

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS: A PATHWAY TO EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

In the face of rising poverty, climate vulnerability and widening inequalities, sustainable and inclusive livelihood strategies are urgent. This paper analyzes the ways in which entrepreneurship can support sustainable livelihoods and advance the broader objectives of sustainable development. With 61% of the global workforce in informal employment, entrepreneurial interventions can enhance human, social, natural, physical and financial capital. Case studies from India, Nepal and Sweden demonstrate entrepreneurship's potential to reduce poverty, build local capacities and align livelihood development with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Women-led agro tourism in Nepal and renewable energy enterprises in Sweden showcase entrepreneurship's contribution to economic resilience, gender empowerment and environmental sustainability. The paper analyzes differences between rural and

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urban livelihood strategies, challenges posed by urbanization and the role of technological innovations. Special emphasis is placed on empowering women and marginalized groups through access to credit, training and markets. Entrepreneurship, embedded within inclusive policy frameworks and supported by innovation and education, can drive sustainable development. Practical suggestions are provided for fostering entrepreneurship to build adaptive, resilient and sustainable livelihood systems in rural and urban contexts. By promoting entrepreneurship, policymakers and practitioners can unlock the potential of vulnerable populations, reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. This paper provides insights into the transformative power of entrepreneurship in achieving sustainable livelihoods and advancing the SDGs.

JEL Classification: I0, M0, O3

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, global development challenges have underscored the urgency to create inclusive, sustainable pathways that enable individuals and communities to achieve economic well-being and resilience. Central to this discourse are the concepts of livelihoods, sustainable development and entrepreneurship. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 61% of the global workforce (approximately 2 billion people) are engaged in informal employment, a trend that is more pronounced in developing regions such as Africa (85.8%), Asia-Pacific (68.2%) and the Americas (40%). (International Labour Organization [ILO], n. d.).

A livelihood, fundamentally, involves the means, capabilities and resources that people use to secure life necessities such as food, shelter and income. It goes beyond formal employment to encompass informal work, subsistence activities and resource-based practices. (International Labour Organization [ILO], n. d.). Entrepreneurship offers a dynamic mechanism for enhancing livelihoods by empowering individuals to create

economic opportunities, adapt to challenges and contribute to local and national development.

This paper examines the interface between livelihoods, sustainable development and entrepreneurship, with a focus on rural and urban contexts, challenges and the integrative potential of entrepreneurship to drive inclusive, resilient and environmentally sustainable growth. Drawing on global statistics, theoretical frameworks and practical examples from countries such as India, Nepal and Sweden, the paper provides a comprehensive analysis of how entrepreneurship can serve as a catalyst for sustainable livelihood development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of livelihoods gained prominence through the work of Chambers and Conway (1992), who defined a livelihood as comprising “the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living.” They emphasized sustainability, proposing that a livelihood is sustainable if it can withstand external shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and not undermine natural resources.

Further refinement came from Scoones (1998), who introduced the idea of livelihood strategies, combinations of activities and choices that people make to achieve livelihood goals. He emphasized five types of capital: human, natural, financial, social and physical, which became core to the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF).

The DFID (1999) Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets institutionalized this framework and encouraged governments and development actors to adopt holistic approaches to poverty reduction. Livelihoods were no longer seen merely as employment but as complex interactions between people, resources, institutions and policies.

In the decades since, literature has evolved to include discussions of vulnerability contexts (Ellis, 2000), institutional influences (Bebbington, 1999) and rights-based approaches

(Carney, 2002), which focus on equity, participation and empowerment.

The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) laid the groundwork for sustainable development, defining it as a balance between meeting current needs and preserving resources for future generations. Since then, sustainability has been conceptualized as encompassing three interdependent dimensions-economic, social and environmental (Sachs, 2015).

A growing body of literature supports the argument that sustainable livelihoods are essential for achieving global sustainability goals. Sen's (1999) "Development as Freedom" highlighted how economic development must also expand people's capabilities and choices, not merely income levels. This aligns closely with livelihood thinking, which focuses on people-centered development.

More recently, United Nations (2015) introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), several of which-especially SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) are directly linked to enhancing livelihoods and promoting inclusive entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship has been widely recognized as a key mechanism for poverty alleviation and livelihood enhancement. Schumpeter (1934) initially framed entrepreneurship as a process of "creative destruction," where entrepreneurs innovate and transform markets. Modern interpretations, however, place more emphasis on social, inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship.

