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The lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they seek
to scale their business within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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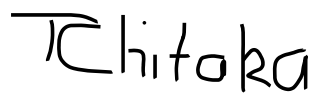
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Approval Form

The undersigned certify that they have read and recommended to the Global E4Impact Management Program and the Catholic University of Zimbabwe, for acceptance a dissertation entitled, "The lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they seek to scale their business within the entrepreneurial ecosystem", submitted by Ruvarashe Winnet Miti, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Global E4Impact MBA Programme.

Dr. Tatenda Chitaka


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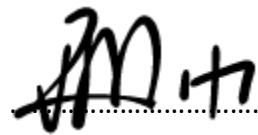
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Abstract

Social enterprises that are run by the youth have become vital in tackling social and economic issues in Zimbabwe. However, these enterprises even with increasing prevalence are confronted with major challenges of scaling their operations in a sustainable manner. This paper presents the lived experiences of young social entrepreneurs regarding their challenges, opportunities, and strategies in the context of scaling in Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem. Based on a qualitative phenomenological design, the in-depth interviews were carried out with fifteen youth-based social enterprises that are located in cities and peri-urban regions. The results indicate that scaling is an emotionally challenging and unpredictable process that is predetermined by financial limitations, legitimacy issues, and irregular support of the ecosystems. However, young entrepreneurs show resilience, creativity, and adaptive behavior to overcome these problems, by using informal networks and hybrid business models. The research will help in the existing literature on social entrepreneurship by showcasing on-the-job lessons, shaping policy making, and giving an empirical advice to aid youth-led businesses in emerging markets.

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I would like to say the sincerest thank you to everyone who helped to make this research a successful one. To start with, I would like to state that I am thankful to the extent of the people who responded to the study, who are young entrepreneurs. Their openness, frankness, as well as openness to share their lived experiences formed the basis on which this research is founded. This study would not be what it is today without the contributions that they bring to it.

My academic supervisor, Dr. Tatenda Chitaka, has played a significant role in this research process through their assistance, guidance, helpful feedback, and encouragement, to which I am deeply grateful. Their experience in the field of social entrepreneurship and uncountable encouragement have contributed to the development of the research into a logical and valuable study.

My family and friends also deserve special mention as they helped me with the driving force to continue as their patience, moral support, and understanding have helped me through the worst periods. I also recognize the assistance that I received with my colleagues and the staff of the institutions that helped me to get access to participants.

Lastly, I also appreciate the Catholic University of Zimbabwe to be my source of the academic materials, ethical supervision and to have the right environment to undertake this research. Without the joint effort of all these individuals and organizations, this research would not have been actualized.

Dedication

The dissertation is dedicated to the youth of Zimbabwe whose entrepreneurial spirit, creativity and resilience provides hope and social change in the face of great odds. It is also committed to the new social entrepreneurs who want to make significant changes to their communities as they go through the intricate economic and social landscapes.

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List of Acronyms

- SME: Small and Medium Enterprises
- NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
- ILO: International Labor Organization
- UNDP: United Nations Development Program
- P: Participant (used in participant coding)
- CBD: Central Business District

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Across the world, youth-led social enterprises have increasingly gained recognition as important actors in addressing persistent social and economic challenges. These enterprises blend entrepreneurial practices with a strong commitment to social goals, aiming to generate lasting social value while remaining financially viable (Dees, 1998; Mair & Marti, 2006).

In settings marked by limited formal employment opportunities and widening social inequalities, youth-led social enterprises play an especially important role. They promote innovation, foster inclusion, and offer locally grounded solutions to community challenges (Nicholls, 2010). Within Sub-Saharan Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, the relevance of youth-led social enterprises is closely tied to high levels of youth unemployment, ongoing economic instability, and the limited capacity of the state to adequately meet social needs (Chigora & Chisi, 2017; World Bank, 2023).

Young people make up a large proportion of Zimbabwe's population, and for many, entrepreneurship has become a critical means of livelihood. Beyond generating income, a growing number of young Zimbabweans are establishing enterprises that directly respond to pressing community concerns, including poverty, food insecurity, environmental degradation, inadequate access to education, and gaps in social services (Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

Despite their increasing visibility and potential contribution to national development, many youth-led social enterprises struggle to move beyond small-scale or informal operations. Scaling a social enterprise involves expanding its impact, market reach, and organizational capacity. This process is influenced by a range of interconnected factors such as access to finance, institutional support, policy environments, and social networks (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009). These factors operate within an entrepreneurial ecosystem that can either support or constrain enterprise growth (Isenberg, 2011).

Although existing studies have examined entrepreneurship and youth unemployment in Zimbabwe, limited empirical work has explored how youth social entrepreneurs themselves experience the process of scaling within this ecosystem. The perspectives and lived realities of young people leading social enterprises remain largely absent from both academic and policy debates. To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach, which seeks

to understand social phenomena through the meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

By centering the lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe, this study aims to generate deeper insight into the challenges and opportunities they encounter as they attempt to scale their ventures. This chapter therefore introduces the study and lays the foundation for examining the background, problem statement, research questions, objectives, significance, and methodological approach guiding the research.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite growing interest in youth-led social entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe and the introduction of various training and support initiatives, a clear gap persists between the establishment of social enterprises and their ability to scale in a sustainable manner. Many youth-led social enterprises remain small, informal, and fragile, which limits their potential to create employment and achieve meaningful social impact.

Although factors such as limited access to finance, restrictive policy environments, skills gaps, and weak ecosystem support are frequently highlighted, there is insufficient empirical understanding of how youth social entrepreneurs themselves experience these challenges and navigate the scaling process within Zimbabwe's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Much of the existing research relies on quantitative methods, which tend to overlook the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings that shape entrepreneurial decision-making (Ndofirepi, 2019).

This lack of experiential insight constrains the effectiveness of policies and support interventions designed to promote the growth of youth-led social enterprises. There is therefore a need for an in-depth, phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of youth social entrepreneurs as they attempt to scale their enterprises in Zimbabwe.

1.3 Background to the Study

Social entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as an alternative development approach that addresses social problems through entrepreneurial means. Unlike traditional profit-oriented

enterprises, social enterprises place social value creation at the center of their mission while sustaining their activities through market-based strategies (Dees, 1998; Mair & Marti, 2006). This hybrid model enables social enterprises to respond creatively to social challenges that are often insufficiently addressed by governments or the private sector, particularly in developing economies (Nicholls, 2010).

The rising participation of youth in social entrepreneurship reflects broader global and regional demographic and economic trends. In Sub-Saharan Africa, young people constitute a significant share of the population but face disproportionately high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and economic exclusion (International Labour Organization, 2022). In response, youth-led social enterprises have emerged as important platforms through which young people generate livelihoods while contributing to community development and social change (Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, the growth of youth-led social enterprises must be understood against a backdrop of prolonged economic instability and structural challenges. Over the past two decades, economic decline, episodes of hyperinflation, currency instability, and reduced industrial activity have significantly eroded formal employment opportunities, particularly for young graduates and school leavers (ZIMSTAT, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Consequently, entrepreneurship has increasingly become a necessity-driven option rather than a purely opportunity-driven choice. Within this context, social entrepreneurship has gained momentum as young people seek to combine income generation with solutions to pressing social issues such as poverty, food insecurity, waste management, gaps in health services, and limited access to quality education (Chigora & Chisi, 2017).

Observations from youth development programs and interactions with young entrepreneurs suggest that many young Zimbabweans display strong motivation, creativity, and commitment to social impact. However, their enterprises often remain small, informal, and vulnerable. While initial start-up support may be available through grants, competitions, or donor-funded programs, sustaining and scaling these initiatives over time remains a significant challenge. Scaling requires increased organizational capacity, broader reach, and stronger internal systems, all of which depend on access to resources, skills, and supportive institutions (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem plays a crucial role in shaping these scaling processes. This ecosystem consists of interconnected actors and structures, including government agencies, policy frameworks, financial institutions, incubators, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and informal networks that collectively influence entrepreneurial activity (Isenberg, 2011). In Zimbabwe, although youth empowerment policies and entrepreneurship support initiatives exist, their effectiveness in enabling the growth of youth-led social enterprises remains inconsistent. Research indicates that bureaucratic hurdles, limited access to affordable finance, weak mentorship structures, and policy inconsistency often undermine the growth potential of youth enterprises (Fatoki, 2014; Moyo & Kaseke, 2021).

Moreover, much of the existing research on entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe has focused broadly on small and medium enterprises, with limited attention given to the specific experiences of youth-led social enterprises. Where youth entrepreneurship is examined, quantitative approaches tend to dominate, emphasizing measurable outcomes such as employment creation or income levels while neglecting the subjective experiences that shape entrepreneurial behavior (Creswell, 2013). As a result, there is limited understanding of how youth social entrepreneurs interpret and navigate challenges and opportunities within the ecosystem as they seek to scale their enterprises.

This study is therefore grounded in the need to move beyond surface-level analysis of entrepreneurship and to capture the lived experiences of youth led social enterprises in Zimbabwe. Through a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to understand how young social entrepreneurs experience scaling, how they make sense of ecosystem dynamics, and how these experiences shape their decision-making and growth trajectories (van Manen, 2016).

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Primary Objective

The primary objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe and to understand the challenges and opportunities they encounter when scaling their enterprises within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Secondary Objectives

The secondary objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the lived experiences of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they attempt to scale their enterprises.
2. Identify the key challenges faced by youth-led social enterprises in their efforts to scale their operations.
3. Explore the opportunities within the Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem that support the scaling of youth-led social enterprises.
4. Analyze how institutional, policy, financial, and social ecosystem dynamics influence the scaling experiences of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe.

