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Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneur as Mechanisms for Environmental Sustainability Impact in Malaysia: An Exploratory Case Study Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurial (SE) innovation is gaining increasing significance in research and practice in Malaysia and globally. However, existing literature highlights a gap in documenting SE's role in environmental sustainability. This article explores how SE innovation can catalyze environmental sustainability in Malaysia. Our study demonstrates that social entrepreneurs leverage their innovations to create social value, focusing on environmental sustainability. A comprehensive literature review identifies significant gaps, notably the need for more research on social entrepreneurs, their methodologies, and the context of their innovations. The primary objective of this article is to analyze the relationship between social entrepreneurs and their innovations and how these innovations contribute to environmental sustainability. Our findings reveal a positive correlation between social entrepreneurship and innovation, underscoring the potential of SE to drive environmental sustainability. To advance future research on social entrepreneurial innovation and its environmental impact, we recommend adopting the Sustainable Social Entrepreneur Model (SSEM).

Keywords:

Social entrepreneurship; social entrepreneurs; innovation; environmental sustainability; social entrepreneurship framework; environmental problem

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1. Introduction

Social innovation and social entrepreneurship are critically important for the nonprofit sector aiming to address societal needs [1]. Social enterprises play a crucial role in meeting community needs by reducing poverty, providing health services, protecting the rights of children and individuals with disabilities, and preserving the environment [2]. Both social entrepreneurship and social innovation aim to foster social change and improve societal conditions. While social

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entrepreneurship focuses on the business side of this change, social innovation emphasizes the processes that generate such change.

Previous study explore the realms of social entrepreneurship and social innovation, emphasizing their nascent conceptualization [3,4]. They delineate social innovation as a pioneering approach toward addressing social needs, drawing from the framework proposed by Sekliuckiene & Kisielius [5]. The model employed by Jelena [3] and her colleagues facilitates a meticulous definition of a company's strategic position and the adoption of its strategy. Through a thorough analysis, critical junctures within a company are identified. This comprehensive examination not only mitigates shortcomings but also lays the groundwork for multifactorial methodologies and more precise mathematical models. The aim is to streamline the questionnaire utilized for implementing the model, enhancing its conciseness and efficacy. Luc [6] describes social entrepreneurship as innovative activities by non-profit organizations and governments aimed at value creation. This engagement can fulfill community needs, decrease poverty rates, provide health facilities, protect children's and disabled individuals' rights, and safeguard the environment. Researchers are increasingly exploring the environmental aspects of social entrepreneurship, its potential to address social problems, and its implications for generating profits [7].

This study aims to enhance understanding of education, attitudes, and best practices in social entrepreneurship for environmental sustainability. Academically, it offers knowledge on social entrepreneurship and environmental problem-solving. Furthermore, it provides insights into the innovative approaches of social entrepreneurs in tackling environmental issues and highlights the challenges they face in environmental preservation. Consequently, this research seeks to offer insights and understanding of the issues and scenarios related to social entrepreneurship, based on the concept of social entrepreneurship. The findings aim to provide guidance and answers, illustrating the role and responsibilities of entrepreneurs as key drivers of environmental sustainability.

1.1 Literature Review

Both social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship share certain characteristics, yet they exhibit distinct differences [8,9]. While entrepreneurship is primarily associated with economic growth and wealth creation, social entrepreneurship extends beyond these parameters to address social needs and environmental sustainability [10,11]. Despite its initial slow progress, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a global force, impacting various social issues such as access to clean water, environmental awareness, and the creation of social value [12]. The innovative solutions devised by local social entrepreneurs often serve as inspirations for others, fostering the growth of new industries on a global scale [13].

Social entrepreneurship helps in solving social as well as environmental issues [14]. According to Ehon [14] and Rozali *et al.*, [15], social entrepreneurship can generate creative ideas and innovations that can help solve social and environmental issues and generate income while contributing to the economy and development of the country. For example, in Malaysia, Urban Hijau is one of social entrepreneur created a sustainable urban farming right in the middle of Kuala Lumpur. Urban Hijau connects people, makes money, and preserves the environment through permaculture. For the benefit of our future generations, they are acting appropriately Najmia [16]. They not only grow healthy food, but they also teach others how to do it, passing down these skills through the generations to bring about long-lasting, significant change. According to Abdullah [17] in Malaysia social entrepreneurship is still in the early stages of development, but the concept of social entrepreneurship is not something new. While according to Jais and Kassim [18], many are

unaware of social entrepreneurship which is a combination of the concepts of social entrepreneurship and social development.

