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Align or Perish: Social Enterprise Network Orchestration in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that networks are vital for scaling the impact of social enterprises. However, at present, insight into how and why social enterprises successfully orchestrate networks over time as they scale, particularly in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, is scant. Theoretically sensitized by social network theory, our inductive study of six Kenyan social enterprises analyzed their phase-contingent network orchestration. Our findings show how and why *entrepreneurial contextual bridging* and *circumventing social liability* are important for initial scaling, whereas *aligned capacity building* as well as *aligning incentives with political actors* become necessary to develop and navigate social business ecosystems. In sum, we contribute a deeper understanding of how and why agentic network actions help social entrepreneurs achieve success as they scale in an emerging economy context.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Previous work highlights the importance of social networks for social enterprises, in particular, to mobilize resources to tackle societal issues (André & Pache, 2016; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Dacin et al., 2011). However, although the literature has provided important insights into the types of networks that are required to develop and grow ("scale") social impact, it tends to assume networks are developed for specific projects, existing already, or that organizations have the leverage to develop networks easily, usually because they are large/reputed already (Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016).

Yet, social enterprises tend to require changes in their networks based on different resource requirements, challenges, and projects over time (Bull et al., 2008; Jacokes & Pryce, 2010; Light, 2008). Thus, given that networks are particularly important for social enterprises to acquire diverse resources (Alvord et al., 2004), exploring how social ventures build and manage ("orchestrate") beneficial social network arrangements over time as the social venture grows, and what drives these changes, is essential (Barkema et al., 2015; Dacin et al., 2011; Hallen et al., 2020). This exploration is particularly important in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, where prior research has argued collectivistic tendencies (i.e., prioritizing the group over the self; Schwartz, 1990; also see Busch & Mudida, 2021; Khavul et al., 2009) prevail, and where networks serve as a substitute for weak formal institutions (George et al., 2016; Khanna & Palepu, 2013), while often creating social obligations as well (Acquaah & Eshun, 2010; Khayesi & George, 2011; Zoogah et al., 2015). Given the lack of systematic insight into how social enterprises scale using social networks in this context (Barkema et al., 2015; Perrini et al., 2010), we asked, "How and why do social enterprises in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context successfully orchestrate their networks as they scale?"

Our research setting was Kenya, a Sub-Saharan African country characterized by collectivist tendencies and relatively weak formal institutions (Busch & Mudida, 2021) that has been at the forefront of innovative inclusive business models in emerging economies (UNDP, 2013). Given our limited knowledge of how social ventures orchestrate their networks as they scale in this context (Barkema et al., 2015; Khayesi et al., 2014), we used an inductive theory-building approach with a multiple-case-study design (Eisenhardt, 1989). To better understand network dynamics over time, we used a longitudinal qualitative comparative approach (Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2008; Flick, 2009). Our findings show how and why orchestrating social ties as a social enterprise scales is associated with success or failure. We identify four novel mechanisms: *entrepreneurial contextual bridging* and *circumventing social liability*, which are important for dis-embedding from the local context when scaling up operations while keeping local legitimacy, and *aligned capacity building* and *aligning incentives with political actors*, which become necessary to integrate activities across stakeholders within the emerging ecosystem. Based on these findings, our study makes two contributions.

First, we contribute to a deeper understanding of how and why social enterprises in the Sub-Saharan emerging economy context orchestrate networks as their ventures scale and require different resources over time (Dacin et al., 2011; Stephann et al., 2016). Capturing the social ventures' network dynamics over time contributes to our understanding of how and why agentic network actions can help realize success as ventures scale (Hallen et al., 2020; Stephann et al., 2016) in this context, and how design and orchestration failures (van Wijk et al., 2020) can be circumvented via effective network orchestration. This has important implications for our understanding of sustainable entrepreneurial interventions and solutions in resource-constrained contexts (Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Sutter, Bruton, & Chen, 2019) by explaining how stakeholders' interests can be aligned over time to "keep things together" and to enact effective ecosystems that outlive funders (Wijk et al., 2020).

Second, our study contributes to understanding how to manage the "dark side" of social networks, for instance, expectations of family, friends, and politicians who do not meaningfully contribute to the venture (Di Falco & Bulte, 2011; Khayesi et al., 2014). Given that the legitimacy of social enterprises in collectivistic settings tends to be based on achieving social objectives and being locally embedded (Busch & Barkema, 2019; Light, 2008), instead of using simple decoupling mechanisms (e.g., Granovetter, 1995; Maurer & Ebers, 2006), the successful enterprises in our study decoupled these social ties from the social enterprise while providing value to them.

In sum, we provide new insights into how and why successful social enterprises develop and align networks in an emerging economy context over time, which improves our collective understanding of how agentic network actions can help overcome structural constraints as ventures scale (Hallen et al., 2020) in this context.

INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises—enterprises with an embedded social purpose (Austin et al., 2006)—often aim to increase their social impact by "scaling" (André & Pache, 2016; Bradach, 2010; Bloom & Skloot, 2010; Dees et al., 2004; Santos, 2012). In this respect, "scaling up"—expanding to reach more beneficiaries—has been used most widely (André & Pache, 2016), often in tandem with "scaling deep" (offering more benefits to an existing group).

These approaches tend to rely on complex networked business models and resource-mobilization strategies, where different stakeholders, such as customers, donors, government, or other partners, add to the resources or revenues for the social enterprise and fund the service for beneficiaries (André & Pache, 2016; Dees et al., 2004). In combination with the need for broader alliance building to address often intricate societal challenges—requiring the insights and resources of a broad variety of partners (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004; Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011)—this shows the importance of networks for scaling social enterprises' impact (Bloom & Smith, 2010; Busch & Barkema, 2019; Light, 2008).

However, although this research highlights the importance of social networks for social enterprises (André & Pache, 2016; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Bloom & Smith, 2010; Dacin et al., 2011; Dees et al., 2004), it typically implicitly assumes networks are developed for particular projects, existing already, or that organizations have the leverage to develop networks easily, usually because they are large/reputed already (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016). For example, work on well-established social organizations in emerging economy contexts, such as BRAC, highlights the importance of local networks to reach social goals related to specific projects (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016). Yet, we know that social enterprises tend to require changes in their networks, based on different resource requirements, challenges, and projects as they scale over time (Light, 2008; Phillips et al., 2019). This suggests that whether and how firms are able to accommodate shifting demands by adjusting their social networks over time may have important performance implications (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Phillips et al., 2019). Thus, given that networks are key for social enterprises' resource acquisition and coordination (Austin et al., 2006; Light, 2008), exploring how successful social enterprises orchestrate social networks as they grow, and why—that is, what explains these changes—is important (Barkema et al., 2015; Dacin et al., 2011; Perrini, Vurro, & Costanzo, 2010).

However, a gap in our understanding exists regarding how and why relevant networks need to—and can—be built and managed ("orchestrated") over time (Stephann et al., 2016). This need is particularly salient in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, where collectivistic tendencies (i.e., prioritizing group over the self; Schwartz, 1990; also see Busch & Mudida, 2021; Khavul et al., 2009; Khayesi et al., 2014) prevail, and where networks often serve as a substitute for weak formal institutions (George et al., 2016; Khanna & Palepu, 2013), although this often creates social obligations as well (Acquaah & Eshun, 2010; Khayesi & George, 2011; Zoogah et al., 2015). Thus, given that at present, systematic insight into how and why social ventures navigate their networks as they scale and tackle emerging challenges in this context in which relationships play a crucial role is limited (Barkema et al., 2015; George et al., 2016), we asked, "How and why do social enterprises in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context successfully orchestrate their networks as they scale?"

Our research setting was Kenya, a Sub-Saharan African country characterized by relatively strong collectivist tendencies and weak formal institutions (Busch & Mudida, 2021) that has been at the forefront of inclusive business model innovation in emerging economies (UNDP, 2013), which made it an interesting setting for exploring social enterprise networks in an emerging economy context (Batjargal et al., 2013; George et al., 2016; Khayesi & George, 2011). We focused on the farming sector, which "demonstrates the greatest potential for low-income people…as consumers, producers, entrepreneurs and employees" (UNDP: 27), and in which two thirds of Kenyans are directly or indirectly involved.

Theoretically sensitized by social network theory, we analyzed how social enterprises developed their networks in the Kenyan context, to inform our understanding of how and why social networks were orchestrated over time as these social enterprises scaled. Given our limited knowledge of how social ventures develop their networks over time—especially in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, in which entrepreneurs often face additional challenges, such as extensive social obligations (Khavul et al., 2009; Khayesi et al., 2014)—we used an inductive-theory-building approach with a multiple-case-study design (Eisenhardt, 1989). To better understand network dynamics over time, we used a longitudinal qualitative comparative approach (Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2008; Flick, 2009). By comparing success, failure, and turnaround cases—namely, firms that went from initially failing to later success—we identified two scaling phases, key characteristics of networks during each phase, and underlying mechanisms of how and why social entrepreneurs changed these networks based on the specific challenges they encountered over time.

