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From Hybridity to Sustainable Impact: A Configurational Framework for Scaling Social Value in Social Enterprises

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Abstract

Social enterprises (SEs) are routinely described as hybrid organisations that combine commercial and social-welfare logics within a single organisational form. While a substantial body of research has examined how SEs manage the tensions that arise from this hybridity, considerably less is known about how hybridity translates into sustainable, scaled social value over time. Extant scholarship on scaling has tended to isolate single antecedents funding diversification, governance design, or partnership strategy, while treating scaling outcomes as the product of linear, additive causation. This conceptual paper departs from that tradition by proposing a configurational framework in which sustainable, scaled social impact emerges from equifinal combinations of five interdependent conditions: mission-anchored governance, resource portfolio diversification, hybrid identity work, ecosystem embeddedness, and replicable operating architecture. Drawing on hybrid organising theory, institutional logics theory, and configurational reasoning, the paper develops four model pathways: the Anchored Replicator, the Networked Orchestrator, the Earned-Income Scaler, and the Movement Builder, through which social enterprises can achieve scale without eroding mission integrity. The framework generates eight theoretical propositions and a research design for empirical validation using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). The paper contributes to social enterprise theory by reframing scaling as a configurational rather than a variance-based phenomenon, and it offers practitioners, boards, and funders a diagnostic vocabulary for assessing an organisation's readiness to scale.

Keywords: social enterprise; organizational hybridity; scaling social impact; configurational theory; institutional logics; fsQCA

Introduction

Over the past two decades, social enterprises have moved from the margins of organizational theory to its mainstream. This is studied as an empirical setting in which the boundaries between the market, the state, and civil society are actively negotiated (Doherty et al., 2014; Battilana & Lee, 2014). The constitutive hybridity distinguishes the social enterprise (SE) from both the conventional firm and the traditional non-profit organisation by the simultaneous pursuit of financial sustainability and social purpose within a single organisational principle (Doherty et al., 2014). This hybridity is now widely treated not as an incidental feature but as the defining characteristic of the organizational form (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Besharov & Smith, 2014).

A key question in social enterprise research is why some social enterprises struggle to expand their social impact even when they balance social and commercial objectives successfully at a small scale. Existing studies have identified several factors that support growth, including effective staffing, communication, partnerships, revenue generation, and the ability to replicate successful practices (Bloom & Smith, 2010). However, these factors are often examined individually, with the assumption that improving each one will lead to greater social impact. In contrast, research on hybridity highlights the ongoing challenges social enterprises face in balancing their social mission with commercial demands. These competing priorities cannot always be resolved, but organisations can manage them through appropriate practices and arrangements (Smith et al., 2013; Besharov & Smith, 2014). Although both areas of research offer useful insights, they have largely developed separately, leaving an important question unanswered: how do different organisational conditions work together to help social enterprises expand their social impact while protecting their social mission? Addressing this question can provide a better understanding of the combinations of factors that support both organisational growth and the long-term sustainability of social value.

This paper addresses the gap by developing a configurational framework to explain how social enterprises can expand their social impact while remaining committed to their social mission. Rather than examining individual factors separately, the framework focuses on how different organisational conditions work together to support sustainable social impact at scale (Fiss et al., 2013). This approach is based on three ideas: (1) Successful outcomes depend on how different conditions combine rather than on the strength of any single factor, (2) There may be different ways to achieve the same outcome, meaning that social enterprises do not necessarily need to follow one common path to success, and (3) The factors that contribute to success may differ from those that lead to failure. These ideas are particularly relevant to social enterprises because they must balance social and commercial objectives, which may support or conflict with each other depending on how they are managed (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Applying this approach to this study of scaling can therefore explain why some combinations of organisational conditions support growth while others may weaken the social mission.

This research brings four main contributions: (1) it connects two areas of research that have mostly been studied separately: organisational hybridity and scaling social impact. (2) it focuses on how different factors work together to help social enterprises grow while protecting their social mission. (3) it identifies organisational factors and suggests ways social enterprises can expand their social impact while maintaining their mission.

(4) The study proposes a research design using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to test these propositions. This method is suitable for examining how different combinations of conditions are linked to particular outcomes and can help strengthen empirical research on social enterprises (Nikou et al., 2022).