1.5 Research Questions

This study explores the lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe and examines how ecosystem dynamics influence their efforts to scale. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they attempt to scale their enterprises?
2. What challenges do youth-led social enterprises encounter during the scaling process?
3. What opportunities within the Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem support the scaling of youth-led social enterprises?
4. How do institutional, policy, financial, and social ecosystem factors shape the scaling experiences of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe?

1.6 Purpose/Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of youth led social enterprises in Zimbabwe, with particular attention to the challenges and opportunities they encounter while attempting to scale their enterprises within the existing entrepreneurial ecosystem. By examining these experiences, the study seeks to gain insight into how youth social entrepreneurs perceive, interpret, and navigate ecosystem dynamics that influence enterprise growth and sustainability (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

The study aims to move beyond outcome-focused analyses of youth entrepreneurship and instead capture the meanings, perceptions, and realities that shape scaling processes for youth-led social enterprises. Such insights are essential for identifying context-specific factors that may not be adequately addressed through quantitative or policy-oriented studies (Nicholls, 2010; Zahra et al., 2009).

Ultimately, the study seeks to generate knowledge that can inform more responsive policies, support mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives tailored to the needs of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe, while contributing to scholarly debates on social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is significant at academic, policy, and practical levels. From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on social entrepreneurship by providing context-specific insights into youth-led social enterprises in a developing economy. While much of the existing literature focuses broadly on entrepreneurship or youth unemployment, limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises, particularly within the Zimbabwean context. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study enriches existing scholarship by capturing the meanings, perceptions, and interpretations that shape the scaling experiences of youth social entrepreneurs (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

From a policy perspective, the study offers empirically grounded insights that may inform the design and implementation of youth entrepreneurship and social enterprise support initiatives. By highlighting the real challenges and opportunities experienced by youth social entrepreneurs, the findings can assist policymakers in developing more responsive, inclusive, and context-sensitive

policies that align more closely with lived realities rather than abstract assumptions (Isenberg, 2011; Nicholls, 2010). This is particularly relevant in Zimbabwe, where youth empowerment is a stated national priority, yet many initiatives struggle to translate into sustainable outcomes.

At a practical level, the study may benefit development practitioners, non-governmental organizations, incubators, and financial institutions involved in supporting youth-led social enterprises. By identifying ecosystem factors that enable or constrain scaling, the research can help refine support mechanisms such as mentorship programs, financing models, capacity-building initiatives, and market access strategies (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009). In addition, the study may serve as a reflective resource for aspiring and existing youth social entrepreneurs by offering insights into common challenges and strategies for navigating the scaling process.

Overall, the study seeks to make a modest yet meaningful contribution to societal development by enhancing understanding of how youth-led social enterprises can be supported to scale and maximize their social impact. By foregrounding youth voices, the research aligns with broader development goals related to youth empowerment, inclusive growth, and sustainable development, while contributing to scholarly discourse on social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

1.8 Assumptions of the Study

This study is guided by several underlying assumptions that inform its design and implementation. First, it is assumed that youth-led social enterprises exist across various sectors in Zimbabwe and that young people are actively engaged in addressing social challenges through entrepreneurial initiatives. This assumption is supported by existing literature that highlights the increasing involvement of youth in social entrepreneurship within developing economies (Nicholls, 2010; Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

Second, the study assumes that youth leading social enterprises are capable of reflecting on and articulating their lived experiences related to scaling their enterprises. Phenomenological research is grounded in the belief that individuals are well positioned to describe and interpret their own experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

Third, it is assumed that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Zimbabwe including policies, institutions, financial systems, and social networks plays a significant role in shaping the scaling experiences of youth-led social enterprises. This assumption aligns with ecosystem theory, which emphasizes that entrepreneurial outcomes are influenced by interactions among multiple contextual factors rather than individual effort alone (Isenberg, 2011).

Finally, the study assumes that participants will provide honest, authentic, and reflective accounts of their experiences. While subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research, these narratives are expected to offer valuable insights into the realities of scaling youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe (Creswell, 2013).

1.9 Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited in terms of scope, participants, and geographic coverage to ensure focus and feasibility. First, the study concentrates specifically on youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe. Youth are defined in accordance with national policy as individuals aged between 18 and 35 years (ZIMSTAT, 2022). Enterprises led by individuals outside this age range or those without an explicit social mission are excluded to maintain alignment with the study's objectives.

Second, the study focuses primarily on scaling experiences rather than the initial start-up or ideation phase of social enterprises. Scaling is understood as the process through which social enterprises expand their operations, increase their reach or impact, and strengthen organizational capacity to serve broader communities (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009). This delimitation allows for a more targeted examination of growth-related challenges and opportunities.

Third, the study is geographically limited to selected urban and peri-urban areas of Zimbabwe (Norton, Mbare, Harare CBD, Msasa), where youth-led social enterprises are more visible and accessible. While the findings may offer insights relevant to other contexts, the study does not attempt to provide national coverage, acknowledging practical and logistical constraints. Participant selection will be purposive, focusing on individuals with demonstrable experience in leading and scaling social enterprises.

By clearly defining these boundaries, the study maintains a manageable scope while ensuring relevance to the research questions and objectives. These delimitations also enable a deeper exploration of lived experiences within the Zimbabwean context, generating rich qualitative insights that may inform policy, practice, and future research (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

1.10 Limitations of the Study

While the study seeks to provide in-depth insights into the lived experiences of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe, several limitations are acknowledged. First, as a qualitative study, the findings may not be generalizable to all youth-led social enterprises in the country. The focus on selected urban and peri-urban areas and purposively sampled participants means that the experiences captured are context-specific and may differ in other settings, particularly rural areas (Creswell, 2013).

Second, the study relies on self-reported data collected through interviews and discussions. Although participants' narratives are central to understanding lived experiences, there is a possibility of subjectivity, recall bias, or selective reporting, which may affect the completeness or accuracy of the data (van Manen, 2016). To address this, strategies such as triangulation and reflective journaling will be employed.

Third, access to participants may be constrained by factors such as availability, time limitations, and willingness to participate, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. Despite efforts to ensure inclusivity, some sectors or experiences may be underrepresented.

Finally, external factors such as economic fluctuations or socio-political changes may influence both the operations of youth-led social enterprises and the research process itself. While these factors are beyond the researcher's control, acknowledging them allows for a more cautious and contextual interpretation of the findings.

1.11 Research Methodology and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of youth leading social enterprises in Zimbabwe. A qualitative

approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The phenomenological design is particularly suitable as it seeks to understand phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them directly (van Manen, 2016). In this study, the phenomenon of interest is the process of scaling youth-led social enterprises within the Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem. Through direct engagement with youth social entrepreneurs, the study aims to capture their perceptions, challenges, opportunities, and strategies for navigating ecosystem dynamics.

Data will be collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants who meet the criteria of leading social enterprises and actively engaging in scaling activities. This approach allows participants to share detailed and reflective accounts of their experiences, generating rich qualitative data.

Data analysis will follow thematic analysis procedures guided by phenomenological principles. This process involves identifying, coding, and interpreting themes and patterns that emerge from participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). The analysis seeks to capture the essence of participants' experiences while recognizing variations across individual accounts.

To enhance credibility and rigor, the study will employ strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and reflective journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These measures are intended to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings and ensure alignment with qualitative research standards.

1.12 Ethical Considerations

Research involving human participants requires careful attention to ethical and legal responsibilities, particularly when exploring personal experiences and challenges. This study recognizes the importance of respecting the rights, dignity, and privacy of all participants involved in youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe.

Key ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality, and the avoidance of harm. Participants will be fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and will voluntarily agree to participate, with the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confidentiality will be ensured through anonymization of participant identities and secure handling of data (van Manen, 2016).

The study will be conducted in a manner that minimizes the risk of physical, psychological, or social harm. Sensitive issues will be approached with care and empathy. The researcher will also maintain honesty and transparency in data collection, analysis, and reporting, ensuring that findings are presented accurately, without misrepresentation and for the purpose it was collected for (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In terms of legal considerations, the study will comply with relevant national and institutional research regulations. Any disclosures related to illegal activities will be handled carefully, balancing confidentiality with legal and ethical obligations.

1.13 Definition of Key Terms and Expressions

For clarity and consistency, key terms are defined as they are used in this study.

Youth refers to individuals aged between 18 and 35 years, in line with Zimbabwean policy definitions (ZIMSTAT, 2022).

A social enterprise is defined as an organization that applies commercial strategies to achieve social objectives, with profits primarily reinvested to advance social impact rather than distributed to owners or shareholders (Dees, 1998; Mair & Marti, 2006).

A youth-led social enterprise refers to a social enterprise in which leadership, decision-making, and management responsibilities are predominantly undertaken by young people within the defined age range.

Scaling is understood as the process through which a social enterprise expands its operations, increases its reach or impact, and strengthens organizational capacity to serve broader communities (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem refers to the interconnected network of actors, institutions, policies, financial systems, and social structures that influence entrepreneurial activity and enterprise growth within a given context (Isenberg, 2011).

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding lived experiences and the meanings individuals attach to those experiences (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

1.14 Organization of the Study

This dissertation has five chapters. In chapter 1, the research gives the introduction to the study consisting of the background, the problem statement, the objectives of the research, the research questions, the importance of the research and the limitations of the study. Chapter 2 is a literature review with focus on relevant literature and theoretical perspectives and the study. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, which entails the research design, population, sampling methods, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. Chapter 4 introduces and discusses the results of the research. The conclusion and recommendations are given in Chapter 5 as a summary of findings.