Our findings show how and why the orchestration of social ties over time—or the lack of such orchestration—was associated with success or failure as the ventures scaled. We identified four new mechanisms: *entrepreneurial contextual bridging* and *circumventing social liability*, which are essential for initial scaling, and *aligned capacity building* and *aligning incentives with political actors*, which become necessary to develop and navigate social business ecosystems. Based on these findings, we make two contributions. First, we contribute to a deeper understanding of how social enterprises in the Sub-Saharan emerging economy context can successfully orchestrate networks over time (Dacin et al., 2011), which helps explicate how and why social enterprises change their networks as their ventures scale (Daspit & Long, 2014; Hallen et al., 2020; Stephann et al., 2016). Rather than assuming organizations focus merely on specific projects, have static networks, or are already large/reputed enough to easily develop local networks (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016), we develop new insights into how and why social enterprises orchestrate networks in an emerging economy context when requiring different resources and facing different challenges over time. This helps us understand how and why agentic network actions enable success as ventures scale (Hallen et al., 2020; Stephann et al., 2016), and how design and orchestration failures (van Wijk et al., 2020) can be overcome in this context. This has important implications for our collective understanding of sustainable entrepreneurial interventions and solutions in resource-constrained settings (Bruton, Ketchen, & Ireland, 2013; Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Sutter, Bruton, & Chen, 2019) by clarifying how stakeholders' interests can be aligned over time to "keep things together" and to enact effective ecosystems that outlive funders (Wijk et al., 2020).

Second, and more specifically, we provide new insights into how to manage the "dark side" of social networks, for instance, expectations of family, friends, and politicians who do not contribute economically to the venture (Di Falco & Bulte, 2011; Khayesi et al., 2014). Given that the social ventures' legitimacy in a collectivistic context was based on achieving social objectives and on being locally embedded (Light, 2008), instead of using simple decoupling mechanisms (Granovetter, 1995; Maurer & Ebers, 2006), the successful social enterprises decoupled these social ties from their enterprise while providing value to them. Thus, we contribute to a better understanding of how social enterprises in this context overcome the dark side of networks (di Falco & Bulte, 2010; George et al., 2016).

In sum, we provide new insights into how and why social enterprises can successfully orchestrate networks in an emerging economy context, thus improving our understanding of how agentic network actions help to overcome phase-contingent constraints as ventures scale (Hallen et al., 2020; Light, 2008) in this context. We contend that this has important implications for other contexts, including those characterized by weak formal institutions in which network orchestration challenges persist, as well as other collectivistic contexts that face (over-) embeddedness challenges.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social enterprises and scaling

Social enterprises leverage resources to address social problems and create value for society (Austin et al., 2006; Dacin et al., 2010; Zahra et al., 2008), often when governments and markets fail to address important needs (Austin et al., 2006; Dacin et al., 2011; Engelke et al., 2016). A core challenge for these ventures is to reconcile social goals with financial sustainability (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Battilana et al., 2015; Wry & York, 2017; 2019; York et al., 2016).

They often aim to increase the value they create for society through "scaling" their social impact (Bauwens, Huybrechts, & Dufays, 2019; Bradach, 2010; Bloom & Skloot, 2010; Dees et al., 2004). Scaling strategies can either be "depth" scaling, focusing on more benefits for the same beneficiaries, or "breadth" scaling, focusing on expanding the number of beneficiaries (André & Pache, 2016; Davies, Haugh, & Chambers, 2019; Desa & Koch, 2014; Lyon & Fernandez, 2012). Ventures may either scale through partnerships (Austin et al., 2016), social franchising (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007), or endogenous growth (Lyon & Stevenson, 2012). Typical scaling challenges include over-embeddedness (Smith & Stevenson, 2010), hybridity of goals (Kannothra, Manning, & Haigh, 2018), mission drift (Ometto et al., 2019), a desire of founders to maintain control (Smith, Kistruck, & Cannatelli, 2016), business model and personnel challenges (Camenzuli & McKague, 2015; Lyon & Sepulveda, 2012), low public awareness of social enterprises (Hynes, 2009; Lyon & Sepulveda, 2012), and problems with resource mobilization (Desa & Koch, 2014; Hynes, 2009; Santos et al., 2015). These challenges may be overcome through leveraging the social mission, anchoring, and using social networks (Busch & Barkema, 2019; Davies et al., 2019). Social networks are particularly important for social enterprises to overcome scaling challenges, because they can allow for gaining access to resources, information, and the broader support needed to scale (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011; Stephann et al., 2016).

Social enterprise networks (in emerging economy contexts)

Social networks—sets of actors and the ties that connect them—encompass various forms of cooperation, such as strategic alliances, collaborations, consortia, and joint ventures (Brass et al., 2004). Relationships between network members tend to be non-hierarchical, and participants tend to operate autonomously based on trust and/or formal contracts (Provan et al., 2007). The "content" of the links between participants may include financial and strategic resources (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Zane & De Carolis, 2016), emotional support (Provan & Milward, 2001), or information (Burt, 1997; Schutjens & Stam, 2003; Stam and Elfring, 2008). The resulting social capital, that is, "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network and the assets that may be mobilized through that network" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998: 243), is often essential for venture performance (Dacin et al., 2011; Stephann et al., 2016).[1]

Much of the network literature has focused on geographical and other structural positions ("structural localism;" Hallen, Davis, & Murray, 2020). Often rooted in the social embeddedness

[1]Theorizing about networks can be grounded in an actor-level view (e.g., individual or organization) or a network-level view (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). A "whole network" refers to a group of "three or more organizations connected in ways that facilitate achievement of a common goal" (Provan et al., 2007: 482). These organizations tend to be goal directed and formally established and governed, rather than serendipitous (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Dyads often form the building blocks of networks, and dyad-centered research tends to look at collections of two-party relationships that form a network of relationships, thus focusing on a network of relationships rather than the network itself (Provan et al., 1997). Previous research shows enterprises that form multiple ties at the same time are particularly successful (Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2009; Webb et al., 2010), because this success can increase access to information and resources.

paradigm (Granovetter, 1985; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Uzzi, 1997), this research tends to assume new ties are linked to entrepreneurs' local networks, with substantial path dependency, where initial network advantages and disadvantages are reinforced and amplified over time (Sydow, Schreyogg, & Koch, 2009; Vergne & Durand, 2010; also see Hallen et al., 2020). Social embeddedness then refers to "the nature, depth, and extent of an individual's ties into an environment, community, or society" (McKeever, Anderson, & Jack, 2014: 222). Whereas embeddedness can enable access to resources and opportunities, over-embeddedness can constrain this access through factors such as cognitive and relational lock-in (Busch & Barkema, 2020; Maurer & Ebers, 2006), re-enforcing path dependencies.

More recent work, however, focuses on agentic network action, "creating" new paths rather than following a structural path dependency (Garud, Kumaraswamy, & Karnøe, 2010; Hallen et al., 2020). This research stream has led to calls to explore how agentic actions influence network structures as ventures scale, and how networks develop from inception to maturity, to better understand how entrepreneurs orchestrate networks over time (Hallen et al., 2020).

This is particularly relevant for social ventures, which often have to access a variety of resources and partners to tackle complex social issues over time (Alvord et al., 2004; Dacin et al., 2011). Given that deep local embeddedness is often necessary to solve complex, context-specific social problems (Beckmann & Zeyen, 2014; Mair et al., 2016), social ventures early on in their development often engage with local stakeholders to develop shared goals and shape the rules of engagement (Austin et al., 2006). This requires creating networks of actors with different norms and expectations, often leading to frictions (Light, 2008). Such tensions may hamper scaling, and only a few successfully develop the required networks (Light, 2008; Zahra et al., 2008). Approaches such as social franchising and licensing may help specialization and scaling while staying locally embedded (Beckmann & Zeyen, 2014; Tracey & Jarvis, 2007; Volery & Hackl, 2010). However, goal asymmetry with stakeholders such as local entrepreneurs or middlemen may cause problems among stakeholders in a network (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007), hampering network alignment, particularly in emerging economy contexts (Busch & Barkema, 2020).

