

Systematic literature review on scalability strategies for a social enterprise : A TCCM approach

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Abstract

This study synthesizes the existing body of literature on the scaling of social ventures using the TCCM (Theory Context Characteristics Methodology) framework. The review finds that the dominant theoretical frameworks are the SCALERS framework, breadth versus depth scaling models and critical realism with limited integration across disciplines. The focus is primarily on base of the pyramid communities in rural India, highlighting affordability, market penetration and inclusive growth models. Urban, developed and digital contexts are not explored sufficiently. Some of the key characteristics identified include dual modes of scaling, organizational capabilities such as internal systems and client selection, and the role of organizational closure in sustaining impact. But there is little focus on long term outcomes such as resilience, systemic transformation and ecosystem level enablers. The

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studies reviewed are mostly qualitative case analyses and there is limited use of advanced quantitative, mixed methods or data driven approaches. The findings identify four main gaps: the need to increase theoretical integration; the exploration of different contexts; the examination of new organizational and ecosystem level characteristics; and the application of more rigorous empirical methods. Finally, implications for theory and practice of scaling social ventures are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

Subject Classification: 91B32, 91B38, 91B43, 91D30.

Keywords: TCCM framework, Scalability, Social enterprise, Social innovation, Social impact, Sustainability.

Introduction

Social enterprises are businesses with a social mission that employ entrepreneurial approaches to realize social or environmental results Dees [1]. They meet the needs of society through market based strategies like selling goods or services and ploughing their profits back to further their course. Scaling of social enterprises is very important as they need to be financially stable and have a positive impact on society. For them to maximize their impact, successful social ventures must either reach more people, by replicating the model or partnering with others, or have a greater impact on the communities they serve. So when we talk about providing clean water for all, or reducing poverty, often it means scaling up from the first local pilot. But these organizations are hard to scale, for they have two missions. Also challenges such as limited funding, competition, gender barriers, and balancing responsibilities hinder progress. Saheb et al. [17] However, there is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of the growing, but fragmented, research on scaling. A systematic literature review can help clarify how the “scaling” concept has been defined in previous work, organize systematically the key theories and strategies, and identify gaps. Systematic reviews in management research tend to follow fixed rules. For example, the PRISMA framework aids in open search and study screening. But PRISMA is really about the rigour of the procedure, like how the articles were chosen Page et al. [12]. Conversely, the authors analyse the literature using a TCCM (Theory-Context-Characteristics-Methodology) approach. The TCCM framework not only lists results, but also classifies studies by theoretical frameworks, settings, research focus and methods. This allows the identification of unexplored areas and the proposal of future research agendas Ebrashi and El-Batawy [13]. The objective of this review is to consolidate knowledge on scaling

social enterprises and determine trends and gaps in theory and practice. The systematic review indicates that the majority of the studies conducted to date have concentrated on a few key themes (e.g. organisational capabilities and social networks) and specific contexts (e.g. rural communities and the base of the pyramid). This paper presents a comprehensive overview of social enterprise scaling approaches under the TCCM framework. The authors provide systematized knowledge on theory, context, characteristics and methodology. They show the state of knowledge and lay out an agenda for both theory building and practice.

Literature Review

Different theoretical frameworks are used to study the scaling of social enterprises. One of the popular theories is Social Capital Theory based on importance of networks, trust and relationships. The literature “often emphasizes the importance of social networks, trust and relationships in the scaling process.” Strong social capital (trusting relationships between stakeholders, partners and communities) helps firms to access resources and legitimacy. The higher the trust, the easier it is to copy the social enterprise model as existing relationships provide opportunities to access new communities and to establish partnerships. Many of the case studies are like this.

Another important view is the Resource Based Theory. Most studies on scaling are from an RBV perspective and look at how internal resources and external resource dependencies affect growth. Ebrashi and El-Batawy [13] develop a typology of scaling strategies based on resources availability. They show how resource mobilization and partnerships can be used strategically to overcome challenges of scaling. Studies on bricolage show that recombination of resources for innovation enables scaling under constraints. Bacq et al. [2] show that social entrepreneurs’ bricolage (improvising with limited resources) is positively related to social impact, being an effective bottom up scaling mechanism.