Social entrepreneurship plays a critical role in addressing both social and environmental challenges [14]. According to Boulven [19], it fosters creative ideas and innovations that aid in resolving social and environmental issues while also contributing to economic growth and national development. While social entrepreneurship is still in its infancy in Malaysia, its concept is not entirely novel [17]. However, awareness regarding social entrepreneurship, which combines the principles of entrepreneurship and social development, remains limited as noted by Jais & Kassim [18].

In Malaysia, environmental management is an important area in the context of today's life. The gains in social quality of life become disproportionate because of rapid development in Malaysia but differ in developing countries according to different periods and places [20]. Moreover, according to the results of Ahmad *et al.*, [21], the knowledge of the society is higher towards natural disasters while the knowledge of the society is moderate towards recycling programs and renewable energy sources. According to Ahmad *et al.*, [21], community attitudes towards environmental issues are low. The results of the knowledge, attitude and practice of Malaysian Society on Environmental Issues found that community practices in Penang and Kuala Lumpur towards environmental conservation are at a low level.

In the context of Malaysia, environmental management holds significant importance in contemporary life. The advancements in social well-being often lag rapid development, leading to disparities, which may vary across different periods and regions in developing countries [20]. Moreover, Fhiri *et al.*, [22] and Ahmad *et al.*, [21] found through their study that while society possesses a higher awareness regarding natural disasters, their knowledge concerning recycling programs and renewable energy sources remains moderate. Community attitudes towards environmental issues are generally low and the level of environmental conservation practices in Penang and Kuala Lumpur is notably inadequate [21].

The effects of human negligence in preserving the environment and natural resources have led to an increase in global temperatures and pollution of human, animal and plant life. The reason to develop an area becomes the cause of the greedy nature of humans to continue to destroy the face of the earth [23]. In addition, environmental issues refer to changes in form that negatively affect the ecological balance and result in destruction to living things [24]. For example, over the past few decades, events like the 1989 Exxon oil spill have devastated wildlife and parts of Alaskan coastlines. The effects of the oil spill have caused the oil to adhere to every surrounding area and be absorbed by plant life. In addition, local wildlife such as birds, plants and marine life have also died.

In addition, the oil spill has also damaged habitat and destroyed breeding grounds. Therefore, conservation and environmental protection are necessary to address the problem so that it does not happen again. In addition, environmental preservation and conservation requires high spending where Exxon pays cleanup costs to cleanup workers of around \$2 billion and \$1.8 billion for habitat restoration and personal damage related to the spill Royal Marines Cadet Portsmouth [25]. Such issues have created a variety of environmental problems and required high expenditures to restore damaged environments.

The effects of human negligence towards environmental preservation have resulted in escalating global temperatures and pollution, adversely impacting human, animal, and plant life [23]. Environmental issues encompass detrimental alterations that disrupt ecological balance and harm living organisms [24]. For instance, events like the 1989 Exxon oil spill have inflicted severe damage on wildlife and coastal areas in Alaska, with oil contamination spreading and affecting

surrounding ecosystems and wildlife habitats. Consequently, conservation efforts are imperative to prevent similar occurrences. The Exxon oil spill incurred substantial expenses, with approximately \$2 billion allocated for cleanup operations and \$1.8 billion for habitat restoration and compensating personal damages related to the incident Royal Marines Cadet Portsmouth [25]. Such incidents emphasize the urgency of addressing environmental challenges and the substantial costs associated with environmental restoration and preservation.

1.1.1 Social entrepreneurship: a review of literature

In recent years, social entrepreneurship has captured interest from various academic scholars, and business practitioners as it provides a way to deal with social issues using innovative and sustainable businesses [1]. Our expanded understanding of social entrepreneurship in the context of environmental sustainability speaks precisely to the interconnectedness of people, planet, and profit, where a knowledge of whether, how and why social entrepreneurship principles and practice can contribute to environmental outcomes needs to be curated. The present study offers an extensive literature review to identify the state which delineates social entrepreneurship at different outlook.