In emerging economy contexts, formal institutions (e.g., laws, property rights, and governmental regulation; Fligstein, 2001; Mair et al., 2011; North, 1991)[2] that establish the "rules of the game" (North, 1990) for entrepreneurial activities tend to be weak (Batjargal et al., 2013; Owen-Smith & Powell, 2008). Thus, alternative compensatory social structures are often needed (Khanna & Palepu, 1997; Webb et al., 2009), and enterprises tend to rely on social networks in order to tackle related challenges such as heightened uncertainty (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2006; Puffer, McCarthy, & Boisot, 2009; Seelos & Mair, 2007; Webb et al., 2010). Earlier research in emerging economy contexts (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016) provides important insights into how local networks—often, for projects—are developed and orchestrated, for example, by working with local leaders or by using social governance mechanisms. However, this research typically assumes organizations already have networks and the leverage to develop relationships with stakeholders, such as governments and local councils. However, although previous research explores projects and interventions of established organizations (Ebata & Huettel, 2019; Vicol et al., 2018), we know little about whether and how networks emerge, change, and are effective over time, for example, once funding runs out (Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Mitchell, Coles, & Keane, 2009; Webber & Labaste, 2010).

This is important because research on social enterprises (Light, 2008; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Phillips et al., 2019) shows a venture's resource needs, goals, and challenges change over time. However, we know little about the mechanisms of network development and how networks can be successfully orchestrated over time (Stephann et al., 2016), particularly in the Sub-Saharan emerging economy context. In these contexts, formal and informal networks are crucial (Barkema et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Khavul et al., 2009; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015; Umoh, 2006; Yenkey, 2015) yet also imply social obligations and expectations regarding how resources are to be distributed (Acquaah & Eshun, 2010; Khayesi & George, 2011; Zoogah et al., 2015), which can impede social ventures from scaling up.

Hence, better understanding how social ventures orchestrate and align networks to respond to these challenges as they scale is necessary (Barkema et al., 2015; Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011; Perrini et

[2] Informal institutions, in turn, refer to elements such as traditions, customs, and religious beliefs (Fligstein, 2001; Mair et al., 2011; North, 1991).

al., 2010). Given a lack of theory in this domain, we inductively explored how social enterprises orchestrated their networks in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, and how and why successful social enterprises aligned stakeholder networks over time as they scaled (Langley, 1999; Sonenshein, 2014; Williams and Shepherd, 2016).

METHODS

The Kenyan Context

Kenya was an interesting context to explore our research question, because it is at the forefront of social business innovation in emerging economies (UNDP, 2013), while having relatively weak formal institutions and strong collectivistic tendencies (Busch & Mudida, 2021). High levels of uncertainty result, making the country an interesting setting for our research, because networks in such contexts are particularly important for coordination and to reduce transaction costs (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2006; Batjargal et al., 2014; Khayesi & George, 2011; Ndemo & Weiss, 2017).

We used a multiple-case-study design for more generalizable and robust theory building than a single-case-study design would allow (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). To effectively compare ventures, we focused on one industry (Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012), the farming sector, directly or indirectly involving two thirds of Kenyans. This sector also "demonstrates the greatest potential for low-income people…as consumers, producers, entrepreneurs and employees" (UNDP, 2013: 27).

We started by mapping the context using publicly available information and, for deeper contextual understanding, interviewed six experts from, respectively, two impact funds, a social enterprise network, two relevant social enterprises, and a local university. They informed us about the context, the agriculture sector, ventures in this sector, and success and failure patterns related to networks, enabling us to identify cases to research and secure introductions to databases and interviewees. Both authors have been active in the Kenyan social enterprise context since 2010 and worked on many local research projects; the experience of the first author in founding and scaling a global social enterprise operating in several African countries, including Kenya, added to contextual understanding.

Using theoretical sampling, we selected cases to fill theoretical categories (Flick, 2009; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012). To generate deeper insights into the evolution, characteristics, and use of networks, we selected cases operating under similar conditions but with high performance variety (Flick, 2009).

To better understand network dynamics and social venture scaling, we explored and compared ventures that had successfully "scaled up" with those that failed to do so (Cardinal et al., 2011).

Defining performance measures to identify what was "successful" versus "unsuccessful" was a challenge given the diversity of goals (Nadolska & Barkema, 2014) and the limited availability of performance data for our context. To capture the multidimensional nature of scaled social performance, the literature and discussions with industry experts led to a simple yet effective two-dimensional conceptualization: survival coupled with scaled social impact.

We operationalized "survival" as the binary measure used in the business-venture literature, that is, whether the venture was retained or abandoned (Pennings, Lee, & van Witteloostuijn, 1998; Nadolska & Barkema, 2014). Based on the social-performance-measurement literature, we operationalized scaled social impact as the income increase of the target group, namely, farmers, in relevant locations (see Paton, 2003; Uvin et al., 2000; also see Bagnoli & Megali 2009). Following the understanding of successful scaling up (Uvin et al., 2000) as the expansion of an organization's reach beyond the local level, with critical mass achieved at three locations, we used a minimum 10% increase in beneficiaries' household income, holding labor input constant, for at least 100 farmers in at least three locations at the time of sampling.[3] Thus, we used a measure that we could reasonably expect to correlate with positive outcomes, that is, enabling small-scale farming as a viable lifestyle (see Ebrahim, 2013; Paton, 2003). These measures were established using archival data from public sources, internal reports, local social enterprise funder materials, and interviews with experts and stakeholders, such as farmers and funders (for a justification, see Acquaah, 2007).

We initially identified 26 ventures as successful or unsuccessful, and continued our theoretical sampling procedure by screening key variables known to affect the relationship between social networks and relevant outcomes (Lerner, Brush, & Hisrich, 1997; Yli-Renko et al., 2001), holding constant spatial or institutional contingencies that may influence an organization's development (Maurer & Ebers, 2006). We selected cases operating within the same regulatory frame (the major

[3] In this paper, we refer to farmers as both beneficiaries and clients, because they were part of the economic model as clients; they were also the object of the social goals, and therefore were beneficiaries. Thus, we used each term depending on what was most relevant in the context of the discussion.

regional clusters Nairobi and Kisumu), in the same sector (agriculture), and of the same type (focused on social impact) and organizational age.

We selected initiatives old enough to potentially have scaled already, that is, older than two years at the study's start, up to 15 years. This approach allowed for network changes to have happened, with a high likelihood that respondents could accurately recall events (Huber and Power, 1985), while those involved in the formation phase were typically still involved. That is, in all companies, the founders were still active, enabling us to track the evolution of enterprise networks from the beginning. We also "controlled" for direct access to resources; no social venture could draw on a rich resource base such as a holding company, and all needed to develop external networks to access resources. We also considered the academic background of the founders and management team; all had a similar level of education, often relevant for the venture, such as finance or marketing. After this initial screening, 14 ventures remained.

Despite our strong local embeddedness via several local research projects, cultural barriers initially slowed down interviewing respondents at these ventures, and we therefore used a variety of approaches. For instance, we asked for introductions from partner organizations such as Ashoka, Acumen Fund, and EASEN, with whom the target organization had a trusted relationship. With a positive response, we followed up directly. With no response, which happened more often, we asked a second person from another partner organization to introduce us. Several CEOs responded but declined, citing time constraints. The remaining eight organizations—six successes, two failures—were generally interested. To establish trust and goodwill, we immersed ourselves in the local community wherever possible and offered post-study incentives, such as consulting and introductions to partners. These discussions led us to drop two "successful" organizations due to unreliable answer patterns, leaving us with four successes and two failures.

Our final sample comprised six social agri-ventures, which engaged low-income residents, particularly farmers. All ventures provided farmers with key supplies such as fertilizer and aimed to help them increase their income (see Table 1). All ventures faced the business-model challenge of poor customers, requiring the enterprise to look for a broad range of potential funders early on, such as international development organizations, NGOs, and grant-based collaborations, while generating their own revenue, by selling their outputs to farmers and supermarkets (see Table 1). Other challenges included seasonality, low profit margins, and restrictions on scale due to regulations; for example, honey or fertilizer certifications were less developed in Kenya, limiting export opportunities and increasing local competition, reducing prices.

"Successful" firms (Agri-S1; Agri-S2; Agri-T1; Agri-T2) survived financially and satisfied scaled social impact measured as described above. Two ultimately successful ventures went through periods of decline before turning around. That is, they first appeared on a failing trajectory and then became successful; we labelled them "turnaround." (This variation represented more "observations" in terms of comparing "success" and "failure.") All successful ventures reached a minimum 10% increase in beneficiaries' household income for over 100 farmers in over three locations—our scaling measure—at the time of sampling. Unsuccessful ("failed") initiatives (Agri-F1; Agri-F2) had no significant social impact and did not survive. To improve the validity of our measures (see Nadolska & Barkema, 2014), we asked some social entrepreneurs and their stakeholders whether they considered the firm successful; their assessments broadly aligned with ours. Before or during our study, the four successful ventures and their leaders were recognized as Ashoka, Echoing Green, or Unreasonable Institute fellows, as further signals of their "scaled" impact.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data collection

We explored the period from the ventures' conception until August 2018 and collected longitudinal data for over a decade, from April 2011 to September 2021. We employed between-method triangulation to improve the accuracy of emergent theory, collecting data through interviews, emails, Skype calls, archival data such as internal growth plans (Yin, 2003), and observations, for example, at local "show farms" that educated farmers on fertilizer effects.

