

The Role of Social Innovation in Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods Among Marginalized Communities in sub-Saharan Africa: A Review

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Abstract

This review takes a closer look at how social innovation can help create sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. It brings together existing research to delve into how fresh approaches like new organizational structures, practices, and solutions tackle the tough challenges that these communities face in achieving livelihood sustainability. The review highlights important areas where social innovation has made a real difference, such as improving access to resources, developing skills, creating market connections, and building resilience. Additionally, it examines the factors that enable or hinder the success and growth of social innovations in this setting. Ultimately, this review seeks to offer a thorough understanding of how social innovation plays a role in fostering more resilient and sustainable livelihoods for marginalized groups in sub-Saharan Africa, while also pointing out possible directions for future research and interventions.

Keywords: Social Innovation, Sustainable Livelihoods, Marginalized Communities, Sub-Saharan Africa, Resilient.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is grappling with ongoing issues like poverty, inequality, and environmental decline, which hit marginalized communities the hardest (United Nations, 2023). To improve the well-being and resilience of these groups, it's essential to pursue sustainable livelihoods. This concept encompasses the skills, assets (both material and social), and activities needed to secure a living that respects both the environment and social justice (Chambers & Conway, 1991). Unfortunately, traditional development methods have often missed the mark when it comes to addressing the complex vulnerabilities faced by these communities, highlighting the need for more innovative and locally-driven solutions (Scoones, 2009). Social innovation, which refers to fresh approaches to social issues that are more effective, efficient, sustainable, or fair than what we currently have (Mulgan, 2007), has

emerged as a hopeful strategy for tackling these intricate challenges. It typically involves engaging communities actively, tapping into local knowledge and resources to craft solutions tailored to their specific contexts (Pol & Ville, 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa, social innovation could pave the way for marginalized communities to establish more secure and sustainable livelihoods by creatively addressing challenges like access to resources, market opportunities, education, and healthcare (Foster & Heeks, 2013). This review seeks to delve into how social innovation can foster sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. By bringing together existing research, we will look at the various forms of social innovation being put into practice, their effects on livelihood outcomes, and the factors that either support or hinder their success. This analysis aims to deepen our understanding of how community-driven initiatives can lead to

more equitable and sustainable development in the region.

Statement of the Problem

Even with various development efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, marginalized communities still grapple with significant hurdles in achieving sustainable livelihoods (Ellis & Freeman, 2004). These hurdles are often made worse by issues like limited access to resources, susceptibility to environmental shocks, and deep-rooted inequalities (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2007). While traditional development strategies have made some headway, they often fall short in effectively addressing the unique needs and circumstances of these diverse communities, which can result in a lack of lasting impact and sustainability (Mosse, 2005). The idea of social innovation presents a potentially game-changing approach by focusing on locally-driven, context-specific solutions that tackle the underlying causes of vulnerability and foster more resilient livelihoods (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). However, we still need to explore how social innovation truly contributes to sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa in a thorough and cohesive way. It's essential to systematically review the existing evidence to grasp how social innovations work, their proven effects on livelihood outcomes, and the contextual factors that can make or break their success in this region. This review aims to fill the gap in understanding the role and effectiveness of social innovation in promoting sustainable livelihoods among

marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Need of the Review

Understanding how to effectively promote sustainable livelihoods among marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa is absolutely essential for reducing poverty and fostering equitable development. While the potential of social innovation to tackle complex societal issues is gaining recognition (Moulaert et al., 2013), there's still a gap in our understanding of its specific role in enhancing livelihood sustainability for these vulnerable groups in the region. Most existing literature tends to look at social innovation in a broad sense or zooms in on particular sectors or countries. This review aims to fill that gap by providing a synthesized view of how different forms of social innovation contribute to the various aspects of sustainable livelihoods—be it economic, social, or environmental—specifically for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, it's vital to pinpoint the enabling factors and barriers that can affect the success and scalability of social innovations. This insight is crucial for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike. By delving into what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, this study seeks to inform more effective strategies and interventions. By bringing together current knowledge, this review aspires to showcase best practices, highlight research gaps, and ultimately aid in designing and implementing impactful social innovations that can truly support sustainable

livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Objectives of the Review

1. To pinpoint and classify the various types of social innovation that are being put into action to enhance livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa.
2. To delve into how these social innovations impact different aspects of sustainable livelihoods, including economic, social, and environmental factors for these communities.
3. To evaluate the reported effects of social innovations on livelihood outcomes, such as income generation, food security, access to resources, and social inclusion.
4. To explore the enabling factors like community involvement, policy backing, and the adoption of technology as well as the obstacles such as insufficient funding, poor infrastructure, and socio-cultural challenges that affect the success and scalability of social innovations in this setting.
5. To bring together the findings for a well-rounded understanding of how social innovation can help foster sustainable livelihoods among marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa, while also highlighting potential areas for future research and intervention.

