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Aligning multiple mandates and mission simultaneously: a case of small and medium-sized social enterprises in South Africa

Emmanuel Simiyu Osembo, Kerrin Myres and Lauren Jankelowitz

Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that social enterprises balance dual-mandated goals emanating from the respective social and commercial logics, to avoid mission drift. However, little is known about the practical ways to simultaneously align multiple goals stemming from multiple external mandates and core social mission. These multiple mandates are embodied within multiple logics. To address this issue, this research analyses how small and medium-sized social enterprises (SMSEs) in resource-constrained environments like South Africa act as melting pots of multiple mandates and core mission that require simultaneous alignment. The study reveals that at a meso-level, the SMSEs leverage community embeddedness, mission agility, and proactive monitoring and evaluation to simultaneously exploit and explore opportunities. The study introduces a framework for internal-external practising facilitating innovative exploration to align multiple mandates with the core missions at a meso-level in social enterprises. With these findings, this study adds to the emergent literature on multiple mandates alignment in social enterprises.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of literature has considered how social enterprises manage mission drift amidst mandated dual social-commercial goals (Besharov and Smith 2014; Mair 2020; Smith and Besharov 2019). The alignment of the dual social and commercial goals embodied within dual social and commercial logics (Battilana and Lee 2014), renders them effective in addressing gaps in social welfare.

Most of the studies to date imply a dyadic context where social enterprises navigate dual social and commercial mandates (Bacq and Lumpkin 2021; Besharov and Smith 2014; Mair 2020; Pache and Santos 2013), stipulated by the mission and funder external requirements, respectively. However, emergent literature portrays social enterprises as 'battlefields of competing [multiple] logics or sites of unresolvable paradox' (Mair 2020, 11). The external multiple mandates associated with these competing logics translate into goal tensions that social enterprises must navigate. While enhancing our understanding, existing research provides limited insights into how social enterprises align these multiple mandates with their core social missions to render them effectual.

With research emphasis on dual tensions at meso-level, blind spots emerge in how social enterprises fulfil multiple mandates while attending to their core social missions

CONTACT Emmanuel Simiyu Osembo emmanuelosembo@gmail.com Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, Johannesburg, South Africa

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simultaneously (Besharov and Smith 2014; Mair 2020; Varendh-Mansson, Wry, and Szafarz 2020). Recent literature acknowledges the difficulties of aligning multiple goals, as organizations strive to balance external mandates and core social missions in their quest to explore and exploit (Mair 2020). Understanding how these mandates and social missions are simultaneously aligned at a meso-level is essential, as misalignment can derail the effectiveness of social enterprises (Kodzi 2015; Mair 2020).

Furthermore, calls exist for more studies on social enterprises in resource-constrained contexts (Klarin and Suseno 2023). Most of these are small and medium-sized social enterprises (SMSEs) that face the challenge of aligning multiple community needs, articulating their social mission, fulfilling mandates imposed by external bodies such as governments and funders, and striving for financial sustainability (Littlewood et al. 2022). This challenge translates to multiple internal tensions (Bacq and Lumpkin 2021; Besharov and Smith 2014; Mair 2020; Pache and Santos 2013). The problem is particularly pronounced for African SMSEs, where the risk of prioritizing external mandates over their social mission is heightened due to their vulnerabilities (Littlewood and Holt 2020; Littlewood et al. 2022). To further sustainable development, *the question is, how do SMSEs in resource-constrained contexts align multiple mandates and core social missions simultaneously?*

In addressing this question, we used the ambidexterity perspective to gain insight into how social enterprises continuously balance explore and exploit decisions, at the meso-level through practices and practising actions (Battilana 2018; Besharov and Smith 2014; Nosella, Cantarello, and Filippini 2012). Specifically, we looked at how these SMSEs [lacking resources and capabilities] innovatively explore in order to align multiple mandates and core missions, a difficult undertaking for such small organizations (Felício, Caldeirinha, and Dutra 2019; Iborra, Safón, and Dolz 2020). The study drew upon case study research of five South African SMSEs pursuing multiple funding arrangements, endeavouring to safeguard their mission, navigating beneficiary community demands and attending to other multiple stakeholders. This presents a melting pot of multiple mandate tensions needing alignment with the core mission.

The study contributes by introducing a framework that social enterprises can use for internal-external practising to align multiple mandates with core missions. The study describes three practical overarching pathways SMSEs optimize to navigate the alignment. First, they leverage community embeddedness for legitimacy and advocacy of the core social mission. Second, they display agility by adapting to various mandates within the core mission. Third, they employ proactive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a dynamic abstract artefact that aligns mission and mandates from the outset. Consequently, this research presents novel insights into how SMSEs innovatively explore at the meso-level to align their mission with external mandates, addressing calls to examine the varied approaches adopted by organizations to align multiple mandates and missions (Mair 2020). This enhances arguments contained in the recent *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* Special Issue on 'Entrepreneurship-as-practice' (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020), by nuancing the art of practising at meso-level.

This article is structured as follows: it begins with a literature review, moving from the alignment of dual social-commercial logics and their associated mandate goals to multiple mandates-mission alignment. It then highlights simultaneous ambidexterity in explaining the continuous explore-exploit as SMSEs face multiple mandates amid their core mission. The unique context and the organizations' approach to balancing the resulting tensions and aligning multiple mandate goals with core mission are then emphasized. The research design and methodology are outlined, followed by findings and discussions. The article concludes by highlighting key contributions related to the SMSEs' innovative exploration through an internal-external practising framework at a meso-level.

2. Background

2.1. Dual social-commercial to multiple mandates-mission goal tensions

A number of influential social enterprise studies suggest that failure to balance dual mandated goals emanating from the respective social and commercial dual logics results in mission drift (Battilana 2018; Battilana and Dorado 2010; Battilana and Lee 2014; Battilana, Besharov, and Mitzinneck 2017; Besharov and Smith 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana, and Mair 2014; Mair and Marti 2006; Pache and Santos 2013). These studies offer a point of departure for this study. The reality is that social enterprises pursue different funding pathways and interact with multiple stakeholders to achieve social missions. The pursuit of different pathways and partnerships with multiple stakeholders may then translate to other multiple goals (Varendh-Mansson, Wry, and Szafarz 2020), resulting in multiple conflicting mandates (Mair 2020). Mandates are defined as the requirements 'imposed by external bodies, be they funders, governments, or standard-setting or accreditation agencies . . . a non-profit is required to observe or practise' (Mair 2020, 26).

The focus of this study moves away from how social enterprises make sense of and respond to conflicting dual mandated goals emanating from the respective social and commercial dual logics. Instead, we focus on how these enterprises align multiple mandated goals and core missions (Mair 2020; Smith and Tracey 2016), embodied within multiple logics (Besharov and Smith 2014; Gopakumar 2022).

How social enterprises innovatively explore to balance multiple mandates and mission at meso-level is inconclusive in literature. Minkoff and Powell (2006) were among the first to highlight that tensions emerge when organizations try to navigate multiple mandates arising from various funder requirements and core mission activities. Recent literature further acknowledges the difficulties inherent in balancing tensions in the quest to explore and exploit under these conditions (Mair 2020).

The multiple tensions intensify as social enterprises pursue multiple funding opportunities involving multiple stakeholders [explore], while safeguarding core social missions [exploit] (Besharov and Smith 2014; Henderson and Lambert 2018). The competing and sometimes contradictory demands may result in added complexity in, for example, stakeholder management (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2019, 2020), mission clarity (Ometto et al. 2019), financial sustainability (Doherty, Haugh, and Lyon 2014), and the alignment of beneficiary communities (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022; Mair 2020).

Therefore, continuous and simultaneous explore-exploit is essential to navigate and align these multiple tensions for effective functioning. While extant literature focuses on how organizations exploit to foreground social mission within the social-commercial goals dyad, blind spots emerge on how they innovatively explore to align multiple external mandates and internal social missions (Mair 2020). For instance, SMSEs operating in resource-constrained contexts, may contort their activities to appease funders and other stakeholders thereby, demand more innovative efforts in aligning mission and mandates (Littlewood et al. 2022).

2.2. Continuous explore-exploit balancing of mission-mandates goals tensions in small organisations

This study draws from organizational ambidexterity to understand the explore-exploit balancing of multiple mandates and mission. With a dearth of research on how organizations align mission and mandates (Mair 2020), ambidexterity offers insight into how the goal tensions are managed and how 'competing alternatives co-exist' (Smith and Lewis 2011, 397).

In this study, 'ambidexterity refers to an organisation's ability to perform differing and often competing, strategic acts simultaneously' (Simsek et al. 2009, 865). This definition is adopted because it encapsulates the goal tensions manifesting when organizations' efforts and resources are divided across potentially opposing actions, albeit in multiple fashions. Indeed, ambidexterity is applicable when 'opposing organisational demands compete for resources, attention and action to design strategy, implement the business operation, and deliver performance expectations in a myriad of organisational settings' (Liu et al. 2022, 2).

The main assumptions of ambidexterity are first, that the ability to explore and exploit exists internally in an organization (O'Reilly, Charles, and Tushman 2013). Second, that tensions exist between exploitation and exploration (Gibson and Birkinshaw 2004). Third, that successful ambidexterity requires sufficiency of resources in organizations for simultaneous execution (Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008; N. Turner, Swart, and Maylor 2013), and fourth, that more success is exhibited in larger organizations than smaller ones (O'Reilly, Charles, and Tushman 2013; Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008).

To fulfil multiple external mandates, organizations need innovative exploration practices that emphasize adaptability, diversification, responsiveness, and flexibility. In contrast, foregrounding their core mission requires exploitation practices focused on stability, continuity, and focus (Gibson and Birkinshaw 2004; O'Reilly, Charles, and Tushman 2013; N. Turner, Swart, and Maylor 2013). While the importance of the latter is well-documented in social enterprise literature (Besharov and Smith 2014; Mair 2020; Varendh-Mansson, Wry, and Szafarz 2020), there is a paucity of research on the former.

Furthermore, it is unclear how small organizations experiencing resource constraints, like SMSEs, can innovatively explore while aligning external mandates with their core missions. The third and fourth ambidexterity assumptions, which suggest that such organizations struggle to explore and exploit simultaneously, are crucial to this study's theoretical extension (Iborra, Safón, and Dolz 2020).