According to Shane and Venkataraman (2000), entrepreneurs seize opportunities to create value. In the context of development, this value creation manifests as income opportunities, employment generation and enhanced community adaptability.

Naudé (2011) highlighted the role of entrepreneurship in addressing development challenges in the Global South, especially in fragile states with weak institutions.

Empirical studies, such as those by Banerjee and Duflo (2011), have shown that when

poor individuals are provided with access to microloans or asset transfers, many engage in entrepreneurial activities like livestock rearing or petty trade, which significantly improve their livelihoods.

Studies by Pitt and Khandker (1998) and Kabeer (2001) provide evidence that access to microfinance increases household income, improves food security and enhances women's bargaining power within families. Microfinance services have significantly increased to initiate micro-business and enterprises (Dhungana, 2018, 2016; Dhungana & Chapagain, 2020).

Similarly, Mayoux (2005) argued that micro-entrepreneurship, when combined with social mobilization and training, leads to transformative changes in gender roles and local economies.

Dhungana and Ranabhat (2022) found that access to microfinance services has contributed to the development of microbusinesses and enterprises through microcredit programs.

Microfinance has significantly increased clients' financial condition such as improvement of income level, productive investment, saving habits, consumption and capital expenditures with the support of microenterprises activities (Dhungana, 2023; Ranabhat & Dhungana, 2021).

Recent literature underscores the role of technological innovation in transforming livelihoods.

In agriculture, precision farming using drones, sensors have allowed for site-specific interventions that boost productivity (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010).

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) noted that digital technologies-especially mobile phones, the internet and data analytics have democratized access to information and markets.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Ferris et al. (2014) documented the use of mobile platforms to provide market and weather information to smallholder farmers, reducing losses and improving incomes.

Urbanization has altered the landscape of livelihood strategies. Satterthwaite and Mitlin (2014) explored how urban migration often leads people to seek informal employment in sectors such as street vending, domestic work and construction.

Research by Chen (2012) emphasized the importance of supporting informal workers through legal frameworks, social protection and entrepreneurship training. Urban informal entrepreneurs are often excluded from mainstream development plans but play a vital role in urban economies.

The ILO (2023) reports that 68.2% of the Asia-Pacific workforce operates in the informal sector, lacking job security and legal protections.

Literature has consistently highlighted the contrast between rural and urban livelihood strategies.

According to Ellis (2000), rural livelihoods are often diversified across farm and non-farm activities, highly dependent on natural resources and vulnerable to environmental shocks.

Microfinance has a crucial role in changing the livelihood standard of rural people using self-help group activities and generating employment opportunities (Chapagain & Dhungana, 2020).

In contrast, urban livelihoods are more dependent on market dynamics, skill sets and infrastructure. Tacoli et al. (2015) noted that urban residents often rely on wage labor, which may be irregular or informal and have greater access to services but face higher living costs. A useful comparison comes from de Haan and Zoomers (2005), who argued that both rural and urban livelihoods are increasingly interconnected through migration, remittances and information flows, calling for integrated policy responses.

As climate change intensifies, livelihoods, especially in agriculture-dependent communities, are increasingly at risk.

Leach et al. (2013) argue that resilience must be central to development planning. Entrepreneurship can serve as an adaptive mechanism by enabling diversification, innovation and local problem-solving.

In the context of disasters, such as earthquakes in Nepal, entrepreneurship has enabled communities to rebuild faster, especially when combined with insurance schemes, access to finance and decentralized governance (Brown et al., 2014).

North (1990) described institutions as the structural foundation of economic life. A supportive ecosystem, marked by policies that promote financial access, education, market stability and property security, is essential for entrepreneurs to achieve their full potential.

Bateman and Chang (2012), however, criticizes overly market-based approaches like microfinance, arguing that without structural change and industrial policy, entrepreneurship alone may not deliver sustainable development. Thus, state and community actors must co-create enabling ecosystems.

