillihan, 2024; Wright et al., 2012). Resilience, therefore, is the ability of organisations to respond to shocks by adapting to both short-term disruptions and long-term incremental changes. It involves bouncing back through creatively overcoming adversity and challenges (Littlewood & Holt, 2017).

Resilience is not as a static trait but as a dynamic, ongoing process of organising that allows organisations to change and adapt, while still fulfilling their core missions (Littlewood & Holt, 2017). It involves a combination of internal and external resources, capabilities, and strategies that enable individuals or organisations to withstand and thrive despite challenges (Littlewood & Holt, 2017; Wright et al., 2012). SEs' internal capabilities and resources that aid their resilience include passion and vision, strategic planning, ability to build networks or collaborations, flexibility and innovativeness. These resources and capabilities enable social enterprises to navigate the complex and often unpredictable operating environment and ultimately contribute to their sustainability and impact.

The SE ecosystem plays an important role in the survival and resilience of SEs (Littlewood & Holt, 2017). By SE ecosystem, we refer to a dynamic and interconnected network of actors in which SEs operate. This encompasses various actors, including entrepreneurs, community members, government entities, and corporate partners, who collectively influence the creation, sustainability, and scaling of these organisations (Akinboade et al., 2021; Carriles-Alberdi et al., 2021; Esau & Tengeh, 2022). While these have been studied variously, an influential World Bank study on SE ecosystem frameworks identifies four critical dimensions that influence their ability to operate effectively, scale up, and ensure resilience (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017). These are: (a) policy and regulation, (b) financing solutions, (c) infrastructure and human capital and (d) information and networks. As we will see below, the World Bank framework (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017) integrates social capital theory and provides a comprehensive understanding of how the different dimensions contribute to the resilience of SEs, particularly in contexts like Soweto.

Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that enable the harmonization and cooperation for mutual benefit. It exists at both individual and collective levels (Daskalopoulou

et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2021). The theory emphasizes that social relationships are resources that can generate tangible or intangible benefits, such as knowledge sharing, innovation, and trust (Xie et al., 2021). Social capital exhibits as bonding, which refers to strong ties within a close-knit group (e.g., family or close friends) as well as bridging which refers to connections across diverse social groups, which fosters access to new resources and ideas. Social capital, therefore entails relationships with institutions or individuals in positions of power that provide access to resources beyond immediate networks (Daskalopoulou et al., 2023).

By integrating the tenets of the social capital theory, the World Bank's framework enriches the understanding of how relationships, trust, and networks influence entrepreneurial and organizational success. Social capital aids the functioning of SEs in at least four ways. First, it is vital for resource mobilisation as SEs rely heavily on networks to access funding, volunteers, and partnerships. In this regard, bridging social capital helps SEs to connect with diverse stakeholders. Second, it enhances trust and cooperation within communities can enhance the effectiveness of SEs by fostering participation and collaboration. Third, social capital enables the exchange of ideas across networks, which is crucial for developing innovative solutions to societal challenges. Finally, social capital ensures sustainability of SEs. Specifically, the relational aspect of social capital strengthens SEs long-term engagement with beneficiaries and stakeholders (Daskalopoulou et al., 2023; Madhooshi & Samimi, 2015). We feel the World Bank framework is useful for explaining SE resilience even in our context in Soweto, as explained below.

3.2 Policy and regulation

This dimension specifically looks at the rules and regulations that govern the operating environment for SEs. Policies and regulations act as both barriers and enablers for the emergence and development of SEs. A supportive policy and regulatory framework is essential for SEs success, especially in facilitating incentives and improvement in the ease of SE establishment and operations (Carriles-Alberdi et al., 2021; Noya, n.d.). Additionally, an enabling regulation facilitates collaboration and dialogue between the public and private sectors that are supportive of SEs (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017). According to Moreno & Agapitova (2017), although the South African government appreciates the role of SEs, it does not have a clear understanding of what it entails. Establishing useful legal and regulatory frameworks tailored to the needs of SEs in this context has been challenging.

Effective policies and regulations are required to create an enabling environment for SEs to thrive. Supportive government policies can facilitate access to resources, reduce bureaucratic barriers, and provide incentives for social entrepreneurship. The process of coming up with such supportive and effective policies and regulations, the social capital perspective argues, can be enhanced through active participation of social entrepreneurs. This is because relationships and networks are central for fostering trust and cooperation. In this context, strong ties between SEs, policymakers, and regulatory bodies can enhance advocacy and lobbying efforts, ensuring that the needs and challenges of SEs are addressed. Such collaborative policymaking that includes input from SEs can therefore lead to more effective regulations that promote resilience. Of importance to the current study is to interrogate how existing policies and their silences are results of such collaborations, or lack thereof.

