

4-19-2023

## Community Engagement Experiences of Social Entrepreneurs in Rural Communities

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### Custom Citation

Teng-Calleja, M., Cuyegkeng, M.A.C., Caringal-Go, J.F., Baquiano, M.J., Tan, A.M.A., & Cementina-Olpoc, R. (2023). Community engagement experiences of social entrepreneurs in rural communities: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *International Perspectives in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1027/2157-3891/a000071>

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# Community Engagement Experiences of Social Entrepreneurs in Rural Communities

## An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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**Abstract:** Using the lens of interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study explored the community engagement experiences of six social entrepreneurs working with rural communities in the Philippines and how they made meaning of their community engagement experience. Data were gathered through semistructured interviews. The findings illustrate how engaging with rural communities through social entrepreneurship is a way for the entrepreneurs to help communities uplift their economic condition and to achieve other social goals such as improvement of the community's quality of life and environmental sustainability. Social entrepreneurship was also a way to help empower communities as well as build their capabilities, shape positive values through culture building, and nurture relationships. Implications of the study to social enterprise research and policy, community engagement programs, and leader development are discussed.

**Keywords:** social enterprise, community engagement, rural community, entrepreneur, Philippines

**Impact and Implications:** The importance of addressing poverty and hunger as well as of collectively striving for “inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all” is emphasized in the 2015–2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The multiple bottom lines sought by social entrepreneurs align with these SDGs and are achieved by empowering and engaging economically challenged local communities. Using a psychological lens, this study gathered insights from the experiences of social entrepreneurs working with rural communities in the Philippines that may orient competency development of social entrepreneurs as well as efforts to enhance community engagement programs of organizations.

There has been increasing attention on social enterprises by practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers, given their unique thrust toward socioeconomic and environmental development through innovative and sustainable means (Doherty et al., 2014). An important avenue for social entrepreneurs to successfully achieve the multiple bottom lines of their organizations is by engaging and empowering local communities (van Twuijver et al., 2020). However, literature on social entrepreneurs appears to focus more on their internal traits, motivations, and characteristics (Boluk & Mottiar, 2014; Lambrechts et al., 2020). There seems to be a dearth of in-depth studies on their community engagement experiences.

Scientific literature has also highlighted the importance of contextualized studies in the field of social entrepreneurship

(Chandra & Kerlin, 2021). For example, research has shown how nuances in geographic spaces such as urban and rural areas may result in differences in how social enterprises are operated and managed (Smith & McColl, 2016). Similarly, regional and country-level factors have led to varying models, norms, and practices (Doherty et al., 2014).

Given these, this study contributes to literature by examining how social entrepreneurs describe their community engagement experiences with rural communities and how they make meaning of these experiences. It is situated in the Philippines, a developing country that is part of the Global South. Findings of the study can help provide insight on the roles of social entrepreneurs in rural social enterprises, as well as the challenges they face in working with local communities. This knowledge can then

be used by various stakeholders, such as policy-makers and institutions that develop social entrepreneurs, to better support them in their endeavors.

## Social Entrepreneurship and Community Engagement

Social enterprises are “organisations whose objectives are to achieve a social, societal and/or environmental impact, rather than maximizing profit for the owners or shareholders” (van Twuijver et al., 2020, pp. 121–122). Because of these multiple missions, they are described to be hybrid organizations that exhibit characteristics associated with private, public, and nonprofit institutions (Doherty et al., 2014). Social enterprises around the world have focused on a broad range of social challenges and have employed various means to create sustainable positive social impact (Doherty et al., 2014; Powell & Berry, 2021).

One approach to bridging societal gaps is by engaging with communities. In literature, a distinct but closely related concept to social entrepreneurship is community-based entrepreneurship, which highlights the importance of locality and “working with the community in solving problems and improving socio-economic value” (Pierre et al., 2013, p. 252). Community-based entrepreneurship improves livelihood by empowering individuals and teams within communities (Parwez, 2017). In this regard, social entrepreneurship can be viewed as a broader phenomenon, with community-based entrepreneurship being a more focused approach toward bringing about economic and social development (Pierre et al., 2013).

## Social Entrepreneurs

Social enterprises are led and managed by social entrepreneurs. Although social entrepreneurs share characteristics with traditional commercial entrepreneurs, they are differentiated by their being “driven primarily by a motivation to create value for society, not to capture value” (Santos, 2012, p. 341). Moreover, they create sustainable and innovative solutions within their local context through an empowering rather than controlling approach (Santos, 2012).