This paper is organised into eight sections. Section 2 reviews the literature on organisational hybridity and scaling social impact. Building on this review, Section 3 presents the proposed framework, its five conditions, and four pathways to sustainable social impact at scale. Section 4 outlines eight theoretical propositions, while Section 5 discusses their implications for theory, management, and policy. Section 6 describes the research design for testing the framework. Section 7 discusses the study's limitations and directions for future research. Finally, Section 8 concludes the paper.

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Theoretical Background

Hybridity refers to the combination of different organisational logics, structures, or identities within a single organisation, even when these are traditionally associated with distinct or competing organisational fields (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013). Social enterprises are a clear example of hybrid organisations because they bring together business practices and social objectives, drawing on the logics of the market, government, and civil society (Battilana & Lee, 2014). As Doherty et al. (2014) explain, the need to balance social purpose with financial sustainability is a defining feature of social enterprises. However, pursuing both objectives can create tensions in managing the organisation's mission, securing financial resources, and attracting and managing employees. These challenges make it important to understand how social enterprises balance competing demands while remaining committed to their social purpose.

Research on organisational hybridity has increasingly focused on understanding why hybrid organisations differ in how they manage competing institutional logics. Besharov and Smith (2014) explain these differences through two dimensions: the compatibility of the logics an organisation follows and their importance to its identity and operations. Their framework suggests that the nature and intensity of internal tensions depend on how these logics relate to one another. Similarly, Skelcher and Smith (2015) identify different ways in which organisations respond to competing institutional demands, including blending, segmenting, and displacing organisational practices. Pache and Santos (2013) further show that organisations may manage competing demands by selectively adopting practices from different institutional logics rather than resolving the tensions entirely. Taken together, these studies suggest that hybridity is not a uniform organisational condition; its effects depend on how competing logics are combined and managed.

Beyond these different approaches to managing competing institutional logics, research also highlights the persistent nature of tensions between social and commercial objectives. Smith et al. (2013) argue that hybrid organisations must balance these competing demands through a “both/and” approach rather than prioritising one objective over the other. This challenge becomes particularly important as social enterprises expand, since growth can increase organisational complexity, resource requirements, and pressure from external stakeholders. Ebrahim et al. (2014) similarly show that organisational growth can increase accountability demands and the risk of mission drift. As social enterprises expand, changing resource dependencies, a wider range of stakeholders, and greater monitoring requirements can make it more difficult to protect their social mission. These insights suggest that scaling social impact depends not only on individual organisational capabilities but also on how different conditions work together to manage competing demands. Building on this understanding, the present study adopts a configurational perspective to examine how combinations of organisational conditions enable social enterprises to expand their social impact while maintaining their social mission.

While hybridity research explains how social enterprises manage competing social and commercial objectives, the scaling literature focuses on how they expand their social impact. Scaling social impact is widely recognised as a key measure of success in the social enterprise field, although researchers have not always agreed on its meaning (Islam, 2022). To address this issue, Islam (2020), through a systematic review of existing studies, defines scaling social impact as an ongoing process of increasing the positive changes an organisation creates in society, both in terms of their reach and their quality. These changes may address social problems at the individual level or bring about wider systemic improvements through different scaling approaches. Building on this definition, Islam (2022) identifies two main strategies for scaling social impact. The first is organisational growth, where a social

enterprise expands its products, services, programmes, or geographical reach. The second is ecosystem growth, where the enterprise extends its impact through partnerships and by supporting other organisations to adopt or sustain similar initiatives, even without significantly expanding its own operations. This distinction shows that scaling social impact does not always require an organisation to grow in size. More importantly, it provides a basis for examining how different organisational conditions may support the expansion of social impact while preserving the social mission of a hybrid enterprise.

Bloom and Smith (2010) identified seven organisational capabilities that supported the scaling of social impact through their SCALERS framework: staffing, communication, alliance-building, lobbying, earnings generation, replication, and stimulating market forces. Their study provided an important foundation for understanding the factors associated with successful scaling. However, examining these capabilities individually may not have fully explained how social enterprises combined different organisational strengths to expand their impact while maintaining their social mission. This was particularly relevant for hybrid organisations, where efforts to strengthen commercial performance could sometimes create tensions with social objectives. Therefore, rather than focusing only on the individual contribution of scaling capabilities, the present study examined how different organisational conditions worked together to support sustainable social impact at scale.

