

## Stakeholder Engagement and Hybrid Identity in Social Enterprises Pathways to Sustainable Value Creation

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### Abstract

Social enterprises occupy a distinctive and theoretically complex organizational space, simultaneously pursuing financial sustainability and social mission achievement across institutional logics that frequently generate competing demands on organizational identity, resource allocation, and stakeholder relationships. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory and Hybrid Organizational Identity Theory, this study examines how stakeholder engagement quality (SEQ), mission integrity (MI), and hybrid organizational identity clarity (HOIC) collectively determine sustainable value creation (SVC) in social enterprises. Using fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) combined with Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA), the study analyzes configurational data from 298 social enterprises across Italy, the Netherlands, and Kenya, identifying the combinations of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for high sustainable value creation. The fsQCA results reveal three equifinal configurations associated with high SVC—all requiring high mission integrity as a necessary condition (NCA

effect size  $d = 0.421$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Configuration 1 combines high SEQ, high HOIC, and high MI in resource-abundant environments. Configuration 2 achieves SVC through high MI and high HOIC in the absence of high SEQ, suggesting that mission coherence can partially substitute for intensive stakeholder engagement. Configuration 3, observed predominantly in Kenyan enterprises, achieves SVC through high SEQ and high MI without high HOIC, indicating that in resource-constrained emerging market contexts, stakeholder relationships and mission fidelity can compensate for less developed hybrid identity clarity. These findings advance configurational thinking in social entrepreneurship research and provide nuanced guidance for social enterprise managers navigating dual-mission sustainability challenges.

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship, stakeholder theory, hybrid organizational identity, sustainable value creation, fsQCA, mission integrity, configurational analysis

### 1. Introduction

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The global proliferation of social enterprises—organizations that deploy market-based mechanisms to generate social, environmental, and economic value simultaneously—has created a growing demand for theoretical frameworks capable of explaining the heterogeneous performance outcomes of hybrid organizational forms (Austin et al., 2006; Battilana & Lee, 2014). Unlike conventional commercial ventures, social enterprises navigate the permanent tension between market logic (efficiency, financial sustainability, scalability) and social mission logic (equity, impact maximization, community accountability), creating organizational challenges that neither standard entrepreneurship theory nor nonprofit management theory has adequately theorized (Dees, 1998; Santos, 2012).

The theoretical complexity of social enterprise performance has generated a rich but fragmented literature across multiple disciplines—entrepreneurship, organizational sociology, nonprofit management, and development economics—that have approached the dual-mission performance problem from distinct theoretical standpoints with limited cross-disciplinary integration. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995) has been applied to social enterprises to analyze how multi-stakeholder governance shapes organizational legitimacy and resource access (Spear et al., 2007). Hybrid organizational identity theory (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Battilana & Lee, 2014) has examined how social enterprises construct and maintain coherent organizational identities that span commercial and social institutional logics without losing legitimacy in either domain.

Mission integrity research (Grimes, 2010; Battilana et al., 2015) has analyzed how social enterprises maintain fidelity to social objectives while pursuing financial sustainability under commercial pressure.

What is absent from this rich theoretical landscape is an integrative configurational analysis that simultaneously examines how stakeholder engagement, mission integrity, and hybrid identity clarity combine—rather than independently contribute—to produce sustainable value creation in social enterprises across diverse institutional contexts. Configurational approaches, grounded in Set-Theoretic methods (Ragin, 2008) and operationalized through fsQCA, are theoretically well-suited to social enterprise research because they accommodate the causal complexity—equifinality, conjunctural causation, and asymmetric causality—that characterizes the dual-mission performance problem (Fiss, 2011; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

This study addresses the identified gap by applying fsQCA and NCA to a cross-national sample of 298 social enterprises across Italy, the Netherlands, and Kenya. The three-country sample provides valuable institutional diversity: Italy's social cooperative movement (representing the world's most institutionally embedded social enterprise ecosystem) (Borzaga & Galera, 2016); the Netherlands' hybrid social enterprise model characterized by strong institutional support and developed impact investment markets; and Kenya's growing social enterprise ecosystem embedded in an emerging market context characterized by institutional voids, high social need, and community-based organizational traditions (Khanna & Palepu, 2010).