A number of studies on social entrepreneurs have focused on their internal traits and motivations. For example, social entrepreneurs are said to be motivated by empathy, personal life events, self-realization, social engagement, sense of meaning and satisfaction, and inner drive (Lambrechts et al., 2020). Some key characteristics of social entrepreneurs include education, global exposure, prior work experience, creativity, empathy, community roots, and contentment (Pangriya, 2019).

The *heroic* and *change-making* characteristics of social entrepreneurs as individuals have also been emphasized in literature (Boluk & Mottiar, 2014; Doherty et al., 2014). However, social enterprise work is not just about the entrepreneur. It involves building and managing relationships with various stakeholders, not least of which are the people in the partner communities (Caringal-Go & Canoy, 2019). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of studies that explore how social entrepreneurs make meaning of their experiences of relating to and working with a community.

## Rural Communities

Scientific literature has emphasized the importance of context in understanding experiences within the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship (Chandra & Kerlin, 2021). In this study, we focus on communities involved in agricultural and fishery activities in rural areas. There appear to be differences among social enterprises in rural and urban communities. According to Smith and McColl (2016), there is greater interdependence and need for collaboration among locals in rural social enterprises. Moreover, leaders in rural communities are mostly incomers; in urban communities, there is often a sufficient pool of experienced leaders although not necessarily from the community itself (Smith & McColl, 2016).

In line with their multiple goals, social enterprises have been found to support rural communities in a number of ways. These include various economic (e.g., provision of jobs), social (e.g., empowerment of marginalized groups, strengthened relationships among the community), and environmental (e.g., environmental awareness and care) impacts (van Twuijver et al., 2020).

Involvement of the local community is essential for social enterprises in rural communities to be successful (van Twuijver et al., 2020). It is also important for rural social entrepreneurs to take on the role of *embedded intermediaries*, wherein through their personal involvement in the community, they are able to connect the community to other organizations and larger networks (Richter, 2017, p. 180).

## Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

This study will utilize interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a means to understand the community engagement experiences of social entrepreneurs. IPA is a detailed examination of individuals' lived experiences and how they make meaning of these (Eatough & Smith, 2008). That is, it explores how individuals interpret and make sense of their personal world, instead of describing the phenomenon based on pre-established criteria or

systems (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It acknowledges that the life worlds of people are never directly accessible to researchers, and as such, all analyses and descriptions from the end of the researcher will always be interpretations (Willig, 2008). Thus, IPA is said to involve a double-hermeneutic approach, wherein individuals attempt to make meaning of their experiences and researchers attempt to interpret these and draw out insights, to make the analysis more comprehensive (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2011).

As an in-depth qualitative approach used in psychological research, IPA is idiographic as it aims to examine cases in detail and seek meaningful patterns of convergence and divergence (Smith, 2011). Therefore, rather than making general claims about a large population, it focuses on unpacking the complexity of meanings among a small number of closely defined cases (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA and phenomenology in general have been used, for example, to examine how nonprofit workers make meaning of work-life experiences (Dee, et al., 2020) and how leaders are developed in social enterprises (Ilac, 2018).

## Significance of the Study and Research Questions

The importance of context in studies on social entrepreneurship has been heavily emphasized in scientific literature (Chandra & Kerlin, 2021; Smith & McColl, 2016). In this study, we take into consideration two geographic contexts where gaps in literature have been noted and which may help frame social entrepreneurs' community engagement experiences. The first is the rural community context, which van Twuijver et al. (2020) noted to be a relatively young academic field that needs further exploration.

Second, it has been noted that majority of the research on social entrepreneurship is based on experiences in Europe and North America (Sengupta & Sahay, 2017). A more contextual approach in understanding the phenomenon is needed in the Global South since social enterprises represent hope in developing countries where many communities experience gaps in resources and opportunities (Hechanova-Alampay, 2009).

Given these, this study contributes to literature in the fields of work and community psychology by examining the experiences of social entrepreneurs who engage with rural communities in the Philippines. In particular, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are the lived experiences of social entrepreneurs who engage with rural communities?
2. How do they make meaning of their community engagement experiences?

## Method

The research is part of a bigger study conducted by a university-based center for social enterprises in the Philippines. A qualitative approach was used to examine the experiences of social entrepreneurs in rural communities. Semistructured interviews were conducted to gather data.