3.3 Financing solutions

Success and resilience of SEs are dependent on access to financial solutions , which in turn are contingent upon policies that aid the establishment of an enabling ecosystem to develop social businesses and facilitate access to funding (Carriles-Alberdi et al., 2021; Noya, n.d.; Patetta,

2022). In the South African context, SEs often face barriers in accessing financial resources due to a lack of understanding of their models, a deficit of assessment instruments, and the absence of collaboration between financial, economic and social sectors. Redressing financing challenges requires government to consider innovative financing solutions, such as grant funding for SEs in the seed and start-up phases to help them test and refine their business models, as well improved access to credit facilities (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017).

Furthermore, access to diverse financing solutions is critical for SEs to scale their operations and ensure sustainability. This includes grants, loans, impact investments, and crowdfunding, which, as the social capital perspective argues, is possible in ecosystems with rich networks and bonds. As seen earlier, social capital specifically aids SEs in securing funding through networks of trust and reciprocity, which facilitate connections between SEs and potential investors or donors. SEs that actively build relationships within their communities and sectors can leverage social capital to access financial resources and support, enhancing their resilience. Of note here, is to interrogate mechanisms that aid Soweto SEs' access to finances and financing solutions.

3.4 Infrastructure and human capital

Infrastructure and human capital are critical components shaping the SE ecosystem, significantly influence their success, and impact (Estery et al., 2 021). Infrastructure is both physical and social (Estery et al., 2021) and encompasses public services and facilities (Ojelabi et al., 2018), technology, and access to training and education. It also includes alternatives to "traditional consumer" finance such as support services (such as availability of skilled and motivated human resources and incentives to encourage new entrants, especially the youth to join the sector) which is crucial for the success of SEs especially in marginalised (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017; Estery et al., 2021).

Social capital perspectives stress the significance of community engagement and collaboration in building human capital, arguing that SEs that foster relationships within their communities can tap into local knowledge, skills, and resources, creating a supportive ecosystem that enhances resilience. Collaborative initiatives, such as training programs and knowledge-sharing platforms, can strengthen human capital and improve operational capacity. The import here, is whether there have been such collaborative initiatives, and the effect of the same.

3.5 Information and networks

Social entrepreneurs benefit from access to information that helps them understand market needs, best practices, and innovative solutions. This enables them to design effective interventions to address social issues. Sharing information through community networks enhances collaboration and resource sharing and aggregation among social enterprises, allowing them to learn from one another and avoid common pitfalls (Ngatse-Ipangui & Dassah, 2019). In addition, social entrepreneurship thrives on building relationships and networks that extend beyond traditional economic transactions. Such networks and relationships facilitate collaboration among social entrepreneurs, enabling them to combine resources, share expertise, and amplify their impact. Such collaborations often lead to innovative solutions that derive from reductions in transaction costs that might not be achievable by individual enterprises alone (Jiatong et al., 2021; Ngatse-Ipangui & Dassah, 2019).

Social capital enhances information flow and networking opportunities. SEs that engage in collaborative networks can share knowledge, best practices, and resources, fostering innovation and adaptability. Strong connections with other organizations, stakeholders, and community members can provide SEs with valuable insights and support, contributing to their resilience.

3.6 Conceptual framework

The figure below helps illustrate these relationships between the different ecosystem factors and is therefore useful for helping us better comprehend how SEs in Soweto and similar contexts can navigate challenges and thrive by leveraging relationships and networks.

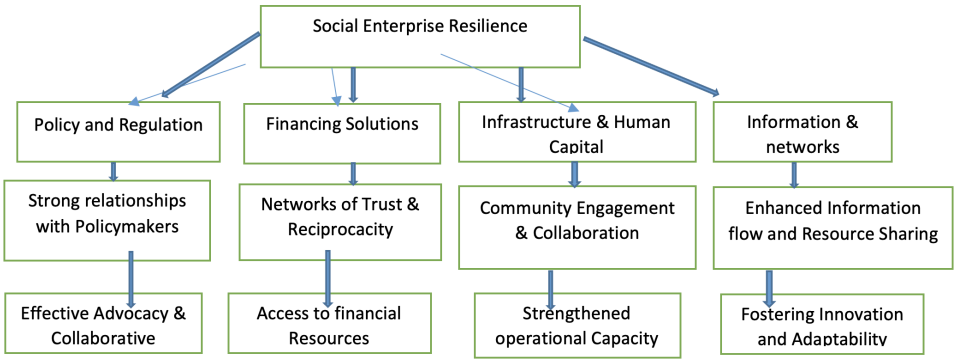

Figure 1. Social enterprise resilience conceptual framework
Source: Authors' creation.