The remainder of this paper proceeds through literature review, gap identification, methodology, fsQCA analysis, and discussion of findings, theoretical implications, and practical guidance for social enterprise managers and ecosystem stakeholders.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social Entrepreneurship: Conceptual Boundaries and Performance Frameworks**

Social entrepreneurship, broadly defined as the recognition, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities to create social value (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Mair & Martí, 2006), encompasses a diverse organizational population ranging from community development financial institutions and fair-trade cooperatives to impact-focused technology ventures and hybrid legal-form enterprises (Austin et al., 2006; Zahra et al., 2009). This organizational heterogeneity has generated definitional debates that remain partially unresolved (Dacin et al., 2011), but a pragmatic consensus has emerged around the dual-mission criterion: social enterprises simultaneously pursue social value creation and financial sustainability as co-equal organizational objectives (Dees, 1998; Santos, 2012).

Social enterprise performance has been conceptualized through multiple frameworks reflecting this dual-mission complexity. Blended value approaches (Emerson, 2003) evaluate performance across financial, social, and environmental value dimensions simultaneously. Impact measurement

frameworks (Social Return on Investment, Theory of Change modeling) attempt to quantify social value creation in terms comparable to financial metrics. Sustainable value creation (SVC), the dependent variable of the present study, synthesizes these approaches by focusing on the organization's capacity to generate measurable social impact while maintaining the financial and relational resources necessary for continued mission pursuit—a longitudinal performance criterion that captures organizational viability alongside impact achievement (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Stephan et al., 2016).

### **2.2 Stakeholder Theory and Social Enterprise Governance**

Freeman's (1984) seminal stakeholder theory posited that firm performance is enhanced by proactive management of relationships with all parties who have a stake in the organization's activities—extending managerial responsibility beyond shareholders to employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and regulators. In social enterprise contexts, stakeholder theory has been extended to accommodate the distinctive multi-stakeholder governance structures that characterize the sector, including user-members, worker-members, community representatives, public funders, and impact investors (Spear et al., 2007; Sacchetti & Tortia, 2016).

Stakeholder engagement quality (SEQ)—the degree to which social enterprises systematically incorporate stakeholder perspectives into organizational decision-making, co-design service delivery with beneficiaries, and maintain transparent accountability relationships with funders and community partners—has been theorized as

a positive driver of sustainable value creation through multiple mechanisms (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman et al., 2010). High-quality stakeholder engagement generates social legitimacy that facilitates resource mobilization; it produces mission-relevant information that improves service targeting; and it creates the relational trust that sustains long-term collaborative value creation partnerships with community organizations, public agencies, and private sector partners.

### **2.3 Mission Integrity and the Dual-Mission Paradox**

Mission integrity—defined as the degree to which a social enterprise's operational decisions, resource allocation choices, and performance evaluation criteria remain aligned with its original social mission despite commercial pressures and organizational growth (Grimes, 2010)—occupies a theoretically central position in the social enterprise performance literature. Battilana et al. (2015) demonstrated that social enterprises with high mission integrity were better able to maintain beneficiary-centric service orientation as organizational scale increased, while those experiencing mission drift—the gradual displacement of social objectives by commercial priorities—exhibited declining social impact even as financial performance improved.

The theoretical mechanisms connecting mission integrity to sustainable value creation operate at cognitive, organizational, and relational levels. Cognitively, high mission integrity maintains organizational sense-making frameworks that direct attention toward social impact opportunities and resist commercial isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Organizationally, mission-aligned performance evaluation systems create accountability structures that embed social value creation in operational routines rather than relegating it to periodic reporting exercises. Relationally, high mission integrity generates trust with beneficiary communities, social-mission-aligned funders, and partner organizations that regard mission fidelity as a prerequisite for collaborative relationships.

### **2.4 Hybrid Organizational Identity and Legitimacy**

Social enterprises' simultaneous pursuit of commercial and social logics creates hybrid organizational identities that must achieve legitimacy across multiple, potentially conflicting institutional fields (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Battilana et al., 2015). Albert and Whetten's (1985) foundational organizational identity framework—defining identity as what is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization—provides a theoretical basis for analyzing how social enterprises construct and communicate identities that coherently synthesize commercial and social elements.

Hybrid organizational identity clarity (HOIC) refers to the degree to which a social enterprise's self-conception, external communication, and governance structures consistently and coherently articulate the integration of commercial and social logics rather than compartmentalizing them into separate organizational domains (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013). High HOIC enables social enterprises to present clear, consistent organizational narratives to diverse stakeholders—reassuring commercial partners of financial competence while demonstrating social

mission commitment to beneficiary communities and social-mission funders. Low HOIC, conversely, creates identity confusion that generates legitimacy deficits in both commercial and social institutional fields.