The literature shows a strong theoretical and empirical foundation linking livelihood strategies, entrepreneurship and sustainable development. From early models of livelihood sustainability to contemporary challenges of climate change, gender equity and informality, the evidence consistently points to entrepreneurship as a critical, though not standalone, pathway to transforming livelihoods. The integration of entrepreneurship within the Sustainable Livelihood Framework provides a holistic and adaptive approach to promoting resilience, inclusion and long-term development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive and conceptual methodology to explore the intersections between livelihoods, entrepreneurship and sustainable development. The study draws upon secondary sources, including scholarly publications, policy documents, institutional reports and real-world case studies.

Research Design

The paper applies a thematic analysis approach, identifying themes such as human capital, social inclusion, resource dependency, gender empowerment and technological innovation. These themes align with the core components of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) and are used to categorize and interpret key findings.

Data Sources

The study draws on a broad range of sources, including reports from international organizations (ILO, World Bank, UNDP, FAO etc.), academic journals and development-focused research institutions. Comparative case studies from India, Nepal, Sweden and Sub-Saharan Africa illustrate the diverse ways entrepreneurship intersects with sustainable development objectives.

Analytical Framework

The conceptual framework integrates the dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental sustainability) and takes into account the urban-rural divide in livelihood strategies and entrepreneurial opportunities. Insights from development programs and policy frameworks, such as the UN SDGs and national entrepreneurship policies, complement the secondary literature.

Ethical Considerations

The research focuses on the responsible use of secondary sources and accurate representation of cited work.

While this study does not involve primary data collection, it utilizes a conceptual synthesis method grounded in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework and SDG framework, supported by illustrative case studies.

By synthesizing information from diverse sources and contexts, the paper aims to generate a nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurship can serve as a bridge between livelihood security and sustainable development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rural Livelihoods: Characteristics and Challenges

Rural livelihoods are predominantly agriculture-based, encompassing farming, livestock rearing, fishing and forestry. These are often subsistence-oriented, with income and food security closely tied to natural resources. For example, paddy farming in Vietnam's Mekong Delta relies heavily on fertile soils and water availability.

Key challenges in rural livelihoods include:

Agricultural risks: Climate fluctuations pose significant threats to crop yields and livestock, with droughts in Ethiopia being a prime example of the devastating impact on food production and local economies. Meanwhile, there is inadequate infrastructure, such as poorly maintained roads and insufficient storage, hampers market access and productivity.

Urban Livelihoods: Characteristics and Challenges

Urban livelihoods are characterized by wage-based employment and a thriving informal sector, including street vending, domestic work and small-scale entrepreneurship. Urbanization brings both opportunities (job creation) and challenges (overcrowding, pollution).

For instance, migrant workers in UAE and Qatar, many from India and Nepal, have capitalized on construction booms. However, they also face exploitative labor conditions and economic insecurity.

Table 1: Livelihood Strategies: Rural vs Urban

Dimension	Rural Livelihoods	Urban Livelihoods
Resource Dependency	Natural Resources (land, water)	Market Forces, Demand
Strategy Type	Asset-based (land, livestock)	Skill-based (IT, Services)
Risk Factors	Weather Variability, Remoteness	Market Competition, Job Insecurity

Role of Entrepreneurship in Livelihood Enhancement

Entrepreneurship provides a pathway out of poverty by enabling individuals to: diversify income sources, build financial assets through business and create employment for others.

Case Studies of Entrepreneurial Interventions

Self-Help Group (SHG) Initiative of India

This grassroots movement of India empowers women to form collectives, mobilize savings and access credit to establish micro-enterprises. SHGs serve as a catalyst for women's economic empowerment, fostering confidence, knowledge sharing and financial stability. Additionally, SHGs have played a pivotal role in improving social cohesion and leadership among rural women (NABARD, 2022). Many SHGs have also expanded their activities to include social initiatives like literacy drives and health awareness programs (World Bank, 2021). The cumulative effect has been an increase in women's participation in local governance and decision-making processes.

National Solar Mission (NSM) of India

The NSM is a government initiative aimed at promoting renewable energy and reducing dependence on fossil fuels. The mission encourages entrepreneurship in the solar energy sector, creating opportunities for businesses and jobs in manufacturing, installation and maintenance. It has contributed significantly to India's renewable capacity growth, with ambitious targets to achieve 280 GW of solar power by 2030 (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy [MNRE], 2023). The NSM also promotes research and innovation in solar technology, leading to cost reductions and increased accessibility (IEA, 2023). Furthermore, it supports rural electrification projects, improving energy security and livelihoods in remote areas.

