



Empowering youth: the transformative impact of social entrepreneurship in developing economies

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Social entrepreneurship as a catalyst for social and economic change

Social entrepreneurship, with its innovative, inclusive and sustainable approach, shows significant promise as a game-changer in economically developing countries, especially those with young populations. It transcends the traditional boundaries of business and social service, leading to a more integrated approach to development. Social entrepreneurship, the practice of using business techniques to achieve social objectives, has been gaining increasing attention worldwide. The question arises: is this trend a passing fad or a genuine game-changer? To address this, we must examine the transformative impact of social entrepreneurship. While challenges remain, such as securing funding and scaling operations, the potential benefits of social entrepreneurship in driving social, economic and environmental change are substantial.

In Turkey, like in many economically developing countries, social entrepreneurship faces a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Challenges often include navigating a complex regulatory environment, limited access to startup and scale-up financing, and a need for greater public awareness and understanding of the social entrepreneurship model. For instance, securing initial funding and finding the right talent can be significant hurdles for social entrepreneurs in Turkey. Additionally, the regulatory framework may not always be conducive to the innovative models proposed by social enterprises, necessitating advocacy and engagement with policymakers.

However, the opportunities in Turkey are substantial. The country's strategic location, combined with a young, dynamic population, offers a fertile ground for social entrepreneurial ventures. Sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, education technology and waste management have seen innovative approaches from Turkish social entrepreneurs. These ventures not only address critical social and environmental issues, but also create jobs and foster economic development.

Social entrepreneurship should be nurtured and supported by governments, investors and the global community. Social enterprises frequently work at the grassroots level, leading to community development. They build social capital by fostering networks of collaboration and trust, essential for the long-term development of any community. By addressing societal needs and showcasing sustainable models of social change, social enterprises can influence public policy.

One impactful example of social entrepreneurship driving social and economic change in Turkey is the development of social entrepreneurship platforms aimed at improving refugee integration. With Turkey hosting a significant number of refugees, social enterprises have developed educational and employment platforms to facilitate their integration into the Turkish economy. These platforms not only help refugees but also contribute to the local economy by filling gaps in the labor market.

Regarding policy change, social enterprises have played a crucial role in advocating for more inclusive and sustainable economic policies in Turkey. For example, through persistent advocacy and successful demonstration of their impact, social entrepreneurs have influenced policies related to renewable energy and waste management. The Government has introduced incentives for renewable energy projects, partly owing to the demonstrated success and advocacy of social enterprises within this sector.

In the broader scope of development, harnessing a youthful demographic through social entrepreneurship can lead to significant societal and economic advancements. By focusing on innovative solutions to pressing issues such as unemployment, education and health care, social entrepreneurs are able to mobilize the potential of the youth, driving forward both economic growth and societal well-being. This demographic advantage, when coupled with the inclusive and sustainable approach of social entrepreneurship, can indeed be a strategic asset for countries like Turkey, paving the way for a future where economic development is closely aligned with social progress.

Social entrepreneurs are known for their innovative approaches to addressing complex social issues. In economically developing countries, these innovations can offer solutions to challenges such as health care, education and environmental sustainability, which traditional models have not adequately resolved. Economically developing countries often face unique challenges related to unemployment, poverty and social inequality. Simultaneously, they possess a demographic advantage in the form of a youthful population, which can be harnessed as a valuable resource for societal and economic progress. This demographic can be a strategic asset for social entrepreneurship.

For instance, the British Council's report on the state of social enterprise within Turkey highlights the sector's potential, driven by young, purpose-led businesses predominantly founded and managed by women. These enterprises are making strides in education, manufacturing and the creative industries, leveraging Turkey's significant youth demographic. The report underscores the importance of a supportive policy context and a growing ecosystem for social entrepreneurship, showcasing Turkey's commitment to addressing social needs through innovative business models. Turkey's demographic landscape is marked by a median age of approximately 31 years, making it a nation with a significant youth population (World Bank, 2020). This demographic presents both opportunities and challenges, and social entrepreneurship initiatives in Turkey have been instrumental in harnessing the potential of the youth and this illustrates how social entrepreneurship can harness the potential of the youth to drive economic growth and social change. By focusing on innovative and sustainable solutions to societal challenges, social enterprises play a crucial role in transforming the economic landscape of countries with substantial young populations.

Social enterprises often focus on creating job opportunities and providing skills training, which is vital in countries with high youth unemployment. This not only aids poverty alleviation, but also stimulates local economies. Considering that the global youth unemployment rate was 13.6 percent in 2019, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the role of social enterprises in job creation is crucial (ILO, 2022). For example, in countries like Kenya and India, youth-led social enterprises have been instrumental not only in creating jobs, but also in providing relevant skills and experience to the youth.

Social entrepreneurship offers a path toward creating new jobs and economic opportunities within these regions. For instance, a study by the British Council found that social enterprises in India have generated over 2 million jobs. Another example study conducted by the Global Entrepreneurship Research Association (GERA) found that social enterprises in various developing countries employ a significant portion of the young workforce, thereby addressing issues of unemployment.