## Research Setting

Social enterprises in the Philippines, numbering around 164,473 in 2017 (CSO-SEED & PhilSEN, 2017), have taken on the social mission to help improve the lives of their partner communities, especially the poorest sectors. Poverty incidence among Filipinos has not improved much from 26.6% in 2006 to 23.7% in the first half of 2021 (PSA, 2015, 2021). The poorest sectors are the fishers and farmers, who live in rural areas (PSA, 2014).

## Participants

The six participants interviewed for the research were either founders or cofounders of new-generation social enterprises, which have engaged fishers or farmers for at least 5 years. New-generation social enterprises "make-up a rising segment of social enterprises that are established by young professionals or entrepreneurs with a social mission to help the poor" (Dacanay, 2020, p. 28). They are business enterprises that involve members of the community in core operations and in the process achieve their social mission to help uplift the quality of life in communities (Cuyegkeng et al., 2020).

The entrepreneurs shared during the interviews that they finished tertiary education while most fishers and farmers did not finish basic education. Furthermore, the participants indicated that they were all originally from cities, although some relocated to areas within/near the communities they served. Table 1 presents background information on the social entrepreneur and the enterprise. The identity of the respondents and their respective social enterprises has been withheld to maintain confidentiality. Transcripts of the interviews were coded, and only the research team knew the interviewees' identities. The video recordings and transcripts were stored in a password-protected shared drive that only the research team could access.

## Data Collection Instrument

A semistructured interview guide was used containing initial questions on the entrepreneurs' motivation for

**Table 1.** Background information on the social entrepreneurs and their social enterprises

Participant's code	Sex	Nature of social enterprise	Community development work of the social enterprise	Year established (all are still in operation)	Growth and expansion	Awards and grants received
SE-A	Female	Marketing dried seafood of community-based enterprises (CBEs) among fisherfolks to high-end markets	Helps establish CBEs among fisherfolk	2015	Increase in the number of community partners from one to four	International award
SE-B	Female	Marketing coffee of community-based enterprises (CBEs) among indigenous peoples (IPs) to high-end markets	Helps establish CBEs among IPs	2008	Expanded operations from several IP communities in Southern Philippines to additional IP communities in Northern Philippines	International award
SE-C	Female	Sales and distribution of organic agricultural produce of small-holder farmers to partner companies	Helps in the enterprise and product development of small-holder farmers	2007	Operating in over 200 communities in the Philippines; creation of product development laboratory; business to business partnerships	Local award
SE-D	Male	Marketing organic agricultural produce of small-holder farmers to local supermarkets	Educates farmers on organic farming	2013	Increased presence in broader supermarket network	Local award
SE-E	Male	Export of cacao beans to international market	Involve farmers in reforestation through cacao farms	2011	Increase in business to business partnerships	International award and grant
SE-F	Male	Manufacturing and marketing of herbal teas to high-end markets	Helps relocated urban poor in developing cooperatives	2011	Expanded operations from crops of lowland communities to crops of upland communities	International award and grant

setting-up the social enterprise, need the enterprise is trying to address, drivers for expanding/growing the social enterprise, challenges and how they faced the challenges, and their vision for the enterprise. The respondents were asked to share their personal experiences and perspectives on these topics. Following the suggestions of Smith and Osborn (2008) on conducting semistructured interviews in IPA, the initial questions served as anchor in conducting the conversations with the participants but were modified or adjusted based on the participants' responses. Probing questions were also asked to further understand important and interesting responses.

## Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining ethics approval from the university's ethics committee, the social entrepreneurs were identified and contacted through e-mails and/or social media through the extensive network of the university-based center for social enterprises. When they agreed to be interviewed, they were sent letters of invitation, the informed consent

form (ICF), and the interview questions. The schedule and venue were set, as agreed with the respondents.

The ICF was discussed and signed by the participant before the conduct of the interview. The form described the nature and purpose of the research, importance of participating in the study; consent to record the interview; and rights to confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal from the study at any time.

Two members of the research team conducted the 1- to 1.5-hour interviews with a research assistant who helped in the documentation and eventually transcription. Interviews were conducted in English and Filipino. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed on Microsoft Word, and reviewed by the researchers. The transcripts of the interviews were presented to the respondents for their affirmation.