Integrating Moreno & Agapitova's (2017) analytical ecosystem framework with social capital theory offers a nuanced understanding of SEs resilience as it surfaces the interplay between policy, financing, infrastructure, and networks, alongside the role of social capital in navigating challenges. It further underscores the importance of fostering strong relationships and collaborative networks to enhance the resilience of social enterprises in addressing social issues effectively. Borrowing from (Muñoz, 2010), suggestions of a more geographically oriented research agenda on SEs to identify the specific contextual ecosystem factors, the model helps us to focus on context-specific ecosystem factors in Soweto as their variability greatly influences outcomes. In view of this, in what follows, we examine the specific geographical context and its effects on SEs resilience in Soweto. We do this by first describing, in the next section, the methodology we applied. This is followed by a presentation of the findings and, thereafter, a conclusion.

4. Methodology

The study utilised a grounded theory approach as it was deemed particularly appropriate for facilitating the creation of a theoretical framework rooted in empirical data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics within the social enterprise ecosystem in Sowetoan context. The research design was qualitative and utilised in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis to collect rich, contextual data. This multi-method strategy enabled the triangulation of findings, thereby enhancing credibility and robustness of the results.

Interview participants were purposively sampled to ensure only those with relevant experience and insights in operations of SEs in Soweto were included. The specific focus was on locally established and staffed SEs actively engaged or recently ceased operations in community development (waste management, nutrition, education, and job creation) in Soweto. This ensured a diverse range of participants identified using the Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) database of SEs that had previously received training or tenders from the organization. This connection provided a reliable starting point for identifying active SEs in the area. In total, twenty SE founders and staff were interviewed to gain deeper insights into their ecosystems.

In addition, seven representatives from local government agencies were included to provide an external perspective on the SE ecosystem. The ultimate sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, ensuring that data collection continued until no new insights emerged. We summarise the details of participants in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees

	Participant identifier	Gender	Legal form/location/ year established	Role of person interviewed	Services they provide	Employees recruited
1	GO01	Female	CoJ Department of Johannesburg-City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ)	General Manager		
2	GO02	Male	JCPZ	Research/ Knowledge Management		
3	GO03	Female	JCPZ	Manager EPWP		
4	GO04	Male	JCPZ	Manager Environments		
5	GO05	Male	JCPZ	Officer – Environments		
6	GO06	Male	SEDA	CEO - Head of Enterprise		
7	GO07	Male	CoJ Department of Economic Development	Development Division		
8	NPO01	Male	NPO (est. 2016) in Soweto	Co-Founder & CEO		Permanent staff - 7, temp staff 12
9	NPO02	Male	NPO (est. 2014) in Soweto	Founder and Director	Environmental education, awareness, skills development	Permanent staff 20
10	NPO03	Female	NPO (est. 2007 & cooperative Soweto (est. 2014)	Chair person	Food services	Coop members 5, Seasonal workers 50
11	NPO04	Female	NPO (est. 2015) Soweto	Project Manager	Cleaning up campaign	Permanent staff 15
12	NPO05	Male	Trust (est. 2012)	Founder	Food Garden	permanent staff 9
13	SE01	Male	Cooperative (est. 2021), Soweto	General Manager	Horticulture, bee-keeping	Members 5
14	SE02	Female	Cooperative (est. 2012), Soweto	Director	Horticulture, construction	Permanent staff 8, Seasonal staff 200
15	SE03	Male	Cooperative (est. 2012), Soweto	Managing Director	Horticulture, construction	Seasonal 196, PikitUp 185. Construction 90
16	SE04	Female	Cooperative (est. 2022), Soweto	Treasurer	Horticulture, Cleaning	Members 11
17	SE05	Female	Cooperative (est. 2019), Soweto	Director	Horticulture, recycling	Members 5, Seasonal 255
18	SE06	Female	Cooperative (est. 2013, Soweto	Project Manager	Advisory services	Members & permanent staff 12, seasonal 13
19	SE07	Male	For profit Company (est. 2014). Soweto	Founder and Director	Construction, home finance	Permanent staff 6
20	SE08	Female	For profit Company (est. 2020). Soweto	Founder	Food garden, skills development	Permanent 12
21	SE09	Male	For profit Company (est. 2012), Soweto	Operational manager	SE: private security for low-income	Permanent 6, seasonal 5 to 10
22	SE10	Male	Cooperative (est. 2016), Soweto	Co-founder	NPO: Community development	Members 5, seasonal 30
23	SE11	Male	Cooperative (est. 2016), now in Cosmo	Founder	Environmental conservation	Members 5
24	SE12	Female	Cooperative (est. 2011), now in Diepsloot	Manager	Grass cutting	Members 5
25	SE13	Male	Cooperative, Soweto	Founder	Horticulture, Bee keeping	Members 5
26	SE14	Male	Cooperative, Soweto	Founder	Recycling	Members 2
27	SE15	Female	Cooperative (est. 2016), now in Diepsloot	Director	Horticulture, Waste management	Members 5, seasonal 240