These limitations become particularly relevant when organisational capabilities interact with the competing demands faced by social enterprises. Smith et al. (2013) explained that pursuing one objective could create challenges for another. For instance, a strong focus on revenue generation could compete with the time and resources required for advocacy and lobbying. Evidence from other scaling studies also highlighted the diversity of approaches adopted by social enterprises. Chliova and Ringov (2017) examined replication strategies among enterprises serving low-income communities, while Giudici, Combs, Cannatelli, et al. (2020) explored social franchising as a means of expanding social impact. These approaches differed from those that relied primarily on partnerships and wider networks to extend impact. Such differences suggested that successful scaling did not necessarily depend on a single set of organisational capabilities but could result from different combinations of organisational conditions. Building on these insights, the present study adopted a configurational perspective to examine how such combinations could enable social enterprises to expand their social impact while preserving their social mission.

Configurational theory provides a useful approach for understanding these different pathways to scaling social impact. Rather than treating outcomes as the result of separate variables acting independently and linearly, it views organisations as combinations of interconnected and interdependent conditions. From this perspective, outcomes are conjunctural, meaning that they result from combinations of conditions; equifinal, meaning that different combinations can lead to the same outcome; and asymmetric, meaning that the conditions associated with achieving an outcome are not simply the opposite of those associated with its absence (Fiss et al., 2013). Configurational thinking also involves two related principles: complementarity, where conditions reinforce one another, and substitution, where one condition can compensate for the absence of another (Nikou et al., 2022). These principles are particularly relevant to hybrid organisations, which may selectively combine or separate elements associated with different institutional logics (Pache & Santos, 2013). Their ability to remain viable therefore depends not only on the presence or strength of individual conditions but also on how these conditions fit together. This perspective provides a theoretical basis for examining how different combinations of organisational conditions can help social enterprises expand their social impact while maintaining their social mission.

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Building on these principles, fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) provides a methodological approach for examining how different combinations of organisational conditions contribute to particular outcomes. This method has begun to gain attention in social entrepreneurship research. Studies using fsQCA have shown that high levels of social entrepreneurship participation across countries can emerge from different combinations of state, market, and social institutional logics rather than from any single logic acting alone. Similarly, other configurational studies have linked combinations of institutional conditions and social capital to the prevalence of social entrepreneurship and outcomes such as subjective well-being. These studies demonstrate the value of configurational analysis for understanding how different conditions work together in social entrepreneurship. However, this research has focused mainly on the factors associated with the emergence and prevalence of social entrepreneurship, rather than on how hybrid organisations expand the social value they create while maintaining their hybrid nature. The present study addresses this gap by extending configurational analysis to the scaling of social impact. Specifically, it examines how different combinations of organisational conditions associated with hybridity can enable social enterprises to achieve sustainable social impact at scale.

Configurational Framework

The framework developed in this study identifies five conditions that are hypothesised to influence whether a social enterprise achieves sustainable social impact at scale, both individually and in combination. It also specifies the outcome condition itself. These five conditions were identified by bringing together three key perspectives from the existing literature: the areas of tension associated with hybridity, including mission, financial resources, and human resources, discussed by Doherty et al. (2014); the organisational-growth and ecosystem-growth strategies for scaling social impact identified by Islam (2022); and the governance-related risks of mission drift highlighted by Ebrahim et al. (2014). This synthesis provides the theoretical basis for selecting the conditions included in the proposed configurational framework.