## Data Analysis

The IPA method proposed by Smith and Osborn (2008) was followed in analyzing the data. The coding process

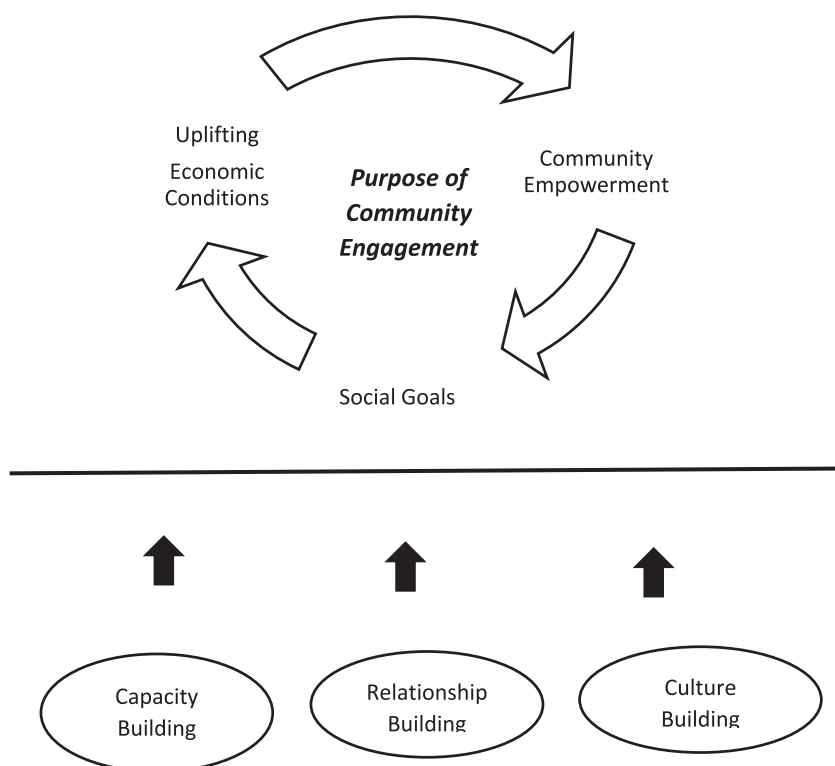
began by reading and re-reading one transcript and capturing exploratory notes from the participant's experience by three of the researchers. Following IPA's double-hermeneutic approach, the narratives were subjected to the researcher's interpretation of the data. Thus, the emerging themes consequently identified from the first case that was analyzed reflected a level of abstraction that connects the participant's experiential claims to psychological concepts. The researchers conducted an initial intercoding meeting to discuss the emerging themes from the first case and came up with a tentative table of themes before examining the remaining transcripts. Convergence and divergence in themes were emphasized through identifying terms, phrases, and ideas repeated across interviews. The final intercoding meeting then took place where the researchers compared the themes identified individually before consolidating the recurring themes. The relationships formed between themes were organized and structured in a cross-case analysis table to better visualize the relationships. The consolidated themes were discussed with the bigger research team until they collectively agreed on the coding, identified superordinate themes based on higher-level convergences across themes, and relevant psychological lenses that may be used to make sense of the data. A narrative account was then constructed by the researchers, using the participant's verbatim accounts of their experiences (Smith &

Osborn, 2008). The narrative accounts are found in the results section, with quotations translated to English. The original text can be made available upon request.

The researchers practiced reflexivity throughout the research process as one of them has been doing extensive work with social enterprises in the Philippines and is very much immersed in this sector. The other members of the team are teachers, consultants, and researchers in the fields of work psychology, social psychology, leadership, and/or organization development that have done work with social enterprises at some point in their careers. These experiences and backgrounds may have influenced the examination of the data.

## Results

Six superordinate themes that captured the social entrepreneurs' experiences of engaging with rural communities emerged from the analysis. Each of the themes describes the actions/circumstances reflective of community engagement as well as the deeper purpose and meaning of these behaviors and experiences from the interpretation of the participants and the researchers. As seen in Figure 1, community engagement for the social entrepreneurs means partnering to uplift the economic conditions of



**Figure 1.** Meanings and experiences of engaging with rural communities among Filipino social entrepreneurs.

community members, achieving other social goals, and empowering the community. These are achieved through various efforts at capacity building, culture building, and relationship building. The succeeding sections describe each of these themes in detail.