1.15 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study on the challenges and opportunities associated with scaling youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe. It situated the research within the broader context of social entrepreneurship, youth participation, and the Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem, highlighting the socio-economic conditions that shape youth entrepreneurship.

The chapter articulated the research problem, research questions, objectives, and purpose of the study, emphasizing the need to explore the lived experiences of youth social entrepreneurs. It also outlined the significance of the study, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations, providing clarity on the scope and boundaries of the research.

The research methodology and design were presented, with justification for the use of a phenomenological approach to capture rich experiential data. Ethical and legal considerations were addressed to ensure responsible and respectful engagement with participants. Key concepts were defined to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the study.

Overall, this chapter established a strong foundation for the research by clearly articulating the context, focus, and methodological orientation of the study. The next chapter will review relevant literature to further situate the research within existing theoretical and empirical work.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The chapter is a review of literature on the topic of the lived experiences of youth leading the social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they seek to scale their business within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. It is aimed at showing how the existing knowledge informs, contrasts, and exposes gaps, which require the current research.

The reviewed literature in this chapter has four functions. To begin with, it aids in determining gaps in knowledge especially on the experiential aspects of scaling youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe. Second, it will enable comparison of the results of past research and the expected outcomes of the present study. Third, it offers an understanding of methodological techniques that have been employed to examine social entrepreneurship and youth enterprise development. Lastly, it assists in the identification and defense of the conceptual and theoretical lenses that characterize the scaling experiences of social enterprises that are youth-led.

The chapter is structured according to the major themes that are in line with the study. It starts by first presenting the conceptual framework within which the research is going to be conducted and then present the theoretical perspectives, which will guide the research. Empirical review of relevant literature is then given where arguments, methodological approaches and findings of the previous studies are mentioned and gaps that require more research are highlighted. The chapter also ends with a conclusion which relates the literature reviewed and the next chapter.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework presents an analytic framework that structures the most important concepts of research and defines the assumed connections between them. However, a conceptual framework as opposed to a theoretical framework is based on several pieces of literature that help a researcher explain his or her understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The conceptual framework in this research acts as a roadmap to the research process of understanding how young-led social businesses in Zimbabwe undergo the scaling process in a dynamic and evolve in a complex entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The model is specifically constructed in such a way that it anticipates experience and not results. It acknowledges the fact that scaling is not a consistent or entirely technical process, but rather a

contextually constrained, individualized, and subjectively interpreted one. The conceptual framework thus combines four concepts which are linked and they include youth-led social enterprises, scaling, entrepreneurial ecosystem dynamics and the lived experiences. These notions are not considered as independent variables, but as complementary factors that individually and together define the scaling patterns of youth-led social enterprises.

The key concept of the framework is youth-led social enterprises. Such enterprises can be described as hybrid organizations that are primarily led and managed by the youths between the age group of 18 and 35 years whose main aim is to generate social value and ensure their sustainability is maintained by market-based operations (Dees, 1998; Mair and Marti, 2006). It is also important to focus on the youth leadership since factors associated with age affect access to resources, legitimacy, preference to make decisions, and risk exposure. The literature indicates that young entrepreneurs frequently fail to gain recognition from financial institutions, policymakers, and potential partners, which can negatively influence their confidence and strategic decision-making (Nicholls, 2010; Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

Social missions are also influencing the youth-led social enterprises. The social enterprises, unlike the traditional businesses, have to juggle social goals and economic sustainability at all times. This two-fold requirement creates further complexity when scaling since the decisions growth make are analyzed not only based on profitability but also according to social impact, ethical issues, and community responsibility. In the context, youth leadership and social mission are perceived as the interactive factors that manifest the process of scaling pursuit and experience.

Scaling is the second significant idea in the framework. Scaling in the study is conceptualized as being a multidimensional process that is non-linear and context-sensitive. Instead of the common approach of defining scaling as only an increase in revenue, scale, or geographical coverage, the framework takes a wider viewpoint that encompasses three dimensions that are interconnected and not independent of each other: scaling out, scaling up, and scaling deep (Bloom and Chatterji, 2009; Westley et al., 2014).

Scaling out means the increased coverage of beneficiaries to serve, new market, or models to be replicated by a social enterprise. Scaling up entails exercising influence over larger systems, policies, or institutional practices that come into play in regard to the social problem under consideration. Scaling deep is concerned with the quality of social impact, its sustainability and transformative nature in the current communities. In the case of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe, these aspects of scaling can be determined in an uneven or a concurrent manner

depending on the resources and ecosystem dynamics. The framework acknowledges the fact that the youth entrepreneurs can give more importance to one of the types of scaling as compared to others, depending on their realities and limitations.

The contextual environment that youth-led social enterprises operate and strive to scale exists in the form of entrepreneurial ecosystem. The formal types of ecosystem dynamics (policies of a government, regulatory structures, financial systems, educational institutions) and informal (cultural norms, social networks, mentorship, peer support) constitute part of the ecosystem processes (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). Macroeconomic volatility, inconsistency of policy, inability to access formal finance, and overdependence on informal economic structures further influence the ecosystem conditions in Zimbabwe (Moyo & Kaseke, 2021).

In the conceptual framework, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is not conceived as a background factor that is passive, but as an active and dynamic factor influencing the scaling experiences of entrepreneurs (Spigel, 2020; Wurth, Stam & Spigel, 2022). The components of ecosystems can act as either enablers or constraints depending on the extent to which youth entrepreneurs interact with them (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021; van der Westhuizen, 2023). For instance, access to incubators can provide technical support, networks, and legitimacy, while regulatory requirements may be perceived as restrictive or exclusionary (Spigel, 2020; Jurgelevičius *et al.*, 2025). The framework further assumes that ecosystem effects are mediated through entrepreneurs' interactions, perceptions, and engagement with ecosystem actors rather than operating in a purely deterministic manner (Wurth, Stam & Spigel, 2022; Stam & Van de Ven, 2021).

The key element of this mediation is the idea of lived experiences, which grounds the framework in the phenomenological orientation. The lived experiences are the meanings, feelings, perceptions, and interpretations that are created by youth social entrepreneurs in the process of scaling. The access to finance is not a conceptualized binary state of being available or not, but a subject of experience constructed through a series of denial, conditional grants or informal lending. Likewise, policy environments are lived in terms of experiencing bureaucracy, practice of enforcement and meeting with officials. Likewise, policy environments are lived in terms of experiencing bureaucracy, enforcement practices, and interactions with public officials (Spigel, 2020; Stam & Van de Ven, 2021; Autio *et al.*, 2022).

In the framework, lived experiences are highlighted as an intermediation between structural ecosystem factors and individual action. The youth entrepreneurs react to ecosystem signals and give significance to success and failure, and adjust their strategies. These meanings affect

motivation, resilience, risk-takingness, and commitment to scaling over the long term. In that way, the outcomes of scaling cannot be completely comprehended without studying the way in which young entrepreneurs perceive and interpret their surroundings (Autio et al., 2022; Spigel, 2020).

Notably, the conceptual framework recognizes the agency therein constraint. Young social entrepreneurs are not inert beings, though the environment of the ecosystem might limit their choices. The ways through which they employ agency are improvisation, dependence on informal networks, hybrid forms of financing, and business model adaptation. The framework can thus be used to explore the creative ways that youth entrepreneurs find to work around constraints and rearrange the given resources to seek scaling in ways that are contextually relevant (Wurth, Stam & Spigel, 2022)

In general terms, the conceptual framework offers a logical framework on how to analyze the dynamics of interaction among the social enterprise driven by young people, scaling processes, entrepreneurial ecosystem dynamics, and lived experiences. It helps in the formulation of the research questions, informs the design of the interview protocols as well as informs the interpretation of the findings. The framework focuses on experiences to be within an ecosystem in order to make sure that the study is able to capture the structural realities and the human side of the process of scaling youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe (Spigel, 2020).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The set of theoretical perspectives adopted in this study is well chosen and helps in offering an interpretation on the scaling experiences of the youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe. Unlike a conceptual framework, a theoretical framework is based on existing theories explaining the social phenomena and defining the way of data interpretation. The theoretical framework of this research is not experimental to test theory, but rather serve as a tool of sense-making to interpret the lived experiences of the youth social entrepreneurs in their field of operation.

Since the study is exploratory and phenomenological, there is no single theory that can be adequate to reflect the complexity of scaling the youth-led social enterprises. Three complementary theoretical perspectives in the study are thus based on Social Entrepreneurship Theory, Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory and Institutional Theory, through a phenomenological interpretive lens. These two views taken together allow us to have a holistic view of the interaction

of the individual agency, the purpose of the organization, and the structural conditions in the scaling process.

2.3.1 Social Entrepreneurship Theory

The social entrepreneurship theory offers the framework through which the hybridity of the enterprises, which is being studied, can be comprehended. Compared to the traditional entrepreneur, social entrepreneurs are unique in that they are more committed to creating social value but at the same time apply entrepreneurial values to their work including innovation, spotting opportunities, and taking risks (Dees, 1998; Mair and Marti, 2006). This theory focuses on the entrepreneurship based on missions and seek solutions to the ongoing societal challenges which are sustainable.

In this theoretical framework, scaling is not only taken to be the growth of the organization, but the fact of multiplied social impact. It is claimed by scholars that social enterprises have special tensions when it comes to scaling, especially the danger of mission drift, resource dilution and the high accountability requirements (Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014). In the case of social enterprises led by youth, these tensions can also be increased by a lack of managerial experience, access to capital, and the increased skepticism of stakeholders who do not believe in their credibility.