The RBV has been extensively employed in the implementation of scaling capabilities, for instance the SCALERS model (Bloom and Chatterji [4]). SCALERS is an acronym for: Staffing, Communicating, Alliance building, Lobbying, Earnings generation, Replication and Stimulating market forces. It considers these as tools for companies to expand. Empirical research on SCALERS in different settings has identified factors that enable successful scaling, such as alliances and revenue generation. There is a very similar difference between scale out (scaling in breadth)

and scale up (scaling in depth). Breadth strategies increase the number of beneficiaries or reach of a program while depth strategies increase impact at the original site. The SCALERS literature discusses two types of breadth mechanisms, replication and franchising. But Depth scaling models such as “scaling deep” by Eiselein and Dentchev [8] are all about improving quality, involving stakeholders and making change stick. Recent work suggests hybrid models that combine breadth and depth, or combine strategies for scaling an organization with strategies for the entire ecosystem. However, Han and Shah [9] suggest an ecosystem framework with both finance and technology, while Stevens, Moray, and Bruneel [15] propose a multi dimensional scaling matrix with penetration, spreading, bundling and diversification. Islam [5] also differentiates between organizational and ecosystem growth strategies.

Institutional theory can provide explanations for the scaling process, particularly for hybrid private and public organizations. Within the framework of institutional logics and legitimacy, some studies have been carried out. For instance, Zhou, Jia, and Yang [3] describe the conflict between social mission and market logic that Chinese microfinance institutions faced during their development. Other studies focus on the institutional environment and competing demands and their impact on scaling results (Votaw and Fuentes [18]). These perspectives suggest the importance of external influences (regulations, cultural norms) and internal governance (dealing with multiple logics) in expansion. At last, an entrepreneurial orientation has been identified as a key factor. Beule [6] shows that scaling is related to three important dimensions of EO, which are firms’ innovativeness, willingness to take risks and proactivity.

The literature is enriched by dynamic capabilities and resource mobilization concepts. For example, Corner and Kearins [10] take a dynamic capabilities perspective and argue that a business seeking to internationalise should change its business model to adapt to new contexts rather than replicate it. They emphasize the necessity of cross border growth strategies that work in different circumstances. It is important, it is normal, to work with other people.

Inclusion and Exclusion/Selection Criteria:

The authors limited their citations to those satisfying the criteria:

- Social Enterprise Focus: Is the research examining organisations or initiatives that merge social objectives with business practices?

- Theoretical Framework: Does the research propose, appraise or critique theoretical frameworks relevant to the scaling or growth of social enterprises?
- Research Methodology: Is the study research (not opinion, commentary, or a study that simply describes things)?

TCCM Analysis

Theories.

Social Capital Theory: The scaling literature highlights the role of trust, relationships and social networks in the scaling process. This theory explains how social enterprises access resources, legitimacy and critical information and support through their networks. The case studies show that social enterprises with high levels of social capital are more successful in replicating their model by establishing trust with new communities and partners.

The SCALERS model Bloom and Chatterji [4], Gauthier, Ruane, and Berry [7], Ćwiklicki [11] converts resource based capabilities (e.g. staffing, alliance building and earnings generation) into scaling mechanisms and has been empirically tested in various contexts.

Impact-enhancing methods in well-established fields are rarely theorized but are available in models such as “scaling deep” (Eiselein and Dentchev [8], Teece [14]. These are ways to improve quality, increase stakeholder engagement and formalize social change.

Hybrid models combine breadth and depth or scaling at the organizational and ecosystem levels. Corner and Kearins [10] suggested a multidimensional ecosystem model that includes dimensions like financing and technology. Stevens, Moray, and Bruneel [15] propose a social impact scaling matrix containing several strategies: penetration spreading, bundling and diversification. Beule [6] speaks about two types of growth strategies: one for growing organizations and the other for growing ecosystems.

Stakeholder theory suggests that businesses need to internalize negative externalities and take responsibility for stakeholders including the nature and society resulted in the reduction of business risks related to sustainability. Tóth-Pajor, Csapi, and Moradi [16].

We draw on perspectives from institutional theory, institutional logics and related frameworks to explore the tensions and risks of scaling, especially when considering hybrid organizations.