## Upliftment of Economic Conditions

Most of the social entrepreneurs described their community engagement as a way to uplift economic conditions and address poverty by increasing family income. According to SE-F, “you deepen the impact on your community by increasing the income...it’s part of...how our current business model addresses poverty alleviation.” Generating income was done by determining economic activities suitable to the community, providing sustainable livelihood, and enabling women’s productivity.

### Economic Activities Suitable to the Community

The social entrepreneurs endeavored to develop businesses that are suitable to the current economic activities and resources of the community. SE-A’s enterprise was conceptualized while their team was conducting recovery efforts after Typhoon Haiyan. They were providing materials for building fishing boats in the coastal communities but realized that the problem was beyond that. She narrated how they went out to the sea with the fishermen and observed that the latter only earns “Php 100 (around \$2) after selling their catch.” She added that “we wanted to do more than just giving boats...that pushed us to really think of something that will help increase their income...” while maximizing the skills of the men and women in the community.

SE-F on the other hand used to work with a government agency that facilitates transfer of urban poor community dwellers to rural communities. He realized that there were no available jobs in the rural areas. According to SE-F:

The reason why we work on climate-smart agriculture is because [of] economic reasons...resettlement areas are relocation for urban poor...we want to see what immediate cash cow can they develop and it just pointed us to crops acting like weeds- lemongrass, *pandan*...we definitely wanted a crop that doesn’t require chemical inputs (and) too much management because...these are urban poor who...doesn’t really have the agricultural skills.

Finding suitable economic activities allowed the entrepreneurs to maximize available resources in the community and work with the current capabilities of its residents. In a way, this made the venture doable and

easier to navigate for them and their partners in the community.

### Providing Sustainable Livelihood

It was important for the entrepreneurs to not just provide jobs but to develop sustainable livelihood in the community. SE-C noted that most of the parents in the community have *odd jobs* as either contractual workers or *labandera* (washes clothes for other households) that were *not stable* and do not provide a *steady stream of income*. Due to this, entrepreneurs like SE-E embarked on initiatives “to generate livelihood in the rural areas,” so farmers can “have income to sustain themselves and their future generations, but at the same time, do it in a way that’s environmentally sustainable.” As can be gleaned from this quote from SE-E, sustainability takes on two perspectives in the community engagement of entrepreneurs. First is sustainability in terms of having a stable source of income for community members. The other is ensuring that the environment is taken care of in the economic activities of the enterprise.

### Enabling Women’s Productivity

The entrepreneurs saw the importance of engaging the women because they “are limited in terms of their mobility. [They] can’t go to [the city]. [They] have to take care of [their] children. The husband will get jealous...when they don’t have jobs and the women have...we felt that kind of gender dynamics” (SE-F). Especially with communities relocated from urban areas, it is the women and children who are left behind when the men go back to the city to find jobs. They are the untapped human resources that social entrepreneurs can maximize. Aside from this, some of the entrepreneurs noted the importance of economically empowering the women because of its impact on the family. SE-F mentioned that “if we give them money – to women and mothers, it will somehow improve children’s schooling.” Seeing this, the social entrepreneurs ensured that the wives were *included* (e.g., SE-A mentioned that in their partner fishing communities, when the husbands catch fish, the wives process the catch). The women were also given access to decent employment and taught financial literacy. In one case, the social enterprise even ended up being *women-run*.

## A Means to Achieve Other Social Goals

As can be gleaned from the previous section, the social entrepreneurs’ engagement with the rural communities goes beyond economics. Other social goals such as improvement in the family’s quality of life and environmental



sustainability were common threads in the narratives of the entrepreneurs.

### Improvement in the Family's Quality of Life

The Filipino's belief in attaining a good life for oneself and family through education were reflected in the community programs initiated by the entrepreneurs. SE-F earlier mentioned how women's economic empowerment leads to improved education for their children. SE-C, on the other hand, shared that they "came up with this savings program... where part of their income would be directed to the scholarship program. In a way, it is really just helping them save up for their kids' education." Similarly, SE-A expressed that "we see that people are improving their... quality of life, [when] they can send their children to school already without having to always borrow money."

### Environmental Sustainability

SE-B emphasized how social entrepreneurs must not just *treat the people right* but also *treat their environment right*. Entrepreneurs that work with farmers emphasized that they "don't want to deal with pesticide-driven or chemical-driven farm" (SE-F) and prefer "creating (a) system wherein farmers are earning well... they're growing their crops in a sustainable way" (SE-E). *Marine conservation* was highly observed in SE-A's enterprise, and they engaged with environmental organizations and marine scientists to ensure this and to enable *behavior change* in the fishing communities.