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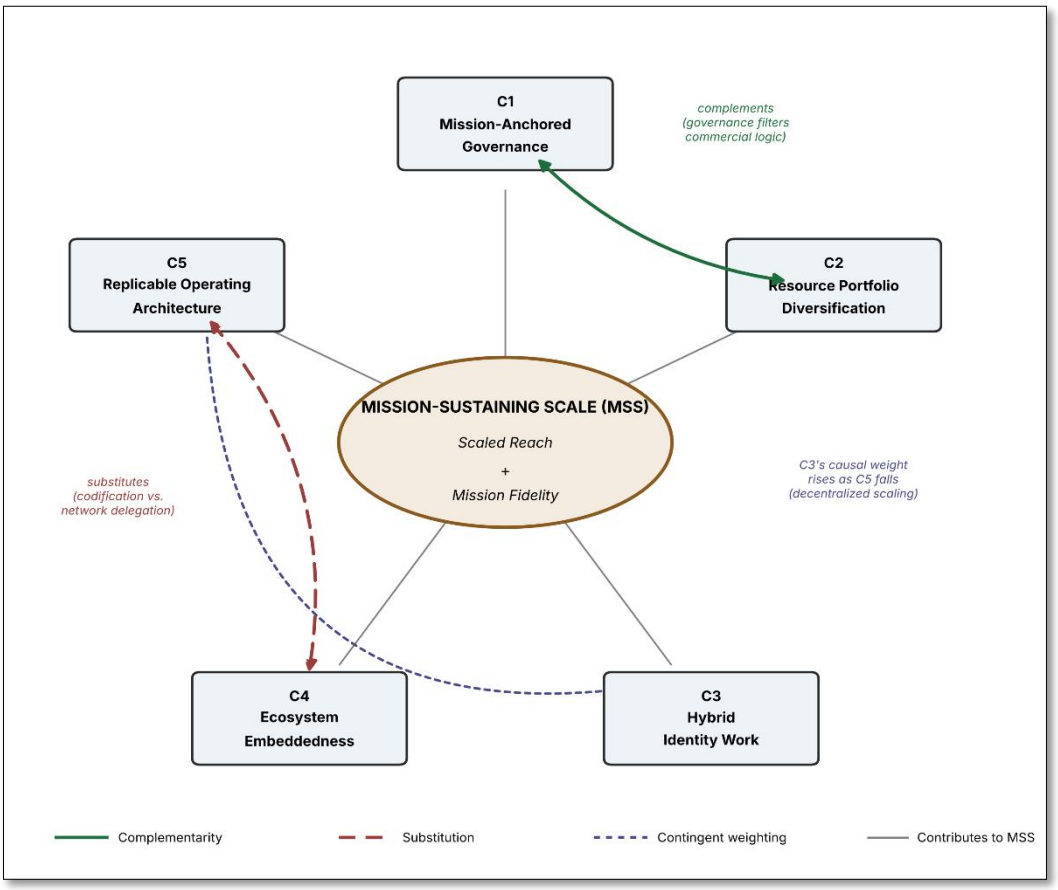


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Organisational Conditions and Sustainable Scaled Social Value

C1-Mission-Anchored Governance: Mission-anchored governance refers to the extent to which board composition, decision-making authority, and formal accountability mechanisms are designed to protect the social mission as an organisation grows. Ebrahim et al. (2014) highlight the importance of governance in addressing accountability challenges and reducing the risk of mission drift as social enterprises expand. Mechanisms such as reserving board positions for mission-aligned stakeholders, incorporating mission-related indicators into strategic reviews, and establishing formal safeguards in organisational rules can help protect the social mission. Such mechanisms may enable social enterprises to pursue growth while maintaining their organisational identity and social purpose.

C2-Resource Portfolio Diversification: Resource portfolio diversification refers to the extent to which a social enterprise draws on multiple sources of funding, including grants, philanthropic donations, earned income, and impact investment or blended finance, rather than relying heavily on a single source. Doherty et al. (2014) identify financial resources as an important area of tension in hybrid organisations, where social objectives must be balanced with financial sustainability. Dependence on a single funding source may increase the influence of the priorities and expectations associated with that source on organisational decisions. By contrast, a diversified funding portfolio may provide greater flexibility to balance competing demands and support the organisation's growth without compromising its social mission.

C3-Hybrid Identity Work: Hybrid identity work refers to the ongoing efforts through which a social enterprise develops and maintains a shared understanding of its social and commercial purposes among employees, beneficiaries, funders, and partners. Battilana and Lee (2014) identify workforce composition and organisational activities as important dimensions of hybrid organising that require active management. Similarly, Besharov and Smith (2014) show that the importance of competing institutional logics to an organisation's identity influences the nature of internal tensions. As social enterprises expand, they often engage new employees, establish additional operating locations, and develop relationships with new stakeholders. These changes can make it more difficult to maintain a shared understanding of the organisation's dual purpose, highlighting the importance of identity work in sustaining hybridity during growth.

C4-Ecosystem Embeddedness: Ecosystem embeddedness refers to the extent to which a social enterprise maintains relationships with intermediaries, peer organisations, government agencies, and market partners to extend its social impact beyond its own operations. Islam (2022) identifies ecosystem growth as an approach to scaling social impact that complements or offers an alternative to organisational growth. Through partnerships and wider networks, social enterprises can encourage other organisations to adopt their models, standards, or practices. Strong ecosystem relationships may therefore help extend social impact without requiring a corresponding expansion in the enterprise's own size or operational capacity.