The theory of social entrepreneurship guides the present research by presenting scaling decisions in the context of value-based decisions, instead of technical strategies. It explains the reason why certain youth-led social enterprises can be unwilling to scale quickly, choose depth of impact over breadth, or take hybrid scaling strategies that suit their social missions. This theory thus offers a normative basis of the understanding of how youth entrepreneurs conceptualize the meaning of success and sustainability in their scaling processes.

2.3.2 Theory of Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem theory proposes a contextual approach, which places youth-driven social enterprises in the context of larger systems of support and restriction. An entrepreneurial ecosystem can be defined as a group of mutually dependent actors and institutions (such as government, financial institutions, education institutions, support organizations, and cultural norms) that interact in a way that determines entrepreneurship (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015).

This theory does not support linear and individualistic perspectives on entrepreneurship but focuses on interdependence, connectivity, and systemic interaction. In this sense, the failure or success of scaling initiatives cannot be explained only by personal ability, but it should be interpreted within the context of the quality and coherence of ecosystem. In contexts of weaknesses (such as in Zimbabwe) that are fragile or volatile, policy inconsistency, limited formal funding, and infrastructural constraints are part of the ecosystem that can profoundly influence the entrepreneurial results.

This study is informed by the entrepreneurial ecosystem theory which describes the ability or limitations of scaling of the youth-led social entrepreneurship under the influence of external conditions. It also demonstrates the unequal share of the ecosystem resources, so the youth entrepreneurs might be at a structural disadvantage in comparison with older or more established participants. Notably, the theory enables one to study how youth entrepreneurs' approach, readjust, or evade the structures of the ecosystem in order to achieve growth and sustainability.

2.3.3 Institutional Theory

The institutional theory can be used to interpret how formal and informal rules, norms, and belief systems affect the organization behavior. Institutions make things deemed legitimate, acceptable, and possible within a particular context (Scott, 2014). In the case of social enterprises, legitimacy plays a very critical role because they are required to be acceptable to various parties such as funders, regulators, communities and beneficiaries.

Institutionally, the problems with scaling that youth-led social enterprises face can be based on the incongruence of organizational practices and the expectations of mainstream institutions. Entrepreneurs who are youthful can find it hard to comply to regulatory standards that are set to fit a traditional business, or to satisfy donors who will rather look at short term measurable results rather than a long-term social change.

The institutional theory will also be a part of the study as it enlightens the current work by shedding light on the impact of legitimacy-seeking behaviors on the scaling strategies. It assists in understanding the reasons why social initiatives founded by youth can choose a specific organizational structure, reporting or associating system, to be accepted, despite the conflicts it has with the initial goals of the initiative. The theory further illuminates the impact of institutional voids and the lack of consistency in the developing economies to introduce obstacles and opportunities to the innovative scaling strategies.

2.3.5 Interpretive Lens Phenomenological Perspective.

Although the theories mentioned above are structural and organizational in nature, the study is ultimately based on a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology aims at understanding the ways people experience and make sense of their world without paying much attention to the objective measure (van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 2013).

The use of theory in the present study is informed by the phenomenological lens. Instead of bringing theoretical constructs to bear on the experiences of the participants, theory is used interpretively to bring out the patterns and meanings in the data. This method acknowledges the fact that youth social entrepreneurs are active in building meaning of scaling, failure, success, and constraint in accordance with their lived realities.

The combination of phenomenology and social entrepreneurship, ecosystem and institutional theories is what gives the study theoretical coherence without the loss of experience. This integrative model enables the study to be able to capture both the structural conditions that give rise to scaling as well as the subjective experience of going through the condition by youth entrepreneurs.

On the whole, the theoretical framework is strong in terms of interpretation of the study findings. It aids the comprehension of scaling as socially grounded, institutionally mediated and experience-based. Such theoretical stance enhances analytical rigor of the research and gives a assurance that the results are based on the theory and experience.

2.4 Empirical Review and Summation of Connected Literature.

2.4.1 Young Social Entrepreneurship and Scaling.

More and more research in the field of social entrepreneurship demonstrates the significance of this sphere as the way to address social and economic issues. According to Bloom and Chatterji (2009), despite the successful social enterprises that have tested innovative solutions successfully, scaling of those solutions is a significant challenge, which is usually constrained by limited finances, poor organizational abilities, and the risk of losing its mission.

Social enterprises run by younger people face even more challenges: the absence of managerial experience, the inability to find professionals, and no formal access to capital (Littlewood and Holt, 2018; Ofosu-Appiah, Boahen and Agbenyegah, 2025).

In spite of these challenges, young entrepreneurs are very innovative, flexible, and committed to social transformation. They have been considered to be the major agents of inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa, and numerous youth-based businesses have emerged to address unemployment and unfulfilled social needs (World Economic Forum, 2025a).

Indicatively, according to Schwab Foundation and World Economic Forum (2025b) African youth-led social enterprises are in a gradual shift of establishing hybrid models that integrate both social missions and entrepreneurial sustainability. Nevertheless, the upgrading is not even due to structural, financial, and institutional barriers.

In Zimbabwe, Chigora and Chisi (2023) established that youth entrepreneurship is mainly necessity-oriented, as they are motivated by a high level of unemployment, economic instability, and low formal employment opportunities. They claim that to many youths, starting a business is not an option rather a survival tactic to gain income and address the pressing social and economic demands. Their study also indicates that even though the Zimbabwean youth are creatively resilient and adaptive, growth and scaling pathways are underdeveloped. The essential resources of finance, professional networks, mentorship, and technical support are not allocated equally, implying that young entrepreneurs tend to use the informal system to keep their business afloat (Chigora and Chisi, 2023).

Chigora and Chisi (2023) additionally note that the research on Zimbabwean studies primarily uses the quantitative factors such as income, survival rates, employment creation, which do not provide much information about the subtle and experiential aspects of scaling. There is scanty information on how young entrepreneurs have their perceptions of the challenges, see opportunities or make a strategic decision under unstable socio-economic conditions. This gap is significant since the viability of the social enterprises led by young people is based on their capacity to overcome systemic barriers such as unstable government policies, inflation, irregular access to formal finance (Moyo and Kaseke, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Thus, it is necessary to examine the experience of these youth entrepreneurs. The researchers can determine the motives, coping styles, and innovations that enable them to scale by studying their

subjective perceptions. As an example, young social entrepreneurs can have a stronger focus on the impact on the community rather than on quick financial gains, align business models with the realities of the local market, or use informal networks and digital platforms to enter new markets (UNDP, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2022). These field insights offer more insight to scaling than uncooked economic data and directly contribute to the aim of this study, which focuses on investigating the issue of Zimbabwean youth-led social enterprise scaling.

ILO (2022) points out that in many cases, youth social enterprises are created because of the lack of a job opportunity. As revealed in their qualitative case studies, young entrepreneurs apply new strategies, namely digital platforms, informal networks, and community partnerships, to expand their social influence. However, scarce managerial capabilities, formal finance and growth-based resources often restrain scalability. Similarly, UNDP (2021) discovered in Africa that incubators, mentorship, and customized financing can greatly increase the scaling of youth enterprises in accordance with the local circumstances.

The rise of the economic role of youth-led social enterprises in Africa has been highlighted by recent global reports, such as the Genesis Analytics (2025). They demonstrate that as these entrepreneurs generate job opportunities, community development, and social innovation, they undermine growth because of the lack of coherent policy execution, fragile institutional ties, as well as inadequate formal financing (Genesis Analytics, 2025). Such results verify that the process of scaling youth-led enterprises requires not only an increase in revenues but also the management of complicated ecosystem processes and the ability to utilize experience.

Altogether, empirical studies have shed light on the structural and resource limitations of the youth-led social enterprises, but one significant gap is still present: how young entrepreneurs perceive and experience scaling. Their experiences or lives, in terms of meaning, interpretations, and strategies of overcoming challenges and opportunities, are central in realizing the realities of scaling, particularly in an unstable socio-economic context such as in Zimbabwe (World Economic Forum, 2025a; UNDP, 2021; Genesis Analytics, 2025).

2.4.2 Scaling and Social Entrepreneurship in Youth

Youth social entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the most important solutions to socioeconomic issues in the whole world and in Africa. Social enterprises are run by young people who have a combination of the desire to impact the society as well as entrepreneurial approaches. Such enterprises are common when unemployment rises, societies feel marginalized, and they still lack essential needs (Bacq & Eddleston, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2022). Not only

businesses but also agents of social change, they have been the solution to urgent needs in the form of education, health, careful management of the environment and active citizenship of individuals. The two fold interest to develop social benefits, and remain financially viable puts strain on it particularly when it is being scaled up. Scaling compels entrepreneurs to strike a balance between mission-oriented objectives and developmental plans (Ebrahim, Battilana and Mair, 2014).

Growth of youth-driven social businesses is not a simple task. It has been found out that the young entrepreneurs find it difficult to expand past pilot projects due to lack of managerial experience, poor professional networks, and unreachable formal finance (Littlewood and Holt, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2022). These issues are aggravated by institutional and regulatory uncertainties, unpredictable policy conditions, and the lack of formal support systems (UNDP, 2021; Fatoki, 2014). Being mission-driven, many young innovators have increased social outcomes at the cost of slowing traditional business growth (Bloom and Chatterji, 2009; Westley *et al.*, 2014).

There are three dimensions associated with scaling, scaling out, scaling up and scaling deep. Scaling out involves copying of models that have proven successful, or accessing more people, or geographical expansion. Scaling up implies impacting the larger systems, policies or institutional practices concerning issues that the enterprise addresses. Scaling deep is also interested in enhancing the quality and transformational effects of interventions in the communities (Bloom and Chatterji, 2009; Westley *et al.*, 2014). In the case of youth-led businesses, these dimensions tend to coincide and emerge at the same time and depend on resources, personal experience, and interactions with ecosystems (Autio *et al.*, 2022).