Beule [6] discusses the Theory of Entrepreneurial Orientation as a driver of scaling. The author finds that innovativeness, risk taking and proactiveness are positively related to scaling and that entrepreneurial orientation mediates the relationship between socio economic goal tension and scaling outcomes.

From a dynamic capabilities perspective, Corner and Kearins [10] argue that scaling across geographies requires adaptation, rather than replication, due to contextual differences. They highlight the significance of context-sensitive approaches to international scaling.

Background

Geographical coverage: The studies have a wide geographical coverage. Many are about Africa, especially Sub Saharan Africa (e.g. Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa), Asia (e.g. China, India, Bangladesh, South Asia) and Western countries (e.g. US, Italy, Netherlands). Some compare emerging/developing markets to developed economies on a like-for-like basis, others discuss scaling globally.

Industry/Sector The research spans multiple sectors. Typical examples are microfinance and financial services (e.g., expanding microfinance institutions in China), renewable energy cooperatives, education and mentoring programs (e.g., MOOCs), agriculture and rural development, and social services.

Type of organization: Most studies considered different types of social enterprises, typically non-profits or hybrid organizations. These include cooperatives, NGOs in collaboration with local government and differentiated hybrid ventures. Some of the research focuses on community-based or women-led social enterprises and other research looks at networked or franchised models of social entrepreneurship.

Characteristics

Key constructs: Organizational capabilities are recurring constructs, consisting of the seven SCALERS dimensions of staffing, communications, alliance building, lobbying, earnings generation, replication and stimulating market forces, and social capital (bonding, bridging and linking), knowledge management, digital technology adoption, entrepreneurial bricolage and embeddedness. Very important are also, according to the researchers, the resource base, governance structures and the mission alignment.

Scaling dimensions: We distinguish between scale up (increasing the depth or breadth of the impact of a model) and scale out / replication (copying models in new contexts). Replication is part of the SCALERS model. Scaling can be measured in various ways, for example by using impact metrics (e.g. number of beneficiaries or results for the community) or financial growth.

Measurement methods/indicators: Many studies are methodologically qualitative or conceptual (e.g. case studies, literature reviews). Some empirical studies test models with survey data using structural equation modeling (SEM) or regression.

Other quantitative methods are multiple regression, factor analysis, and cluster analysis. Qualitative indicators of scale are rate of growth, number of partnerships or replications and qualitative assessments of impact. For some components the approach is based not on numbers but on theoretical modelling (SCALERS framework and ecosystem models).

Results and Discussions

When scaling social enterprises, it is important to develop their internal capabilities training, monetary systems and IT infrastructure. Bricolage is applicable when formal resources are unavailable. Leaders must align strategy with mission. Go wide (replication/franchising) or deep (quality/engagement) with a sustainable revenue model. It's about contextualizing. What works in the rural areas might have to be adapted for the urban markets. Digital instruments can help to overcome physical barriers. Stakeholder Legitimacy and Resistance Reduction Supported by Transparent Impact Measurement and Government Alliances Policymakers need to cut red tape, promote multi-stakeholder platforms and the creation of digital social innovation.

Limitations

Some limitations exist in this review. It contains only peer-reviewed and primarily English language literature. There may be unpublished or practitioner sources that are not included. The TCCM framework relies on subjective category and the corpus is mostly qualitative case studies, limiting generalizability and quantifiable effect sizes. Most studies are conducted in developing-world settings, potentially limiting transferability to other locations. No formal assessment of study quality was performed. Semantic heterogeneity was present due to heterogeneity in the definition

of “scaling” across studies. However, despite these limitations, the review provides a structured synthesis of current knowledge under the guidance of PRISMA criteria. Future research should broaden these findings by incorporating alternative approaches and broader contexts.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this systematic literature review is to provide an overview of the current knowledge on social enterprises’ scalability strategies according to the TCCM framework, highlighting the dominant theories, contexts, constructs and research methods shaping the field. The findings suggest that frameworks such as SCALERS, Resource-Based View and Social Capital Theory provide useful insights, but the literature is fragmented and contextually bound. However, there remain large gaps in theoretical integration, the digital and developed-market contexts, longitudinal research and quantitative validation. Future research should integrate interdisciplinary perspectives, multi-level analyses, and robust empirical methods to develop holistic frameworks of scalability. These efforts will contribute to both the academic understanding and the practical strategies for sustainable social impact.

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