We conducted 64 interviews: 12 expert interviews—six at the beginning and six toward the end of the study period—and 52 semi-structured interviews with founders, senior staff involved in high-level decisions, and key stakeholders, such as funders. This focus on actors responsible for network development aligns with research on entrepreneurial tie formation (Katila & Chen, 2008; Ozcan &

Eisenhardt, 2009). Interviews typically lasted 50-70 minutes and were conducted during four trips to Kenya, two to four weeks each, and via Skype. To capture key developments and changes over time, we interviewed most participants twice over the study. Our questions were sensitized by the relevant literature and were loosely framed to allow new ideas to emerge (Flick, 2009). The topic guide included questions about organizational development, access to external networks, and relationships it had developed. During the interviews, we made explicit reference to key events such as securing funding to trigger retrospective inspection (Merton & Kendall, 1946), which also facilitated subsequent interview questions about changes related to critical events, such as the closing of a partnership and its effects.

A "snowballing" approach (Morgan, 2008) to sampling began with an interview with the CEO or founder that ended by asking for referrals to the most relevant people to interview. These recommendations usually corresponded with people we had identified beforehand through experts and archival mapping, including internal documents. We interviewed all active founders, as well as key people responsible for networks, such as senior strategists. We used interviews with funders and experts from support institutions, such as local incubators for data triangulation (Denzin, 1989). We recorded interviews whenever possible (Flick, 2009). If respondents showed discomfort, we prioritized open communication over recording and used handwritten notes.

Consistent with the logic of theoretical saturation, we limited the number of interviewees per case and omitted "pseudo-interviews" that could have increased the total number without adding to quality. For example, we interviewed several farmers who helped confirm the actual impact of the venture but whose insights regarding our core questions were limited; we did not count them as part of the 64.

We tackled potential informant bias in several ways. For example, we blended retrospective accounts with real-time accounts of emerging and ongoing events, such as a new funder relationship (Leonard-Barton, 1990). The use of retrospective data enabled the efficient collection of more observations, whereas the real-time data mitigated retrospective bias (Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2009). We encouraged openness through anonymity and asked "courtroom questions" focusing on factual accounts (Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012). In addition, we used archival data to contextualize our findings, that is, methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1989). However, the nature of our organizations, namely, early phase, entails an inherent lack of history and documentation, so we used these documents for contextualization and triangulation, rather than as "information containers."

Data analysis

Our data analysis was partly planned, partly emergent. We shifted back and forth between data, emerging patterns, and theory on networks and social enterprises. This iterative analysis was not linear, but for simplicity, we discuss it here in succinct steps (see Graebner, 2009). First, we composed case accounts for the six ventures, emphasizing process patterns of events (Eisenhardt, 1989; Sonenshein, 2014), as well as networks. We started with a within-case analysis and then began a cross-case analysis.

Within-case analysis. We aggregated data for each venture, including timelines and informant quotes (Flick, 2009): 37–122 pages per venture. We coded emerging themes to identify underlying social processes and categories (Flick, 2009). This process was both data and theory driven, using the literature on networks and social entrepreneurship to inform the coding. Succinct themes emerged, which we coded as "nodes." For example, our informants interpreted venture development in phases, triggered by questions such as "how did your organization develop over time?" Therefore, we coded and re-coded phases based on the emerging data; that is, we used a *temporal bracketing strategy* (Langley, 1999). These periods were demarcated by changing venture roles, needs, and challenges. For example, informants interpreted their initial role as laying the foundations for the venture and its network, indicated by quotes such as "there was [a] focus on establishing what the problem was" (Founder, Agri-S2). Later, they started "scaling," indicated by quotes such as "scaling the networks" (CEO, Agri-S2).

Next, we coded and recoded based on emerging network characteristics per organization, per phase. We went through several coding iterations to ultimately arrive at two scaling phases. We also coded emerging mechanisms and conditions; some were more pronounced in some phases than in others. (Although we used "phases" as broader temporal demarcations, our coding iterations focused on the demarcation of "phases" based on the respective challenges rather than mere "linear" development over time; i.e., phases can overlap). To improve accuracy and validity, we discussed our findings with some of the social entrepreneurs. To tackle the challenge of "the potential endlessness of options for coding and comparisons" (Flick, 2009: 317), we used sensitizing concepts from the literature to imagine potential demarcations without imposing them. We used qualitative analysis software, NVivo9*, for its good integration of memos and indexing to improve transparency and effectiveness of the coding process (Flick, 2009).

Cross-case analysis. We embarked on a *cross-case analysis* to detect similarities and differences between cases (Denzin, 1989; Eisenhardt, 1989), comparing successful and unsuccessful cases. Comparing cases across dimensions, we identified succinct patterns (see Table 2). We engaged in an iterative process, moving between theory and data, until we reached theoretical saturation, that is, a close match between data and theory (Bansal & Corley, 2012). Comparing emerging theoretical concepts with the literature enabled us to make sense of emerging data and refine theoretical relationships and underlying mechanisms (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Table 2 shows how we moved from quotes to aggregate dimensions for our conceptual framework (Flick, 2009). To increase the degree of confidence in our study's data and analysis, we used existing criteria for elevating *trustworthiness* in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Amankwaa, 2016; Flick, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance credibility, we used prolonged engagement (i.e., spending sufficient time in the field to understand the setting and engage meaningfully with members of that setting; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) during several extensive trips to Kenya. We used peer-debriefing with local academics (e.g., at Strathmore University and at the University of Nairobi), member-checking (e.g., with participating social entrepreneurs), and reflective discussions with local experts (e.g., of the local entrepreneurship hub, iHub, and members of the local Ashoka office). Our close collaboration with Strathmore University, based on close ties between the research team and Kenyan academics—including Kenyan academics with whom we co-authored related papers—allowed us to engage closely with the local ecosystem. To increase the dependability and confirmability of our data, we used regular peer debriefings among the co-authors, as well as frequent presentations of our results at Sub-Saharan African universities (e.g., Strathmore University; University of Nairobi; University of Cape Town) and at academic conferences such as the Africa Academy of Management Annual Meeting. We discuss the transferability judgment of our findings, especially to (a) other collectivistic settings and (b) other emerging economy contexts—as well as limitations—in more detail below.

FINDINGS

Two scaling phases, capturing strategic actions and network changes, emerged from our data, which we labeled "scaling phase 1" and "scaling phase 2." Each phase showed common characteristics and challenges across ventures and helped explain why social ventures had to adjust their networks as they scaled. Whereas scaling phase 1 network issues tended to be related to embeddedness challenges (i.e., being sufficiently but not too much embedded in their respective local context while aiming to expand), scaling phase 2 network issues tended to be about ecosystem creation and alignment issues (i.e., building capacity of beneficiaries (i.e., farmers) conjointly with productive stakeholders such as international funders, and aligning with the objectives of government officials, who were of particular relevance in this context).

Successful and unsuccessful social enterprises responded differently to these challenges, and we identified salient differences in underlying network mechanisms (see Table 2 for additional evidence). Two organizations (Agri-S1 and Agri-S2) scaled successfully; two failed to do so and folded over time (Agri-F1 and Agri-F2); and two (Agri-T1 and Agri-T2) followed a trajectory whereby success changed over time: after an initial period of expansion, they went through a decline period, eventually reversing their "failing" strategies and returning to successful scaling, thus adding additional richness to our findings. Figure 1 captures our emerging insights, which we discuss in the rest of this section.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Emergence

All six ventures started with identifying a core social problem of a relevant target group, namely, their beneficiaries, and developing an idea on how to tackle it. Key challenges at the beginning included framing, communicating, and legitimizing the idea, and gathering information about the target market. To tackle these challenges, the ventures tapped a network of existing ties—contacts that the founders had developed before starting their venture—with research institutes (Agri-S2), close friends, and family members (Agri-F1; Agri-S1; Agri-T1). People around the entrepreneurs initially did not completely understand the social idea and/or the related products. However, "they tried their best to be able to understand. . . . They had faith in what we are doing" (Founder, Agri-S1). For instance, the enterprises' focus on social objectives was difficult to grasp, given that "there were few organizations [and individuals] which were intrigued by driving social development using the efficiencies of the private sector. . . . [The confusion] was due to a lack of detailed understanding . . . [of the] . . . social aspect" (Founder, Agri-T1). This later led to unusual network choices, for example, the need to partner with international organizations for funding and legitimacy when expanding across local contexts.