Data collection process followed an iterative sampling logic, continuously selecting new data sources based on the analysis of previously collected data (Charmaz, 2006). This involved three rounds of data collection, starting with field visits and brief ad-hoc interviews, followed by two rounds of in-depth interviews to gather comprehensive information. To ensure theoretical saturation, we supplemented our primary data collection with information from various sources, including literature, newspapers, and online blogs. In the initial rounds, access to participants was facilitated by Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ), which likely contributed to a higher prevalence of social enterprises involved in waste management and horticulture (the two areas most supported by JCPZ), as well as a generally positive perception of the local government. We addressed potential biases in our sampling approach by employing contrast sampling in the third round of interviews.

We obtained written informed consent from all participants, and whenever consented to, interviews were recorded. Interviews utilised an interview guide and maintained a flexible approach to allow for exploration of emerging themes. The interview guide covered a wide range of topics related to the organisational ecosystem, conditions that influenced the formation

of the organisations, daily existential challenges they face, and their relationships with the community.

The data analysis process involved several key steps to ensure thorough examination and validation of themes. Firstly, transcriptions of interviews were subjected to open coding, where segments of data were labelled with descriptive codes. This step aimed to capture the richness of participants' responses. After initial coding, focused coding was conducted to identify more significant categories and patterns within the data. This involved grouping similar codes into broader themes. Themes were derived from the data through constant comparison, where codes and categories were compared against each other to refine and consolidate findings. The research team met regularly to discuss and validate emerging themes, ensuring consensus on interpretations.

5. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings from our empirical data concerning the key parameters for a supportive ecosystem for social enterprises in Soweto. While confirming some of the ecosystem dimensions identified in the Word Bank model earlier discussed, these findings also surface Soweto context specific factors. Specifically, the following identified parameters are presented and discussed: the legal environment, cooperation and co-production arrangements with (local) government, social responsibility partnerships with corporates, and philanthropic activities of community members (including volunteering, reciprocal support) and foundations.

5.1 The legal and policy environment

The data revealed that the legal and policy environment is an important dimension of the ecosystem that affects SEs in Soweto. The legal environment encompasses the regulatory frameworks for SEs in South Africa, which, as one City official indicated, is challenging:

> We struggle with the regulatory framework. Establishing a single public-private partnership (PPP) agreement will take us three years. It is not even our responsibility. It is decided by the national treasury. In the local government, there are councillors; up there in the executive, there are the Mayor, City Manager, and their officers.. . . councillors are the legislature [but] never challenge any laws that are enacted. In essence, laws come from the top but do not have any input at the local level (top-down approach) ... and none of the councillors have the guts to challenge the existing framework. (GO04)

The World Bank framework suggests PPPs help in providing a conducive environment for SEs as they promote public procurement from SEs leading to their resilience (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017). However, as noted in the interview excerpt above, the top-down oriented bureaucracy in establishment of PPPs negatively affects SEs operating in Soweto.

An additional challenge for SEs in Soweto highlighted by another respondent emanates from delays or abandoning of implementation of already the agreed projects at local government level. According to this participant, "many politicians in the city have come up with good ideas and projects, but their ideas are not implemented, and many projects do not come to fruition". This challenge of implementation emanates from lack of coherence and coordination across different city departments working with SEs. For instance, various City of Johannesburg departments promote collaboration with cooperatives, but they work in silos. This leads to duplications, misunderstandings, leadership challenges, and ultimately undermines implementation and results. One respondent from the JCPZ captured this well by describing the lack of coordination and knowledge sharing among City departments:

> "Information is all over the place. There is a lack of knowledge management. There is silo thinking [in the municipality]. Every Department is doing its own thing. I don't feel we have platforms that support knowledge management." (GO02)

Several participants indicated that this lack of collaboration among different City of Johannesburg departments leads to "lack of communication … and lack of administrative integration [due] to strong hierarchies and top-down governance. Platforms that are created for coordination do not work" (GO07). Consequently, this has resulted in a "distance between the government and society … people do not know what the government does, what kind of programs are out there, and how to apply for them" (GO03).