According to Parul *et al.*, [26], the landscape of social entrepreneurship is characterized by distinct challenges and opportunities amid the intricate fabric of modern business dynamics. Social entrepreneurs are confronted with formidable market competition, regulatory hurdles, and financial constraints which may appear overwhelming, yet concurrently, these circumstances cultivate an environment ripe for inventive problem-solving and cooperative endeavors. A notable challenge social entrepreneurs contend with is market competition. Within an ecosystem predominantly controlled by conventional businesses, it is often arduous for social enterprises to establish their presence [27]. Nonetheless, this adversity simultaneously offers a platform for social entrepreneurs to employ unconventional thinking and devise inventive strategies for distinguishing their ventures within a saturated market.

Environmental sustainability pertains to methodologies ensuring resource availabilities for future generational utilizations. This notion encompasses activities aimed at minimizing waste outputs, curtailing carbon emissions, and preserving biodiversity. Based on Brundtland Report of 1987, sustainable development is elucidated as developmental practices meeting contemporary needs without hindering future generations' abilities to fulfill their necessities. The convergence of social entrepreneurship with environmental sustainability may be comprehended when viewed through the perspective of "ecopreneurship" [28] and "green entrepreneurship" [29]. These terminologies designate entrepreneurial endeavors that are directed towards addressing environmental issues and encouraging sustainability.

i. Ecopreneurship

Ecopreneurship is all about businesses that place the environment first. These are the companies that really work up and down to see what they do and what they offer has a good impact on our planet. Picture a renewable energy company harnessing the power of the sun to light up our homes, or an organic farm producing healthy, chemical-free food. Imagine recycling firms taking our waste materials and transforming them into valuable resources. What would all this mean? Those businesses won't just be starting for some profit but also for a good cause. They intertwine ecological sustainability into

every facet of their operations for the protection and preservation of the environment for the coming generations.

ii. Green Entrepreneurship

Green entrepreneurship seems close to ecopreneurship but delves more into the individual resolve of an entrepreneur for green principles. This approach mobilizes concerns about profits by mixing them with apprehensions of future ecological unsustainability, so as to encourage and incorporate practices in different streams of businesses. Green entrepreneurs are those who are dedicated to fostering an eco-friendly business ethos while maintaining economic viability.

2. Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods through case studies, focusing on both the social and natural contexts. Qualitative research, as outlined by Jiahui & Cecilia [30], is often referred to as "word science." This approach was selected to delve deeply into the innovative strategies of social entrepreneurs in environmental conservation. In the social sphere, these entrepreneurs navigate subjective human experiences, where perceptions of reality can evolve across time and diverse social contexts [26]. The research utilizes a comprehensive methodology to depict the current state of investigation, aiming to grasp the essence of social entrepreneurship, introduce social problem-solving techniques, and explore environmental concerns.

Interviews were conducted with three social entrepreneurs who are actively engaged in environmental conservation. Each interview was semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in exploring various topics in depth while following a general guide. Participants were asked about their motivations, challenges, and innovative strategies in addressing environmental issues.

In the social sphere, these entrepreneurs navigate subjective human experiences, where perceptions of reality can evolve across time and diverse social contexts [26]. In addition to interviews, relevant documents such as project reports, community feedback forms, and environmental impact assessments were analyzed. This provided a holistic view of the strategies employed and their effectiveness. Documents were coded to identify recurring themes and cross-validated with interview data to ensure consistency.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and, along with document data, were coded using Atlas-ti analysis. Key themes such as community engagement, innovation in environmental practices, and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs emerged prominently. This process was guided by the principles of qualitative research, emphasizing depth and contextual understanding.

The qualitative methods used in this study provided deep insights into the strategies of social entrepreneurs in environmental conservation. By exploring both social and natural contexts, the research highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of social entrepreneurship and its critical role in addressing environmental issues.

3. Limitations

The study's limitations include a small sample size of three social entrepreneurs, a limited scope of data collection through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, subjectivity in qualitative analysis, and contextual constraints. The insights may not be representative of all social

entrepreneurs involved in environmental conservation across different regions, and the findings may be influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors specific to Malaysia.