2.3. *Setting: SMSEs within resource-challenged environments*

Most of the research on how social enterprises respond to mission tensions has been in settings that explicitly classify social enterprise typologies, such as Europe and the US, with calls for more research from other parts of the world (Klarin and Suseno 2023; Mair 2020). Part of the advancement in the discourse from developed countries is the existence of resources and a variety of how the social enterprises organize in response to conflicting dual logics. For example, how community interest companies in the UK and Benefit corporations in the US navigate (Haigh et al. 2015; Rawhouser, Cummings, and Crane 2015). However, we still do not know how social enterprises align multiple mandates as they balance tensions in less researched contexts, such as in Africa (itt; Mair 2020).

South Africa, despite being highly regarded among emerging economies due to its higher-than-average GDP compared to other sub-Saharan African countries (Littlewood and Holt 2018a; World Bank 2019), faces significant resource constraints. These constraints are evident in the pervasive challenges of poverty, high morbidity levels, extreme inequality, low educational outcomes, over 50% youth unemployment, and high crime rates (Kodzi 2015). These economic and social issues underscore the necessity for complementary efforts by partners such as social enterprises to bridge the existing social welfare gaps. However, external funding for these organizations continues to dwindle as South Africa is classified as an emerging economy, which often leads to decreased financial support from international donors (Littlewood and Holt 2018a; World Bank 2019).

Social enterprises comprise for-profit and non-profit organizations (NPOs) pursuing both social and commercial goals (Choi and Majumdar 2014; Defourny, Nyssens, and Brolis 2020; Klarin and Suseno 2023). This study examines SMSEs defined as organizations often resource-constrained, embedded in communities, use diverse funding arrangements, and engage multiple stakeholders (Gupta et al. 2020; Maier, Meyer, and Steinbereithner 2016; Weerawardena, McDonald, and Mort 2010), to achieve social missions and manage resource dependencies. This necessity exposes SMSEs to multiple external mandates, which, although not intended to divert them from their missions, can shift their focus away from their core missions.

SMSEs in South Africa primarily operate at the community level to achieve social missions, with most registered as NPOs, comprising about 93% of the 276,183 registered NPOs (DSD 2022). In a resource-constrained environment, these SMSEs face heightened vulnerability due to insufficient resources, competition and dependency on funders and other stakeholders (Littlewood and Holt 2018a). However, how they navigate in such settings warrants further research (Littlewood and Holt 2020).

These SMSEs strive to balance tensions among various stakeholders, including community leaders, beneficiaries, government departments, and funders (Kodzi 2015). They must align their activities to meet the demands of these stakeholders while managing specific funder requirements and income-generating activities. To remain viable and sustainable, SMSEs may prioritize one set of mandates over others, potentially compromising their social mission (Henderson and Lambert 2018; Mair 2020). This study explores how South African SMSEs navigate these challenges, aligning multiple mandates with their social missions.

3. Research design and methodology

The phenomena in this study aim are highly contextual. Hence, the use of a case study design, through multiple cases, allowed the exploration of the phenomenon within its natural context and link to theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Welch et al. 2020; Yin 2017). The exploratory and inductive nature of case design (Henry and Foss 2015) facilitated a detailed examination of how the social enterprises innovative exploration facilitated the alignment of multiple external mandates with their primary social mission simultaneously.

3.1. Sampling and case selection

The cases were selected using purposive sampling to provide more in-depth and rich insight into the phenomenon (Gentles et al. 2015; Henry and Foss 2015) within a specific context bounded by space and time (Yin 2017). To select the cases, theoretical sampling was adopted to extend the theory (Eisenhardt 1989). Theoretically, organizations must simultaneously explore and exploit to manage internal competing and possibly conflicting multiple goals (Zimmermann et al. 2020). The selected multiple cases were SMSEs engaged in multiple funding arrangements to fulfil social mission (Mair 2020), operated at the community level (Littlewood et al. 2022), navigating multiple stakeholders (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2020), and were also pursuing earned income for sustainability (Reficco, Layrisse, and Barrios 2021). Accordingly, this presented multiple mandates needing to be navigated within the selected cases and provided an opportunity to understand how the SMSEs align multiple mandates with their core mission simultaneously. This is from the premise that organizations may be required to adapt to manage multiple competing organizational goals (Ometto et al. 2019; Powell and Rerup 2017).

The study employed a homogenous purposive sampling strategy through the identification of similar (industry, size, operating budget, and focus) South African SMSEs in the health and social services sector, to exclude sector-specific effects in other sectors (Creswell and Poth 2016). Despite having commonalities, each case selected offered variation and insight into how they adapted to explore and align activities related to multiple external mandates with the social mission. This sampling methodology was well suited to the case study research, especially when selecting cases that provide in-depth information (Yin 2017). The sample size included seven organizations but only five were analysed to better answer the research question. The cases were selected based on the following factors:

(a) SMSEs having operating budgets below R50 million per annum in the health and social services sectors.

(b) SMSEs working to support beneficiaries at the community level to allow for investigation on how they maintain their mission focus.
(c) SMSEs engaged in multiple funding arrangements, for instance, through multiple contractual agreements, earned income generation, dealing with multiple stakeholders, and so forth, to gather insight into how they manage multiple mandates.

The table below further describes the selected cases multiple mandates they navigated and missions they needed to align with.

3.2. Data collection

Ethical clearance was obtained from the researchers' local university. Data was collected using both primary and secondary sources through semi-structured interviews of respondents (Gehman et al. 2018; Roulston 2010), secondary documents, and observations (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins 2010; Yin 2017). This enhanced the triangulation of the empirical study (Fusch, Fusch, and Ness 2018; Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte 2014). The data collection happened between February and June 2022.

3.2.1. Semi structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews facilitated drawing rich experiential information from the respondents (Gehman et al. 2018). Semi-structured interviews also allowed for the framing of the discussions and an opportunity for the respondents to share more detailed factual and experiential information (Gehman et al. 2018). The semi-structured interview protocol was adopted and covered the relevant topics with scope for flexibility (Roulston 2010). The interview questions followed several overarching thoughts on how social enterprise explored multiple mandates while aligning with their missions. Without a prior research instrument, the interview guide was developed using ideas from the conceptual framework by Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan (2014). The topics included an introduction of the organization, a discussion on their core mission, information on different funders and stakeholder mandates at play and how they ensure they balance all these stakeholder interests while avoiding mission drift.

The most knowledgeable informants within the social enterprises, with knowledge of actions around practices, processes, and routines related to resource seeking, tracking mission attainment, implementation, and reporting on funder requirements, were targeted for interviews to mitigate retrospective informant bias (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). The respondents included directors and senior and middle-level managers who oversee the strategic mission, operations, monitoring, project management, reporting, and funding-related processes. The number of respondents selected averaged six per each of the final five identified case social enterprises to facilitate triangulation and saturation. Regarding saturation, during analysis, it was evident that the responses started to have recurring themes from the 13th interview, and hence, the 29 interviews are well within what is suggested in the literature for analysis (Mason 2010).

The data collection was conducted between February and June 2022 during the COVID-19 partial restrictions imposed by the government. Hence, seven of these interviews were conducted physically face-to-face, twenty were virtual face-to-face, and four were platforms without video due to bandwidth challenges. Interviews conducted by synchronous online platforms, such as Zoom, mitigate challenges that may arise in conducting face-to-face interviews (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Salmons 2018), especially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic movement and social-distancing restrictions. The average interview time was 1.05 hours, and each interview's actual times are detailed in Table 2.

A pilot interview was conducted by a global social enterprise founded and headquartered in South Africa. The key respondent was the organization's CEO, who considered himself a subject matter specialist in social enterprises as he has worked in over 25 countries in the sector. The pilot interview tested the clarity of the questions and whether they would facilitate in-depth discussions that solicit insights to answer the research question. Seven cases participated in the study, but five were analysed to answer the research question better.

3.2.2. Documentation

Documentary evidence was collected and reviewed to enrich other primary obtained data (Weerawardena, McDonald, and Mort 2010). The types of data from the 199 documents helped to explain the contribution. The document selection was based on the following criteria:

- Founding documents to review the articulated missions of the social enterprises and how they are registered, as summarized in Table 1.
- Funding or resource application documents of successful contracts and funding agreements to understand the activities proposed and stipulated requirements.
- Annual or funder reports to review how activities are monitored against the funder requirements and the organization's missions.
- Financial reports to determine how different funding sources are accounted for and reported on.

Table 1. Case description (all names below are pseudonyms).

Cases	SMSE registration structure	Core mission	Multiple mandates to navigate
Damco	Education and Development Trust with NPO status	Offer tailored training, social research, and health and social development interventions in the health and social services for children, youth, and young adults sector at the community level.	Earned income through fully owned accredited Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) training college, social & health services provision at the community level, employment and training agent on behalf of government municipalities, multiple funders, family trust
S-Impact	NPO with a profit arm	Provide care and support to vulnerable children and their families in the health and social services sector at the community level.	Social & health services provision at the community level, operating a fully owned for-profit social enterprise, multiple funders, employment, and SETA accredited training agent on behalf of government municipalities, running a commercial building
Hilcorp	Trust with NPO status	Use health and other means to improve the overall well-being of the communities in the health and social services for children, youth, and young adults sector	Social & health services provision at the community level, SETA accredited training centre, running a commercial building, multiple funders, secretariate of local government, and community advisory council
H-Inc	Non-profit company with NPO status	Poverty alleviation and transforming communities through economic strengthening focusing on youth, women, and marginalized minority communities.	Social & health services provision at the community level, multiple funders, employment, and SETA accredited training agent on behalf of government municipalities, employment agent of the government
Ugo	Proprietary limited liability company (pty) with fully owned NPO arm	Enhance generation of quality data and innovative M&E interventions to generate innovative solutions for better population health and development outcomes within communities	Operating for-profit social enterprise, social & health services provision at the community level, consultancies in M&E for earned income, multiple funders, initially family-run consultancy

Table 2. Cases, respondents and document review.