Young entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa learn how to be structural constrained and inaccessible to formal support. Digital platforms, social media, and mobile technology are what they use to access new markets, engage stakeholders, and increase their impact without extensive capital investment (UNDP, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2022). There is also support of technical assistance, legitimacy, and resources through peer collaboration, mentorship, and community networks (Littlewood and Holt, 2018). Those are strategies that demonstrate that scaling is not an economic process, but a socially based, context-oriented, process, which involves creativity, resiliency, and innovation.

Zimbabwe has more scaling difficulties. Growth is challenging due to macroeconomic instability, oppressive policies, and uneven environmental support (Moyo & Kaseke, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Nevertheless, there are still some entrepreneurial youths who can demonstrate a striking

level of ingenuity, using both formal and informal tools to multiply their influence. Chigora and Chisi (2023) discovered that the young people in Zimbabwe work in an environment of necessity due to the high rates of unemployment, financial insecurity, and formal employment. Their analysis emphasized the fact that young entrepreneurs are creative, resilient and innovative even though the channels of scaling are informal, undeveloped and lacked experience.

It has been empirically demonstrated that social enterprises run by young people employ hybrid scaling strategies. Others will combine grant funding with revenue-generating processes, whereas others collaborate with local NGOs, community organizations, and participants in the private sector to both expand social outcomes and risk management (UNDP, 2021). These adaptive strategies indicate how the young entrepreneurs are agency in overcoming structural constraints, which is consistent with the concept of lived experiences mediating the ecosystem and action of individuals (Spigel, 2020; Wurth, Stam & Spigel, 2022).

Incubators, accelerators, and mentorship programs are just some of the supportive mechanisms that have been found to enhance scaling outcomes (UNDP, 2021). These resources are however not evenly distributed. The accessibility of urban entrepreneurs compared to rural or marginalized locations is usually high (International Labor Organization, 2022). This imbalance highlights the necessity of research on the perception and utilization of available resources by young social entrepreneurs, institutional constraints negotiation, and sense of meaning in the scaling process, which is largely absent in existing quantitative studies.

Finally, the literature highlights that structural, financial, and ecosystem barriers to scale exist, although it also focuses on experiential and qualitative knowledge of the growth of youth-led social enterprises. Scaling does not merely concern access to resources, but it also includes interpretation, decision-making, and sustainability when faced with socioeconomic stress (Autio et al., 2022). Zimbabwean situation, characterized by economic instability, institutional vulnerability, and entrepreneurship due to need, suggests the importance of examining lived situations in order to understand how the youth must navigate the complex scaling process. The given focus also promotes the aims of the study in terms of analyzing the lived experiences, determining the challenges, and investigating the opportunities of the ecosystem in youth-led social entrepreneurship.

2.4.3 Youth Enterprise Development and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems influence the way young-led social enterprises develop, adjust, and expand. They consist of actors, institutions, policies, financial systems, and cultural norms that

interact to shape how entrepreneurs behave and perform (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). This section uses a funnel method and examines global trends, African ecosystem, Zimbabwe neighbors and Zimbabwe context. It demonstrates the interactions between structural factors and lived experiences in determining scaling processes.

2.4.3.1 Global and European Context

The European market provides a developed social enterprise environment in youth. Well-organized support is offered by other countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK, which include incubators, accelerators, seed funding programs, mentorship networks, and social impact investment funds (Autio et al., 2022; Jurgelevicius et al., 2025). Studies indicate that such mechanisms have a direct effect of enhancing the scaling capacity of youth social enterprises. Indicatively, one example is social impact bonds in the UK where young entrepreneurs can test new social solutions at reduced financial risk and maintain mission alignment (Autio et al., 2022).

Spigel (2020) discovers that the European ecosystems are a combination of formal and informal support that complement each other. Technical knowledge is provided through universities and other research institutions, mentorship is provided by non-governmental organizations and other foundations, and policy consistency and resource access is offered through government-supported programs. Such ecosystems enable young social entrepreneurs to focus on mission-driven innovation and not survival strategies. After that, they also grow not only in revenue or reach but also in the quality of social impact, policy effects, and sustainability (Wurth, Stam & Spigel, 2022).

2.4.3.2 Sub-Saharan African Context

The Sub-Saharan Africa experience a more disjointed and unstable ecosystem of youth-led social enterprises. Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa are examples of countries in which limited resources, informal networks, and innovation-related coping mechanisms interact (ILO, 2022; Uddin, Khan and Smith, 2025).

Social entrepreneurship among the youth in Nigeria is done under the conditions of high unemployment and inaccessible formal finance. But they rely on digital channels, community networks, and social media to expand and target underserved communities (Akinwale, Adeyemi & Olaniyi, 2021; ILO, 2022). Some of the examples are mobile health education, employment among the young people in the country, and clean energy solutions. Nigerian youthful entrepreneurs are highly adaptable, despite the structural limitations, and engage in informal mentorships and alliances in order to overcome systemic limitations (Uddin, Khan & Smith, 2025).

Youth scaling in Kenya is facilitated by innovation hubs, tech incubators and social entrepreneurship competitions. According to Wanjohi and Mugure (2020), such mechanisms avail financial resources, sharing of knowledge, accessing markets, and legitimacy, which are vital factors when considering the young social enterprises. Nevertheless, there is a challenging implementation of the policy, bureaucratic red tape, and a lack of information about accessing finance that hinders the possibility to scale broad (UNDP, 2021).

South Africa is a complex ecosystem that is relatively mature. Formal structures include the SAB Foundation Social Innovation Awards, university entrepreneurship centers, and government youth funds where the young social entrepreneurs can benefit (Fatoki, 2014; Littlewood and Holt, 2018). Scaling is however, undermined by bureaucracy, funder skepticism and competition over scarce resources. According to research, young South African social entrepreneurs are using hybrid approaches that balance the social impact and financial sustainability, which imply inherent tensions (UNDP, 2021).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the formal institutional support is supplemented by informal ones, such as peer networks, mentorship circles, and community-based funding (ILO, 2022; UNDP, 2021). These informal processes form the views of youths on possibilities and limits and highlight the relevance of lived experience in scaling (Uddin, Khan & Smith, 2025).

2.4.3.3 Regional Situation

A closer look at the scaling pathways is provided by having a closer look at the immediate region of Zimbabwe.

Zambia: Young social enterprises are dependent on the community-based funding and informal networks since formal finance and policy implementation gaps exist (van der Westhuizen, 2023). Social issues targeted by enterprises are local, such as youth unemployment, healthcare access and renewable energy. Scaling is achieved by collaboration with the NGOs, local government programs, and regional trade initiatives (UNDP, 2021).

Botswana: The youth entrepreneurs have limited institutional support despite the macroeconomic stability. Targeted programs can be small or project-based, and they do not allow scaling long-term (Littlewood and Holt, 2018). However, the digital tools and social media platforms can be used to reach markets and networks (ILO, 2022).

Mozambique: The macroeconomic instability, inadequate infrastructure, and weak institutions are the factors that hamper scaling. Social enterprises by young people tend to be survivalist and aim at ensuring local social contribution instead of overall geographical expansion (UNDP, 2021).

South Africa: Has a better structured opportunities that indicate that the cohesion of the ecosystems and access to the resources have a great impact on the scaling outcomes. Effective youth-based businesses incorporate both formal and informal social capital alongside support to scale the activities and influence (Fatoki, 2014; Littlewood and Holt, 2018).

2.4.3.4 Zimbabwean Context

Youth-based social enterprises in Zimbabwe are characterized by extremely restricted ecosystems, which are characterized by macroeconomic instability, unstable policies, inadequate finance, and institutional support (Moyo & Kaseke, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Chigora and Chisi (2023) state that youth entrepreneurship is also based on necessity in great part, and young entrepreneurs employ creativity, resilience, and networks of informality to survive and prosper.

Scaling in Zimbabwe is generally nonlinear and specific. The concepts of strategic decisions and resilience are conditioned by lived experiences, including the perception of bureaucratic barriers, access to youth empowerment funds, and encounters with community and government actors (Spigel, 2020; Wurth, Stam and Spigel, 2022). Youth-led social enterprises can grow even within the bounds of the structure by innovative ways of coping digital marketing, peer collaboration, and hybrid business models (ILO, 2022; UNDP, 2021).

The dual mandate of social enterprises is often followed by the Zimbabwean youth whereby they are more concerned with the social impact rather than the rapid financial growth. This empirical understanding is essential in scaling: quantitative metrics such as revenues or market presence are not a sufficient measure of the subtle choices and trade-offs in young entrepreneurs operating in resource-constrained environments (Chigora and Chisi, 2023; Autio et al., 2022).

2.5 Research Gap

The summary of the literature review has presented some gaps that are critical. To begin with, the current research on youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe is limited to few studies and especially regarding scaling. Second, the available literature is inclined to focus more on structural and outcome-based analysis and disregards the lived experience and subjective meaning that have

an impact on entrepreneurial decisions. Third, literature on youth entrepreneurship has few integrations of phenomenological views and the entrepreneurial ecosystem theory.

Such gaps are the reason why the current study is necessary. The research adheres to the requests to provide more context-based and experience-oriented entrepreneurship studies by using a phenomenological approach. Another aspect the study offers is the chance to compare the results to the available empirical data and determine the applicability of the ecosystem theory to the situation in Zimbabwe.