This absence of coordination and public awareness regarding government programs has multiple effects on SEs. First, it hampers their access to resources and potential for collaboration with key stakeholders in effective delivery of services. Second, it can lead to delayed regulations, poor quality implementation, and wastage of resources (Ahsan, 2018), and discontinuity of agreed projects (Tucker & Vaughan, 1982). In the World bank framework (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017), these bureaucratic and coordination bottlenecks speak to both challenges in access to financial solutions as well as information and networks. We argue that by enhancing coordination and communication, these challenges can be addressed, unlocking the potential of Sowetan SEs to amplify their impact.

In addition to coordination challenges among different CoJ departments, the lack of specific regulatory framework puts South African SEs at a disadvantage compared to other businesses. This limits their ability to attract investments, grow their operations, and effectively address social and environmental challenges. One SE founder indicated how lack of guiding policies affected their proposal to make use of the CoJ's conserved grasslands and public places that they had proposed to use for agriculture towards urban food security. However, because the city does not have a policy on urban food gardens, the proposal failed:

> "There is normally conflict between the need for land for people to utilise for activities such as farming/gardening and preserving conservation areas. Although it makes sense to allow people to do some urban agriculture, there is no policy in place to guide this activity." (SE10)

This lack of policy on urban food gardens impacts not just SEs aiming to utilize underused spaces for urban agriculture, but also food security for urban communities in Johannesburg (Sakapaji et al., 2024). There is therefore an urgent need for a policy framework to support and regulate such efforts and to support SEs operating on these issues as well as meet pressing food security needs in Johannesburg.

As earlier noted, the failure to execute planned projects or policies was also highlighted as a challenge for SEs in Soweto and Johannesburg more broadly. Those interviewed indicated that CoJ politicians, policymakers and those responsible for implementation, operate especially in politically sensitive environments, and often prefer large-scale initiatives to supporting smaller organisations. This tendency is driven by a desire for visibility, as larger projects attract more attention that is public. Mlachila & Moeletsi (2019), observe similar trends across South Africa where policy and development projects' priorities are heavily skewed towards those with greater visibility and potential for resource acquisition, often at the exclusion of smaller and more deserving cases. This is because politicians are frequently seeking public recognition associated with high-profile events, like ribbon-cutting ceremonies, as well as big projects with resources that can be easily controlled for patronage purposes. The effect is that such projects often lack stakeholder engagement in policy crafting, resulting in low trust and lack of diversity in

perspectives, and exclusion of stakeholder inputs and therefore, poor grassroots support (Flanner et al., 2018; Tregidga & Milne, 2022). As one CoJ official commented:

> "The city says that they want to change the face of the city by enabling our residents to change their environment. But if you go deeper into that statement, you will see that it is not worth more than the ink on the paper. Most of those issues are just election manifestos and do not develop into anything tangible. In many cases, the city goes for big issues/projects, and they do not support small organisations." (GO04)

Stakeholder engagement and trust are also important ecosystem factors, especially for SEs work in marginalized communities. In this regard, at grassroots level, SEs assist local government in easily reaching the difficult to reach citizens because of good stakeholder engagement and trust that exists between them:

> "If we have a project, [the SEs] are able to go house to house, door to door. They know whom to engage, who is more active, [and] how to best [...] roll out a project in their communities. So, they [make] sure that we access everybody in the community." (G003)

The other challenge faced by the SEs is compliance with various regulatory requirements, especially on registration and tax. Our interviews revealed that for a SE to work with the local government, they need to be registered and be in compliance with multiple other policies, as revealed in one of our meetings with JCPZ:

> They [SEs] have to be registered with Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC) and be tax-registered. That's how we establish contracts with these cooperatives. Then, co-ops need to register with the City so that they are placed in a central database of all service providers. You must have a business address... And all of these compliance issues are a challenge for co-ops. For example, getting your tax right. (Minutes of a meeting with JCPZ)

The challenge with these regulations is that they do not factor start-ups. For example, our meeting with JCPZ officials revealed that in the Sowetan context:

> Most of these co-ops are entry points for these community members to start a full-grown business or get a job somewhere else. Their revenues are so low that they do not even get above the tax-exemption level. Tax filing is complex and with too many requirements for such a small business. Co-ops are considered a start-up in South Africa – however, this gives them a too big a tax load and formal requirements to comply. The standards should not be the same as for Pick'n'Pay [big supermarket chain in SA]. (Minutes of meeting with JCPZ)

Navigating the tax landscape is therefore, often very difficult for SEs; they face up to 11 different taxes, including income tax, capital gains tax, and VAT (Abrie & Doussy, 2006; Tshidzumba-Sengwane, 2023). This complexity creates significant compliance burdens, particularly for smaller SEs that lack the resources to manage extensive tax obligations effectively.