All social ventures initially leveraged these relationships for unidirectional emotional and resource support, in particular, to gain access to ideas, knowledge, and feedback (Agri-T1; Agri-F2), emotional support (Agri-F1), and material resources (Agri-S1). This helped them overcome early challenges such as legitimizing the project.[4] Although we did not observe salient differences among ventures in this early phase, differences became increasingly visible when the ventures started *expanding.*

Scaling phase 1

In the first scaling phase, all ventures began testing and selling products to a broader audience: "The demand was there, then scaling it" (Founder, Agri-T2). Challenges included establishing a reliable and scalable supply chain and maintaining local embeddedness while expanding into different geographies with diverse local needs.

To tackle these scaling challenges, the ultimately successful ventures (Agri-S1; Agri-S2; Agri-T1; Agri-T2) started to expand their network with local communities and NGOs across different geographies. To get the necessary financial support, reputation, and scale, successful social enterprises developed extensive links with international organizations, such as the World Bank, that were introduced to them by local support organizations, such as local incubators. These international organizations often were crucial to gaining the financial capital and knowledge necessary to expand. Thus, successful social ventures developed a strong local network in an expanding set of geographies paired with international ties. For instance, the CEO of Agri-T1 illustrated this point by highlighting

[4] These insights correspond to challenges and networking behavior that have been observed in previous research on early-stage social enterprises, especially regarding the liability of newness (Austin et al., 2006; Perrini et al., 2010). However, we included this description of emergence to foreshadow how and why in subsequent phases different challenges required changes in networks.

that their founder was “very good at building relationships with NGOs and [international] development agencies. That’s what led to a lot of that initial growth.” Furthermore, in contrast to the one-way relationships during “emergence,” successful ventures (Agri-S1; Agri-S2; Agri-T1; Agri-T2) were now developing reciprocal relationships because they had established themselves, were starting to be profitable, and were able to provide value to partners, which they were not able to do at the beginning. For example, collaborations with local universities focused on bringing the universities’ knowledge into the company, contributing to their programs, or involving students in venture activities (e.g., Agri-T1).

By contrast, unsuccessful ventures were unable to develop these effective local relationships with universities and other stakeholders providing new insights or resources and had fragile or no international ties. For instance, the founder of Agri-F1 acknowledged that although his venture was strongly embedded in the local context, it was via unproductive ties that developed collectivistic expectations toward the venture (see below), and he was “very attached to the local people, always wanted to help everywhere,” and often took on ineffective family members and other unproductive network partners. The successful ventures, in turn, were embedded in the local community but “kept it professional” (Founder, Agri-T2). For example, the founder of Agri-S1 “brought in key guys to do procurement and other areas, and I made it clear to them that they are now in charge, so that I can say to people who ask me for favors, ‘these guys are in charge of making these decisions’…and I told the people working for me that they can only hire people that meet all the standards, and that people they and I know need to compete with everyone else.”

Whereas the successful ventures had local founders, the ventures that were led by foreigners—Agri-F2 was run by American founders, Agri-T1 had hired an American CEO—faced the challenge of being “under-embedded” and had issues connecting with the local community: “To get buy-in from locals . . . can be a big hurdle” (Founder, Agri-F2). The founder of Agri T1, which went through a major decline phase before turning around, reported that “not being local necessitated building relationships with the local community from scratch.” The company’s American CEO often felt awkward about being at ribbon ceremonies in villages as the only white person, and he found connecting with villagers was hard, “as if I was just a bystander.” Over time, the management team handed more and more (equity) control to locals, to be able to immerse the venture more deeply in the local community. Hence, ventures run by non-locals had to make additional efforts to develop local buy-in, successfully so in the case of Agri-T1. For example, they coopted local community members because "people need to hear from their friends that we are reliable—don't take my word for it, let's hear it from your friend" (Founder, Agri-T1).

In sum, whereas all ultimately successful social ventures over time developed crucial ties locally and internationally, the unsuccessful venture Agri-F1 was "over-embedded" with ineffective contacts, and the unsuccessful venture Agri-F2 had problems establishing relevant contacts.

Two mechanisms emerged that explain how and why successful ventures in this phase coped with the embeddedness and related expansion challenges and orchestrated their networks differently from unsuccessful ones: *entrepreneurial contextual bridging* and *circumventing social liability.*

Entrepreneurial contextual bridging. When ventures faced the challenge of expanding across geographies with different languages or local dialects, we observed a clear difference in the entrepreneurs' ability to establish rapport with local stakeholders. The successful entrepreneurs used entrepreneurial forms of transferring new meanings and practices to a context in a locally sensitive way ("contextual bridging" McKague et al., 2015; Venkataraman et al., 2016), given that in addition to needing to establish local rapport, they had to overcome liability of newness (Austin et al., 2006; Perrini et al., 2010) as early-stage social enterprises. We define *entrepreneurial contextual bridging* as "transferring new meanings and practices to a context in a locally sensitive way while establishing legitimacy and credibility."

For example, given major disparities across Kenya, such as tribal separations observed earlier in (collectivistic) emerging economy contexts (Yenkey, 2015), successful ventures mediated between different groups and catered to local languages of customers and local partners. They managed to convince locals of their legitimacy and recruited them into their network. The founder of Agri-T1 explained, "We spent a lot of time [personally interacting with] people . . . this makes our connections work when needed." This was particularly important given the small size of the ventures, because "if you cannot show them a big company advertisement [sic] or you're not a company with many more people, you have to prove you are to be trusted" (Founder, Agri-S1). Given that legal agreements did not mean much in a village context, the ventures developed local buy-in through public accountability. Agri-T1, for example, during their turnaround phase, "had our local representatives and partners make frequent public commitments in front of local villagers: 'We will deliver xyz by xyz' or 'we will help you in xyz ways', and then delivering them . . . this developed trust and legitimacy" (CEO, Agri-T1). Agri-S2, in turn, identified farmers who were unsuccessful, for support programs, because "a powerful story is also to be told by [local] people who actually were written off, who are [now] succeeding. This forms the kind of network that [is] working for us" (CEO, Agri-S2). By contrast, unsuccessful firms showed a disconnect with stakeholders across geographies, and the founders of both unsuccessful ventures admitted they did not establish the necessary rapport with potential stakeholders.

In sum, although the unsuccessful ventures were unable to do so, successful ventures were able to develop buy-in across contexts and understood the reflexive interplay between interventions and local environments (van Wijk et al., 2020), facilitated by frequently asking for feedback and adjusting operations accordingly. Unlike large NGOs such as CARE (e.g., McKague, Zietsma, & Oliver, 2015) or PRADAN (e.g., Venkataraman et al., 2016), the young social ventures not only had to bridge into the respective social context, but also had to overcome their liability of newness in creative ways, and thus needed to go beyond standard approaches of established organizations such as hiring local staff and engaging village elites (e.g., McKague et al., 2015). The companies also attempted to build relationships with the government, which, due to the low legitimacy of the early-phase projects (i.e., the ventures' liability of newness), proved to be a challenge. As we discuss below, this changed over time.

Circumventing social liability. As the ventures grew and revenues came in, the prospect of money attracted a variety of ineffective stakeholders such as previously uninvolved family members expecting to benefit financially from the venture, suppliers trying to charge higher prices, or politicians trying to benefit financially or politically. This threatened the growth and survival of the companies. As a response, successful ventures used *circumventing social liability*, which we define as "productively bypassing structural embeddedness constraints via agentic actions."

All ultimately successful ventures (Agri-S1; Agri-S2; Agri-T1; Agri-T2) started establishing mutually beneficial and often interdependent relationships with their stakeholders. For example, when ventures started scaling, they needed to engage middlemen; engaging with farmers one on one became impossible. However, middlemen often exploited local farmers who were easily manipulated due to lack of access to market information. This created a potential social liability for ventures because it made their networks less effective and dissonated with their social goals related to helping farmers. Successful ventures therefore engaged intermediaries such as local cooperatives, organized by farmers and serving their interests:

> We've always been very wary of middlemen, because we are aware that is what has caused many, many problems...most of them take advantage. . . . There's a lot that changed [since last interview]. Last time, we were . . . working with the farmers one-on-one. But . . . we realized that there's more power in just dealing with the farmers through . . . cooperatives. (Founder, Agri-S1)

These cooperatives provided accountability, because “they guarantee each other just within. . . . So, we know very well that . . . you’re not going to default . . . because . . . I know your wife, I know where you stay” (Founder, Agri-S1). Although all ultimately successful ventures focused on cutting out or retraining unaligned intermediaries and on working with aligned intermediaries such as cooperatives (“Cooperatives deal with the farmers directly, and then the only thing now we come in is when . . . you pay or when you collect all the input,” senior strategist, Agri-S1), unsuccessful ventures (incl. Agri-T1 and Agri-T2 in their decline phase) did not follow this approach: “We worked with [unaligned] middlemen. Yes, and that is another cause of failure . . . the middlemen have no fixed price, there’s simply no way of going to control that . . .that fluctuation in the input price eventually contributes to your collapse” (F, Agri- LS1). The founder of Agri-T1 critically reflected that “we went to find brokers instead of sourcing directly in partnership with farmers . . . what [we were] . . . left with was no cash, and little competitive advantage [in relation to our social impact].” During their turnaround, both Agri-T1 and Agri-T2 changed back to aligned cooperatives and cut out unaligned middlemen.