Organisation	Respondent (individual interviews) Total = 29 interviews Total time 1,818 mins or 30.3 hours	Secondary data (document review) Total = 199 documents	Observation
Damco	Executive Director (*50 min*); Operations & HR manager/Deputy director (*55 min*); Program manager (*49 min*); M&E coordinator *(38 min)*; Finance manager *(38 min);* IT/Admin coordinator *(33 min);* total approx. 263 min *6 interviews*	Annual and program reports; financial reports; sample contract agreements; strategy & policy documents *45 documents*	Observation memo
S-Impact	Executive Director (*1hr20min*); M&E manager (*1hr15min*); Program manager (*1hr10min*); Finance manager (*47 min*); HR/Admin manager *(44 min*); total approx. 316 min *5 interviews*	Annual and program reports; financial reports; contract agreements; strategy & policy documents *42 documents*	Memo (virtual)
Hilcorp	Executive Director(*1hr06min*); Program manager (*1hr03min)*; Finance and ops manager (*1hr03min)*; M&E manager (*44 min*); HR/Admin manager (*56 min)*; total approx. 292 min *5 interviews*	Annual and program reports; financial reports; contract agreements; strategy & policy documents *36 documents*	Memo (virtual)
H-Inc	Executive Director/CEO (*1hr15min*); M&E manager (*1hr11min*); Finance manager (*1hr16min)*; Program manager (*1hr21min)*; HR/Admin manager (*49 min)*; IT/Admin coordinator (*47 min*); total approx. 399 min *6 interviews*	Annual and program reports; financial reports; contract agreements; strategy & policy documents *45 documents*	Observation memo
Ugo	Executive Director/CEO (*1hr17min)*; Operations Director (*1hr10min)*; M&E Director (*1hr15min)*; Program Director (*1 hr*); Director fundraising (*55 min)*; Finance manager *(43 min)*; IT/data coordinator (*38 min*); total approx. 418 min *7 interviews*	Annual and program reports; financial reports; contract agreements; strategy & policy documents *31 documents*	Observation memo

- Organizational structure and standard operating procedures that can assist in reviewing the internal routines and practices and how they monitor and track set contractual activities against their stated mission.

Documentary evidence was necessary for this study, and reviewing the 199 documents also allowed for the triangulation of findings. The hermeneutical analysis approach facilitated making sense of the meanings within the documentary evidence when obtaining insight into how the organizations align their mission and mandates from the pre-proposal to reporting phases. The use of documentary evidence across the phases [pre-proposal, proposal, contracting, implementation, reporting] and hermeneutic analysis was essential to corroborate interview data. All this was coded using Atlas. ti. As summarized in Table 2, the critical documentary evidence reviewed included Requests for proposals (RFPs), successful proposals, funding contractual agreements, funder reports, annual reports, audit reports, and other strategic planning and policy documents. This enriched and triangulated the primary data obtained (Weerawardena, McDonald, and Mort 2010) and provided insight into the phases.

3.2.3. Observations

Participant observations were conducted in the cases to corroborate how practices that facilitate the simultaneous alignment of mission and multiple mandates were enacted internally. A semi-structured observation checklist was utilized to gain insight into the ways in which participants deliberated and made sense to align activities that may be conflicting in fulfilling both mandates and mission. For example, one of the researchers participated in two management meetings in Damco, with one of the main agenda items being how they navigate the relationship with one funder who was asking for more data than stipulated in the prior agreement. Another example was participation in a board meeting in Ugo with one agenda item relating to how they had won an assignment in a different country to do data assurance work in a field and country they had not ventured into before. They discussed how to be innovative, but remain aligned with their mission.

Having participated in such meetings before, the researchers had tacit knowledge to gain fruitful insights during the observation sessions and were able to draw insights into how the organizations creatively aligned the multiple mandates with their mission. The researchers had to counter potential biases by practising reflexivity and acknowledgement of inherent biases upfront, as well as maintaining analytical memos and fieldnotes (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Yin 2017).

3.3. Data analysis

In exploring in-depth and rich information through our chosen case study design, we utilized conventional content analysis to derive codes and categories from the data, rather than predetermining them (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This facilitated the generation of themes and patterns that assisted in answering the research question.

The study was inductive; hence, the coding and subsequent data analysis were driven from the obtained data instead of a prior envisaged analysis framework (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). We coded all quotes and analysed them to sort and group the transcribed text data using codes and categories that provided meaning in a structured fashion (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This was through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Saldana 2013), in this case, Atlas.ti. We then linked the codes to data and later to categories (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm 2021). This iterative process happened in about three cycles and, in other instances, four or five cycles to get to a group of related categories (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm 2021; Saldana 2013). Furthermore, the codes were refined to depict 'repetitive patterns of action' (Saldana 2013, 5), highlighting practices and how they were reconfigured to align multiple mandates and missions. Finally, codes within three categories were generated after splitting, merging, and dropping codes and categories (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm 2021). All the coded transcribed interviews and documents are available in the university's central repository.

We developed the themes as we analysed how SMSEs navigated the pre-proposal, proposal writing, negotiation and contracting, implementation, and reporting phases, ensuring alignment across projects with the missions. The semi-structured interviews provided insight into how the organizations creatively explored various funders whilst navigating the resulting mandates and the emerging themes from this. Transcription of interviews and field notes was completed immediately after each interview with the help of instantaneous live transcription capabilities within the Zoom virtual software.

The documentary evidence corroborated how they interpreted and presented information to internal and external users using hermeneutic analysis (Ponterotto 2005; Schwandt 2000). Multiple documentary evidence covered the different phases, specifically, the request for proposal [RFP], proposal [technical, M&E, and budget], contract agreement, policy documents, and reports were reviewed to understand how the SMSEs navigated the different phases. Furthermore, we examined how that information is interpreted to meet multiple internal and external stakeholder needs.

Hermeneutical analysis facilitated making sense of the meanings within the documentary evidence when obtaining insight into how the organizations align mandates and mission. Hermeneutics involves seeking a deeper understanding of the various meanings of statements in organizations' documents, as well as within the context in which the statements are made (Ponterotto 2005; Schwandt 2000). This was achieved by reviewing RFPs, proposals, M&E plans, SOPs and reports. We specifically traced the requirements in the RFP and how the cases responded to the RFP within the proposal document while articulating their theory of change. In addition, we analysed how SOPs, M&E and implementation plans were adapted to meet funder requirements and organizational needs concurrently. We also reviewed how SMSEs foregrounded and documented their mission-related achievements, as embedded in documents such as annual reports, while demonstrating the achievement of other stakeholder multiple mandates. The process was repeated in all cases to gain insight into conflicting goals and how the multiple and sometimes were simultaneously managed.

Furthermore, the researchers used observations to understand how the individual employees deliberated decisions regarding proposal funding, implementation, and reporting to ascertain how they align activity requirements from funders and activities core to their social mission. Field notes from the observations were also coded. Using conventional content analysis, we analysed each case and cross-case to identify emerging relationships (Yin 2017). The findings highlight how the codes emerged from identified innovative exploration to align mandates and mission. The process evolved as categories were dropped, merged, split, and sequenced based on how they gained theoretical traction (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm 2021). Table 3 summarizes how the codes arising from data formed categories and the final themes of community embeddedness, mission agility and proactive M&E, facilitating the SMSE balance of mission and mandates. Sample detailed quotes, codes, and categories are included to depict the creative exploration to align multiple mandates with missions.

To ensure quality assurance, the researchers debriefed and provided thick descriptions as a check to improve trustworthiness (Morse et al. 2002; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins 2010). We conducted member checks for all transcripts, and only three participants came back with minor comments, mostly on the correct titles of individuals and not the content of the transcript. We also triangulated data from the multiple sources, as well as the use of multiple data techniques outlined (Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte 2014), to bolster data validity. We developed clear interview protocols, clear field notes and analytical memos (Yin 2017) to ensure data reliability. We used codebook for generating quality codes and categories (Morse 2015), as well as clear analytical memos. A clear case study protocol and a case study database, from Atlas.ti was maintained.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

The findings primarily centre on how SMSEs align multiple mandates with their mission. In particular, they emphasize the SMSEs' practices and practising at meso-level to innovatively explore, thereby facilitating the alignment of mission and multiple external mandates. The SMSE cases seem to be in control and not victims of the funders, financiers, and other stakeholders within the South African context.

They undertake internal iterative practising to facilitate their understanding and interpretation of needs. A noteworthy finding across the cases is how they leverage the community as a resource to legitimize social missions. The cases endeavour to understand social needs at the community level and align with their internal mission using a portfolio of priority activities. They subsequently use this knowledge to approach funders and financiers from the pre-proposal phase. Therefore, they act as brokers that link stakeholders.

The SMSEs' community embeddedness allows them to continuously undertake an internal-external assessment to understand and leverage communities' social needs within the social mission. This facilitates aligning the community needs and the SMSEs' core mission.

Subsequently, mission agility allows the SMSEs to creatively diversify while interpreting and mapping funders' mandates to fit within the social mission. This is especially so by how they practice interpretation, negotiation, language infusion, and implementation of multiple project mandates to align social needs and broader core mission, thus emphasizing SMSEs' brokerage role.

Another important finding is the art of practising M&E proactively in a creative way to adapt and align their core mission with the different funders' requirements. The SMSEs are managed according to portfolio thinking. This is from conceptualizing project proposals, proposal negotiations, implementation, and reporting. They translate and map requirements while articulating the Theory of

Table 3. Data to themes: aligning mandates with mission.