Our data suggests that lack of collaborative policymaking and coordination among government departments exacerbates these challenges and diminishes the potential for SEs to influence regulations that directly affect their operations. We take the view that as social capital theory posits, strong ties and networks can enhance advocacy efforts, ensuring that the needs of SEs are communicated effectively (Daskalopoulou et al., 2023; Shan & Tian, 2022).

5.2 Cooperation and co-production arrangements with (local) government

Globally, government entities are key players in promoting social enterprises (SEs). In our context, the government intervenes in various ways to support the development and viability of SEs. For example, notwithstanding the administrative challenges highlighted above and the lack of a specific legal framework tailored exclusively for SEs, the national government collaborates with provincial and local authorities to create policies, programs, and constitutional reforms that guide the activities of SEs. In this regard, laws such as the Nonprofit Organisations Act, No. 71 of 1997 (NPO Act), Companies Act No. 71 of 2008 (as amended in 2011), and Cooperatives Act 14 of 2005, influence the environment and operations of SEs (Steinman & van Rooij, 2012). Additionally, a new Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) policy has been proposed to regulate SEs in South Africa (Steinman, 2020). The government has also initiated research efforts and launched a website to support the SSE policy process (ILO, 2022).

Another significant government initiative is the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) -a national initiative executed at provincial and local levels, aimed at creating job opportunities across four sectors: infrastructure, non-state, environment, and culture and social (The Republic of South Africa, n.d.). Many SE participants indicated that EPW Programmes were pathways to social entrepreneurship. Prior to establishing their cooperative ventures, many had worked in EPW Programmes which catalysed their SEs journey as they learnt of opportunities for funding, skills training, and in-kind resources like land, equipment, and contracts. These opportunities are also reflected in the words of a CoJ official:

> I must say upfront that our support [to cooperatives] is non-financial, because the law does not allow local government to fund small businesses. That's why our support is a nonfinancial support. Now by nonfinancial support, we are providing things like training to cooperatives, and we are also doing some referral work … we support them with land but also in our trainings, with equipment, with seeds to cooperatives. (GO07)

SE07 corroborated this, indicating: "They [JCPZ] provided us with training." The support given by government, respondents indicated, has enabled these cooperatives to emerge and survive. Under the EPWP, JCPZ trains members of the community in various skills that enable them to register their businesses as cooperatives that provide goods/services to solve social challenges in their communities. Once registered, JCPZ offers opportunities to newly registered cooperatives through awards of tender contracts (GO02). Indeed, a majority of respondents from SEs indicated they started their business with JCPZ support.

Part of government's support manifests as inter-departmental collaborations and co-producing with SEs. Departments like Social Development, Trade and Industry, Small Business Development, SEDA, and JCPZ, among others, offer both financial and non-financial support, including training, and linkages that help SEs grow and network. Our data suggests that most of the partnerships with different CoJ departments stem from the initial JCPZ linkages that lead to SEs having access to funding and other benefits such as skills training. In this regard, a participant from one of the SEs explains how they have benefited from working with government departments, leading to co-production arrangements:

> "We could have never afforded to make the prototype if it was not for the Department of Trade and Industry. They came in at that crucial stage... Going forward, the winning of those awards maybe, will bring other departments to say, look perhaps let us link [with them…] SEDA might come in and work with us, exposing us to [more] government partnerships...The Department of Community Safety

> was able to deploy these projects in different areas because of our partnership with them." (SE09)

Another respondent reinforced the role of partnership with government departments in provision of jobs for volunteers they first trained:

> "In previous years, we used to work closely with EISD [Environmental and Infrastructure Services Department]. They have stipend-based programs where most of our volunteers would be added onto those programs. So, they created a few jobs for our volunteers.… At this moment, those projects are completed." (NPO01)

Overall, local government departments have been crucial in providing jobs, land, and facilities, as well as leveraging their networks to assist SEs. This finding is consistent studies highlighting the role of various levels of government in South Africa in offering opportunities which enhance SEs capacity; opportunities which otherwise would only have been possible for the "well-connected" organizations (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017). Our data revealed that, at the municipal level, it is councillors who wield considerable influence over such opportunities, and often determine who benefits based on their relationships with those seeking assistance. This suggests that they play a critical role in this ecosystem.