Overcoming expectations emphasizing cohesiveness among individuals and prioritizing group over the self (“collectivistic expectations;” Schwartz, 1990; Khavul et al., 2009; Khayesi et al., 2014) was a particular challenge in the Sub-Saharan African cultural context. This included real or perceived obligations toward previously uninvolved family members who “don't have the slightest idea of how the venture started . . . all they do is to come here and say, . . .‘we are here to eat’” (Founder, Agri-F1).

Surprisingly, successful social ventures found creative ways to dis-embed from such local, unproductive ties while still creating value. Agri-S1, for example, involved effective family members in the organization, based on merit, while creating opportunities for ineffective family members outside the venture, avoiding nepotism:

> I try to connect them [ineffective stakeholders] to some of these [friends' companies], because . . . nobody wants to get into conflict with either your wife or your brother or your sister. So . . . [I] try to create opportunities for them outside [Agri-S1] . . . because I saw a number of my friends—they literally sunk because maybe the brother took some money from the company and misused the funds, and there's no [way to] . . . take his brother to prison . . . [thus] I've tried to link them up with other parties, so they're working for them so those guys . . . [can] control them. (Founder, Agri-S1)

This approach enabled expansion while avoiding disappointing friends and family members. This logic was not limited to family members and friends, however; it also applied to government officials and community members. For example, although Agri-T1 initially benefitted from informal recommendations, with increasing success, more community members "asked for favors that we couldn't provide, for example, getting honey from us. Instead of saying 'no', we found ways to circumvent the 'no'. For example, we said that 'you can't get the honey from us, but maybe you can become a beekeeper, and make your own honey'" (Co-Founder, Agri-T1). Thus, Agri-T1 made community members part of the value chain instead of giving them handouts.

By contrast, Agri-F1 was overwhelmed by collectivistic expectations and got trapped in dependency relationships. The founder of Agri-F1 described how "each one of them [key stakeholders and potential stakeholders such as previously not involved family members] . . . felt that . . . 'this thing is ours, and we could easily walk with cash'. . . without proper accounting for every single cent that left the enterprise. . . . [This] eventually brought that enterprise down to its knees." (Foreigner-driven Agri-F2 did not face this challenge, because it was not able to develop strong local contacts in the first place).

Thus, during the expansion phase, successful ventures avoided resource drain by creating opportunities for ineffective family members outside the venture, cutting out or retraining unaligned middlemen, and involving government officials and community members in the value chain instead of spending money on them. This allowed them to expand into different contexts while staying locally embedded. Given that this allowed the ventures to productively circumvent structural embeddedness constraints ("social liabilities") via agentic actions (Hallen et al., 2020), we labelled this mechanism *circumventing social liability*. As we discuss below, this approach created social value while dis-embedding, which was important for their legitimacy. Over time, it enabled successful social enterprises to focus on growing and aligning the emerging ecosystem instead (phase 2). By contrast, unsuccessful venture Agri-F1 and turnaround ventures during their decline periods were drained by these "structural" constraints.

Insert Table 2 about here

Scaling phase 2

In scaling phase 2, successful ventures increasingly moved from developing individual ties successively to strategically developing and aligning productive "ecosystems"—systems of interaction between a variety of actors, functions, and institutions (Isenberg, 2010)—that allowed them to scale and sustain their activities and networks across the different geographies. Challenges included developing and holding this ecosystem together in sustainable ways, which was aggravated by the weak formal institutional infrastructure in this context (e.g., lack of formal support structures), which made trusted relationships with government officials even more important.

To tackle the challenge of coordinating their stakeholders at scale and across locations, successful ventures (Agri-S1; Agri-S2) assumed a *central role*, coordinating stakeholders such as farmers, government, and others to "be in the middle of it all . . . one thing that cuts across these associations [is] that they are all willing to impart from us" (Founder, Agri-S1). A key change for all successful ventures was to collaborate more extensively with the government, which shifted from being a barrier in earlier phases—for example, the founder of Agri-S1 was briefly imprisoned because local officials did not believe organic fertilizer was effective and thought it might be "an act of the devil" (Founder, Agri-S1)—to being a supporter. (We discuss below what enabled this change.) Access to stakeholders such as elected government officials became increasingly important, because larger-scale operations required influence over regulatory and financial resources controlled by public institutions.

Successful social ventures went beyond *reciprocal* to *enabling* relationships; based on their social goals, they provided as much to partners as their partners did in return, and sometimes even more, enabling stakeholders such as farmers to advance more holistically. For instance, all ultimately successful ventures (Agri-S1; Agri-S2; Agri-T1; Agri-T2) tried to "have influence on the whole system" (Founder, Agri-S1), for example, by helping to increase the productivity of farmers without direct financial benefit to themselves. Agri-S1, for instance, allowed access to their organic fertilizer IP and facilitated local capabilities beyond the ventures' immediate business context, which helped scale their social impact:

> Bringing in a sustainable model, something that involves the community themselves because . . . the solutions to these communal problems are among them . . . never from somewhere, it's within . . . my argument was, now let me see how we can use these people down there so that you mobilize them to solve their own problems. (Founder, Agri-S1)

This was facilitated by successful ventures learning to work with international organizations and the government. As a result, the relationship with funders changed over time. Initially, ventures assumed the international organizations they partnered with, such as the World Bank, knew best how to operate locally, and followed their lead. However, over time, successful ventures realized they had more relevant local expertise than their international partners, which made them more confident about making independent decisions. The founder of Agri-T1 explained that "this specialized expertise did not exist when we were dealing with [funders] in 2004 . . . now legal [and other] counsel [is] available. That's creating more symmetry [in the relationship]" (Founder, Agri-T1). For example, whereas international funders had initially pressured Agri-T1 into expanding into a number of locations quickly even though it did not make sense to the founders from a financial or impact standpoint, over time, the social enterprises became more confident and started to push back. By contrast, unsuccessful ventures were unable to take a central role and to enable stakeholders, as we discuss below.

The need to scale and sustain their activities and related networks across locations required social ventures to develop mechanisms that aligned their stakeholders at scale. We identified two mechanisms: *aligned capacity building* and *aligning incentives based on leveraging stakeholder objectives*.

Aligned capacity building. To reach their social objectives (i.e., improving farmers' lives), the successful ventures embarked on *aligned capacity building*, which we define as "motivating partners to participate in coordinated efforts towards developing and strengthening the skills and resources of the focal beneficiaries." They focused, for instance, on empowering local entrepreneurs/partners as "entrepreneurial agents" through approaches such as micro-franchising (Agri-T1). Although during their decline phase, Agri-T1 and Agri-T2 lost touch with partners such as local cooperatives, during their turnaround period, to develop a strong ecosystem, both ventures realigned incentives between their objectives and the interests of key stakeholders such as farmers and cooperatives. Creative approaches included layering their products on top of international organizations' value chains (e.g., Agri-T1), helping them scale while enabling their international partners to increase their local legitimacy and image.

The successful ventures supported the creation of new markets, for example, by facilitating deals with crowdsourcing platforms that funded the farmers. This enabled below-market prices for items such as fertilizers to reach poorer farmers (e.g., Agri-T1). The founder of Agri-T1 explained that "it's about looking at the whole value chain of the agriculture . . . if we can develop markets that can help link farmers to [customers] for better prices, we think that's the incentives that farmers need to increase production." Given the low purchasing power of farmers, the ventures provided financing solutions and subsidized products, reinforcing their social goals and expanding networks with third parties, often international funders. A customer of Agri-T2 explained that "they helped us get access to what we need to make this work [financially] . . . and they help us develop our skills to go forward."

In fact, all ultimately successful ventures supported sustainable income streams for stakeholders, for example, via guaranteed purchase of products, price guarantees, or by providing lifelong assets. A founder of Agri-T1 illustrated that "to make sure that a beehive is valuable, we must purchase the honey, because what you don't want is for the farmer to end up with a dead asset." This approach went beyond the more traditional training and support programs that the ventures provided as well (see Alvord et al., 2004; e.g., Agri-S1 regarding farming skills), such as creating employment in the value chain.