C5-Replicable Operating Architecture: Replicable operating architecture refers to the extent to which a social enterprise has formalised its core processes, including service delivery procedures, training materials, quality-assurance systems, and technology platforms, so that they can be transferred across locations or partner organisations while maintaining consistency. Chliova and Ringov (2017) highlight the role of replication in scaling social impact among enterprises serving low-income communities. Similarly, Giudici, Combs, Cannatelli, et al. (2020) examine social franchising as an approach to expansion that relies on an established and transferable operating model. These studies underline the importance of codifying organisational practices before extending them to new settings. A well-developed operating architecture may therefore support wider implementation while helping maintain the quality and consistency of social value creation.

The outcome condition, sustainable scaled social value, combines two aspects that are often examined separately in the existing literature: the extent of social impact achieved and the ability to maintain the social mission over time. The first relates to the breadth and depth of social impact, consistent with Islam's (2020) integrated definition of scaling social impact. The second concerns the continued

protection of the social mission and the avoidance of mission drift and accountability failures, as discussed by Ebrahim et al. (2014).

A social enterprise does not achieve this outcome simply by expanding its operations if that growth comes at the expense of its social mission. Similarly, an organisation that remains committed to its social purpose but lacks the capacity to expand its reach or generate meaningful social value at scale does not fully meet the outcome. Sustainable scaled social value therefore requires both a meaningful expansion of social impact and the continued protection of the organisation's social mission. By bringing these two aspects together, the outcome condition connects the central concern of the scaling literature, which is the extent of social impact, with that of the hybridity literature, which is the ability to maintain a balance between social and commercial objectives over time. This combined perspective addresses an important gap, as neither literature alone fully explains how social enterprises can expand their impact while sustaining their social mission.

Building on the five organisational conditions and the outcome of sustainable scaled social value, the proposed framework identifies four possible pathways through which social enterprises may expand their impact while maintaining their social mission. Consistent with configurational theory, these pathways do not assume that a single combination of conditions is necessary for success. Instead, different combinations may lead to the same outcome, and the importance of individual conditions may vary across pathways (Fiss, 2011). The four pathways are theoretically derived from the literature on organisational hybridity, replication, social franchising, and ecosystem-based scaling. They represent propositions for further empirical testing rather than configurations already established by previous studies.

Table 2. Configuration table for the four equifinal pathways to Mission-Sustaining Scale

Condition	A. Anchored Replicator	B. Networked Orchestrator	C. Earned-Income Scaler	D. Movement Builder	Legend
C1 Mission-Anchored Governance	● Core	◐ Peripheral	● Core	◐ Peripheral	● = Core, high
C2 Resource Diversification	◐ Peripheral	— Don't care	✕ Core, low (dominant earned income instead)	— Don't care	◐ = Peripheral
C3 Hybrid Identity Work	— Don't care	◐ Peripheral	◐ Peripheral	● Core	✕ = Core, low/absent
C4 Ecosystem Embeddedness	✕ Core, low	● Core	— Don't care	● Core	— = Don't care
C5 Replicable Operating Architecture	● Core	✕ Core, low	● Core	✕ Core, low	

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Contextual / boundary assumption	Market/beneficiary legitimacy substitutes for low C4	Ecosystem enforces a quality/fidelity floor	High C1 compensates for commercial-logic dominance	Shared external standard substitutes for codification	

Pathway A — The Anchored Replicator: This pathway is characterised by high mission-anchored governance (C1) and high replicable operating architecture (C5), supported by resource portfolio diversification (C2). Hybrid identity work (C3) and ecosystem embeddedness (C4) may contribute to the outcome but are not expected to be the defining features of this pathway. It represents social enterprises that expand primarily through direct replication or social franchising. Strong governance arrangements help protect the social mission across operating locations, while clearly documented procedures support consistency in service delivery. Chliova and Ringov (2017) explain the importance of template development and replication in scaling solutions for low-income communities. Similarly, Giudici et al. (2020) demonstrate how social franchising can support the expansion of social value while retaining the social mission. These studies provide a basis for proposing that the combination of mission protection and a replicable operating model may support sustainable scaling.