## **2.5 Configurational Approaches to Social Enterprise Performance**

The dominant variable-centered analytical approaches in social enterprise research—regression, SEM, and multilevel modeling—impose symmetry assumptions (equivalent positive and negative effects of predictors), independence assumptions (additive rather than interactive causal effects), and equifinality restrictions (single causal pathway to performance outcomes) that are theoretically unjustified in the complex, context-sensitive environment of social enterprise management (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008).

Set-theoretic methods, operationalized through fsQCA, overcome these limitations by treating causal conditions as configurations—combinations of conditions that together constitute sufficient or necessary causes of outcomes—rather than as independent additive predictors (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). fsQCA's capacity to identify equifinal paths to outcomes (multiple sufficient combinations), asymmetric causality (conditions for high outcomes may differ from conditions for low outcomes), and conjunctural causation (conditions that only generate effects in combination with other conditions) makes it theoretically well-suited to social enterprise performance research, where organizational diversity, context-sensitivity, and institutional

heterogeneity are the norm rather than the exception.

## **2.6 Institutional Context and Cross-National Comparative Analysis**

The institutional contexts of Italy, the Netherlands, and Kenya create distinct enabling and constraining conditions for social enterprise performance that motivate the cross-national comparative design. Italy's social cooperative framework—anchored in Law 381/1991 and embedded in regional social economy ecosystems—provides institutional scaffolding that supports stakeholder engagement through co-operative governance requirements and reduces mission drift through legally mandated asset locks and social purpose reporting (Borzaga & Galera, 2016). The Netherlands' mixed institutional model combines private law flexibility with emerging certification frameworks (Social Enterprise NL) and growing impact investment markets. Kenya's emerging social enterprise ecosystem is embedded in institutional voids (Khanna & Palepu, 2010) that require enterprises to develop substitute institutional functions—community governance mechanisms, informal accountability systems, and relationship-based trust—that may generate distinct configurations of conditions sufficient for high SVC.

## **3. Research Gap**

Social enterprise performance research has examined stakeholder engagement, mission integrity, and hybrid organizational identity as independent determinants of sustainable value creation, but has not investigated how

these conditions combine configurally to produce SVC across diverse institutional contexts. Variable-centered analyses have obscured the equifinal character of sustainable value creation—the possibility that different combinations of conditions may be equally sufficient for high SVC—and have neglected the institutional conditionality that may make different configurations effective in different country contexts. The present study addresses these gaps through fsQCA and NCA, providing the first cross-national configurational analysis of sustainable value creation in social enterprises.

#### **4. Research Objectives**

1. To identify the necessary conditions for high sustainable value creation in social enterprises across Italy, the Netherlands, and Kenya.
2. To identify the configurations of conditions (SEQ, MI, HOIC, and institutional context) that are sufficient for high SVC.
3. To examine whether different institutional contexts generate distinct sufficient configurations for SVC.
4. To provide configurational guidance for social enterprise managers and ecosystem stakeholders navigating dual-mission sustainability challenges.

#### **5. Hypotheses Development**

Given fsQCA's configurational orientation, the study advances three propositions rather than traditional hypotheses:

**P1:** Mission integrity is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for high sustainable value creation across all institutional contexts.

**P2:** Multiple equifinal configurations of SEQ, MI, and HOIC are sufficient for high SVC, with different configurations prevalent across different institutional contexts.

**P3:** In emerging market institutional contexts (Kenya), stakeholder engagement and mission integrity can substitute for hybrid organizational identity clarity as a configurational component of sufficient SVC pathways.

#### **6. Research Methodology**

##### **6.1 Sample and Data Collection**

A cross-national sample of 298 social enterprises across Italy (n = 108), the Netherlands (n = 96), and Kenya (n = 94) was assembled through national social enterprise networks (Confcooperative Italy, Social Enterprise NL, Kenya Social Enterprise Network). Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of enterprises with: (1) explicit dual social-commercial mission statements; (2) minimum three years of operation; and (3) availability of audited financial and social impact reporting data.

Data were collected through structured interviews with founding directors/CEOs (primary) and board members (secondary verification), supplemented by document analysis of annual reports, impact assessments, and governance documentation. The dual-informant, document-supplemented data collection

strategy was adopted specifically to reduce key informant bias in fsQCA, where calibration accuracy is critical.

## 6.2 Construct Measurement and fsQCA Calibration

SEQ was assessed through a composite of stakeholder participation indices, governance inclusivity scores, and community accountability documentation review (14 items). MI was measured through mission alignment indicators including mission-referenced performance evaluation, asset lock status, and beneficiary-centric service delivery documentation (12 items). HOIC was assessed through organizational communication analysis, governance structure review, and identity coherence ratings by independent assessors (10 items). SVC was operationalized through a blended value composite combining financial sustainability scores (revenue/cost ratio trajectories), social impact documentation quality, and stakeholder-assessed mission achievement.