Spiritual Tourism: Empowering Livelihoods in India

India's spiritual tourism initiative has emerged as a vital source of livelihood generation, empowering local communities through sustainable tourism practices. By showcasing India's rich spiritual heritage, this initiative has created new economic opportunities for artisans, entrepreneurs and small businesses. Spiritual circuits like the Buddhist and Ramayana circuits have attracted millions of visitors, boosting regional economies (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). Local homestays, handicraft centers and guided tour services

have flourished, promoting inclusive growth (UNWTO, 2022). Moreover, these initiatives emphasize eco-friendly and culturally sensitive tourism models that sustain both heritage and environment.

Fostering Entrepreneurship in Nepal's Youth

Government-backed programs, including the Youth and Small Entrepreneur Self Employment Fund (YSEF), have given young entrepreneurs the tools to launch successful businesses, stemming the tide of migration and joblessness. For example, women-led enterprises in Pokhara have leveraged e-commerce platforms to export handmade products, gaining international recognition. Recent government partnerships with private institutions have further expanded access to microfinance and digital training (UNDP, 2022). These initiatives are cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset among youth and promoting innovation in agriculture, tourism and technology (MoYS, 2023). As a result, local economies are becoming more resilient and self-sustaining.

Green Technology Innovations in Sweden

Sweden is a global leader in green technology innovations, with a strong focus on renewable energy solutions and sustainable transportation systems. The country has made significant strides in reducing its carbon footprint, with initiatives such as bio-based fuels, electric vehicles and smart grids. Swedish companies like Vattenfall and Scania are pioneering sustainable energy solutions and eco-friendly transportation systems, showcasing the potential for green tech to drive economic growth and environmental sustainability. The Swedish government's Green Deal framework continues to support innovation and cross-sector collaboration (Swedish Energy Agency, 2023). Moreover, Sweden's investment in circular economy models has reduced waste and encouraged sustainable consumption (OECD, 2022).

Technological Innovations

Technological tools like drones in agriculture (for crop monitoring), mobile banking and online marketplaces are transforming both rural and urban livelihoods. In Africa, precision agriculture using drones has improved yields and efficiency (FAO, 2023). In Nepal, mobile applications like Krishi Gyan Kendra provide farmers with real-time information on weather, pests and market prices, thereby boosting productivity and income (ADB, 2022).

Furthermore, digital payment systems such as eSewa in Nepal and India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) have revolutionized financial inclusion by enabling quick, low-cost and secure transactions even in remote areas (World Bank, 2023; National Payments Corporation of India [NPCI], 2023). In addition, India's Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) is democratizing e-commerce by connecting small businesses, farmers and local retailers directly with consumers through an open digital infrastructure, reducing dependency on large online marketplaces (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade [DPIIT], 2023). E-commerce platforms like Jumia in Africa and Daraz in South Asia have similarly created new income sources for small vendors and local producers (UNDP, 2022). These technological advancements not only improve efficiency but also bridge the rural–urban divide, enhancing livelihood resilience and promoting inclusive growth across developing economies.

Women and Livelihood Strategies

Women play a critical role in livelihood sustainability. In many rural areas, women manage agriculture, livestock and household enterprises. However, they face structural barriers such as limited land ownership, lack of access to credit, and gender-based discrimination (ILO, 2022). Entrepreneurial programs targeted at women have shown promising results. In India, the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) supports entrepreneurship development among women, including linking Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to marketing platforms and providing dedicated market outlets (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023).

In Nepal, organizations like SAATH have enabled rural women to launch cooperative businesses in organic farming, enhancing their autonomy and economic resilience (UN Women, 2022). Additionally, digital literacy initiatives and microfinance programs have empowered women to manage small enterprises more efficiently and access wider markets (ADB, 2023). Overall, gender-focused livelihood interventions are proving essential for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction in South Asia.

Integrating Livelihoods and Sustainable Development

As 70% of the world's poor live in rural areas (World Bank, 2023) and 1.3 billion people work in informal sectors (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022), entrepreneurship-driven sustainable livelihoods are essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth (United Nations, 2023). Strengthening local entrepreneurship can promote inclusive economic growth, reduce vulnerability and empower marginalized groups, aligning global development efforts with long-term sustainability targets.