Relationships built on trust between SEs and government officials can facilitate smoother interactions and collaboration that is more effective. The ability of SEs to engage with local government not only enhances their operational capacity but also fosters a sense of community ownership and participation in decision-making processes. High levels of social capital can lead to better communication and resource sharing, ultimately benefiting SEs.

5.3 Partnerships under social responsibility programmes

Our data suggests that social responsibility partnerships with private sector corporates is an important ecosystem factor as SEs either fail or succeed because of the partnerships they have private sector institutions under their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. The dominant approach is that a private company funds the implementation of community development programs in their preferred area through NPOs or SEs. In most cases, these relationships emanate from networks created with the public institutions mentioned above. Some SEs have partnerships with companies like Coca-Cola (NPO01), Danone (NPO02) and other companies (NPO03). Such partnerships with corporates, as seen in the World Bank Framework (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017), are important for providing financing solutions for SEs. Our research corroborates this, revealing that consistent with literature (Baron, 2005; Del Baldo, 2013), SEs tends to be resilient when they partner with corporates, as such partnership enhances access to resources including funding for SEs and capacity building.

Partnerships between different SEs are becoming prominent, albeit most are informal. Here again, JCPZ plays a critical role in catalysing intra-SE partnerships: "When JCPZ arrange monthly meetings among SEs, it allows for networking leading to further partnerships among SEs" (D4). Through these forums, SEs involved in environmental issues in Soweto, for example, come together and discuss issues about the environment. These groupings are also used to trade opportunities, and for information sharing (NPO01; SE02). Another respondent (NPO02) similarly indicated: "At the moment we are about to collaborate with another foundation…in the elderly forum…in Alex." However, no formal networks have emerged from these partnerships. That notwithstanding, the informal monthly meetings arranged by JCPZ allows organisations to meet and familiarize themselves with each other. As SEs become familiar with each other, they can help each other with other resources like tools, loans, or even share skills.

Successful intra-SE partnerships depend on several factors, one of which is the relationship between members. Cooperative members, for example are usually people who have a close affinity and a common need to meet the needs of the community while generating an income for themselves. In addition, the fact that the organisation is a partnership of different members of the same community they are providing services to, makes it easier for other community members to support them because of their shared identities (Asmussen & Fosfuri, 2019). In this regard, social identity theory helps us understand how individuals grow their sense of self and community, based on their group membership, and how group membership can influence behaviour and attitudes supportive of SEs (Scheepers & Ellemers 2019). Social capital developed in these contexts facilitates these partnerships by creating networks of trust and reciprocity. The relationships built through these partnerships can also enhance the visibility and credibility of SEs within the community.

5.4 Philanthropic activities of community members and foundations.

Attitudes and behaviours towards philanthropic activities and practices by members of the community came out strongly as an important ecosystem factor for SEs resilience. SEs largely rely on philanthropic and voluntary activities of community members and other organisations such as foundations for their survival. For example, a participant practicing horticultural farming relies on volunteer labour from the community:

> We found there are a lot of general workers … they are underpaid, but they're overused. So, that behaviour is making a lot of people stay at home because now with the increase in price of petrol, it's more expensive to travel out to work...We heavily rely on these as volunteers to do our work… We normally host about 15 people daily. (NPO04)

SEs ask such community members to volunteer and in exchange, they get training which equips them with specific skills they use to seek for employment elsewhere:

> We have an all-volunteer program where we ask people to volunteer on our programs, and then they get skills and knowledge and education from our programs... If they stay longer than one month, we give them different skills on our programs -our conservation programs especially, and our food security programs, and our water conservation programs. .... So, our volunteers are actually skilled in what they're doing now at this moment, they take some leadership initiatives as well. (NPO01)

These voluntary activities by communities sometimes lead to informal partnerships and networks between SEs and other organisations in the ecosystem the net effect of which are jobs for these volunteers. This is illustrated by respondent NPO01 who indicated: "In previous years, we used to work closely with the City's Environmental and Infrastructure Services Department in their stipend-based programs where most of our volunteers would actually be added onto those programs." Therefore, SEs activities serve as critical pathways for skills training and access to jobs. In addition, literature states that such skills are critical parts of human capital infrastructure necessary for SEs to thrive (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017).