4. Significant of the Study

A significant of the study are by introducing innovative ideas and strategies on social entrepreneurship towards environmental conservation. It also develops the Sustainable Social Entrepreneur Model (SSEM), as a structured framework to understand how social entrepreneurs contribute to conservation efforts. The results emphasize how crucial creative thinking is to advancing environmental sustainability. The study also highlights the possibility for long-term advancements in environmental conservation initiatives, leading to better strategies and results, and offers insightful information for other stakeholders and businesses.

5. Results

The study's methodology involved the analysis of data collected from interviews with social entrepreneurs who champion innovative strategies for environmental sustainability. Utilizing the Atlas.ti 9 method alongside to examine real-world implementations of participants' strategies, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of their approaches.

The discussion and analysis of this section is more clearly stated where the findings of the study are detailed based on themes that are coded as innovative idea codes. Based on the analysis and observations made on all the informants, it shows that the informants use innovative ideas to preserve the environment. Furthermore, the study analysis also showed that there was a real relationship between the informants of the study based on the code of the theme of innovative ideas. The findings found that the code of innovative ideas was consistent across all the informants involved. There is no disagreement about innovative ideas in producing products or services for environmental sustainability. The statements of the informant show the informant using innovative ideas for environmental sustainability. Innovative ideas inform by producing products or services aimed towards environmental sustainability.

In this section, the findings of the study are explained in depth using codes for innovative ideas, which facilitate a clearer discussion and analysis. It is evident from the analysis and observations of each informant that they employ creative solutions to protect the environment. Additionally, the analysis of the study revealed that, according to the code of the theme of inventive ideas, there was a genuine relationship among the study informants. The results showed that all of the involved informants adhered to the same code of creative ideas. Regarding creative concepts for creating goods or services that promote environmental sustainability, there is no disagreement. The informant's statements demonstrate how they apply creative thinking to promote environmental sustainability. By creating goods or services with an eye toward environmental sustainability, innovative ideas educate.

The study's findings are thoroughly described in this section's discussion and analysis, which are arranged according to themes designated as creative concepts. It is clear from participant analysis and observation that creative thinking is essential to environmental preservation initiatives. Furthermore, the thematic code of creative thoughts indicates a concrete relationship between study participants. The findings show that all participants were consistent in their usage of creative ideas, demonstrating that innovative techniques are important when designing products or services for environmental sustainability. Statements from participants highlight the application of creative

thinking to accomplish environmental sustainability objectives, emphasizing their critical role in guiding the development of environmentally sustainable goods and services.

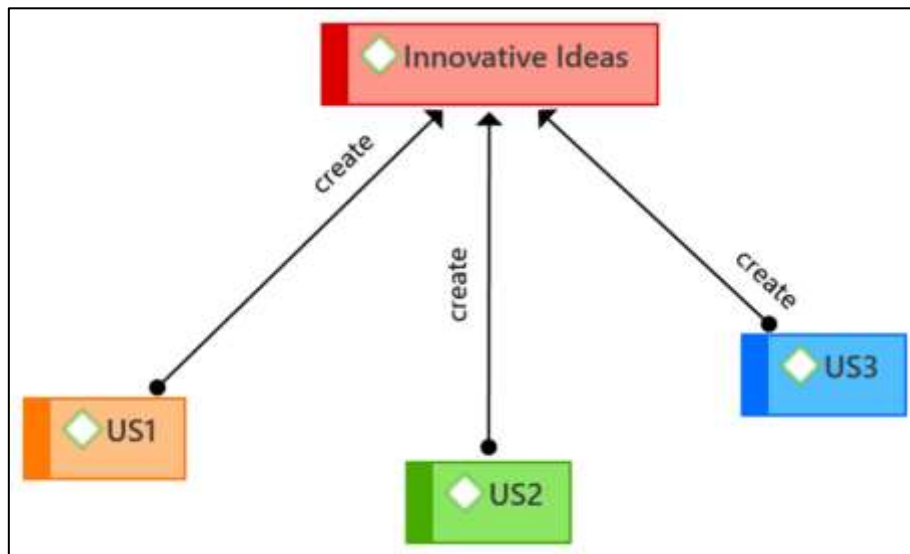


Fig. 1. Network Analysis

As depicted in Figure 1, each social entrepreneur has the capacity to develop multiple products or services. This illustrates the expansive nature of innovative ideas within social entrepreneurship, suggesting that there are ample opportunities for further expansion. The concept of social entrepreneurship lies in the creation of distinctive products and services with a social mission at their core. Some social entrepreneurs derive their innovative ideas from the phenomena occurring in their surroundings.