## Community Empowerment

It was evident in the narratives of the entrepreneurs that one of their goals as they engage with community members is to enable them to manage their own enterprise while maintaining the partnership with the social entrepreneur.

### Community Will Manage Their Own Enterprise

The desire to enable communities to manage their own enterprise was captured in the following quote from SE-B, "success would mean... we have developed a leader in that community that could take care and continue on the business." This was in a way, already realized in SE-A's organization:

In early 2018, that's when we started to build the community enterprise wherein the whole production was transferred to the community... We equipped them – built a structure, so they have their own board of directors... their own management team – and then capacitated them on business development skills, and

then also on standards... on the kind products that you want to sell... So, the model now is that [the enterprise] doesn't do any production anymore. The community enterprise does everything from buying the fish, to deboning, cleaning, to packing, until delivery. So, what [the enterprise] does now is coordinate... We give purchase order (PO) to the manager, "Okay for the month of August... this is our PO. So, 1,000 packs of dried fish, 1,500 packs of dried squid," and they are the ones who will produce.

### Continued Partnership with the Social Enterprise

The experience shared by SE-A shows how the entrepreneurs wish to have continued partnership with the community even if the latter is already independently managing their enterprise. In this set-up, the entrepreneur serves as conduit between the community and the market. SE-A described her eventual role as a *middleman* that handles *marketing and distribution*. It is from these activities in the value chain where the social enterprise will continue generating income while ensuring that the community enterprise will sustain operations. Some entrepreneurs emphasized that the community can also partner with other organizations in distributing their goods. SE-B shared that:

In our web page... when we publish [the community enterprise], traders from Manila will course through us... Eventually, they will buy directly from the community enterprise, and that is okay with me as long as we have a secure amount of coffee reserved for us.

The experiences of the social entrepreneurs reflected how sustaining partnerships with communities and enabling communities to manage their own enterprise required capability building, culture building, and nurturing positive relationships. Each of these integral aspects of the social entrepreneurs' community engagement is described below.

## Capability Building

Supporting the development of community enterprises in impoverished rural communities entailed numerous skill-building programs and efforts to improve financial literacy as well as provision and facilitation of access to resources.

### Skill-Building and Financial Literacy

All the entrepreneurs ensured that they provided adequate opportunities for community members to develop the skills needed to engage in the business. SE-D noted that they

“empower farmers to become agri-entrepreneurs.” They have a *farm academy* where farmers are given “the tools, the knowledge, the playing field to hone their skills.” Similarly, SE-E mentioned engaging in “capacity building – how to plant properly... farm maintenance and pest and disease maintenance... and post-harvest.”

SE-F noted that for the enterprise to have a positive impact on the rural community, the *intervention* should go beyond ensuring *income* and include *financial literacy*. This is critical since as SE-D has pointed out “it doesn’t mean that they earn more means their lives are better. They could actually be buying alcohol or buying cigarettes” as what was experienced by SE-B in one of their communities. The need to enhance community members’ capacity to manage finances likewise prompted SEs-A, B, and C to establish savings programs.

### Provision and Facilitation of Access to Resources

Five of the six entrepreneurs shared how their engagement with the community also meant facilitating access to resources from national government agencies (SEs-B and E), local government units (SEs-A, B and C), nongovernment organizations (SEs-A, E and C), experts (SEs-C and E), and donors (SEs-A and B). An example was when SE-B worked with the Department of Trade and Industry and discovered that they give assistance to community enterprises. They assisted community members in writing proposals and in listing “things that they needed to produce good quality coffee.” Aside from this, the entrepreneurs also shared resources to enable access to “water and electricity” (SE-A), “marketing and branding” (SE-C), as well as “farm support” (SE-E). Some of the entrepreneurs took care of research and product development to make sure that what the communities will produce are not just up to market standards but aligns with the SEs mission for environmental sustainability. In some instances, the SEs noted how product development was a process experienced with the community. As shared by SE-B, “We were... doing the research and then... we did an experiential thing in terms of processing coffee with the farmers... learning with them.”

## Culture Building

Developing capabilities was complemented by culture building. This was experienced through helping community members develop positive values and by institutionalizing norms and standards that will enable attainment of shared goals.