Entrepreneurship can align livelihood development with the three pillars of sustainability:

FIGURE 1

Pillars of Sustainability



The findings of this study reveal that entrepreneurship plays a transformative role in enhancing both rural and urban livelihoods through financial inclusion, innovation and gender empowerment. These results corroborate the conclusions of Naudé (2011), who argued that entrepreneurship acts as a key mechanism for job creation and resilience, particularly in developing economies. The outcomes from India's Self-Help Group (SHG) movement and Nepal's Youth and Small Entrepreneur Self Employment Fund (YSEF) demonstrate that access to microfinance and entrepreneurial support significantly improve income stability and community participation-consistent with the observations of Pitt and Khandker (1998) and Kabeer (2001) on the empowering effects of microcredit for women. Similarly, Dhungana and Ranabhat (2022) reported that microfinance-driven microenterprises enhance financial security and asset accumulation in rural Nepal, reinforcing this study's conclusion that inclusive finance and entrepreneurship are key to sustainable livelihoods. However, the results also echo Bateman and Chang's (2012) critique that microfinance, while valuable, must be complemented by structural reforms and supportive policies to achieve long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, the technological and environmental dimensions of entrepreneurship identified in this study align closely with recent global research emphasizing innovation for sustainable growth. The adoption of digital tools such as mobile applications and e-banking in Nepal and Africa reflects Brynjolfsson and McAfee's (2014) argument that digital technologies democratize access to markets and information. Likewise, the National Solar Mission in India and Sweden's green technology initiatives validate Sachs' (2015) view that sustainable development must integrate economic progress with environmental stewardship. These findings also mirror Ferris et al. (2014), who highlighted how mobile platforms enhance agricultural productivity and reduce market asymmetry for smallholder farmers. Overall, this research supports the growing consensus that technology-enabled entrepreneurship, combined with inclusive policy frameworks, acts as a bridge between livelihood security, innovation and environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has explored how entrepreneurship intersects with sustainable livelihoods and contributes to achieving key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By drawing on real-world case studies and development frameworks such as the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF), it has been demonstrated that entrepreneurship can diversify income sources, increase resilience, empower women and foster environmental sustainability.

From self-help groups in India to green technology ventures in Sweden and women-led agro-enterprises in Nepal, entrepreneurship has shown significant promise as a people-centered development tool. Furthermore, the integration of digital platforms such as Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) highlights how technology and innovation can unlock new markets and enhance livelihood strategies across rural and urban contexts (NPCI, 2023; DPIIT, 2023).

The role of policy and institutional support in enabling entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods is crucial. Without supportive environments, entrepreneurial initiatives may remain fragmented or fail to scale. Governments, development agencies and local institutions must co-create ecosystems that provide access to finance, training, markets and technology, particularly for marginalized populations. India's Startup India initiative exemplifies a policy-driven approach by offering tax incentives, funding access and mentorship for emerging entrepreneurs. Similarly, Nepal's microfinance policies targeting rural populations and women have facilitated inclusive growth, while Sweden's support through Vinnova has promoted green technology ventures contributing to both environmental sustainability and economic development. Digital infrastructure policies, including platforms such as BHIM and Jan Samarth Portal in India, are further transforming livelihoods by providing seamless access to financial services, subsidies and markets.

However, entrepreneurship should not be seen as a panacea. Without structural reforms, inclusive policy frameworks and equitable access to resources, education, and decision-making platforms, its potential may remain under-realized. Ensuring that entrepreneurship contributes to long-term development requires coordinated efforts from state and community actors, along with technological innovation and gender-sensitive interventions, to create resilient, inclusive and sustainable livelihoods.

This study is limited to secondary data analysis and case studies from selected countries, including India, Nepal, Sweden and parts of Africa, which may not fully capture the diversity of entrepreneurship-driven livelihood experiences globally. Future research could examine the long-term resilience of entrepreneurship-driven livelihoods, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions, to assess how these initiatives withstand environmental and economic shocks. Additionally, comparative studies on the effectiveness of urban versus rural entrepreneurship programs could provide insights into context-specific strategies for inclusive growth. Further investigation into the role of public-private partnerships and the impact of digital platforms on informal sector livelihoods across diverse socio-economic groups would help identify scalable models for sustainable and equitable development.

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