Pathway B — The Networked Orchestrator: This pathway centres on high ecosystem embeddedness (C4), supported by mission-anchored governance (C1). Replicable operating architecture (C5) need not be a defining condition because impact is extended primarily through partnerships and the adoption of practices by other organisations rather than through the direct expansion of the focal enterprise. The social enterprise acts as an orchestrator, connecting different actors and facilitating the transfer of knowledge, practices, and operating models. This pathway reflects Islam's (2022) distinction between organisational growth and ecosystem growth as approaches to scaling social impact. From a configurational perspective, strong external relationships may reduce the need for direct organisational expansion, while appropriate governance and accountability arrangements help maintain alignment with the social mission across the wider network.

Pathway C — The Earned-Income Scaler: This pathway combines high resource portfolio diversification (C2) with high replicable operating architecture (C5) and strong mission-anchored governance (C1). The diversified portfolio includes a substantial earned-income stream alongside other sources of funding, rather than depending exclusively on commercial revenue. Earned income may support financial sustainability and provide resources for expansion, while a replicable operating model helps maintain consistency as activities grow. However, commercial activities may also increase the influence of market priorities on organisational decisions. Doherty et al. (2014) discuss the tensions social enterprises face in managing financial resources while pursuing their social mission, and Ebrahim et al. (2014) highlight the governance challenges associated with balancing social and commercial objectives. Accordingly, this pathway proposes that a diversified funding base and a replicable operating model are more likely to support sustainable scaling when accompanied by governance arrangements that protect the social mission.

Pathway D — The Movement Builder: This pathway combines high hybrid identity work (C3) with high ecosystem embeddedness (C4). Replicable operating architecture (C5) need not be a defining condition because impact is extended through shared values, common practices, and collective commitment across a decentralised network rather than through formal replication alone. Hybrid identity work helps employees, partners, and other participating organisations maintain a shared understanding of the social mission as the initiative spreads. Giudici et al. (2020) illustrate how a

shared mission-driven identity can support social franchising through decentralised decision-making, shared governance, and collaborative knowledge-sharing. Building on this insight, the proposed pathway suggests that strong identity work and ecosystem relationships may enable social enterprises to extend their impact even when formal codification is limited. Appropriate mission safeguards remain relevant to ensure that decentralised expansion does not weaken the organisation's social purpose.

Propositions:

This framework leads to the following eight propositions.

Proposition 1. Sustainable scaled social value does not depend on any single condition being independently necessary among mission-anchored governance, resource portfolio diversification, hybrid identity work, ecosystem embeddedness, and replicable operating architecture. Instead, it can be achieved through different combinations of these organisational conditions.

Proposition 2. Mission-anchored governance (C1) is expected to be a key condition in most configurations that lead to sustainable scaled social value, as it can help social enterprises remain accountable and protect their social mission as they grow (Ebrahim et al., 2014).

Proposition 3. High resource portfolio diversification (C2) may help social enterprises expand their impact, but without strong mission-anchored governance (C1), it may not be sufficient to protect the social mission over time. In such cases, the influence of commercial priorities may increase the risk of mission drift, particularly when appropriate governance safeguards are lacking.

Proposition 4. Social enterprises may expand their social impact through different routes. A well-developed and replicable operating model (C5) may support expansion even when ecosystem embeddedness (C4) is limited. Conversely, strong ecosystem relationships may help extend social impact when formal replication is less prominent. This reflects the distinction between organisational growth and ecosystem growth as alternative approaches to scaling social impact (Islam, 2022).

Proposition 5. Hybrid identity work (C3) may be less important in configurations where a well-developed and replicable operating model (C5) supports expansion. However, it may become a key condition when social impact spreads through decentralised networks and formal procedures are less developed, as a shared understanding of the organisation’s social mission can help maintain alignment across different actors.

Proposition 6. The Anchored Replicator configuration, characterised by strong mission-anchored governance (C1), a well-developed replicable operating model (C5), and moderate resource portfolio diversification (C2), is expected to support sustainable scaled social value even when ecosystem embeddedness (C4) is limited. In this configuration, clear governance safeguards and standardised operating procedures may enable social enterprises to expand their impact while protecting their social mission, without relying heavily on external networks or partnerships.

Proposition 7. The Movement Builder configuration, characterised by strong ecosystem embeddedness (C4) and active hybrid identity work (C3), is expected to support sustainable scaled social value even when replicable operating architecture (C5) is less developed. In this configuration, strong partnerships and a shared commitment to the social mission may help social enterprises extend their impact through decentralised networks without relying heavily on formalised procedures or standardised operating models.