Impact of social entrepreneurship on skill development

Social entrepreneurship provides youth with opportunities to develop leadership skills, problem solving, financial literacy, to think creatively and to engage actively in societal issues. It encourages them to take an active role in shaping the future of their communities. Encouraging entrepreneurship can be a key strategy to harness the potential of the youth, along with providing support in terms of finance, mentorship and infrastructure. Also, young people are a catalyst for social and political change. They often demand more transparency, democracy and social justice, which can lead to significant societal transformation.

As the founder of the SosyalBen Foundation in Turkey, I have experienced firsthand the profound impact social entrepreneurship can have on harnessing the potential of youth to address societal challenges. Through the Foundation, my focus has been on empowering disadvantaged children, by enhancing their social skills through art, sports and creative activities, showcasing a unique approach to social entrepreneurship. This initiative goes beyond fostering personal development among the youth; it contributes to social cohesion and community development. My work as a social entrepreneur and advocate demonstrates the power of innovative, mission-driven approaches in creating meaningful change, especially in countries with significant youth populations like Turkey. My efforts highlight the critical role of social entrepreneurship in engaging youth, creating employment opportunities and driving societal progress through innovative and sustainable solutions.

The transformative work of the SosyalBen Foundation in Turkey vividly illustrates the profound impact social entrepreneurship can have on skills development and employment, particularly through its engagement with a vibrant community of volunteers and the support it extends to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This dual approach not only empowers the immediate beneficiaries, but also fosters a broader culture of social responsibility and professional growth among young professionals and students.

Empowerment and professional growth

SosyalBen attracts a dynamic group of volunteers, primarily consisting of students and young professionals eager to contribute positively to society. This engagement serves as a pivotal learning platform, offering real-life experience in addressing social challenges. Volunteers gain invaluable insights into the complexities of social issues, enhancing understanding and empathy toward different community needs. This hands-on experience broadens their vision, fostering a deep sense of social engagement. Moreover, volunteering with SosyalBen equips volunteers with critical social skills, such as teamwork, leadership and problem-solving; all highly valued within the professional world. This not only enhances their employability, but also prepares them to be more effective, empathetic leaders in their future workplaces.

Access to education and beyond

For the children and communities supported by SosyalBen, the impact is both immediate and far-reaching. By focusing on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, SosyalBen provides access to educational resources and opportunities that they might otherwise find to be out of reach. Such access is the first step toward breaking the cycle of poverty, offering these children a pathway to a brighter future.

However, SosyalBen's impact extends beyond academic education. The Foundation places a strong emphasis on emotional and social development, recognizing this as crucial for children's overall well-being and future success. Through various programs and initiatives, children develop essential life skills, such as communication, empathy and resilience. These skills not only improve children's immediate social interactions, but also lay the foundation for their future employability and success within the workforce.

Figure 1 Impacts of SosialBen workshops on children's skills development, 2022



Source: SosialBen Foundation Research Report, 2022.

Figure 1 visualizes the impact of SosialBen's workshops on children's skills development, specifically in areas such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, curiosity, empathy, groupwork skills and volunteering motivation. Each category is represented by the percentage of improvement observed, demonstrating the significant positive changes these workshops have fostered in children aged 7–13 years. This graphical representation effectively highlights SosialBen's role in enhancing essential personal and social development skills through its diverse range of activities. The methodology behind measuring this impact involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including pre- and post-workshop assessments, surveys and interviews. These tools are designed to accurately evaluate changes in cognitive and social skills among the participants. By analyzing data before and after workshops, alongside qualitative feedback from various stakeholders, the SosialBen Foundation quantitatively and qualitatively demonstrates the effectiveness of its programs in contributing to the holistic development of the children it serves.

Furthermore, by exposing children to new opportunities and ideas, SosialBen plays a critical role in broadening their horizons and aspirations. This exposure can inspire them to pursue higher education and careers they may not have considered possible, directly influencing their future employment prospects and potential to contribute to their communities. The children and communities served by SosialBen gain the skills, confidence and aspirations needed to pursue educational and employment opportunities, contributing to a better skilled and more resilient workforce.

Policy recommendations for supporting social entrepreneurship

To maximize the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship in countries with youthful populations, policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders alike should consider implementing supportive frameworks, financial incentives and capacity-building programs.

Amid the formidable challenge of youth unemployment and the promising potential of social entrepreneurship in addressing societal issues, the imperative for governments to developing countries to establish enabling environments for social enterprises becomes increasingly apparent. Recognizing the multifaceted benefits of social entrepreneurship, including its capacity to not only generate economic opportunities, but to also nurture essential skills and community engagement among the youth, underscores the importance of comprehensive policy frameworks. This transition sets the stage for a detailed exploration of policy recommendations aimed at harnessing social entrepreneurship in order to address youth unemployment and facilitate skills development in developing countries

Supportive ecosystems for social entrepreneurship in developing countries can take multiple forms.

- a. Implementing legal frameworks that specifically recognize and define social enterprises. This recognition can facilitate tailored support and legitimacy, encouraging more youth to engage in social entrepreneurship. For instance, in Colombia, the "Empresa de Oportunidades" law provides legal recognition and support for social enterprises (Villamizar, 2023).