2.6 Chapter Summary

The reviewed literature in this chapter was dealing with youth-led social enterprises, scaling and entrepreneurial ecosystems with specific focus on literature that is pertinent to Zimbabwe and Sub-Saharan Africa. The review helped to define the main ideas that embraced the study, identified the theoretical views that informed the study, and discussed the findings of empirical research on the subject of youth social entrepreneurship and ecosystem dynamics.

Notably, the chapter has highlighted serious gaps in the current literature, especially the absence of phenomenological researches that summarize the lived experiences of young social entrepreneurs who are trying to scale their businesses. Such gaps are good reasons why the present study was done and why it has to contribute to the academic discussion, policy development, and interventions. The following chapter will provide the research methodology, which includes the description of the procedures and methods that were used to answer the research questions.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research method and design that was used to explore the lived experiences of youth-led social enterprises in scaling their operations through the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Zimbabwe. Based on the problem statement, objectives, and the research questions, and informed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, this chapter will expound on how the study was carried out systematically to produce credible and meaningful findings (Nickerson, 2024).

This study is situated in Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on youth-led social enterprises operating in urban and peri-urban areas, where the influence of ecosystem support systems such as incubators, innovation hubs, non-governmental organizations, and financial institutions is most evident. Zimbabwe is an informative and pertinent environment as the socio-economic environment is complex in the sense that it has economic volatility, youth unemployment is high, and there is a growing dependence on social entrepreneurship as a process through which social and economic issues can be resolved (World Bank, 2023). The study location thus suits well in investigating how the youth social entrepreneurs feel the scaling effect in limited and changing ecosystems (UNDP, 2021). The research methodology and paradigm will be discussed in detail in the following section.

The research was based on the interpretivist research paradigm, which presupposes the social construction of reality and the derivation of meaning by people out of their subjective perceptions of their experience. The paradigm that suits this research is the interpretivist paradigm in that the research aims to conceptualize in which youth social entrepreneurs make sense of scaling, opportunity, constraint, and success in their unique situations, as opposed to quantifying variables and trying to prove pre-existing hypotheses (Nickerson, 2024; Oliveira, Basini & Cooney, 2024).

In line with this paradigm, the research used the qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research is effective when it is necessary to study the social phenomenon, which is deeply rooted in context and experience (SAGE Publishing, 2025). As noted in Chapter One, the research problem needs a detailed conceptualization of how scaling is experienced, perceived, and maneuvered by youth-led social enterprises, which cannot be effectively quantified using quantitative methods.

To be more precise, the research utilized a phenomenological methodology, and it deals with the description and explanation of lived experiences of the respondents. The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to access the nature and experience of youth social entrepreneurs toward the scaling process, their meaning of the opportunities, challenges, and interactions with the ecosystem. The methodological decision was in line with the theoretical stance of Chapter Two whereby lived experience was found to be core in the explanation of scaling dynamics (Pandey & Pandey, 2023; Oliveira, Basini & Cooney, 2024).

3.2 Research Location

The study was located in urban and peri-urban areas of Zimbabwe, focusing on youth-led social enterprises that demonstrate visible engagement with ecosystem support systems such as incubators, innovation hubs, NGOs, and financial institutions (UNDP, 2021; Isik, 2025).

3.3 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is defined as a set of philosophical assumptions according to which a study should comprehend reality, knowledge and the way of how this knowledge should be generated. It became the basis on which the research design, data collection techniques, and conclusions are informed (Pandey and Pandey, 2023). Research paradigms determine the way in which researchers theorize the relationship between the researcher and the research participants and the formation of knowledge concerning social phenomena.

The research was based on the interpretivism research paradigm that presupposes that reality is socially constructed and that people create meanings by their contacts and experience in specific social situations (Nickerson, 2024). In contrast to positivist methods of study, which attend to objective measurement and hypothesis testing, interpretivism stresses the subjective meanings, which people give to their experiences. The paradigm thus emphasizes interpretation, context and the views of participants in elucidating the phenomena in the society.

The interpretivist paradigm fits the research since the proposed study seeks to examine how the young social entrepreneurs perceive the process of growing their social businesses within the Zimbabwe entrepreneurial ecosystem. The element of scaling in this case is not a technical or an economic phenomenon that could be quantified using quantitative measures like revenue increase or job creation. Rather, it concerns multifaceted perceptions, interpretations, and experiences of opportunity identification, institutional organizational limitations, interaction with the ecosystem, and individual drives.

The interpretivism research approach enables the researcher to explore how the youth entrepreneurs make meaning within the concepts of success, growth, impact and sustainability in their particular socio-economic context. Such meanings are constructed through engagement with actors in the ecosystem which include financial institutions, incubators, government agencies, community organizations, and peer networks. The interpretivist approach also provides a more in-depth insight into the interaction between structural conditions and personal experiences to affect the scaling processes by prioritizing the views of the participants.

In the interpretivist paradigm, the research has a phenomenological and anthropological orientation, which is the study of the nature of lived experiences as viewed by people who have personally experienced the phenomenon being studied (Oliveira, Basini & Cooney, 2024). Phenomenology attempts to reveal the way in which people make sense of their experiences and how those senses shape their behavior as well as decision making. Within the framework of the current research, phenomenology will enable the researcher to examine the perceptions of the youth social entrepreneurs towards opportunities, constraints, and meaning creation of scaling their enterprises.

This paradigm also recognizes that researcher has an interpretive role in the research process. The researcher does not stay fully inapplicable to the research context; instead, they peruse the stories of the participants and explain them within the wider theoretical and contextual scope of the research (Pandey and Pandey, 2023). This interpretive interaction makes the experience of the youth entrepreneurs more put into perspective and that the results include both experiential and theoretical perspectives.

On the whole, the interpretivist paradigm is a suitable philosophical framework of the proposed study as it is consistent with the aim of the research, which is to investigate the subjective and experiential aspects of scaling social entrepreneurship led by youth. Through the connotations that they ascribe to their experiences, the study can produce in-depth information on how the dynamics of entrepreneurial ecosystems influence the scaling process of youth social enterprises in Zimbabwe.

3.4 Research Design and Methods

The type of research design that was used in this study is a qualitative phenomenological research design. The design also helped the researcher to immerse within the stories of participants and make discoveries about the nature of their collective experiences in relation to scaling youth-led social enterprises (The Shillonga, 2025).

The research focused on youth-based social enterprises, which in Chapter One are defined as organizations led by individuals between the ages of 18 and 35, whose primary objective is to create social value while also ensuring financial sustainability. The purposive approach in sampling is used to identify the sample of participants with direct experience on the phenomenon being studied. The sampling approach will guarantee that the subjects will be information-rich cases and will be capable of giving in-depth details about the scaling process (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2025).

The expected number of participants were 10–15, which corresponds to the standards of phenomenological research, in which the depth rather than the breadth is emphasized (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The participants were chosen according to the criteria that entail leadership in the youth, social entrepreneurship, and initiatives to scale operations, succeeded or failed. This broad method enabled the research to explore a variety of scaling histories and courses.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The information in this study was produced mainly using semi-structured interviews that are in-depth. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate since they give an elastic framework that enables the participants to describe their experience using their own words and at the same time, covering the major topics of research that have been identified.

The interview guide was designed according to the objectives of the research, research questions and the conceptual framework. The guide involves open-ended questions that enquire into the experiences of scaling of the participants, the interventions of the actors in the ecosystem, access to resources, and the perceptions of institutional support and the meanings attributed by the respondents to growth and sustainability.

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or virtually, based on the participants' availability and their geographical location. Interviews were also recorded on audio tape with the informed consent of participants in order to have accurate and complete data. Field notes were also recorded to get non-verbal information, contextual observations, and reflexive information which adds to the interpretation of the data (The Shillonga, 2025).

3.6 Sampling Technique

Sampling is a process of identifying a small number of people among a large group of people to gain information that will represent the entire population. The purposive sampling method is typical of qualitative research since it allows the researcher to sample relevant participants to the research topic with regard to their knowledge or experience concerning it (Scribbr, 2023). Purposive sampling in this study was used to sample out participants that were actively engaged in youth-based social businesses and had experience of scaling their businesses.

The selection of the participants was made according to certain inclusion and exclusion criteria so that the data gathered would be relevant. The inclusion criteria were that the participants had to be leaders or founders of youth-based social enterprise, aged between 18 and 35 years, and participated in the management or scaling of their enterprise. The participants should also have

been well knowledgeable and experienced when it came to the growth and development of their enterprises. The exclusion criteria were people who did not make direct decisions in the enterprise, and those who did not fall within the age bracket in addition to individuals whose organizations were not established as social enterprises. The participants were working in the sectors such as: Recycling and waste management, Food security and Agribusiness projects, Skills training and job programs among the youth, Renewable energy services, Education assistance programs, Health and hygiene projects. Businesses were between two years and six years old. They were mainly small or medium and had between three and twenty-five people, but volunteers or temporary workers usually helped out.

The size of the sample was calculated in accordance with the data saturation principle which is observed when new information or themes do not emerge with the further data collection. A small sample that is rich in information was deemed suitable to this qualitative study as it enables an in-depth investigation of the research issue. Purposive sampling helped to select the people, who were knowledgeable on the subject under study and had an ability to give detailed and relevant information that helps towards accomplishing goals of the study (Research Methods Knowledge Base, 2022).

3.7 Data Analysis and Interpretation Processes

The information obtained in this research was analyzed thematically, which is preferable to phenomenological research as it allows the researcher to determine the patterns of meaning in the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was described as a methodology of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes in a qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The paper adhered to the six-step thematic analysis framework as put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial step was familiarization with the data and the researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews and read the transcripts several times to understand the responses of the participants better. The second step was to come up with preliminary codes, during which meaningful bits of the data were outlined and coded to appear to capture significant features pertaining to the research topic.