Proposition 8. Configurations with weak mission-anchored governance (C1) and limited hybrid identity work (C3) are expected to be less likely to achieve sustainable scaled social value, even when the other organisational conditions are favourable. Without effective governance safeguards and a shared understanding of the social mission, social enterprises may find it difficult to maintain their social purpose as their impact expands, increasing the risk of mission drift.

Discussion

The proposed framework makes three distinct theoretical contributions. First, it connects organisational hybridity theory with the literature on scaling social impact. Research on hybridity focuses on how social enterprises manage competing social and commercial priorities (Smith et al., 2013; Besharov & Smith, 2014), while scaling research examines how social impact can be extended through organisational growth and wider ecosystem engagement (Islam, 2022). By bringing these perspectives together, the framework shows how the challenge of maintaining a social mission can be considered alongside the strategies used to expand social impact. This integration provides a broader theoretical basis for understanding how social enterprises can grow without losing sight of their social purpose.

Second, the framework advances a configurational understanding of organisational conditions in scaling social impact. Existing frameworks, such as SCALERS (Bloom & Smith, 2010), identify important drivers of scaling. The proposed framework shifts attention from individual drivers to the ways in which different conditions may work together. Drawing on configurational theory, it recognises that some conditions may reinforce one another, while others may serve as alternatives in particular combinations (Fiss et al., 2013; Nikou et al., 2022). The theoretical contribution lies in explaining scaling not simply through the presence of particular organisational capabilities, but through the relationships among governance, resources, identity, ecosystem relationships, and operating arrangements.

Third, the framework explains how different organisational configurations may lead to the same outcome of sustainable scaled social value. Rather than assuming that one model of scaling is suitable for all social enterprises, it proposes four possible pathways: the Anchored Replicator, Networked Orchestrator, Earned-Income Scaler, and Movement Builder. Each pathway represents a different combination of organisational conditions through which social enterprises may expand their impact while maintaining their social mission. This contribution draws on the principle of equifinality in configurational theory, which recognises that different combinations of conditions can lead to a similar outcome (Fiss, 2011). It therefore offers a theoretical explanation for why social franchises, partnership-based initiatives, commercially supported enterprises, and decentralised movements may achieve sustainable social impact through different organisational arrangements. These proposed pathways require empirical testing.

Practical and Managerial Implications

For social enterprise leaders and boards, the framework provides a practical way to assess whether their organisations are ready to scale their social impact. Instead of focusing on whether the organisation has enough of each individual resource or capability, leaders can consider how different organisational conditions work together. Building all five conditions to the same level may place unnecessary pressure on limited resources and management attention. The four proposed pathways can help leaders identify the approach that best matches their organisation's existing strengths and external context. They can then focus their efforts on developing the conditions most relevant to that pathway.

For example, a social enterprise with a well-developed and standardised service model but limited external networks may benefit more from strengthening its governance arrangements and following the Anchored Replicator pathway than from investing heavily in partnerships that it may struggle to maintain. This illustrates how the framework can help leaders make more focused decisions about the use of limited resources. Furthermore, the framework highlights the importance of mission-anchored governance across different scaling approaches. As suggested by Proposition 2, strong governance arrangements may help protect the social mission and maintain accountability as the organisation grows. Although the most suitable scaling strategy may differ across social enterprises, safeguarding the social mission remains an important consideration for boards and leaders.

Policy and Funder Implications

For funders, impact investors, and policymakers, the framework suggests that support for social enterprises should be tailored to their scaling strategies rather than based on a single checklist applied to every organisation. Before approving funding, funders could assess each organisation's governance arrangements, funding sources, operating model, partnerships, and capacity to maintain its social mission during expansion. This assessment could then guide funding decisions and the design of capacity-building programmes according to the organisation's intended scaling pathway.

For social enterprises pursuing the Anchored Replicator or Earned-Income Scaler pathway, funders could provide grants or technical assistance to document service delivery procedures, develop staff training materials, introduce quality-assurance systems, and strengthen governance safeguards. For organisations following the Networked Orchestrator or Movement Builder pathway, support could focus on partnership development, network coordination, stakeholder engagement, and the sharing of knowledge and practices. Funding agreements could also include pathway-specific milestones, such as improving service consistency, establishing active partnerships, or strengthening mission-related accountability, rather than relying only on financial growth or the number of beneficiaries reached.