Documentary and observation data	Interview data	Code	Category	Theme
'S-Impact found ways to increase its visibility in the communities by having support care workers directly on the ground' (*annual report*) 'the good relationship with community stakeholders gave S-Impact easy access . . . when conducting group sessions' (*annual report*)	'We get them from the community'.	Community-based hiring	Community embeddedness	Leveraging Community embeddedness
'Other input considered included the views of community stakeholders on the needs of the communities served by Hilcorp, the role that the stakeholders felt Hilcorp could play, and national priorities' (*Board meeting minutes)* 'Our general approach to project roll-out after sign-off involves extensive community mobilisation and stakeholder engagements' (*proposal*).	'You realise that the community is powerful, that if you forget to talk to the community, even if the government has said do this, forget, it's not going to work'. 'The things that are key to us, we always find a way of prioritising, even if they are not a priority to the donor because most of the time, people that are key to us . . . are our communities'.	Community proximity and entry	Community buy-in	Leveraging Community embeddedness
'Another structure that is crucial to how we function is the Community Action and Advisory Committee, which is made up of community members and helps guide the delivery of Hilcorp programmes' *(annual report*) 'Sustained links and forums to facilitate Hilcorp consultation with the community' (*Board meeting minutes*)	'We also have a community advisory committee, which is very active in those communities, which helps a lot, because those are the people that are advocates, Hilcorp advocates within the community'.	Collaborating/ incorporating community leaders in decisions	Community buy-in	Leveraging Community embeddedness
'S-Impact partnered with community leaders collaborated in reaching different nationals for participatory assessments' (*annual report*) 'Our actions influence whether we will be successful and meaningful to both our beneficiaries and our funders' (*annual report*)	'We try to get our experience to count by trying to guide the funders to understand that, yes, you want to achieve this kind of outcome. But we believe that if you do it this way, it's going to work, and you'll be able to leverage on efficiencies in doing them'. 'If the donor doesn't know and just mandates us to help, we tell them that there are two ways we can do that'.	Experiential negotiation with community needs in mind	Art of interpreting and mapping needs with mission	Leveraging Community embeddedness
'Considering the inputs of the community and national priorities, the Board identified the strategic priorities for Hilcorp' (*Board meeting minutes*)	'All our different sites, we have suggestion boxes, whereby they've set up in places where . . . beneficiaries utilize those platforms, then they can report anything they want, they anonymously or confidentially, they can do that'.	Infusing Beneficiary/ community feedback	Art of interpreting and mapping needs with mission	Leveraging Community embeddedness

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Documentary and observation data	Interview data	Code	Category	Theme
'Our project offices, outside offices, are always branded correctly to make sure that the people know' *(annual report)*	'That is how your community gets to know you. And then our project offices, outside offices, always branded correctly, and make sure that the people know. We are also giving out flyers, making sure that the brand is always there'. 'What we try to emphasize is to brand our presence in the local communities as far as we can. And that has resulted in some of the health programmes being effectively done in our offices in the field'.	Creating awareness in the community	Community branding	Leveraging Community embeddedness
'The processes we follow allow us to use our knowledge and skills, creativity and opportunities to develop state of the art services, using our own bespoke apps' *(Annual report*). 'Mapping and assessment of community-based workers who support the Government of South Africa' (*Proposal sample*)	'If you look at our broad kind of vision and mission statements, you can see that they are very data-oriented. It is about data for decision making; it is about helping organizations use data in strategic ways, access it, and analyse . . . But of course, part of that for me was always the other mission . . . which was I want to get out there, design projects, and implement HIV AIDS programmes or other health programmes, you know, be an implementer, and that's how we got into the Global Fund'.	Interpreting needs to allow activity shifts	Mandate-mission agility within activities	Mission Agility
'The training should cover self-starting behaviour innovation, coping strategies for resilience to setbacks, planning and feedback [internal competencies]. Modules approved by [funder] will also be used for the training' (*Proposal sample*). 'Ugo is a sub-recipient under the Global Fund . . . Ugo also provides contractual technical assistance on monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning' (*Proposal sample*)	'There are different pillars in the organization . . . Those pillars are all of them at the end of the day; although the objective from the funder may be different, but all of them at some point align. Because at the end of the day, all the activities now join into the main job creation' 'When COVID came, it was a health issue, but it had a lot of socio-economic implications that needed an immediate response'	Mapping activities within mission	Mandate-mission agility within activities	Mission Agility

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Documentary and observation data	Interview data	Code	Category	Theme
"Work with government and non-governmental organizations to collaboratively generate insights to transform . . . developmental outcomes (*Proposal sample*) "2021 was a difficult year considering the effects of COVID-19 Despite all these challenges, S-Impact found ways to increase its visibility in the communities" *(annual report).*	'Our vision has not shifted much. It has remained basically the same. But . . . we have expanded the services that we do for us to deliver on our vision. So, the number of services that we used to offer, there's an expansion' 'Also, we have supported households during COVID. . . . though that is not what we do' 'Additional services coming in to ensure that they're able to also get access to additional funding that the government was putting in place, and the corporate world was putting in place. So we had to re-strategise and reorient ourselves so that we can remain relevant and continue supporting our clients'	Activity expansion	Deliberate activity expansion and shift within mission	Mission Agility
'The ECHS project will be built on an already existing similar programme that promotes Child Health and Development that has been implemented since 2013' (*Proposal sample*) "One of Damco's key strengths is our expertise in customizing learning programmes. We design programmes to meet clients' specific requirements and target audiences' needs" (*Proposal sample*)	'It was very streamlined in terms of the mission, the goals, the objective; everything was very streamlined. It was very small, like narrow, very narrow . . . we had to restructure so that it incorporates every programme. So our mission had to touch a bit of each and every programme' 'Under COVID, it necessitated that our supported beneficiaries needed to be compliant, which funders were not interested in funding. So, the moment that became necessary for them to access government funding, relief funding, and then we started supporting'	Activity shifts	Deliberate activity expansion and shift within mission	Mission Agility
'The organisation maintains a lean, flexible management structure geared towards enhancing operational efficiencies and reducing overheads' (*Proposal sample*).	'I think it's the beauty of the organization is that, because we are small to medium, it's a very close relationship . . . the ability to change swiftly, and that is one of the other cool barriers, I would say, for non-profits to move over in transition into social enterprises. That they are so used to "this is the way we work", and we cannot change immediately'	Small-sized nimbleness	Art of implementation and multitasking	Mission Agility

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Documentary and observation data	Interview data	Code	Category	Theme
"S-Impact has been flexible and motivated to move to places where the needs are the greatest (*annual report*).	'You see, the advantage of it is the decision-making is quick. It's rapid. If you are in a very structured system, it takes longer to make a decision, or it takes longer to make decisions than If you are fluid or flexible' 'The roles are really interchangeable. It's really in terms of on a needs basis what needs to be done'	Quick decision-making	Art of implementation and multitasking	Mission Agility
'The results from the MER system are also used by S-Impact management to improve service delivery to OVC and their families and the management of all social work activities' (*proposal*). 'Ugo also provides contractual technical assistance on monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning' (*proposal*)	'For me, this is M&E. So, I am trying to show you, where did we begin? Where are we at? What are the key parameters that are of interest to the board? . . . So, this is data, it is presenting the data back to decision-makers, to policymakers, to people who can make a judgement of how we are doing, this is all M&E' 'When we present to a corporate, we present our profile, and we let them know about our activities and our mission and values'	M&E used to align stakeholders	Proactive Theory of change	Proactive M&E
'S-Impact theory of change for positively influencing the health and economic resilience of vulnerable youth and their associated families' (*proposal)* 'Our actions influence whether we will be successful and meaningful to both our beneficiaries and our funders' (*annual report*)	'The funders, they come to us, they say we want to do this project, this is how we want to do it, can you support us? So, we know that it's something that we have done, but we have done it in a different way. So, then we'll say, okay, we can support you; it's not very far from whatever we're doing. It's just different in terms of the approach' 'We populate it on a very simple tool that helps the programme understand because when you do these things, you don't complicate programmes. You try as much as possible to simplify it for the people that are going to implement because they need to understand where the gap is'	Art of interpretation	Proactive Theory of change	Proactive M&E

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Documentary and observation data	Interview data	Code	Category	Theme
"We specialize in the management of projects in various fields and on different scales" (*proposal*) 'Damco has the capacity and the logistical know-how to roll out national projects rapidly, reaching targets within budget and on time' (*proposal*)	'Project management that we utilize helps us a lot to be agile, and be to meet our targets and be able to change if we need to' 'The project managers really jump around between programmes . . . so where there are certain people that you can't put 100% LOE. Those are the ones that we can use between projects' 'The roles are really interchangeable. It's really in terms of on a needs basis what needs to be done'	Project management multitasking	Active use of M&E function to multitask	Proactive M&E
'However, as the program proceeds, things change . . . So, we need to go back, update that M&E plan and we also have like an operational plan on site' 'Ugo also provides contractual technical assistance on monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning' (*proposal*)	'within also our M&E systems we've got also different actual SOPs . . . for instance, M&E processes, M&E functions, data flow in general, DQA . . . ,data ethics' 'We have been able to custom-make tools that give us information in real-time. And that only doesn't support the funder. It supports also our internal planning' 'We pull the data from CIBIMS [funder database] and migrate it to our own database, then we start analysing based on what we want as S-Impact. It informs us better'	M&E tools	M&E innovative tools	Proactive M&E
'The Ugo team presented in this proposal has over 100 years of combined professional work experience in Monitoring Evaluation Reporting and Learning (MERL) capacity development, including Routine Data Quality Audits (RDQA) gained from working with multiple projects through which a wide variety of organizations' (proposal)	'M&E is used in pulling reports together and quality control' 'This report [annual report] . . . is a practical way of utilizing M&E skills as well' 'We do different reports and then we pull different reports for different purposes. Also, for the funders, we still pull those reports'	M& use to demonstrate report and impact	M&E use to enhance concurrent reporting	Proactive M&E

Change (ToC). They utilize ToC practising to commence with the end goal, which is their social mission, and then reverse-engineer this to facilitate alignment between their mission and external mandates. Hence, the ToC is articulated from proposal development to reporting, where concurrent reporting fulfils funders' or financiers' mandates and demonstrates core mission attainment.

M&E abstract artefacts [ToC] and M&E material artefacts such as log-frames are creatively used to facilitate adaptability and the simultaneous alignment of mission and multiple mandates. SMSEs opportunistically translate requirements to their advantage. Furthermore, the dynamism of the artefacts, internal adaptations, optimization of technology, and the ability to concurrently disaggregate and integrate reports allows the balancing of mission and mandates. Table 3 summarizes the findings with sample quotes depicting practices and practising [codes] facilitating the SMSE balance of mission and mandates. Additionally, how these practices and practising are aggregated within categories and themes.