- b. Policies should facilitate access to capital through microfinance initiatives, social impact bonds and government grants. Public-private partnerships can also play a key role in financing social ventures. So, too, can establishing and promoting microfinance institutions and credit facilities targeted at young social entrepreneurs with low-interest rates and manageable repayment terms in order to enhance access to finance and credit facilities, as is the case with the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh (Boston Consulting Group, 2018).
- c. Creating platforms, opportunities and providing market access for social enterprises facilitating market access and networking opportunities for social enterprises to access markets more easily, including government procurement programs that prioritize social enterprise products and services. In addition, developing partnerships between social enterprises and vocational training centers in order to ensure skills being taught are aligned with market needs.
- d. Integrating entrepreneurship into school and high school curricula in order to build business acumen and foster an entrepreneurial mindset from a young age. For instance, it is important to establish entrepreneurship training programs that equip young individuals with both business and social impact skills such as in Nepal, where the King's College introduced courses on social entrepreneurship, fostering youth-led initiatives (Prajapati, 2019). Another example is that of the YouthStart Entrepreneurship Program in Africa (ILO, 2014).

Amid the critical challenge of youth unemployment and the promising potential of social entrepreneurship as a solution, the example of the SosialBen Foundation vividly illustrates the necessity for supportive ecosystems. This social enterprise, rooted in the mission of empowering disadvantaged children through educational and social projects, showcases the tangible benefits of integrating social entrepreneurship within educational systems and fostering collaborations across a network of stakeholders, including enterprises, educational providers and governmental bodies.

However, SosialBen's journey provides insightful lessons on navigating challenges within this context. Faced with obstacles such as securing sustainable funding and adapting to regulatory environments, SosialBen has innovatively tackled these issues through initiatives like the SosialBen Academy and SosialBen Store. These solutions not only created alternative revenue streams, but also reinforced the Foundation's commitment to education and empowerment. By launching the SosialBen Academy, the organization developed a platform for skills development and training in social entrepreneurship, addressing both funding needs and its educational mission. The SosialBen Store, offering merchandise related to the organization's brand, further contributed to financial sustainability while increasing public awareness. These strategies demonstrate how social enterprises can creatively overcome challenges by aligning business models with mission-driven goals, thus providing a blueprint for policymakers to support similar initiatives. Encouraging the development of enabling policies that facilitate such entrepreneurial creativity and resilience is crucial in leveraging the power of social entrepreneurship to tackle youth unemployment and enhance skill development.

SosyalBen's journey from an educational concept to a flourishing social enterprise underscores the vital role of educational integration. SosialBen highlights how educational institutions can serve as incubators for social innovation, blending theoretical knowledge with practical community service. This integration within academic curricula is pivotal, preparing students for real-world challenges by nurturing essential skills such as critical thinking, empathy and leadership.

Furthermore, SosialBen's development has been significantly supported by partnerships with businesses and governmental organizations, which have provided financial support, mentorship and market access. A multitude of companies have engaged with SosialBen, aligning with their sustainability and social impact visions, acknowledging the significance of supporting societal development endeavors. These collaborations transcend financial aid, including efforts such as employee volunteering, donations of goods and services, and offering mentorship opportunities for the youth involved in SosialBen's initiatives. These collaborations have not only enabled SosialBen to broaden its impact, but also demonstrated the importance of creating ecosystems that offer comprehensive support to social ventures. These insights from SosialBen's experience offer valuable lessons for policy formulation aimed at leveraging social entrepreneurship to combat youth unemployment and promote skill development. Policies

should thus focus on fostering educational integration by incorporating social entrepreneurship into curricula and facilitating partnerships between educational institutions and social enterprises. Moreover, establishing supportive ecosystems that provide financial assistance, mentorship and market access is crucial. Encouraging community engagement and prioritizing youth empowerment are also key strategies, enabling young people to actively participate in and benefit from social entrepreneurship initiatives.

In essence, the narrative of SosyalBen serves as a compelling case for the implementation of comprehensive policy frameworks that recognize and support the multifaceted benefits of social entrepreneurship. By investing in these areas, governments can harness the potential of their young populations, fostering economic growth and social development.

Conclusion and future directions

While there is a tendency to view social entrepreneurship as a fad, evidence suggests that it is more of a game-changer, particularly in developing economies with young populations. Its impact on job creation, social innovation and economic diversification is significant. However, its long-term success and sustainability depend on supportive policies, access to capital and the continuous engagement of the youth. In summary, the transformative impact of the social entrepreneurship economy in developing countries with young populations is evident in various aspects, including employment generation, poverty alleviation, education and skills development, innovation, sustainability, and community development. By harnessing the creativity, energy and digital fluency of the youth, social entrepreneurship serves as a game changer, addressing societal challenges while promoting economic development. The integration of supportive policies and initiatives is essential in order to amplify the positive impact of social entrepreneurship in these dynamic and evolving societies. In conclusion, this paper advocates for continued support and investment in youth-led social entrepreneurship initiatives and offers insights that can inform policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders on how to harness the potential of youth as a catalyst for profound socioeconomic change in dynamic and evolving societies.

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