The statement from the US3 informant primarily emphasizes innovative ideas in product manufacturing, particularly highlighting their commitment to environmental sustainability through the production of goods made from organic materials. The statement is stated as follows:

"I'm an environmentalist, where all of my products are made from organic materials, many of which come from the Bujang Valley itself. I even named my products after the Valley of the Singles. For example, my soaps you see here are called Merbok River, Geoforest, and Stone River. The ingredients in these soaps are all organic ingredients that are good for the skin." [4:5]

Examining the statements of participants provides concrete examples of how innovative ideas are applied in practice. For instance, the US3 informant's emphasis on crafting organic beauty products sourced exclusively from the Bujang Valley Ecopark exemplifies the integration of innovative ideas into product manufacturing processes. By eschewing chemicals in favor of natural ingredients, US3 not only prioritizes consumer safety and environmental preservation but also underscores the potential for global market competitiveness, particularly in regions like Japan where consumer preferences align with these values. With its focus on safety and environmental consciousness, US3 believes its products can successfully compete in global markets, particularly in countries like Japan, where there is a strong emphasis on consumer safety and environmental sustainability [31,32].

Similarly, the approach taken by the US1 informant underscores the role of innovative strategies in engaging communities in environmental conservation efforts. By infusing ecological enjoyment into conservation initiatives, US1 seeks to foster a deeper connection between

communities and their environment, thereby promoting a sustained commitment to environmental stewardship.

"In my opinion, I give people fun with the river. If the fun is attracted to the place, then, at the same time we give the education. If we're going to continue to give education like that, our people are a bit difficult, right? I didn't understand, but I forgot. It's like that." [2:7]

The discourse from US1 [2:7] underscores US1's acknowledgment of societal issues, particularly regarding the environmental sustainability of local communities. US1 observes the relatively low levels of environmental sustainability prevalent in these communities. In response, US1 advocates for the cultivation of a sense of ecological appreciation to engender community interest in conservation endeavours. By captivating communities with the intrinsic beauty of their surroundings, US1 posits that community members will be spurred to better preserve their environment, thus facilitating its conservation. Additionally, US1 contends that relying solely on scientific knowledge is insufficient to mobilize society for conservation initiatives. Human memory is susceptible to lapses and forgetfulness, underscoring the necessity of supplementing scientific understanding with strategies that evoke emotional connections and foster sustained commitment to environmental stewardship.

These examples highlight the inherent creativity and resourcefulness that define social entrepreneurship. Despite its familiarity, the thematic code of innovative ideas remains a pivotal aspect of the study's findings, emphasizing its significance in guiding the development of environmentally sustainable products and services.

6. Conclusion

In sum, this study aims to thoroughly explore and analyse the real-life phenomena surrounding the innovative practices of social entrepreneurs in environmental preservation. Innovative ideas serve as crucial elements empowering social entrepreneurs to develop competitive products and services, thereby fostering a community of individuals committed to environmental sustainability. However, the potential of innovative ideas remains unrealized without the necessary resources for development. In today's world, where money holds significant importance, proper management of financial resources is critical. The journey of the informant, starting as an entrepreneur, highlights the importance of seeking financial backing, often leveraging personal reserves. Innovative ideas not only enable informants to generate profits for themselves but also contribute positively to society. These ideas stem from the informant's inherent qualities as a social entrepreneur, driven by a profound passion and concern for the environment.