This increased the loyalty of farmers; for example, a customer of Agri-S2 told us, "[Agri-S2] is with us on this journey, and they help us . . . so we stay with them when it's ups and downs." Enabling local partners helped successful ventures scale, because "these are the farmers who were selling, who are using [our product]. . . . So . . . your scale will be directly linked to the . . . entrepreneurial abilities [and incentives] of your farmers" (Founder, Agri-S2). We did not observe this at the unsuccessful venture.

In sum, successful ventures aligned incentives with farmers and other key stakeholders, such as funders, and coordinated them effectively. This went beyond traditional *capacity building*—strengthening the skills, processes, and resources of target groups (in this case, regarding smallholder farmers; Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Stoian et al., 2012)—and showed how related networks can be "held together" by *aligning* activities across the ecosystem (Light, 2008; Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2018). We therefore labelled this mechanism *aligned capacity building*. This mechanism was particularly important because most stakeholders, including employees and suppliers, had a short-term focus, and incentives such as stock options "were just not possible, as people prefer immediate pay-outs over longer-term gains that feel abstract" (CEO, Agri-T1).

Aligning incentives with political actors. To be able to orchestrate the emerging ecosystem effectively, successful social ventures relied on the support from political actors, who played a major role in a context characterized by weak formal institutions. We defined this mechanism as "engaging public officers in ways that harmonize with their objectives." Whereas in earlier phases, a major focus was on lower-level ties, such as government extension workers, the ventures increasingly connected more strategically with higher-level politicians such as governors and government ministers. For example, Agri-S1 explicitly aligned its objectives with Kenya's "Vision 2030"—addressing, for instance, malnutrition—and made the local governor realize supporting the company in order to be seen as a champion of the people would be in his interest. Thus, the venture adjusted its network by appealing to the governor's plans to eradicate malnutrition and turned the government from foe to friend. In a similar vein, Agri-T1 made government officials feel they were important and could benefit from being associated with the venture:

> We were…finding a lot of resistance . . . we added . . . some government people, and to the NGO people we said, "If you come . . . you get an advanced beekeeper certificate" . . . [this] . . . helped to restore the sense the government official needed, that they were the source of information and knowledge in a community. (Founder, Agri-T1)

The inclusion of government helped increase ventures' legitimacy and eased their access to resources as well as relationships with farmers, and "[government] people that we were able to convince . . . became some of our strongest performers . . . they actually helped us to do a lot of the training, to build the relationship with the farmers . . . a critical turning point" (Founder, Agri-T1 during turnaround). The founder of Agri-T1 shared a concrete tactic for how his company aligned incentives with political actors:

> Politicians often wanted money for their campaigns in return for their support. I said, "no, we can't give you money—but we can help you be seen the way you want to be seen. You want to be a champion in your community, so why don't we instead of giving you the money bring you and your ideas to the community, so that you're seen as the facilitator who's making things happen?" So rather than saying "no," we've been finding ways that our interests align based on who they think they want to be seen as . . . to us it was like "let me see the world from your perspective."

This active alignment with political actors was particularly visible during the decentralization process of the Kenyan government ("devolution") during our study, in which the central government handed over power to local counties. The successful social ventures substituted central government contacts with local government contacts to maintain access to resources and contracts, and aligned incentives with local government officials. Agri-S1, for instance, aligned the company's social objectives with the employment objectives of the county as well as the image of the local governor as a champion of the people, and received buy-in, and eventually funding, from him. The founder of Agri-S1 reported that "the politicians have become clear how relevant we are to help them build their vision of the county and their role in it, like their vision of themselves as a leader who can feed his [sic] people."

This approach enabled successful ventures to access resources such as local subsidies. By contrast, the founder of the less successful venture Agri-F1 shared with us that he did not manage to align incentives with and gain support from politicians: "I did not focus much on trying to work with well-connected people like politicians, make them feel special; I was focused on selling things . . . now I'm thinking I should have put more effort into making relationships with these people work … help them be champions so that they have the motivation to help me get bigger." In a similar vein, Agri-T1 and Agri-T2 during their decline period neglected these dynamics. This changed over time for the two "turnaround ventures," as they started aligning with the government, for example, by including them in their activities. Thus, given the focus of successful ventures on obtaining support from political actors by harmonizing their objectives, we labelled this mechanism *aligning incentives with political actors*.

In sum, successful social ventures tackled emerging challenges in this phase via *aligned capacity building* and *aligning incentives with political actors*, which helps us understand how their ecosystems were "being held together" long term (Donovan & Poole, 2013; 2014; Rutherford et al., 2016) by improving goal alignment (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007).

As we discuss in more detail below, our insights help us understand how and why social enterprises orchestrate and align networks as they grow (Dacin et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2019; Perrini et al., 2010; Stephann et al., 2016), and how agentic actions can shape network structures and performance outcomes (Hallen et al., 2020) in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to better understand how social enterprises orchestrate networks as they scale in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, responding to changing challenges and needs over time (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Phillips et al., 2019). Our study provides new insights into how and why successful social enterprises take deliberate, purposeful actions to create and capture value via managing a network of partners (i.e., "orchestrate networks;" Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006) over time as they scale in an emerging economy context characterized by weak formal institutions and collectivistic tendencies. The successful social ventures in our study went through two scaling phases, with each phase presenting different challenges and resource needs that were common for all ventures, but to which successful social enterprises responded differently than unsuccessful ones. We identified four network mechanisms that capture how agentic actions help entrepreneurs scale and identified network paths from inception to maturity that helped us better understand how and why entrepreneurs orchestrate ties over time, overcoming potential constraints as they scale (Hallen et al., 2020) in this context, especially related to embeddedness and alignment challenges. We make the following two contributions.

How and why agentic network actions can help social ventures scale in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context

First, we contribute to the social enterprise literature (Daspit & Long, 2014; Stephann et al., 2016) a deeper understanding of how and why social enterprises navigate networks as they scale in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, and we identify four mechanisms that help overcome contextual challenges by resolving goal asymmetries and developing aligned networks. Our findings illustrate how in earlier phases, these network mechanisms can help ventures expand to new, different contexts and to dis-embed from unproductive parties while staying locally embedded, whereas in later phases, a stronger focus on developing broader ecosystem networks necessitates alignment mechanisms to develop a productive ecosystem. Hence, we heed recent calls for research identifying agentic actions that shape network structures and "path create" as ventures scale (Hallen et al., 2020). More specifically, we identified four time-contingent mechanisms that help social ventures scale successfully a context characterized by weak formal institutions and collectivistic dynamics: in the first scaling phase, *entrepreneurial contextual bridging* and *circumventing social liability* helped ventures overcome collectivistic expectations and expand into diverse contexts; in the second phase, *aligning incentives with political actors* and *aligned capacity building* helped them navigate whole social business ecosystems.

Prior research (Mair & Marti, 2009; Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016) suggests social enterprise networks are coordinated and aligned via markets and informal control mechanisms. For instance, BRAC developed local networks through social mobilization via Village Poverty Reduction Committees, integrating local structures, norms, and beliefs and coordinating with local leaders (Mair et al., 2016; Venkataraman et al., 2016). However, although this research provides important insights into how organizations develop and orchestrate local networks—for example, using social governance mechanisms—it typically assumes organizations already have networks or the leverage to develop relationships with stakeholders such as governments and local councils, often focusing on projects of established organization at particular times. Prior work (e.g., Light, 2008), taking a more dynamic perspective, emphasizes that social enterprises tend to shift networks over time to tackle challenges and resource needs as they scale. Our study extends this work by providing an understanding of which mechanisms enable social enterprises to navigate these challenges (Barkema et al., 2015; Stephann et al., 2016). More specifically, we contribute to this literature an understanding of how social ventures create and align networks as they scale in the Sub-Saharan Africa emerging economy context, enabled by the four mechanisms we identified in this study, and how entrepreneurs' agentic network actions help to achieve success (Hallen et al., 2020) in this context. This helps explain important dynamics, for example, how the government can shift from barrier to supporter, and how orchestration failures of social organizations in resource-constrained emerging economy contexts can be prevented (van Wijk et al., 2020). Our study shows how misalignments between initial contextual conditions and interventions affecting the efficacy of the intervention (*design failures*; Dyck & Silvestre, 2018; Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005; McKague et al., 2015; van Wijk et al., 2020; Venkataraman et al., 2016) may be overcome, for instance, by making government officials part of the process and layering value chains on top of existing supply chains. Our study also shows initial failure to adapt to the local context (*orchestration failures*; van Wijk et al., 2020) may be overcome by early-stage social ventures via *entrepreneurial contextual bridging*. Successful ventures learned and applied strategies to handle this challenge, for example, related to public accountability, by creating effective ecosystems based on constant feedback from stakeholders. Understanding how design and orchestration failures can be overcome is important given that many social ventures fail to scale in this context (Busch & Barkema, 2019).