4.1.1. Leveraging community embeddedness

The SMSEs leverage their embeddedness within communities and proximity to beneficiaries to superimpose social needs within their core mission. Using a portfolio of relationships, the SMSEs creatively leverage the inherent 'power' derived from community buy-in, to negotiate with funders and advocate the activities requiring funding. This puts them at a vantage point to map activities within the mission while being the conduit of the funding to implement priority community projects. For instance, Damco, S-Impact, and Hilcorp have practices such as community entry, community branding, and obtaining feedback from beneficiaries. This enriches the internal interpretation and mapping of the SMSE social mission with mandates from the onset.

Beneficiaries and the broader community, recognized as vital resources and strong supporters of SMSEs, hold considerable influence. Their position empowers SMSEs to prioritize their social mission over funder mandates. Consequently, SMSEs' deep integration within the community enables them to advocate for the community's interests, enriching the social mission while aligning with multiple stakeholders.

The art of interpretation and negotiation is depicted in how SMEs utilize their knowledge of the community needs to advocate for activities and how they are implemented in ways that align with the core competencies and mission. The specific practices innovatively employed to engage with the communities vary. For example, they use the traditional ['induna'] community leaders as advocates, participate in community stakeholder advisory committees, and incorporate the community leaders in field workers' governance and hiring process.

Practices such as being part of the community advisory committee are a gateway for SMSEs to the community. Therefore, when responding to specific funder RFPs, they can incorporate critical aspects based on deliberations with the community advisory committees. For instance, Hilcorp responded to an RFP by a funder to add an economic strengthening support aspect based on deliberations with the community advisory committee. The annual report excerpt highlights the importance of community leadership in aligning stakeholders:

> 'Another structure that is crucial to how we function is the Community Action and Advisory Committee, which is made up of community members and helps guide the delivery of Hilcorp programs' *(annual report)*.

The deliberate inclusion of beneficiaries and community leaders in the governance structures gives them a voice in decision-making. The SMSEs prioritize the community needs within the social mission, akin to community logic (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022; Waardenburg 2021). This is achieved through creative co-designing and co-creating projects with community stakeholders to offer a value proposition that simultaneously speaks to the community's needs, organizational mission, and funder priorities. For instance, Ugo indicates,

> 'We co-design the projects with them [community stakeholders]. They call us to say we want to do this, and then we start co-designing and co-crafting the project design. And then when it comes to the formalities, they [funders] advertise, you get it [project funding]'.

Hence the value proposition is embedded within the community priorities, which is then aligned to the organization's mission and subsequently proposed to resource owners to fund. The M&E function and capabilities would then facilitate the cases to ensure the co-designing and co-creation align the multiple requirements with the mission. The SMSE cases ensure they align and are attuned with the priorities at the community level as they utilize the community leaders and beneficiaries as advocates to win over resource providers. This underscores the role of feedback from the beneficiaries at the community level for these interventions and, hence, in a way, handing the power back to the recipients on how funding would flow.

The community embeddedness of the SMSEs allows them to ground the relationship between the SMSE and the community. This accords them a different resource and power that the SMSEs use as a 'bargaining chip' with funders. Therefore, the role of the community emerges as an impetus for the SMSEs' alignment with stakeholders. Community embeddedness leverages the SMSEs' brokerage role to align the social mission and multiple mandates. Furthermore, SMSE's social mission is legitimized by the communities. Therefore, the SMSEs have identified this and are using it in a deliberate, as well as opportunistic fashion so that they align multiple stakeholders.

4.1.2. Mission agility: activity shifts, small size, and optimising regulatory context to balance mission and mandates

The cases demonstrate how they practice agility to balance multiple mandates and missions. The study findings highlight how the SMSEs innovatively explore their funding pursuit decisions around their mission while still adapting internally in a manner that would fulfil multiple mandates. The agility is reflected in how they employ practices such as shifting and expanding activities creatively to allow them to fulfil different mandates concurrently without compromising the accomplishment of the broader mission. In this way [activity expansion and shifts], the mission is intact while ensuring other stakeholder requirements are met.

The cases' practice of interpreting funders' requirements and mapping them appropriately internally enables them to enact varied activities agilely [art of implementation]. The mission is spelled out with a wide scope of coverage. While mission statements are broad, deliberate activity shifts and expansion allow the cases to be agile but still fit within their broader mission. In this way, the mission is intact while meeting other stakeholder requirements. For example, the SMSEs, through their M&E prowess, seem to have found a way to innovatively communicate their mission achievements and the fulfilment of donor requirements through proposals and annual reports. For instance, the H-Inc Executive Director states, 'We also realized that with our donors, when we say we have accreditation, it is not good enough. So, we went on to be accredited with the International Labour Organisation on their start and improve your business [accreditation]'. This allowed H-Inc to have a broader scope within the training component of its mission. These activity expansions and shifts allow cases to be agile and have more comprehensive activity-scope coverage that fits within their broader mission. Damco's broad mission also allowed them to apply for funds under an economic strengthening pillar within an HIV program as it was aimed at their target group (Damco, RFP1 [request for proposal]).

Sometimes, they shift geographical or target-group reach to suit funders' requirements but remain in areas they strategically want to venture into, fostering alignment. Besides, mapping internal core activities and the required outputs is vital in ensuring they are agile enough but remain within their core mission-related target reach and activities. This is well captured in one of Damco's proposals;

> 'One of the key strengths is our expertise in customizing learning programs. We design programs to meet clients' specific requirements and target audiences' needs' (*Proposal sample*).

The practice of an internal–external outlook to align funders' or stakeholders' mandates and the core mission-related activities requires agility in the face of external changes. A case in point was the COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated adaptations of organizational activities requiring nimbleness. This was exemplified in the H-Inc proposal excerpt highlighting the use of a 'blended approach, face-to-face and virtual'. The M&E function, tools, and capabilities allowed the cases to adopt and adapt internally in ways that align the multiple requirements with the mission.

The study's findings also spotlight how small size is crucial for SMSEs to swiftly and efficiently organize practices internally. Damco indicates that the small size allows them 'the ability to change swiftly' (Damco, Operations manager). The agility enables the SMSEs to quickly adjust in a manner that does not clash with their mission once the funder requirements change or new funders come on board. This also requires quick decision-making, and the cases demonstrate this to ensure alignment across various mandates. The swift decision-making facilitates interpreting the mandates and how they can be aligned internally. The organizations then make the necessary adjustments.

All the cases creatively utilize the flexible registration regime for SMSEs in South Africa to establish registered entities that enable them to manage various funders and financiers effectively. They employ an adaptive approach, selecting 'the entity that makes sense' (Ugo, Executive Director) based on their understanding of social needs and internal practice. However, they maintain centralized governance and leadership for non-profit organization (NPO) coordination. This agility allows SMSEs to prioritize their social missions while fulfilling multiple mandates. For instance, they retain NPO status and do not 'pay tax on income or surplus' (H-Inc, Executive Director) while simultaneously engaging in multiple funding arrangements.

4.1.3. Proactive monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

How M&E is proactively used to balance mission and mandates is a noteworthy finding. M&E is ingeniously used to direct how the SMSE maps the community priorities internally proactively from the onset, and not only to monitor and measure reactively – the way M&E is traditionally depicted in the literature (Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014). The importance of M&E's proactive use enables the SMSEs to innovatively align organizational mission and multiple mandates from the pre-proposal, proposal, contract negotiation, implementation, and reporting phases.

The SMSEs incorporate the community's needs into their mission and proposed activities right from the start using the Theory of Change (ToC) practices. ToC demonstrates to funders and other stakeholders how SMSEs intend to achieve impact by integrating proposals demonstrating their commitment to meeting multiple requirements while preserving their core mission. A review of some successful proposals shows how they present the entire organization's business and operation model, visually, indicating how units complement each other in project implementation while aligning with the mission. This approach anticipates how the SMSEs are structured and showcases their ability to leverage existing resources to fulfil their mission. For instance, as S-Impact's M&E manager states, 'We always need to go back and update that M&E plan' during negotiations to customize and accommodate changes proposed by funders while leaving the core message intact.

Additionally, the use of language in proposals, M&E plans, Gantt charts, and reports are used to articulate and interpret the core ToC explicitly and how it is applied to the various funders' documents. Therefore, SMSEs make it look like they are structured merely towards meeting the funder's needs but also foregrounding their ToC. Sometimes, the language on the ToC is explicit regarding the alignment of funders' mandates and the mission. In other instances, the language is implicit and broad to simultaneously accommodate different mandates and the mission. Hence, similar language may be used to signal their broader mission and, at the same time, infuse specific requirements made by the funders. As H-Inc's Executive Director highlights,

> 'The funders come to us, and they say, "we want to do this project", this is how we want to do it . . . So, we know that it's something that we have done, but we have done it differently. So, we'll say, okay, we can support you; it's not far from whatever we're doing. It's just different in terms of the approach'.

In addition, M&E tools such as M&E plans facilitate translation and mapping of core missions within proposals while incorporating nuanced funder plans. M&E artefacts such as data quality assessment tools and M&E online applications are utilized to multitask and manage multiple projects at various phases. The different M&E tools and templates are also vital in concurrent measurement validation and reporting. They 'custom-make tools that give information in real-time that doesn't only support the funder but also supports internal priorities' (Ugo, Data manager)

The SMSEs use M&E to facilitate the organization's reporting of outputs and outcomes related to the target beneficiaries and set activities embodied in the social enterprise's core social mission. The

SMSEs develop clear outputs and outcomes related to their missions from the onset and superimpose them over various mandate requirements. They attain this by nuancing the mission scale [for example, target beneficiaries] and mission scope [specific activities]. As the M&E manager at Ugo states, 'We do different reports, and then we pull different reports for different purposes. Also, for the funders, we still pull those reports'.

The ability to report to multiple stakeholders simultaneously is critical for the SMSEs. The SMSEs have concurrent measurement and output validation capabilities. The M&E function is essential in the reporting process, disaggregating program reporting information from multiple sources into the achievement tables and disseminating the information to the relevant funders. The cases have innovative ways of disaggregating and integrating data to achieve multiple reporting demands. They 'custom make tools that give information in real-time … not only to support the funder, … , but also supports internal priorities' (H-Inc, M&E Manager). Besides, the reports are customized for various funders as well as to communicate the organization's central achievements as per the interview excerpt below by Damco's Programme Manager;

> 'For all the projects, we do a project report…And then we do another management report, where you have a report on each project and then combine it'.