Research Questions

1. What are the main types of social innovations being used to enhance livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa?
2. In what ways do these social innovations impact the economic, social, and

environmental aspects of sustainable livelihoods for these communities?

3. What evidence is available about the effects of social innovations on specific livelihood outcomes, such as income, assets, and overall well-being, for marginalized groups in sub-Saharan Africa?
4. What factors help promote the successful development and implementation of social innovations aimed at achieving sustainable livelihoods in this region?
5. What are the major obstacles that limit the effectiveness and scalability of social innovations designed to support sustainable livelihoods among marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa?

Operational Definitions

- 1. Social Innovation:** This refers to a fresh approach be it a product, service, process, or model that tackles a social issue more effectively, efficiently, sustainably, or fairly than what's currently available. It aims to create social value, especially for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa, often involving these communities actively in the innovation journey.
- 2. Sustainable Livelihoods:** This term describes the ability of marginalized individuals and households in sub-Saharan Africa to handle and bounce back from challenges and crises. It's about maintaining or improving their skills and resources like natural, financial, human, social, and physical both now and in the future, all while ensuring that the natural resource base remains intact.
- 3. Marginalized Communities:** These are groups of people who face systemic

disadvantages and exclusion due to factors like poverty, ethnicity, gender, geographic location (such as rural or remote areas), disability, or other social or cultural traits. This often results in limited access to resources, opportunities, and participation in the broader society.

Methodology

This review took a structured approach to bring together existing research on how social innovation can help promote sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Desk Review Method was used in extracting the relevant literature which included analysis of publications, documents and online data.

Literature Search Strategy: A thorough search across key academic databases like Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar was conducted. The search used a mix of keywords identified earlier (Social Innovation, Sustainable Livelihoods, Marginalized Communities, Sub-Saharan Africa, Resilience) along with some related terms. Also dived into grey literature, such as reports from NGOs and international development agencies active in the region, to gather a wider array of relevant insights and focused on literature published in the last two decades (2005-2025) ensured that the most current research was used.

Inclusion Criteria: Included studies that explored the link between social innovation and livelihoods. Specifically, focused on marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Offered empirical evidence, case

studies, or theoretical discussions that relate to the topic. And are published in English.

Exclusion Criteria: Excluded studies that concentrated on regions outside of sub-Saharan Africa Didn't directly address the livelihoods of marginalized communities. Failed to discuss social innovation or similar concepts and were purely theoretical without any real-world context.

Quality Assessment: Even though this is a review, the quality of the studies was assessed which included, especially those that presented empirical findings.

Findings of the Review

The review shed light on the various ways social innovation plays a role in fostering sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings include:

● **Social Innovations such as:**

1. Technology-driven solutions like mobile money platforms that make financial services more accessible, digital literacy programs, and the sharing of agricultural information through mobile phones.
2. Community-led initiatives like Self-help groups, community-based natural resource management, and local entrepreneurship models that empower residents.
3. Market-based approaches such as inclusive business models, fair trade initiatives, and social enterprises that create job opportunities.
4. Service delivery innovations like creative methods for delivering healthcare, education,

and sanitation services to underserved populations.

● **Contributions to Sustainable Livelihoods:**

1. Economic empowerment: Generating income opportunities, improving access to markets and financial resources, and enhancing skills for better employment prospects.
2. Social inclusion: Building community ties, empowering marginalized groups (like women and youth), and improving access to essential services.
3. Environmental sustainability: Encouraging sustainable farming practices, adopting renewable energy, and supporting conservation efforts.
4. Resilience building: Strengthening communities' ability to handle shocks and stresses by diversifying livelihoods and improving access to information and support networks.