The third step was a search of themes, and similar codes were combined to create larger patterns or themes that represented the experience of the participants in regards to scaling youth-led social enterprises. Step four entailed review of themes where the themes that had been identified were reviewed and narrowed down to make sure that they well represented the collected data. The fifth step was defining and naming themes, in which the researcher clearly explained each theme and how it would be related to the objectives of the research. The last stage was to create the report in which the themes were interpreted and provided with supporting extracts of the interview information (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Springer nature, 2023).

As a precautionary measure to uphold confidentiality and anonymity, actual names of the subjects were not utilized in the research. Rather, the participants were given their own identification code like Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), etc. When making quotations or findings in the analysis with the use of codes, these codes were employed so that the participants would not be recognized, yet the researcher would be able to tell the difference between various responses.

The theoretical perspectives such as the social entrepreneurship theory, the entrepreneurial ecosystem theory as well as the institutional theory also influenced the interpretation of the findings although they were also based on the lived experiences of the participants. This method allowed the analysis of the balance between theories and the empirical data (Oliveira, Basini & Cooney, 2024).

3.8 Presentation of Results

The results of the research are provided in thematic narrative in Chapter Four. Every high-level theme is presented, explained, and depicted with the help of verbatim quotes of the participants to retain their originality and tone. Thematic presentation enables a good structuring of results without obscuring the richness of experience of participants (SAGE Publishing, 2025).

Where appropriate, themes are linked back to the research questions and objectives, as well as to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks. This ensures coherence across chapters and facilitates meaningful discussion and interpretation of results (Nickerson, 2024).

3.9 Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability Considerations

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is emphasized over conventional notions of validity and reliability. This study addressed trustworthiness through the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Springer Nature, 2023).

Credibility is enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, use of verbatim quotations, and member checking, where participants are given the opportunity to verify interpretations of their accounts. Dependability is ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting research decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical steps. Confirmability is addressed through reflexivity, where the researcher critically reflects on personal assumptions and potential biases. Transferability is supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings (SAGE Publishing, 2025).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to established ethical principles. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Catholic University of Zimbabwe prior to data collection. Participants are provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty (UNDP, 2021).

Informed consent is obtained from all participants before interviews are conducted. Confidentiality and anonymity are ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of data. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes are stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Given the potential sensitivity of discussing business challenges and failures, care is taken to conduct interviews respectfully and to minimize any risk of harm or discomfort to participants (The Shillonga, 2025).

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology and design employed in the study. It has explained the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative phenomenological approach, research design, data collection and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and strategies for ensuring trustworthiness. The chapter provides a clear methodological foundation for the presentation and discussion of findings in the subsequent chapters (Nickerson, 2024; Oliveira, Basini & Cooney, 2024; Springer Nature, 2023).

CHAPTER FOUR: Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Introduction

The chapter illustrates, synthesizes and interprets the results of the study examining the experiences of the youth who are spearheaded by social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they seek to grow their enterprises in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The reporting of the findings is in the phenomenological method used in Chapter Three, with the emphasis on the lived experiences of the participants, as well as the meanings that they attach to the scaling processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In contrast to quantitative research which dwells upon numerical depiction, this chapter pays attention to the subjective interpretation, emotional reactions, and practical experiences of the scaling of enterprises of the participants. The results are thus not only given as an account of the events but rather an interpretation of how social entrepreneurs among the youths in Zimbabwe perceive and negotiate scaling in the economic and institutional environments (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

The chapter starts with a description of the characteristics of the participants and response rate, and then thematic presentation of the findings in accordance with the study objectives. Verbatim quotes from participants were used to support the themes identified during the data analysis and to maintain the authenticity of the participants' perspectives. The results are then explained concerning conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The chapter ends with a conclusion which gives summary of major findings which answers the research questions.

4.2 Response rate and Profile of the participants.

The research involved fifteen social enterprises that were youth led and in the urban and peri-urban regions of Zimbabwe. The sample was purposely chosen to make sure that the respondents had direct experience in running and trying to expand social enterprises (Patton, 2015).

The participants were working in the sectors such as:

Recycling and waste management.

Food security and Agribusiness projects.

Skills training and job programs among the youth.

Renewable energy services

Education assistance programs.

Health and hygiene projects.

Businesses were between two years and six years old. They were mainly small or medium and had between three and twenty-five people, but volunteers or temporary workers usually helped out.

The participants exhibited different scaling approaches that comprised expansion of geographical regions, diversification of services, formulation of alliances, and deepening of impact in communities. The variety of enterprises allowed to understand scaling experiences in various spheres fully.

4.3 Findings Presentation and Analysis

Thematic analysis led to the creation of five key themes

- Scaling as an emotionally challenging and insecure experience.
- The main obstacle to scaling is financial constraints.
- As an asset but partial Ecosystem.
- Age related and legitimacy issues.
- Resilience in entrepreneurship and adjustment.

All the themes have been explained below accompanied by narratives of the participants.

4.3.1 Theme One: Scaling as an Emotionally Demanding Journey

The participants always referred to scaling as uncomfortable and unpredictable instead of linear growth.

Fear of Enterprise Collapse

Some entrepreneurs were afraid to continue with the expansion on the basis of their financial and managerial ability.

One participant explained:

“Scaling would be good before you see that as you grow, you are exposed to risks that you might not be able to bear.” P1

The fast growth also led to straining operations, late payments and challenges in managing staff.

Affective Orientation towards the Social Mission

Participants focused on social mission and not on quick financial expansion, which is common in social entrepreneurship where mission often takes priority over profit (Dees, 2001).

Participant P2 stated:

“We did not begin to help communities in order to make profit. Expanding too rapidly will mean losing such focus. This shows a conflict between the impact and financial sustainability objectives.” P2

4.3.2 Theme Two: Financial Constraints as a Barrier of Scaling

Access to finance was indicated as the prevailing obstacle to scaling.

Poor Accessibility to Bank Financing

As far as lack of collateral and perceived business risk are concerned, participants revealed that they had a hard time getting loans.

“Banks demand security which we lack. Social enterprises are perceived to be risky.” P3

Dependence on Donor Funding

The participants were experiencing short-lasting dependencies on the donor funds that posed a challenge of sustainability.

“Where there is an expiration of grants, programs become slow or stagnant.”P3

There was less funding that limited the ability to hire, invest in infrastructure and expand the services. Limited financial access has been widely identified as a barrier to entrepreneurial growth in developing economies (World Bank, 2020).

4.3.3 Theme Three: Inconsistent Ecosystem Support Despite Available Assistance

Entrepreneurs reported access to training programs and incubators, but they reported ecosystem support to be inconsistent.

Urban-Based Support Systems

The major cities had focused support services.

“The opportunities are largely in Harare. Entrepreneurs in other places do not make it.” P15

No-Financial-Support Organizational Training

The respondents appreciated the importance of mentorship but noted the shortage of capital to implement.

“Training is good, but nothing without money so you can put what you have learned to use.” P9

This is an indication of an ecosystem fragmentation, a challenge commonly discussed in entrepreneurial ecosystem literature (Isenberg, 2011).

4.3.4 Theme Four: Legitimacy Threats against Young Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs who were young used to be looked down upon in terms of their skills.

Age-Based Trust Deficit

Respondents complained of having problems winning over trust by investors and partners.

“It is a belief that youths are inexperienced.” P 11

Gender-Based Challenges

Women respondents explained other obstacles.

“As a female entrepreneur in youth, you need to always be able to show credibility.” P 14

The institutional expectations affected the access of opportunities, reflecting broader legitimacy challenges faced by new ventures and young entrepreneurs (Suchman, 1995).

4.3.5 Theme Five: Entrepreneurial Resilience and Innovation

Entrepreneurs were flexible despite the difficulties.

Use of Informal Networks

The participants made use of support and alliances within their communities. Informal networks played an important role in sustaining their enterprises, particularly when formal institutional support was limited. As one participant explained:

"Informal networks hold us together when the formal system fails." (P3)

Business Model Adaptation

The members enhanced diversification of services to maintain operations.

"We used paid services to invest community initiatives." P1

"Adaptive approaches resulted in survival in limited environments." P6

4.4 Discussion of Findings

Results show that interaction between the constraints of the ecosystem and entrepreneurial agency determines scaling.

In line with the Social Entrepreneurship Theory, the participants were more interested in social mission, which at times curtailed the growth pace (Dees, 2001).

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory describes the factors of poor institutional and financial framework that suppress growth (Isenberg, 2011) and the Institutional Theory describes the issue of legitimacy among young entrepreneurs (Scott, 2014).

Phenomenologically, the interpretation of challenges by the participants affects the strategic decisions, resilience, and motivation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Scaling thus comes out as structural and experiential.

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

This chapter has introduced and discussed the results related to the experiences of young people who run social enterprises in an effort to expand their projects in the Zimbabwe entrepreneurial ecosystem. The analysis indicated that scaling is not witnessed as a simple process of organizational development but a complicated and emotionally challenging process with uncertainty, financial stress and risks to operations. The emotional aspect that was inherent in the scaling processes was often associated with fear of organizational instability and ambitions of growth by entrepreneurs.

The research also determined that the financial constraints are the biggest impediment to the growth of enterprises. The lack of access to low-cost financing, the reluctance to provide collaterals, and the lack of trust that young people can be good entrepreneurs will limit the prospects of scaling. Also, reliance on temporary donor funding was observed to cause low sustainability, which usually compels businesses to slow or cease growth when funding periods are over.