### Helping Communities Develop Positive Values

SE-F emphasized the importance of alignment between the values of the entrepreneur and the community – “Values

really matter... Do the communities share these values of development with you?” He mentioned that their community partners expressed the desire to “continuously expand... so we can also support fellow mothers and women in this community and have the livelihood that we have” which is critical for the development of the community enterprise. For SE-C, community engagement means advocating for:

a life of dignity... the people in the mountains, in the communities... They won’t have to “bow down” to corporations or people who would discount over their land... [They can] live the life that they want... [and] won’t have to look down upon themselves just because they don’t have enough.

This seems to be why the social entrepreneurs were also set on ensuring that they are developing an entrepreneurial mindset among community members and not a dole-out mentality. This is described by SE-E:

We provide the seedlings, but it’s definitely not a “give”... like a hand-me-down type of relationship... that’s what we’ve always stressed with our farming communities... we’d like to treat you guys as business-to-business. I mean what better respect can you give a community than saying that we’re equals.

### Developing Norms and Standards

Imbibing an entrepreneurial mindset sometimes entailed unlearning old practices and learning new ways of doing things to meet market standards. This was evident in the following quote from SE-A on product preparation:

We brought them to Manila... the premium stores where we distribute, then they [underwent] a training with some of our volunteer chef so they will understand the quality that we are asking because initially we had a problem with culture... the norms that they have.

SE-D also noted how community members need to be “market-driven... to understand what the market needs, what the market wants, and then from there have the skill to... grow [the products].”

## Relationship Building

Developing the needed capabilities, values, norms, and standards were important but not easy. What seems to have facilitated the changes was the nature of the relationship that the social entrepreneurs have with community members – one that is built on trust as well as grounded and responsive to the needs of the community.

## Trust Building

“What’s more important is the people, the farmers. Organizing is much harder than the technology, but to gain their trust, for them to risk, farmers don’t have the capacity to risk. It’s a day-to-day existence.” This quote from SE-D that highlighted the importance of building trust among community members was echoed by SE-F:

For all these people to stick in the social enterprise... for them to trust me... that, to be honest, this is the only thing I can bring into the table but I have a dream and we will build it together... we’ll come up with your own business, we’ll come up with your enterprise.

## Grounded and Responsive

For trust to be built and for the relationship to be nurtured, the entrepreneurs had to be grounded on what is happening in the community and respond accordingly. SE-B narrated how they would “write something for this community to appeal to the government... that this big corporation [was] poisoning them because of the banana plantation and using [aerial] spray.” The entrepreneurs also noted how they adjusted their ways of engaging with various communities depending on their context. As narrated by SE-C:

It is really varied per community... There are some communities that only need help in marketing because they are fairly established in terms of production. Some communities need help from scratch... It is really dynamic and we really have to adjust every time... that’s a challenge.

These experiences of the entrepreneurs showed how community engagement was not one-size-fits-all. What helped them in navigating through the diversity were their efforts to spend time in the community: “We are very engaged with our farmers, we talk to them, we visit them in the community, [and share] stories” (SE-D).

## Discussion

This study looked at the lived experience of social entrepreneurs engaging with rural communities and how they made meaning of their community engagement experience. Our participants find that engaging with rural communities through social entrepreneurship is a way for them to not only help communities uplift their economic condition but also to achieve other social goals such as environmental sustainability and improvement of the community’s quality of life. Social entrepreneurship, for them, is also a means to help

empower communities, build and strengthen their capabilities, shape positive values, and enhance their relationships.

The findings of our study show that some social entrepreneurs in the Global South emphasize the value of toiling with the community to help them reduce poverty and address human problems (Pierre et al., 2013). Social and economic development help empower communities (Parwez, 2017), including women, in becoming self-sufficient and capable of managing their own enterprises. This is precisely what social entrepreneurship is all about – creating social values (Abu-Saifan, 2012) and effecting significant social changes (Saebi et al., 2019).

What we find notable about the experience of our participants is their unique relationship with the communities that they engage with. For example, their partnership continues even when the communities are already in charge of their own enterprise. The social entrepreneurs still serve, for instance, as *middle persons* or help with goods distribution. It is as if the social entrepreneurs are guardian angels, ensuring that the community enterprise is able to sustain its operations. Linked to this is their developing a meaningful relationship together that is built on trust and responsive to and grounded on the needs of the community. They do not only build an enterprise together but they also *grow* together. We believe that this is distinct, considering the Philippines’ collectivistic and paternalistic culture. This agrees with the findings of Caringal-Go and Canoy (2019) that social enterprise in the Philippine context involves building and managing relationships with the people that social entrepreneurs’ partner with.