The SMSEs practice shadow reporting to multiple stakeholders using similar reports innovatively to achieve simultaneous alignment of mission and mandates. For example, the annual reports are used to concurrently document achievements aligned with the core mission and the funded projects. SMSEs also use other communication channels, such as annual general meetings and beneficiary feedback sessions, to disseminate specific report outputs to meet various needs as necessary.

Concurrent measurement validation is also achieved by using routine audits and audit reports. On the one hand, they 'have the individual audits' (Damco, Finance manager). Conversely, they 'integrate on an organizational level when preparing for audits' (Damco, Executive Director). The audits are essential when approaching funders and financiers alike. Clean audits address multiple requirements, including statutory, stakeholder management, and improvement of internal management controls as indicated in the annual report excerpt below from S-Impact.

> 'A full version of the audited Annual Financial Statements has been made available to members. Annual financial statements will be distributed to major donors and funders' (*annual report*).

Digital and social media are also utilized to achieve concurrent reporting. Ugo's M&E Director indicates this is important 'when it comes to developing apps, doing analytics, statistics, so the quality of reports … are up to scratch, in terms of the standard'. Damco uses social media 'through group WhatsApp' (Damco, Programme Manager) to collate multiple reports concurrently.

5. Discussion

The main aim of this study is to gain further insights into how social enterprises simultaneously align multiple external mandates and missions. Like Lindgreen et al. (2021) and the case study outcomes, a synthesized theoretical model emerges. It illustrates how the art of internal-external practising enables SMSEs to innovatively explore and exploit simultaneously, facilitating the alignment of mandates and mission. This is despite other authors, such as Felício, Caldeirinha, and Dutra (2019) and Iborra, Safón, and Dolz (2020), arguing that small organizations within resource-constrained environments find it difficult to simultaneously explore and exploit, and even more so when they are exposed to multiple tensions beyond dual, arising from multiple mandates (Mair 2020).

The SMSEs act as 'brokers' in the nexus of communities and other stakeholders by leveraging activities that resonate with the critical community needs as part of the mission. Subsequently, the SMSEs use the existing community structures to advocate for the organizations' missions with other stakeholders through their ToC. Mission agility allows iterative internal-external practising as the

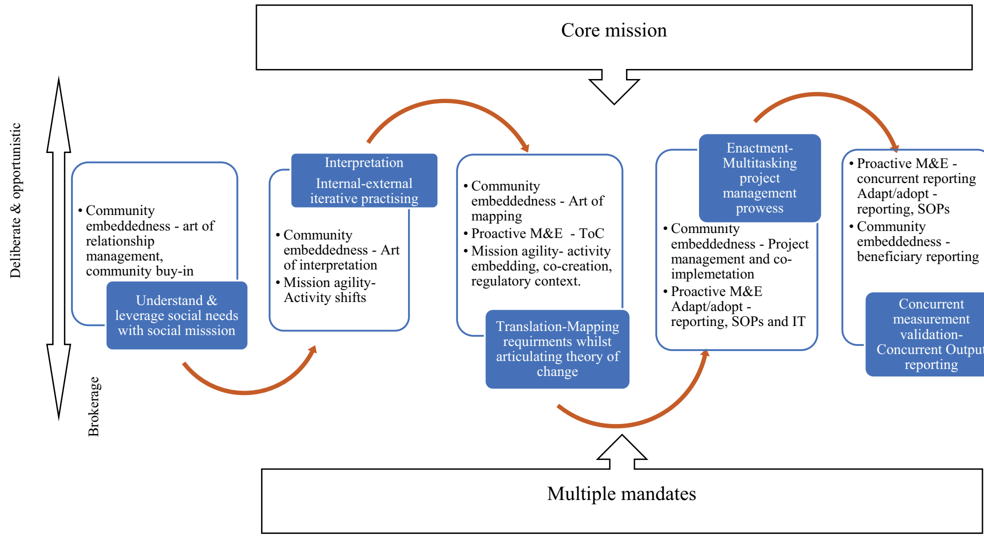

Figure 1. Theoretical model: internal-external practising to simultaneously align mission and mandates; leveraging community embeddedness, mission agility, and M&E role.

'middlemen', hence, the ability to foreground the core social mission amidst multiple mandates. The SMSEs are also deliberate and opportunistic in seeking resources from funders to map and align them with the core mission that leverages SMSEs understanding of community needs. Using their M&E prowess the SMSEs opportunistically map, multi-task, and report to multiple stakeholders concurrently. Therefore, Figure 1 below summarizes the theoretical model of how SMSEs innovatively explore employing the iterative internal-external practising This approach enables them to effectively balance the simultaneous pursuit of multiple mandates and their core mission.

The 'how' aspects of aligning mission and mandates in the study findings are key. First, it has to be considered how SMSEs understand and leverage the community social needs within the internal social mission and priorities. Second, one has to understand how they interpret with an internal–external iterative outlook, third, their ability to translate and map funder [stakeholder] requirements while articulating their [SMSE] theory of change. Fourth, SMSEs' enactment of multitasking project management, and finally, how the measurement validates the multiple stakeholder requirements and mission simultaneously, specifically, through concurrent output reporting.

5.1. Understanding and leveraging social needs within the social mission

The empirical evidence underscores how the SMSEs employ experiential practising to make sense of external mandates by first understanding the community's social needs and aligning them with their social mission. The SMSEs then strategically leverage the community's social needs and embed them within internal priority activities when negotiating with funders. This strategy grants them legitimacy as 'power brokers' and social mission 'champions' on behalf of the communities they serve. Importantly, this approach serves as a foundation for how SMSEs employ the ToC practising to ensure alignment between community needs and their social mission from the outset. The study's findings emphasize the significance of the community as a key stakeholder for SMSEs (Mair 2020), in their brokerage and boundary-spanning role (Fleming and Waguespack 2007).

Community buy-in through practices such as community-led programming, community branding, community entry meetings, and incorporating community leaders in governance play an important role in validating the SMSE work. There is a nexus between the expectations of the community on how they deem the social mission should be implemented and how the organizations adopt this as their core mission. Through the art of practising, for instance, relationship management and negotiations, the SMSEs obtain a social licence to operate, which gives them leverage over conflicting funder-related mandates. The study findings confirm that SMSEs' art of relationship management (Battilana and Lee 2014; Klein, Schneider, and Spieth 2021; Muñoz and Kimmitt 2019) facilitates the alignment of various stakeholders. For instance, through relationship management with community leaders, funders, and other stakeholders, the SMSEs are able to ground their mission amidst multiple stakeholders' mandates.

The study findings respond to a call by Mair (2020) to bring 'renewed attention to power as a crucial factor in theorizing about social enterprises' (p. 27) ability to foreground mission. The SMSEs are able to obtain subtle power by practising freedom through nuancing 'what they are supposed to do and who they are supposed to be' (Dey and Steyaert 2016, 637). Contrary to the notion under Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) that resource owners have power over the resource recipients (AbouAssi and Tschirhart 2018; Mair 2020; Malatesta and Smith 2014), the study extends the notion of power through how SMSEs leverage community embeddedness as a resource. The beneficiaries and community legitimize the SMSEs' powerful position as a resource. Previous research has also argued that SMSEs are usually in power-disadvantaged positions vis-à-vis resource owners (Oukes et al. 2019). However, the findings in this study indicate that the extant literature provides an incomplete understanding of SMSEs' 'brokerage' power or agency to champion communities' social needs because literature typically focuses on SMSEs' dependency and funding constraints.

With the evolution of social impact and the triple bottom line, recent literature indicates how resource providers rely on outputs and outcomes of the interventions 'for, in, with, enabled by, and driven by communities' (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022, 2). This underscores the role of feedback from the beneficiaries at the community level for these interventions and hence, in a way, hands the power back to the recipients on how funding flows. Within the context of the SMSEs, the activities that need to be funded would mostly need buy-in from the communities where the interventions are implemented. The SMSEs optimize community embeddedness (Littlewood and Holt 2020) by aligning and being attuned with the communities' priorities while using community leaders and/or beneficiaries as advocates to win over resource providers.

5.2. Interpretation: internal-external iterative practising

The SMSEs demonstrate adaptability by iteratively practising internal–external alignment, interpreting and harmonizing their organizational mission with mandates. Utilizing practices such as co-designing with communities and subsequently with funders, they adeptly navigate difficulties of understanding community needs, responding to RFP requirements, presenting proposals that satisfy stakeholder demands, and foregrounding their mission objectives in a simultaneous fashion. This is in agreement with the social accounting literature on how to manage stakeholders' perceptions concerning the SMSE social mission (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2020; Ometto et al. 2019; Ramus and Vaccaro 2017). The uncertainties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic further required an internal-external outlook and were 'forcing NPO researchers to look beyond organizational conflicts and tensions, and to consider the bigger picture' (Bacq and Lumpkin 2021, 287).

The study joins the discourse to 'expose the boundary conditions of mission ... and reveal the need for mission agility instead' (Bacq and Lumpkin 2021, 287). The SMSEs are agile in how they interpret multiple requirements. They can accommodate and variate activities and geographical scopes within their broader missions in collaboration with the community stakeholders right from the onset of the projects, for example, through activity shifts and expansion. The SMSEs then adapt their value proposition to align the core and the proposed funder activities. Furthermore, they leverage the appropriate use of entities registered under them to manage tensions from the onset by using the art of portfolio thinking.

Interpretation also highlights the role of human agency in facilitating the balancing of mission and mandates. This is in line with the argument by Cloutier and Ravasi (2020), on how SMSEs can navigate internal tensions through an ‘end’ and not a ‘means’ approach. The SMSEs use their proximity to the community stakeholders, their previous experience, and their background for effective iterative internal–external practising to manage tensions. They are able to use portfolio thinking and foresight to interpret multiple incoming requirements and align their competencies within the broader core mission.