Results also revealed that even though there are elements of entrepreneurial ecosystem support in Zimbabwe, the support structures are not well coordinated and are also skewed. The training programs and incubation initiatives equip with skills and networking but at times they do not produce the desired results due to lack of financial support and follow-up services in an enterprise development, especially to those entrepreneurs who are not located in large cities.

Moreover, the study has mentioned the issues of legitimacy of youth entrepreneurs, who often encounter distrust in investors, partners, and clients because of their age and relatively limited experience. Women entrepreneurs were also found to have other credibility challenges and this indicates that gender plays a greater role in influencing the experiences of an entrepreneur.

In spite of these institutional and structural limitations, the participants were incredibly resilient and adaptable. The entrepreneurial approaches that were employed include the use of community networks, partnerships, diversification of revenue sources, and adaptations of business model to continue operating. These responsive practices explain the agency that the young entrepreneurs

exercise as they maneuver in the challenging environments and still keep their social impact goals at the same time.

On the whole, the results prove that the scaling of the youth-based social enterprises depends on the limitations of the ecosystem, as well as the ability of the entrepreneurs to adapt and survive. These generated insights give a solid basis when coming up with conclusions and offering viable recommendations in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a conclusion of the study and recommendations on the findings which were discussed in Chapter Four. The study has been conducted with an aim of seeking the lived experiences of youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe as they strive to scale their operations in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The study in particular looked into how young social entrepreneurs view the opportunities, constraints and support systems within the ecosystem and how these affect scaling processes. The research adopted a qualitative phenomenological method that involved collecting in-depth information on youth entrepreneurs that conducted business in Zimbabwe urban and peri-urban centers. Using the thematic analysis, a number of major themes were revealed that demonstrated the intricate realities in which young social entrepreneurs operate when trying to expand their businesses.

The chapter thus captures the summary of the research, outlines the key findings, and contains conclusions based on the findings and also offers a practical recommendation that could enhance the scaling of the youth-led social enterprises in Zimbabwe.

5.2 Research Summary

The research was inspired by the growing significance of youth-based social enterprises in resolving social and economic problems in Zimbabwe. Increased unemployment of the youth, economic uncertainty and lack of formal jobs have stimulated a number of youths to start social entrepreneurship to address the social issues of their communities and earn them a sustainable living.

Even though youth-led social enterprises are significant in the development of the community, there is currently available literature that reveals that these enterprises are greatly challenged when it comes to expanding their operations. The numerous studies are devoted to the structural and economic results like the survival of the business, the creation of jobs, and financial results. Nonetheless, scarce studies investigate the experiences of young entrepreneurs and how they perceive and address the problems of scale in complex entrepreneurial ecosystems.

In a bid to fill this gap, the study took a qualitative phenomenological methodology based on the paradigm of interpretivism. The study was based on urban and peri-urban based social enterprises

run by youths in Zimbabwe where the entrepreneurial support structures in the form of incubators, innovation hubs, NGOs, and financial institutions are more evident. The semi-structured interviews with fifteen youth social entrepreneurs who had first-hand experience with operating and trying to grow their businesses were used to collect the data. The participants in the survey were of different sectors such as recycling, agribusiness, renewable energy, skills training, education support and health programs.

The data collected was interpreted using thematic analysis. The review found that there were five key themes that characterize the lives of young entrepreneurs as they strive to grow their social businesses in the Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem.

5.3 Findings

The study found that there were a number of key results explaining how the processes of scaling apply to youth-led social enterprise in Zimbabwean entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Scaling is an Emotionally Demanding Process.

Among the most important findings in the study is the fact that scaling has been found to be a process that is personally challenging and unpredictable. A number of the participants also referred to scaling as dangerous and unpredictable instead of a simple growth process. When venture entrepreneur tried to grow their businesses, they said that they were afraid of business failure, strain (operational), and financial instability.

Simultaneously, participants stressed that social impact and not financial gain are the main driving force. This usually puts a strain between the social purpose of the business and the fast growth.

One of the greatest barriers is the financial constraints.

The researcher concluded that money is the greatest challenge to the growth of youth-led social businesses. Numerous respondents indicated that they faced challenges in getting bank loans because they could not provide collaterals, they did not have a long history of financial transactions and because they believed that social enterprises are not safe investments. Moreover, there are a number of businesses that depend on the donor financing and short-term grants. Whereas some funding can be used to start up operations, it has been observed to become unsustainable in cases where the grants run out. A lack of access to dependable sources of finance denies youth entrepreneurs an opportunity to employ workers, invest in infrastructure and increase services.

Scattered Support of the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.

Despite the support set-ups that are in place in Zimbabwe e.g. incubators, mentorship programs, and entrepreneurship training, the respondents indicated that these support systems are inconsistent and disjointed. The support services are clumped to major urban areas like Harare and therefore the entrepreneurs in other regions are not provided with much access to mentorship, funding, and professional connections. The participants also reported that most of the support programs offer training and knowledge but do not offer financial resource which is needed to execute the business strategies.

Difficulties in Legitimacy among Young Entrepreneurs.

The research study also established that young entrepreneurs had legitimacy issues in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The participants have noted that the investors, partners, and institutions consider young people as experienced or unskilled to run big businesses. The issues of gender were also noted. Women in business also cited other challenges of being able to earn credibility and trust in the professional and financial world. Such legitimacy problems have impacts on funding sources, collaborations, and other opportunities required to scale businesses.

Resilience and Adaptation in the Entrepreneurial Way of doing things.

Youth entrepreneurs were quite resilient and adaptable despite the difficulties specified. Most of the players also depend on informal groups and community relationships and innovative business models to transcend structural constraints. Entrepreneurs have reported diversifying services, creating alliances with community organizations, and creating hybrid revenue models that blend social impact initiatives with revenue generating activities. These adaptive mechanisms also help youth entrepreneurs to survive and over time increase their social impact even in limited conditions.

5.4 Conclusions

With the findings of this research, a number of conclusions can be made on the scaling experiences of social enterprises that are led by the youth in Zimbabwe.

To start with, the process of scaling the youth-led social enterprises is not a technical or economic one. Rather, it is a complicated and emotionally stressful process that is formed by the structural circumstances and personal visions. The personal experiences of entrepreneurs are significant in the determination of the strategies and growth directions.

Secondly, finances are the greatest structural challenge to the scale-up of youth-led social enterprises. In the absence of sound and available funding opportunities, most of the businesses find it difficult to move out of small local programs to bigger sustainable organizations.

Thirdly, Zimbabwe has a certain degree of support of youth entrepreneurship through the entrepreneurial ecosystem but such structures are not well integrated and evenly distributed. Although training programs and incubators can be helpful in terms of knowledge and mentorship, they tend to be hard on the financial and operational requirements needed to scale.

Fourthly, legitimacy issues are still present in the lives of the young entrepreneurs especially in terms of age and gender assumptions. These institutional and social barriers restrict access to resources and opportunities that are required to grow businesses.

Lastly, youth social entrepreneurs are very resilient and creative even though various challenges are present. The way they are able to adjust their business models, mobilize community networks and their dedication to their social missions indicates a high degree of entrepreneurial agency in limited environments.

5.5 Recommendations

According to the results and findings of this study, some recommendations are offered to policymakers, ecosystem stakeholders, financial institutions, and youth entrepreneurs.

Young People Social Enterprise Policy.

Government agencies ought to formulate policies that target social entrepreneurship that are led by youths. These policies can be simplified regulatory processes, tax breaks, and special funding schemes that make youth entrepreneurship and social innovation attractive. Established favorable policy environments may assist in minimizing bureaucracies and enhancing access to resources required in scaling.

Improved Access to Finance

The financial institutions and development organizations ought to design funding systems that suit the interests of the youth social enterprises. Such mechanisms can be with youth entrepreneurship funds, low-interest loans, impact investment programs and blended financing models. Such programs can minimize the use of short-term donor funding and offer long term financial assistance to the growth of enterprises.

Enhancing Ecosystem Support of Entrepreneurship.

The stakeholders in the entrepreneurial ecosystem should consider offering integrated support services that merge mentorship, training, networking opportunities, and financial aid to start-ups e.g. incubators, accelerators, NGOs and innovation hubs. Similarly, more support systems will have to be extended beyond the big cities to take care of the youth entrepreneurs in the smaller cities and the peri-urban regions so as to make them equally resourceful and opportunity-accessible.

Moving beyond Legitimacy Challenges.

They should promote programs that help to enhance the reputability and professional competency of young entrepreneurs. Young entrepreneurs can be given mentorship programs, leadership development, and networking solutions to enable them to gain confidence and build a reputation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Female youth entrepreneurship should also be supported with special attention as such groups of individuals might be burdened with extra social and institutional challenges.

Young Entrepreneurs Capacity Building.

The youth entrepreneurs themselves are to work on enhancing the business management skills, financial planning, and strategic alliances. Opportunities to scale and sustainability can be enhanced by establishing robust professional networks and cooperating with actors in the ecosystem.

5.6 Chapter Summary

The chapter outlined the study findings and recommendations based on the lived experiences of the youth-led social enterprises on scaling in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Zimbabwe. The chapter concluded the research, reported the most important findings, and provided conclusions made based on the research.

The results indicated that financial limitations, disjointed ecosystem assistance, challenges to legitimacy, and emotional strains pertaining to the development of entrepreneurial initiatives all affect scaling of youth-led social enterprises. Meanwhile, young entrepreneurs are resilient and display innovative approaches that help them to provide their businesses even under adverse conditions.

Some practical recommendations were also provided in the chapter to enhance the policy support, financial access, ecosystem coordination and capacity building of entrepreneurs. The adoption of

these suggestions could help to empower the social enterprises led by youths and increase their power to expand social impact in Zimbabwe.

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