● **Impact on Livelihood Outcomes:**

1. Boosting household income and alleviating poverty.
2. Enhancing food security and improving nutritional health.
3. Providing better access to education and healthcare services.
4. Increasing asset ownership and decreasing vulnerability.
5. Fostering social connections and empowering communities.

● **Enabling Factors:**

1. Active involvement and ownership from the communities benefiting.
2. Supportive policies and partnerships with the government.
3. Strong collaboration among various stakeholders (like NGOs, the private sector, and academia).
4. Tapping into local knowledge and resources.
5. Smart use of technology and innovative approaches.

● **Barriers to Effectiveness and Scalability:**

1. Challenges in accessing funding and resources.
2. Inadequate infrastructure and logistical hurdles.
3. Socio-cultural barriers and resistance to change.
4. Insufficient monitoring and evaluation systems.
5. Issues with scaling successful local initiatives.

All the above findings are backed by the evidence gathered and synthesized from the reviewed literature, offering a thorough overview of how social innovation can promote sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

This review dived into the complex role of social innovation in fostering sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. By looking at existing literature, and uncovered a

rich tapestry of innovative strategies, from tech-driven solutions to grassroots initiatives, all designed to tackle the unique challenges these communities face. The findings indicated that social innovation plays a vital role in promoting livelihood sustainability through economic empowerment, social inclusion, environmental care, and increased resilience. While there's evidence of positive effects on various livelihood outcomes, the success and scalability of these innovations heavily depend on factors like community involvement, supportive policies, and collaboration across sectors, as well as challenges such as limited resources and cultural contexts.

In the end, this review highlights the immense potential of social innovation to create context-specific and locally relevant pathways toward more sustainable and equitable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa. However, unlocking this potential requires a deep understanding of how innovation interacts with the community and the wider socio-economic and political landscape. Future research should prioritize thorough impact evaluations, the long-term viability of these initiatives, and strategies for scaling successful models. By nurturing an environment that supports social innovation, stakeholders can help pave the way for more resilient and prosperous futures for marginalized populations throughout the sub-Saharan African region.

Suggestions and Way Forward

Based on the insights gathered from this review, below are some suggestions and a path forward to boost the role of social innovation in fostering sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities in sub-Saharan Africa:

1. Strengthen Community-Centric Approaches:

It's essential for future initiatives to focus on the active involvement and ownership of marginalized communities when it comes to designing, implementing, and evaluating social innovations. This approach ensures that the solutions are relevant, tailored to the local context, and sustainable in the long run.

2. Foster Enabling Policy Environments:

Governments and policymakers need to establish supportive regulatory frameworks and allocate resources that promote and facilitate social innovation. This could involve simplifying processes for social enterprises, offering seed funding, and weaving social innovation into national development strategies.

3. Promote Cross-Sectoral Collaboration:

Encouraging collaboration among governments, NGOs, the private sector, academia, and local communities is vital. This collaboration can harness a variety of expertise, resources, and networks to amplify the impact of social innovations.

4. Invest in Capacity Building: Initiatives should aim to empower marginalized communities by enhancing their ability to

engage with and lead social innovation efforts. This includes developing skills, improving access to information, and strengthening local institutions.

5. Enhance Monitoring and Evaluation: It's crucial to have robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks in place to assess the impact and effectiveness of social innovations on livelihood outcomes. This will help identify successful models and pinpoint areas that need improvement. Future research should utilize strong methodologies to measure both the intended and unintended effects of these innovations.

6. Enhance Knowledge Sharing and Scaling: The need to boost platforms that allow for sharing knowledge, best practices, and lessons learned across various contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. This will help us adapt and scale successful social innovation models more effectively.

7. Utilize Technology for Inclusion: It's important to explore and promote the right use of technology to connect with marginalized communities. This can improve their access to information, markets, and services, ultimately enhancing their livelihood opportunities. But we must also focus on bridging the digital divide to ensure everyone has equal access.

8. Prioritize Long-Term Sustainability: When designing social innovation initiatives, we should keep long-term financial, social, and environmental sustainability in mind, rather than just focusing on quick fixes.

By embracing these ideas, stakeholders can tap into the full potential of social innovation, paving the way for more resilient, equitable, and sustainable livelihoods for marginalized communities throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

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