5.3. Translation: map funder requirements while articulating theory of change

The SMSEs’ M&E prowess allows them to map funders’ requirements internally and synchronize them with their mission-related priorities. M&E is a common routine to retroactively monitor projects and is usually set up once social enterprises have received funding with the view of tracking how mandates are fulfilled (Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014). In the study, ToC [within M&E] is not project-specific as depicted in literature (Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014; Hobson, Mayne, and Hamilton 2016); rather, it is viewed holistically as long-term, starting with the end goal [social mission] and then reverse-engineered to facilitate alignment between their mission and external mandates. In so doing, they ensure that the community’s essential needs are an integral part of their mission and proposed activities.

The flexibility in small organizations (Miller et al. 2021) facilitates the swift management of competing multiple priorities without being held up by bureaucratic processes. SMSEs’ agility allows them to optimize and map activities within the requisite registered organizational forms.

The study findings demonstrate that the regulatory context acts as a catalyst for the SMSEs to innovatively utilize aspects, such as their registration status, to balance multiple mandates and the mission. The SMSEs take advantage of the regulatory ambiguity and using the art of portfolio thinking, they map different activities to the appropriate organizational form and ensure the core social mission-related activities are foregrounded amidst the multiple mandates. The absence of streamlined regulatory contexts in Africa (Littlewood and Holt 2020), unlike community interest companies in the UK and benefit corporations in the US (Haigh et al. 2015; Rawhouser, Cummings, and Crane 2015), does not lead to trade-offs between mandates and mission, as suggested in the literature (Battilana et al. 2022). In this setting, social enterprises demonstrate agility in not only managing dual social-commercial goals (Battilana et al. 2022) but also balancing conflicting multiple mandates and mission goals. This aspect has not been extensively explored in existing literature (Klarin and Suseno 2023, Littlewood and Holt 2018b; 2020; Mair 2020), as it has started to be addressed in this study’s findings.

Through the art of practising co-creation and activity embeddedness, they also superimpose their mission-related activities within the funder-focused activities. Additionally, they overlay core central policies on the funders’ requirements to minimize internal tensions. In some cases, they form partnerships for mutual goals. Besides, through co-creation, they sometimes adapt activities to fit into various funders’ implementation models.

Tools such as the logical framework are used innovatively to capture the broader organizational core activities while linking them with other externally mandated activities. Additionally, they articulate the assumptions and expected outcomes of the activities within the broader mission scope. The art of negotiation is crucial for SMSE actors to align multiple stakeholders effectively. They negotiate with funders, often with the support of community leaders and sometimes beneficiaries. They use their community proximity and knowledge to co-create with funders and to facilitate funder education on priority activities to be implemented in a given locality. This approach makes it seem as though they are fulfilling the funders’ requirements while they are actually prioritizing their mission.

5.4. Enactment of multitasking project management prowess

The SMSEs' art of multitasking to manage multiple projects while ensuring alignment of mission and mandates is evident. The study findings highlight the role of centralized M&E nimble artefacts in facilitating the alignment of multiple goals and tensions (D'Adderio 2014). Artefacts are defined as the 'formal design of a routine … such as rules, schedules, and standard operating procedures' (S. F. S. F. Turner and Rindova 2012, 26), in order to standardize or reorganize the activities performed. The ability to utilize tools that are nimble creatively allows the SMSEs the necessary flexibility. The innovative use of business tools to deliberately enact multiple projects is not commonly discussed in social enterprise literature. The study depicts how these tools, policies and procedures facilitate the internal-external practising for mission–mandate balancing.

Using project management and the art of implementation, the SMSEs utilize the core shared staff to multitask as key project managers across projects. Since they understand the organizations' missions, they act as the coordination glue that aligns multiple activities with the key organizational priorities across the organization. The SMSEs' frugal HR practices dynamically ensure employees are committed to the organization and also deliver on multiple requirements. The literature on ambidexterity highlights how organizational practices are practised through the socialization process (March 1991). Specifically, social enterprise literature involves practices that 'routinise organizational values' (Battilana 2018, 1293) through formal means, such as intensive training, and informal methods (Jankelowitz 2020). Employees' socialization with each other and their commitment to the SMSE's mission facilitates an enabling work environment for the SMSEs to navigate the myriad of challenges. Most of the field staff are hired from the beneficiaries and communities they came from, and this enhances their commitment to the SMSE and communities they serve.

Horizontal socialization across the SMSE employees is empirically demonstrated in SMSE pairing, training, and social connections, among other examples. Shared core staff members act as ''value carriers', sustaining the values of the organization and transmitting them' (Cornforth 2014, 13) to field staff, the communities and the funders.

The M&E practices facilitate project management being able to ensure multiple projects achieve the key funders' objectives while also ensuring the concurrent mission focus. There is a dearth of literature on how M&E facilitates continuous and simultaneous proactive internal alignment of multiple mandates and mission (Battilana 2018). As empirically seen within the cases, M&E is set up with the view to track how mandates are fulfilled and to measure whether the core mission is attained. This is achieved through multitasking and project management prowess, using tools such as M&E log-frames, timesheets, implementation plans, and Gantt charts. Other practices such as co-implementation are used to align competing activities.

While M&E is a common routine in social enterprises (Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014; Hobson, Mayne, and Hamilton 2016), it has not received much attention in the literature (Battilana 2018; Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014), on its potential to act as a dynamic abstract artefact (Berglund

Table 4. M&E as an abstract artefact adapted from Berglund (2022).

M&E depiction	Definition	Examples
Abstract	Conceptual devices that help SMSEs develop theories of change which in turn help them navigate multiple stakeholders and simultaneously align mission-mandates tensions	M&E theory of change articulation
Material	'Things' and material substance processes, procedures, and tools central to the alignment of mission and mandates	M&E tools and systems M&E digital applications
Narrative	Sensemaking enablers defined by their ability [using language] to facilitate the synchronization and alignment of multiple conflicting goals across individuals and stakeholders in meaningful ways	M&E plans and log frames Annual reports lingo

2022) in balancing mission and mandates. The study suggests that M&E is an abstract dynamic artefact that is a central part of SMSEs to facilitate the alignment of multiple mandates and the core social mission. Table 4 depicts the instantiation of M&E from abstract, material, and narrative artefacts as adapted from the entrepreneurship as-practice typology by Berglund (2022).

Using the as-practice theorizing, the findings argue that M&E, as an abstract artefact, helps SMSEs define the ToC (Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014) and hence facilitate the management of mission-mandates tensions. This is similar to how business models support for-profits in the entrepreneurial process (Berglund 2022). The SMSEs use M&E to articulate mandates with an eye on the core mission. This is through the relevant tools and systems that allow the balancing of multiple mandates (Littlewood et al. 2022) whilst facilitating the legitimacy of the SMSE identity and core mission (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2019).

M&E also facilitates the instantiation of material and narrative artefacts, as defined by Berglund (2022). The requisite M&E systems, digital applications, data quality tools, and reporting applications act as material artefacts to facilitate fulfilling multiple mandates and mission simultaneously. M&E facilitates sensemaking practising (Johannisson 2011) within documents to articulate relevant information to varied stakeholders simultaneously. The use of language within documents such as, M&E plans, M&E log frames, and annual reports illustrate the use of M&E lingo as a narrative artefact to articulate achievements to multiple stakeholders simultaneously. Therefore, M&E acts as a 'canvas' (Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014), and an abstract artefact (Berglund 2022) to facilitate SMSEs developing their ToC to balance mission and mandates.

The SMSEs also utilize frugal IT and digital means to simultaneously align multiple tasks. Additionally, the cases adapt and adopt internal organizational aspects that would manage multiple stakeholders simultaneously, such as developing SOPs as addenda to central policies. This contradicts the findings by Ometto et al. (2019) regarding social enterprises' inability to adapt and manage multiple internal tensions.

5.5. Concurrent measurement validation

The SMSEs utilize concurrent measurement M&E tools and reporting to validate the achievement of mandates and mission simultaneously. They innovatively report on achievements to multiple funders and financiers, as well as to other stakeholders on the achievement of their core social mission simultaneously. For instance, they use annual reports to demonstrate the fulfilment of both, the mandates and the mission. The content of the reports contains details that address multiple target audiences concurrently. The same annual report is a key artefact that is used to communicate to different stakeholders with multiple conflicting mandates on the fulfilment of the multiple requirements and the organizational mission concurrently. Therefore, as opposed to requiring disparate artefacts to manage different goals (D'Adderio 2014), the study findings demonstrate the innovative use of artefacts in SMSEs, akin to dynamic capabilities (Teece 2014, 2018), to simultaneously manage multiple competing actions. This negates the findings by Mia and Lee (2017) who imply the occurrence of mission misalignment as microfinance social enterprises amend their internal reporting structures to suit new commercial funders.

The findings extend the use of M&E to not only track and report on existing and past projects (Mueller-Hirth 2012), but also its proactive use to balance the SMSEs' mission-centric actions with the expectations and requirements of the funders and other stakeholders. M&E, as a function, is also key in tracking and reporting on funders' mandates and simultaneously on the mission's attainment. The ToC and M&E plans are used as the basis for identifying the activities, target population, indicators, and output measurement. M&E is appreciated within the SMSEs not only as a function within specific individuals but as a collective organizational approach to align the core mission with other multiple mandates.

The SMSEs utilize centralized agile IT systems to disaggregate as well as integrate reports to fulfil multiple stakeholders' requirements in a frugal manner, for example using social media. They optimize digitization and advanced IT capabilities to facilitate real-time reporting. Digital hybridity has been recently suggested, however, this has only considered dual social and commercial tension management (He et al. 2022). Furthermore, IT ambidexterity literature which covers exploring existing while exploiting new IT resources (He et al. 2022), does not fully explain how SMSEs lacking such resources align mandates and mission. The findings in this theme extend these findings to how frugal IT and digitization [social media] is important in facilitating the management of not only dual but multiple internal tensions simultaneously.