6. Policy and practical implications

This study has offered useful insights on the critical factors that influence the resilience of SEs with significant implications for multiple stakeholders in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem

in marginalized urban areas like Soweto.. Drawing from these, stakeholders can develop targeted strategies that promote their sustainability and effectiveness in several ways.

First is in strengthening the legal and policy framework. The current bureaucratic processes hinder the establishment of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and limit the effectiveness of existing regulations. Local governments should work to simplify and expedite the processes for establishing PPPs. This could involve creating a dedicated task force to oversee the development of these partnerships, ensuring that SEs can access necessary support more efficiently. Policymakers should actively seek input from SEs and community members when developing such PPPs regulations. Establishing advisory committees that include representatives from SEs can help ensure that policies are relevant and effective.

Second is to enhance cooperation within local governments. Fragmentation among government departments and a lack of knowledge management is impeding the effectiveness of government support initiatives. Local governments should promote collaboration among various departments to create a cohesive approach to supporting SEs. This can be done through regular interdepartmental meetings that can facilitate information sharing and coordinated efforts. Local governments can also establish a centralized platform where SEs can access information about available resources, funding opportunities, and government initiatives. This can help mitigate the "information overload" described by respondents.

Third is in building corporate partnerships as this is essential for providing funding and resources to SEs. Local governments can incentivize corporates to engage SEs through tax breaks or recognition programs for companies that establish meaningful partnerships with local social enterprises. They can also organize events that bring together SEs and corporate representatives to foster connections and explore potential collaborations. These events can serve as platforms for sharing success stories and best practices.

Fourth, is in promoting community engagement, volunteerism and philanthropy to enhance the sustainability of SEs. Local governments and NGOs should initiate campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of SEs and encourage community members to get involved through volunteering or supporting local initiatives. They can also create structured volunteer programs that connect community members with SEs, facilitating skills development and increasing the capacity of these organizations.

Last, but not least, is in leveraging trust and networking to enable sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices. This can be facilitated by local governments or NGOs through workshops and networking events. They can also provide training and resources to SEs to help them build their networking and advocacy skills. This can empower them to engage more effectively with stakeholders and enhance their visibility within the community.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the ecosystem surrounding community-based social enterprises (SEs) in Soweto, Johannesburg, revealing critical insights into the factors influencing their resilience and contributions to urban community development. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, we engaged various stakeholders, including social enterprise founders and local government representatives, to illuminate the complex dynamics that define the operational landscape for SEs in marginalized urban settings. The research highlights significant challenges within the legal and regulatory frameworks governing SEs. The absence of specific policies tailored to the unique needs of SEs, particularly regarding urban agriculture, hampers their ability to attract investment and scale their operations.

The bureaucratic nature of public-private partnerships (PPPs) further complicates the landscape, creating barriers to effective collaboration between SEs and local government. While

government entities play a crucial role in supporting SEs through initiatives such as the Expanded Public Works Program (EPWP), our findings indicate that a lack of coordination among government departments undermines these efforts. The "siloed" approach to policy implementation leads to inefficiencies and limits the potential for SEs to fully engage with available resources and opportunities.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of social responsibility partnerships with corporate entities. These collaborations provide essential funding and resources that enhance the sustainability of SEs. However, the reliance on corporate partnerships also raises questions about the long-term viability of SEs if these relationships are not nurtured or if corporate priorities shift. Additionally, the findings reveal that community engagement, particularly through volunteerism and philanthropic activities, is vital for the sustainability of SEs. Community members often provide essential support, contributing their time and skills to help SEs thrive. The role of social capital in fostering these relationships is critical, as trust and collaboration within communities can significantly enhance the operational capacity of SEs.

The research illustrates that the resilience of SEs is not solely dependent on individual factors but rather on the interplay between various ecosystem components. Effective policies, access to financing, robust infrastructure, and strong networks all contribute to the overall health and sustainability of social enterprises in marginalized contexts. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on social enterprises and community resilience by providing empirical insights into the specific challenges and opportunities faced by SEs in a marginalized urban context. It emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of how local ecosystems operate and the importance of context-specific factors in shaping the resilience of social enterprises. By integrating social capital theory with the World Bank's analytical ecosystem framework, this study offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the dynamics of social enterprises in urban settings.

While the study has provided valuable insights, future research could explore the resilience of social enterprises in other marginalized urban settings across South Africa and beyond, to allow for generalisability and comparability. Comparative studies could identify common challenges and successful strategies, offering a broader understanding of how SEs navigate diverse contexts.

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Conflict of interest

We declare that we do not have any conflict-of-interest issues in this project and manuscript.

Ethical approval:

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