We also want to highlight the importance that the social entrepreneurs in our study place on empowering women. They put a premium on enabling and capacitating women in their partner communities to become productive as well as educating them on how to handle their finances. The women in the communities get to earn because they are productive, and with their earnings, they now have their own resources, can exercise their choice (e.g., sending their children to school), and can be economic partners to their husbands. According to Kabeer (2005), empowerment is manifested in one’s resources, achievement (e.g., being able to earn one’s own living), as well as agency or the ability to make and act on one’s own choice. Empowering women accomplishes two important goals: (a) It ensures that women benefit at all levels (individual, household, and community), and (b) It promotes long-term development (Bayeh, 2016). The social entrepreneurs in our study found empowering women in their partner communities a meaningful experience.

The findings of the study point to social entrepreneurship as (a) targeting structural or second-order change in which actions are directed toward changing power relationships and shared goals instead of focusing on individual

adjustments (Linney, 1990) and (b) attaching importance to capability building, citizen participation, empowerment, collaboration, and interdependence that bind communities and social entrepreneurs together. Empowering communities to control their own lives and exercise power through community participation enable members to be meaningfully involved in collective decision-making (Prilleltensky, 2001). These contribute to the promotion of better quality of life and the advancement of socially just changes. For instance, second-order change addresses social justice and allows for changes in relationships, advancing the growth of the members of the community (Kloos et al., 2012). The findings of the study reflect the hybrid nature of social entrepreneurship – i.e., the emphasis on economic growth and achievement of social goals. Thus, insights from this research on community engagement among social entrepreneurs may contribute knowledge to the fields of work psychology and community psychology.

Literature on social entrepreneurship points to studies that investigate on characteristics of entrepreneurship (Abu-Saifan, 2012), motivations (Lambrechts, et al., 2020) as well as key attributes of social entrepreneurs (Pangriya, 2019), among others. Our use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, however, allowed us to go more in-depth by digging into the experience of social entrepreneurs working together with communities in the rural areas. This provided us not only with insights into their experience but also into how they make sense of this experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis, thus, proves to be a potentially powerful tool in imparting us with a more extensive understanding of the subjective experience of social entrepreneurs, in allowing researchers to generate their own interpretation and advance our theoretical understanding of social entrepreneurship, and in contributing to the formulation of future policies related to social entrepreneurship.

## Implications

Our study looked at the lived experience of social entrepreneurs engaging with rural communities and how they make meaning of their experience. Future studies may explore the perspective of community members to have a more holistic view of the community engagement experience. Subsequent studies may also investigate the conversations of social entrepreneurs and the community members and look at their shared understanding of social entrepreneurship or how they dynamically position themselves and each other in the course of their exchanges.

The findings of the study point to social entrepreneurship as a space where communities and entrepreneurs grow together as partners as they move toward creating social values and effecting relevant social changes. This unique

relationship can be nurtured so that as a team, both the social entrepreneurs and the communities can work together more smoothly and effectively. The results may likewise orient strategies and ways in which social entrepreneurs cascade a shared vision with their community partners that catapults the development and progress of the enterprise. Social entrepreneurs may further help broaden the network of the communities by linking them to agencies or organizations with which they can directly collaborate in the future.

The results can also be used to back-up proposed government policies and leadership development programs of academic institutions that can provide sustainable and long-term support to potential entrepreneurs to acquire the needed skills and experience to run an effective and efficient social enterprise in rural communities. Aside from providing avenues for capacity building, the government may design policies that promote the creation and growth of social enterprises, support a strong financial marketplace for them, and provide funding for research endeavors on social entrepreneurship (OECD/European Commission, 2013).

Our results demonstrate how the social enterprises in the study use business principles to help communities improve their economic situation and their quality of life, shape positive values, and foster relationships. The findings may support the development of social enterprises as vehicles toward the fulfillment of collective development goals that promote empowerment and address poverty.

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## History

Received April 20, 2022


Revision received January 15, 2023

Accepted January 25, 2023


Published online April 19, 2023

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