The SMSEs also use financial reports to meet multiple requirements. For example, the same audit reports are used to meet various regulatory requirements and funder requirements, and they are also used as a marketing tool to demonstrate sound management in obtaining financing from private credit institutions. This is in line with literature on the role of artefacts in how routines can interact. The study findings suggest that artefacts are not merely abstract (Berglund, Bousfiha, and Mansoori 2020), but can dynamically be utilized in SMSEs to manage multiple conflicting goals in a simultaneous fashion.

The SMSEs align the community stakeholders on project outcomes to ensure ownership and continued legitimacy within the communities (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2019). They utilize different avenues to align multiple stakeholders on project outputs and outcomes, for example, participation in community partner meetings, debriefs with community leaders, dissemination of project outcomes at community [and local government] meetings, and annual general/stakeholder meetings.

6. Conclusion

In response to a call by Mair (2020), this study investigates how SMSEs in resource-constrained environments align multiple mandates and mission simultaneously. The paper extends the dyadic context where social enterprises navigate dual social and commercial mandated goals, associated with dual social-commercial logics, to how they align multiple external mandated goals and their core missions. This provides an opportunity to delve into the meso-level and its implications for social enterprises. The study emphasizes innovative exploration through internal-external practising to align multiple mandates and mission. The theoretical model presented in the study encapsulates how SMSEs employ community embeddedness, mission agility, and proactive M&E for effective internal-external practising. This enables them to innovatively explore and concurrently align multiple mandates with their core missions through internal-external sense-making, interpretation, mapping, multitasking project management enactment, and concurrent measurement. While this study offers significant practical insights, its focus on South African SMSEs may limit the generalizability of its findings to other contexts.

6.1. Implications for theory

The context presented opportunities for organizations to be innovative, creative and adaptable in aligning multiple mandates and mission. This study makes a contribution to the social enterprise literature by illustrating how SMSEs leverage community embeddedness, mission agility, and proactive monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This allows SMSEs to simultaneously balance multiple mandates and mission.

First, the study contributes to the literature by presenting a counterargument to RDT, challenging the idea that resource owners inherently hold power over recipients (AbouAssi and Tschirhart 2018; Mair 2020; Malatesta and Smith 2014). The study illustrates the benefits of SMSEs prioritizing alignment with the community's social mission, akin to the community logic (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022; Waardenburg 2021). The role of the community [social needs, beneficiaries and leadership structures] is important to legitimize the social mission of the SMSE, and moreso, firming up the nexus of entrepreneurship and societal impact (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022). The community is increasingly being argued to be a powerful and important player in determining social impact, akin to community logic (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022; Waardenburg 2021). SMSEs leverage their community embeddedness, for example, through the art of community leadership involvement, and utilizing their proximity to beneficiaries to effectively articulate social needs and the core missions. This enhances their legitimacy (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2019, 2020), and social licence to operate (Demuijnck and Fasterling 2016), giving them negotiating power with the funders and other external stakeholders. They make sense of multiple beneficiary needs and nuance them within their core mission creatively. This sort of practising of their flexibility and freedom, through subtle power (Dey and Steyaert 2016) gives the SMSE impetus to facilitate the social mission in trumping conflicting mandates by funders. The beneficiaries and community appear resourceful and the biggest supporters of SMSEs. This powerful position gives impetus to SMSEs in aligning the funders' mandates with their social mission.

Second, the study extends the discourse on 'the need for mission agility' (Bacq and Lumpkin 2021, 287) beyond mission drift (Varendh-Mansson, Wry, and Szafarz 2020) in SMSEs. How such organizations deal with the nuances of conflicting multiple mandates in less regularized contexts has not yet been sufficiently addressed in the literature (Littlewood and Holt 2018b; Mair 2020), as it has begun to be addressed in this study. The study contributes by explaining how SMSEs innovatively align multiple mandates with mission through innovative activity expansion and shifts within the broader mission, allowing them to accommodate varied mandates. Value creation adaptations through practices such as creative co-creation occur to align stakeholder mandates with the core missions. Additionally, business tools are used creatively to capture the broader organizational core activities, while linking them with other mandates in innovative ways of managing multiple mandates and moving towards meeting the mission. The study also highlights the unique features of SMSEs and their adaptability. Their small size and the regulatory ambiguity of the social enterprise sector enable them to be agile and creative. They take advantage of the regulatory loopholes (Littlewood and Holt, 2018a, 2018b, 2020) in registering the appropriate NPO and for-profit entities, which allows them the agility to navigate competing priorities simultaneously.

Third, the study illustrates how the role of proactive M&E capabilities is instrumental in facilitating the simultaneous alignment of mission and multiple mandates. M&E has not received much attention in the literature beyond the theory of change as a concept [ToC] (Battilana 2018; Ebrahim and Kasturi Rangan 2014), and in social impact measurement (Holt and Littlewood 2015). The study contributes to elevating the role of proactive M&E from the 'what' to 'how' and how M&E manifests at a meso-level. The study provides insights into the practical ways M&E is utilized to manage different tensions simultaneously. The SMSEs practice ToC holistically, taking a long-term perspective, and starting with the end goal, which is their social mission, and then reverse-engineer this to facilitate alignment between their mission and external mandates. From the pre-proposal stage, the SMSEs utilize their M&E skills to enhance the 'brokerage' aspects of understanding the community's social needs and articulating them within their own social mission, especially through the co-designing of projects. During proposal writing, funders' requirements are interpreted and the M&E plans are mapped in creative ways that articulate fulfilling the funders' requirements while addressing their own core social mission activities simultaneously. During implementation, M&E tools are used to enact multitasking project management to track projects and mission achievements concurrently. M&E skills are also applied to concurrently measure and report data to funders and stakeholders alike to demonstrate the achievement of mandates as well as mission attainment in annual reports. Besides, nuanced practices like the art of language infusion and utilizing annual reports to fulfil stakeholder mandates, promote the organization's mission, and attract other financiers, all at once, are utilized.

6.2. Implications for practice

This study makes a practical contribution to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, which emphasizes partnerships for achieving global goals. It highlights how social enterprises can engage in strategic partnerships with profit-driven stakeholders while maintaining a focus on their specific social missions. Additionally, the study's insights into 'mission agility' reveal underexplored mechanisms by which hybrid social enterprises, combining social and economic aims, can adapt to economic challenges and build resilience (Gopakumar 2022). Specifically, it examines how these organizations effectively integrate complex structural arrangements to advance their missions while navigating diverse partnerships. The theoretical model in the study provides guidance on preliminary leverage assessment that organizations can conduct when engaging multiple stakeholders.

The study also offers valuable insights into how scholars and practitioners can foster supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems that address the distinct needs of diverse entrepreneurial communities. Building on Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin (2022), it explores how communities can actively participate in co-designing, co-creating, and co-implementing social-economic goals. This approach reframes communities not just as beneficiaries but as active contributors in setting and evaluating social-economic indicators. By empowering communities to assess the achievement of these goals, the study underscores their essential role in driving progress towards sustainable development goals and enhancing the relevance and impact of entrepreneurial efforts.

The study also spotlights the role of M&E in strategic planning and execution in social enterprises. Specifically, how these hybrid organizations can utilize M&E practising, approaches, and tools innovatively in leading the internal–external assessment to define core mission activities that align with the social needs [and their priorities] at the community level. Additionally, how M&E practitioners interpret RFPs and translate them internally in a fashion that foregrounds the core mission activities, as well as core competencies. Thereafter, how they enact, monitor, and report on outputs that meet stakeholder requirements, as well as achievements attributable to the core mission. This facilitates the organization's capability to safeguard its core mission amidst its pursuit of multiple funding to ensures financial sustainability.

6.3. Future research

Areas of future studies are inferred at several points in the findings and discussion. The study argues that the community is increasingly being recognized as being a powerful and important player in determining the social impact of social enterprises' hybrid work (Bacq, Hertel, and Lumpkin 2022; Waardenburg 2021). However, further studies need to be conducted to understand the role of the community and its sub-groups – who might have other priorities and needs – in resource-seeking and social impact through the lenses of RDT (Mair 2020), legitimacy (Grimes, Alma Williams, and Yanfei Zhao 2020), and social licence to operate, within the social contract theory (Demuijnck and Fasterling 2016). This would be enriched by including community stakeholders in gathering data to understand the nexus of social impact, SMSE's social mission, and other stakeholders' priorities.

Mission agility is emerging as an important aspect of social enterprises (Bacq and Lumpkin 2021). The study's findings highlight the SMSEs' internal–external practising that facilitates the understanding of the funder and other stakeholders' requirements within the broader mission scope. It needs to be assessed how requirements are interpreted and translated internally when using M&E in a fashion that fulfils the funders' and other stakeholders' needs, while still achieving the organizational mission simultaneously at a micro-level. Future studies can also examine how mission agility, more so internal–external practising dynamics, manifest and are navigated in other contexts, in institutions of higher learning, and other large social enterprises. This would assist in enhancing the validity and generalizability of the findings (Yin 2017, 2017).

While the study was not specifically focusing on dynamic capabilities, the empirical evidence points to how the artefacts in the SMSEs turned out to be dynamic capabilities. The study's findings further suggest the facilitation of ambidexterity through the agility of internal workings of practices [microfoundations and capabilities] to manage multiple tensions. This is because practices and routines can be building blocks of dynamic capabilities in SMSEs (Howard-Grenville and Rerup, 2017; Schmidt and Santamaria-Alvarez 2022). Hence, future studies should examine how dynamic capabilities within social enterprises [devoid of resources] enhance sensing opportunities, seizing and performing optimally (Teece 2018), at a micro-level.

The study is in line with recent business model innovation (BMI) literature on social enterprises (Weerawardena et al. 2021). However, beyond dual commercial and social competing goals in social enterprises, there is a need for more studies on BMI microfoundations in navigating multiple competing logics, especially through co-designing, co-creation, and co-delivery. As an emerging research topic, BMI provides a basis for rich, nuanced and dialectic discussions not addressed in previous studies in resource-constrained organizations and other contexts in this regard. In addition, a focus on the internal organizing practices and routines through the BMI lens can reveal significant and previously overlooked implications for aligning multiple mandates and mission. This will potentially generate new knowledge on coping strategies by social enterprises in resource-constrained environments for adaptability and survival, evidenced by social mission achievement (Berrett and Holliday 2018).

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Informed consent

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