The innovative ideas cultivated by social entrepreneurs hold great value, particularly when they are open to enhancement and refinement. Governments ought to embrace these innovative concepts put forth by social entrepreneurs, fostering an environment conducive to their development and implementation. Exposure to the principles of social entrepreneurship equips students with a competitive edge for the future. Unfortunately, Malaysia lags behind in this regard, trailing in the global competition of innovative ideas. However, developing countries are increasingly recognizing the role of social entrepreneurs as essential catalysts for addressing societal challenges, establishing them as critical agents of transformation.

Based on the study's findings, its contribution lies in advancing knowledge within the genre of social entrepreneurship and environmental conservation. This study represents a novel addition to the field of social entrepreneurship, shedding light on a phenomenon with broader implications,

particularly emphasizing the innovative ideas employed by social entrepreneurs in environmental preservation. Furthermore, the study serves to deepen understanding among entrepreneurs and society regarding the concepts of social entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship, while highlighting the significance of innovative approaches for environmental sustainability. Notably, the study has led to the development of a novel framework termed the Sustainable Social Entrepreneur Model (SSEM), illustrated in Figure 2.

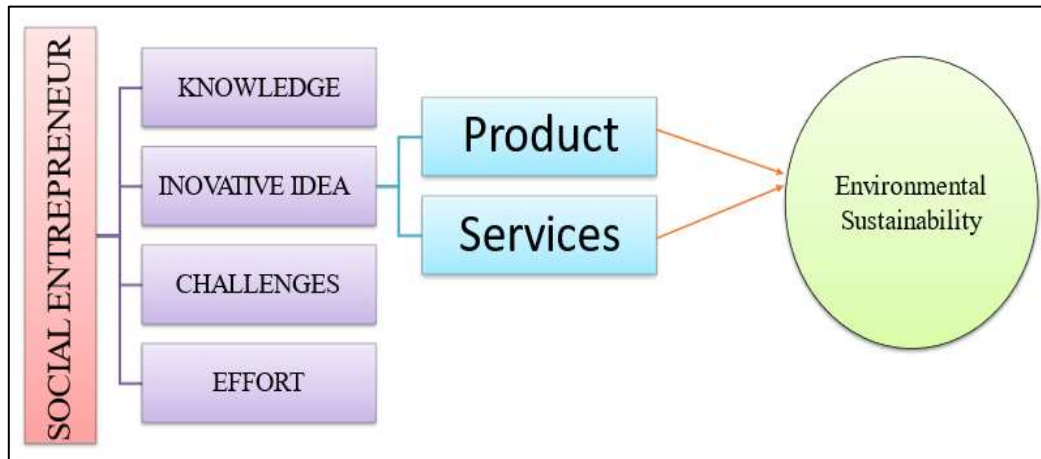


Fig. 2: Sustainable Social Entrepreneur Model (SSEM)

The Sustainable Social Entrepreneur Model (SSEM) is a framework proposed by researchers to delve deeper into the findings of research pertaining to the comprehension, innovative concepts, challenges, and efforts undertaken by informants, such as social entrepreneurs, in the context of environmental preservation. Basing on the informant's experiences in environmental conservation, the model facilitates the identification of avenues for enhancement in both social and environmental entrepreneurship. A social entrepreneur's understanding of their responsibility in environmental preservation enables them to provide products that not only protect nature but also contribute to the welfare of society at large.

In conclusion, this study aims to offer a novel contribution that addresses existing gaps in the understanding of social entrepreneurship. It is hoped that this study will prove beneficial for future generations, particularly those seeking to conduct more extensive research into social entrepreneurship. Given the expansive scope of social entrepreneurship, further exploration is necessary to foster the emergence of more social entrepreneurs within Malaysia. Furthermore, this effort is anticipated to drive Malaysia's journey toward becoming a developed nation, enabling it to compete effectively with other advanced economies. As a result, Malaysia can strive to become a cleaner nation with healthier citizens, emphasizing the significance of valuing our planet and conserving the environment.

To better understand the impact of social entrepreneurship on environmental conservation, the study recommends increasing the sample size and diversity of social entrepreneurs, carrying out longitudinal studies, comparing practices across regions, employing a mixed-methods approach, looking at the impact of policies, integrating technology, encouraging community engagement and education, and creating sustainability metrics. These suggestions will make it possible for further studies to offer a more thorough comprehension of the function that social entrepreneurship plays in environmental preservation.

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