The framework also highlights the need to help social enterprises avoid excessive dependence on a single source of funding. Funders and policymakers could offer a combination of grants, philanthropic support, impact investment, and access to earned-income opportunities, depending on the organisation's needs and capacity. They could also provide financial planning support to help enterprises assess the risks associated with different funding sources and develop a sustainable funding portfolio. Finally, funding agreements should include regular reviews of both social impact and mission alignment. Measures such as beneficiary outcomes, service quality, and adherence to the organisation's social objectives could be assessed alongside financial performance. These measures would help funders identify early signs of mission drift and adjust their support as the organisation grows.

Directions for Empirical Validation:

Since the propositions developed in this study focus on combinations of organisational conditions, conventional regression-based methods may not fully capture the relationships they seek to explain. Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) offers a suitable approach because it examines how different combinations of conditions may lead to the same outcome. The method has been applied to configurational questions in social entrepreneurship and related fields, including innovation and corporate governance (Misangyi & Acharya, 2014; Nikou et al., 2022).

Empirical validation of the framework could proceed in four stages. First, a purposive sample of approximately 40 to 80 social enterprises could be selected to capture variation across sectors,

geographical locations, and organisational age. The final sample size should reflect the diversity of the cases and the complexity of the proposed configurations. This variation would help assess whether different combinations of organisational conditions are associated with sustainable scaled social value across different settings.

Second, the five organisational conditions and the outcome would be operationalised and calibrated into fuzzy-set membership scores. Data could be collected from governance documents, annual reports, funding disclosures, structured interviews, and survey instruments. Direct calibration would be used to establish membership scores based on clearly defined thresholds for full membership, full non-membership, and the crossover point. These thresholds should be justified theoretically and specified before the analysis.

Third, the analysis would examine the necessity of individual conditions for achieving sustainable scaled social value and then assess which combinations of conditions are sufficient for the outcome. The truth table would be constructed and analysed using appropriate frequency and consistency thresholds to derive complex, parsimonious, and intermediate solutions. Particular attention would be given to whether the empirical results support the four proposed pathways: the Anchored Replicator, Networked Orchestrator, Earned-Income Scaler, and Movement Builder.

The Anchored Replicator pathway is expected to combine high mission-anchored governance (C1), high replicable operating architecture (C5), and moderate resource portfolio diversification (C2), with ecosystem embeddedness (C4) expected to be less prominent. The Networked Orchestrator pathway is expected to feature high ecosystem embeddedness (C4), supported by mission-anchored governance (C1), while replicable operating architecture (C5) is expected to be less prominent. The Earned-Income Scaler pathway is expected to combine high resource portfolio diversification (C2), high replicable operating architecture (C5), and high mission-anchored governance (C1). The Movement Builder pathway is expected to combine high hybrid identity work (C3) and high ecosystem embeddedness (C4), with replicable operating architecture (C5) expected to be less prominent. Conditions not specified as defining features of a pathway would remain open to empirical investigation rather than being assumed to be either present or absent. These pathway descriptions represent theoretical expectations to be tested, not predetermined empirical results. The analysis should also examine the absence of sustainable scaled social value to determine whether the configurations associated with unsuccessful scaling differ from those associated with success.

Fourth, robustness checks would assess whether the findings remain stable when calibration thresholds, consistency cut-offs, and other relevant analytical choices are varied. Where feasible, a longitudinal study following the same social enterprises through different stages of growth could further examine how organisational configurations change over time. This would extend the analysis beyond a cross-sectional assessment and provide insight into how different combinations of conditions develop as social enterprises expand their impact.

Conclusion

This paper argues that understanding how social enterprises expand their social impact while maintaining their social mission requires a configurational approach rather than an additive one. By bringing together research on organisational hybridity, which highlights the ongoing tensions between social and commercial objectives, and research on scaling social impact, which distinguishes between organisational growth and ecosystem growth, the paper develops a framework consisting of five organisational conditions, four possible pathways, and a set of testable propositions.

The framework does not assume that all social enterprises must follow the same path to growth. Instead, it recognises that different combinations of governance, resources, identity work, ecosystem relationships, and operating systems may lead to sustainable scaled social value. The success of each pathway may depend on how well these conditions complement and support one another. Future research using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) and other set-theoretic methods can test and refine the proposed framework. Such research can contribute to a better understanding of how social enterprises expand their impact while maintaining the balance between their social mission and commercial objectives that defines their hybrid nature.

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