All constructs were calibrated to fuzzy-set membership scores (0–1) using direct calibration with three qualitative anchors: fully in (0.95), crossover (0.50), and fully out (0.05), following Ragin's (2008) calibration guidelines.

## 6.3 Analysis Strategy

NCA was first employed to identify necessary conditions (Dul, 2016), using the ceiling regression (CR) technique with effect size threshold  $d \geq 0.10$  for theoretical relevance. fsQCA (version 4.1) was then conducted with a frequency threshold of 2 (minimum number of cases per

configuration) and a consistency threshold of 0.80 for sufficiency analysis, following standard fsQCA protocol (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

## 7. Data Analysis and Findings

### 7.1 Sample Profile

**Table 1** *Organizational Profile of Social Enterprise Sample (N = 298)*

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Country	Italy	108	36.2
	Netherlands	96	32.2
	Kenya	94	31.5
Legal Form	Social Cooperative	112	37.6
	Social Enterprise (hybrid)	98	32.9
	NGO with enterprise	88	29.5
Sector	Social Services	89	29.9
	Education/Training	74	24.8
	Agriculture/Food	61	20.5
	Environment/Energy	47	15.8
	Healthcare	27	9.1
Age (years)	3–5	78	26.2
	6–10	119	39.9
	11+	101	33.9
Annual	<€100K	87	29.2

Characteristic	Category	N	%	Condition	Coverage	Consistency	Effect Size (d)	Significant?
Revenue	€100K-€500K	124	41.6	High MI	0.891	0.876	0.421	Yes (p < .001)
	>€500K	87	29.2	High SEQ	0.824	0.798	0.287	Yes (p < .01)
				High HOIC	0.812	0.783	0.261	Yes (p < .05)
				High IEQ	0.734	0.741	0.198	Borderline

### 7.2 Descriptive Statistics and Fuzzy-Set Membership Distributions

**Table 2** Descriptive Statistics and Calibration Summary

Construct	Raw Mean	Raw SD	Fuzzy Mean	% Fully In (>0.8)	% Fully Out (<0.2)
SEQ	4.61	1.18	0.589	34.2%	11.7%
MI	4.83	1.12	0.621	39.6%	9.7%
HOIC	4.29	1.34	0.541	28.5%	14.4%
SVC	4.47	1.19	0.569	31.9%	12.4%
IEQ (country-level)	—	—	IT: 0.781; NL: 0.834; KE: 0.412	—	—

Note. NCA ceiling regression technique (CR). Effect size  $d \geq 0.10$  = relevant;  $d \geq 0.30$  = large. Mission integrity is the only condition meeting large-effect necessary condition threshold. SEQ and HOIC are relevant but not large-effect necessary conditions. IEQ is borderline and context-dependent.

### 7.3 Necessary Condition Analysis

**Table 3** Necessary Condition Analysis Results (Outcome: High SVC)

### 7.4 fsQCA Sufficient Conditions Analysis

**Table 4** fsQCA Truth Table Summary (N = 298; Frequency Threshold = 2; Consistency Threshold = 0.80)

Configuration	SE	M	HOI	IEQ	Raw Coverage	Unique Coverage	Consistency
Config. 1	●	●	●	●	0.412	0.089	0.891
Config. 2	○	●	●	●	0.287	0.063	0.851
Config. 3	●	●	○	○	0.241	0.078	0.834

Configuration	SEQ	MI	HOIC	IEQ	Raw Coverage	Unique Consistency
Solution Coverage					0.658	
Solution Consistency					0.863	

Note. ● = condition present; ○ = condition absent; blank = irrelevant (don't care). Solution coverage 0.658 indicates the three configurations collectively explain 65.8% of the high-SVC outcome set. Solution consistency 0.863 exceeds the 0.80 threshold.

**Configuration 1 (High-Resource Integration):** Present predominantly in Italian and Dutch samples (74% of cases). High SEQ + High MI + High HOIC in high-IEQ institutional environments. Coverage = 0.412, consistency = 0.891. This configuration represents the "ideal type" social enterprise—one that achieves SVC through comprehensive integration of stakeholder engagement, mission fidelity, and hybrid identity clarity within enabling institutional environments.

**Configuration 2 (Mission-Identity Anchored):** Present across all three countries, with slight Italian concentration (58% of cases). High MI + High HOIC without high SEQ, in high-IEQ environments. Coverage = 0.287, consistency = 0.851. This configuration demonstrates that intensive stakeholder engagement is not necessary for high SVC when mission integrity and hybrid identity

are both strong—organizations with clear, coherent, mission-aligned identities can achieve sustainable value creation through more bounded stakeholder relationships rather than comprehensive engagement strategies.

**Configuration 3 (Relational Mission-Driven):** Present predominantly in Kenyan sample (71% of cases). High SEQ + High MI without high HOIC, in low-IEQ environments. Coverage = 0.241, consistency = 0.834. This configuration is theoretically the most novel: in institutional void contexts, social enterprises can achieve high SVC through strong stakeholder relationships and mission fidelity even without clearly articulated hybrid organizational identities—the relational and mission dimensions compensate for identity ambiguity that might be performance-constraining in higher-IEQ institutional settings.

### 7.5 Analysis of High-SVC Negation (Conditions for Low SVC)

**Table 5** fsQCA Negation Analysis: Configurations Associated with Low Sustainable Value Creation

Configuration	SEQ	MI	HOIC	Coverage	Consistency
~Config. A	○	○	○	0.312	0.871
~Config. B	●	○	●	0.198	0.829

Note. ○ = condition absent. Asymmetric results: absence of high MI appears in both low-SVC configurations, while high MI

appears as necessary condition for high SVC, confirming its causal asymmetric importance.

## **8. Discussion**

The NCA finding that mission integrity is the only large-effect necessary condition for high SVC ( $d = 0.421$ ) is the study's most consequential theoretical contribution. This result establishes that, regardless of stakeholder engagement quality or hybrid identity clarity, social enterprises cannot achieve high sustainable value creation without high mission integrity—a conclusion with strong theoretical resonance and practical implications. The absence of high MI in both low-SVC configurations (Table 5) confirms the causal asymmetric importance of mission integrity: it is both necessary for high SVC and, when absent, sufficient to generate low SVC even when other conditions are favorable.

The three equifinal configurations reveal that the pathways to high SVC are genuinely multiple rather than singular, validating the configurational approach against variable-centered analytical alternatives. The Kenya-specific Configuration 3—achieving SVC through stakeholder relationships and mission integrity without developed hybrid identity clarity—is particularly theoretically significant. It suggests that in institutional void contexts, social capital and relational legitimacy (operationalized through stakeholder engagement quality) can substitute for the formal organizational identity clarity that institutional environments typically scaffold in higher-quality regulatory settings. This finding extends institutional void theory (Khanna &

Palepu, 2010) to the social enterprise domain by identifying the specific organizational mechanisms through which social enterprises navigate institutional voids.

## **9. Theoretical Implications**

This study contributes to three theoretical conversations. First, it advances Stakeholder Theory in the social enterprise context by demonstrating that stakeholder engagement, while beneficial, is neither necessary nor sufficient for high SVC in isolation—its performance value is conjunctural, depending on the presence or absence of other conditions including mission integrity and institutional context quality. Second, it enriches Hybrid Organizational Identity Theory by demonstrating the asymmetric institutional conditionality of HOIC's contribution to SVC: important in enabling institutional environments but substitutable in institutional void contexts. Third, it provides the first multi-country fsQCA-based empirical validation of configurational thinking in social enterprise performance research, contributing methodologically to the growing literature on set-theoretic methods in entrepreneurship.

## **10. Practical Implications**

For social enterprise managers, the NCA finding that mission integrity is a necessary condition for high SVC carries a clear operational implication: mission alignment mechanisms—mission-referenced performance dashboards, beneficiary-centric accountability systems, governance

structures that protect social mission from commercial isomorphic pressures—are non-negotiable organizational investments rather than optional governance enhancements. Managers in resource-constrained environments (particularly Kenyan and comparable Sub-Saharan African contexts) may find reassurance in Configuration 3's demonstration that high SVC is achievable through stakeholder relationship investment and mission fidelity without the organizational identity clarity development that typically requires more substantial institutional and organizational resources.

## 11. Conclusion

This study has applied fsQCA and NCA to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for sustainable value creation in 298 social enterprises across Italy, the Netherlands, and Kenya. Mission integrity emerged as the only large-effect necessary condition, while three equifinal configurations—differentiated by institutional context—were identified as sufficient pathways. These findings advance configurational thinking in social entrepreneurship, integrate stakeholder theory and hybrid identity theory in a novel cross-national comparative framework, and provide practitioners with nuanced, context-sensitive guidance for dual-mission management. Future research should extend the configurational framework longitudinally to examine how social enterprises navigate transitions between configurations over time, and should incorporate additional countries to further map the institutional boundary conditions of equifinal SVC pathways.

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