This has important implications for our collective understanding of sustainable entrepreneurial interventions and solutions in resource-constrained settings (Bruton, Ketchen, & Ireland, 2013; Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Sutter, Bruton, & Chen, 2019), by clarifying how stakeholders' interests can be aligned over time to "keep things together" and to enact effective ecosystems that outlive funders (Wijk et al., 2020). Prior research on value-chain interventions—the improvement of access to inputs, information, and services by small-holders and SMEs (Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Stoian et al., 2012)[5]—provides mixed results regarding the efficacy of organizational interventions (Akram-Lodhi, 2009; Ebata & Huettel, 2019; Vicol et al., 2018). For example, positive

[5] This research explores interventions such as those involving farmer cooperatives (Carletto, Kilic, & Kirk, 2011; Carletto, Kirk, & Winters, 2010; Helin, Lundy & Meijer, 2009), linking farmers to markets (IPE, 2017; Seville, Buxton, & Vorley, 2011), and facilitating commercialization by improving access to inputs, information, and services (Humphrey & Navas-Aleman, 2010; Stoian et al., 2012).

effects may only last until funders cease investments (Ashraf, Giné, & Karlan, 2009), and long-term benefits, such as more income for farmers, may be limited (Donovan & Poole, 2013; 2014; Rutherford et al., 2016). Factors such as short-term funding for research projects have led to a lack of longitudinal data, and we know little about how interventions can be sustained over time (Ebata & Huettel, 2019). Our longitudinal study elucidates the missing piece of how, over time, successful social enterprises can use mechanisms as identified in this study to "keep things together"—a necessary but not sufficient condition for longer-term social impact. This may help farmers and other stakeholders in the emerging ecosystem in the long term, enabling them to specialize and develop sustainable revenue streams. Moreover, these mechanisms may help to enact effective ecosystems that outlive funders, thus avoiding potential maintenance failures (Wijk et al., 2020).

These insights add to the research on the role of entrepreneurship in resource-constrained settings (Bruton, Ketchen, & Ireland, 2013; London & Hart, 2011; Sutter, Bruton, & Chen, 2019). Our study identifies concrete mechanisms such as *aligned capacity building* that may help social enterprises provide market access, financial capital, training, and information to tackle lack of resources (e.g., Chliova et al., 2015; Hart & Christensen, 2002; Khavul, 2010; McMullen, 2011). More broadly, our study identifies new mechanisms for entrepreneurial ecosystem orchestration (Austio et al., 2015; Lamaanen et al., 2016; Nambisan & Baron, 2013) as ventures scale, co-creating value with ecosystem partners (Autio et al., 2015; Autio et al., 2018; Hannah, & Eisenhardt 2018; Isenberg, 2010). We contribute to this literature through a better understanding of how (social) enterprises manage ecosystem dynamics, particularly via network-alignment strategies (Autio et al., 2015; Mindruta, Moeen, & Agarwal 2016; Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2009).

Elucidating the dark side of social networks

Previous research has explored the benefits (George et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2010) and costs (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Hallen et al., 2020; Meagher, 2005) of social networks, such as free-riding (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993), social obligations (Di Falco & Bulte, 2011; Khavul et al., 2009), and maintenance costs (Khayesi et al., 2014; Kiggundu, 2002).

We know from previous research that collectivistic cultures, as observed in the Sub-Saharan African context (Khayesi et al., 2014; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015), may imply high maintenance costs of networks, due to implied obligations for the enterprise (Khayesi & George, 2011; Khayesi et al., 2014). How do entrepreneurs overcome such challenges? Prior research suggests entrepreneurs use non-family ties (Khayesi et al., 2014), accumulate non-shareable durables (Di Falco & Bulte, 2011), and hire employees from other ethnic groups (Granovetter, 1995). Granovetter (1995) suggests entrepreneurs may decouple from local contexts by doing the following: (a) relocating to other countries, reducing the number of claimants; (b) focusing on non-kin customers, making collecting debt and denying credit easier (Boissevain & Grotenberg, 1986); (c) hiring employees from other ethnic groups; and (d) adopting another ethnic identity, such as displaying more abrupt "Chinese behavior" in the Malaysian context during crop season to avoid demands for discounted prices (Gosling, 1983). All these mechanisms help to cut or avoid ties. Similarly, for commercial enterprises in the Global North, research suggests severing ties by dissolving interlocks, institutionalizing relationship management, and facilitating exit routes for companies no longer fitting the ecosystem (Borgh et al., 2012; Davis, 2016; Hernandez et al., 2015).

However, for social enterprises and their founders in the Sub-Saharan African emerging-country context, who tend to focus on social objectives and local embedding, cutting or avoiding social ties might lead to reducing their overall positive impact, to losing legitimacy, and, ultimately, failure (Busch & Barkema, 2019). Identity—that is, broadly recognized and meaningful categories that people apply to themselves and others as role players and group members (see Conger et al., 2018; Powell & Baker 2014; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Wry & York, 2017, 2019)—in this context tends to be related to strong social expectations by community members (Powell & Baker, 2014; Slade Shantz, Kistruck, & Zietsma, 2018; Zuzul & Tripsas, 2019). Fulfilling these strong social expectation—and keeping legitimacy—may thus depend on catering to "shared values" (Gehman & Grimes, 2016) or treating stakeholders in a manner that is beneficial for them (Busch, 2014; O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016; Pache & Santos, 2013), and traditional dis-embedding tactics (e.g., Borgh et al., 2012; Davis, 2016; Granovetter, 1995; Hernandez et al., 2015; Maurer & Ebers, 2006) may be detrimental to their success.

Indeed, the social ventures in our study found creative ways to satisfy these expectations without being drained by them, for example, by replacing ineffective family members or cutting or retraining unaligned middlemen, in line with their social objectives. Instead of simply cutting ties (Granovetter, 1995; Maurer & Ebers, 2006), the ventures in our study decoupled while providing financial and social value for their ties. They did so by doing the following: (a) creating job opportunities outside the venture, or "outsourcing" them to other organizations/accountability structures; (b) aligning, retraining, or replacing unaligned middlemen or linking them to other customers with aligned farmer cooperatives; (c) changing demands for favors by local community members into productive opportunities; and (d) opening up non-monetary collaboration opportunities with key stakeholders such as politicians. Hence, they navigated the "dark side" (Adler & Kwon, 2002) of social networks by dis-embedding from unproductive parties while remaining locally embedded and creating social value. By contrast, failed ventures were either "over-embedded" with ineffective ties, as in the case of locals-driven Agri-F1, or "under-embedded," as in the case of foreigner-driven Agri-F2 (also see Slade Shantz et al., 2018, regarding the finding that "outsiders" tend to be less embedded in their local communities, thus facing less related benefits and constraints).

In sum, these findings help us understand how and why social enterprises can overcome the dark side of social networks, and how and why social enterprises can successfully orchestrate networks in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context, thus deepening our understanding of how agentic network actions help to overcome phase-contingent constraints as ventures scale (Hallen et al., 2020; Light, 2008) in a context characterized by weak formal institutions and collectivistic dynamics.

The insights of our study of social enterprise network dynamics in a (collectivistic) emerging economy context may also apply, first, to other collectivistic contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa (Khavul et al., 2009; Khayesi et al., 2014) facing similar challenges. Second, our insights on how collectivistic expectations may be circumvented might be relevant for collectivistic contexts more broadly, for example, in the Global North, such as Latin migrant communities in the US who also seem to have collectivistic tendencies (Busch & Barkema, 2020). Third, our insights might be relevant regarding employees at social enterprises in non-collectivistic contexts who were hired at early development stages and who expect loyalty but no longer fit organizational goals as the organization scales.

Introducing these employees to other early-stage ventures, or ventures with different types of accountability structures, may help protect the social venture and its legitimacy (Light, 2008) as it scales. Fourth, our findings may be useful for social and commercial ventures operating in other contexts characterized by weak formal institutions, for example, regarding developing strong ecosystems with key stakeholders such as the government at the core.

Practical implications

Our paper offers several practical implications. First, our findings are likely to be relevant to social enterprises that aim to scale in collectivistic contexts. Given the challenges we discussed above, very few social ventures are able to scale in these contexts (Busch & Barkema, 2019), and our study reveals new approaches that social enterprises can use to scale while catering to local group expectations, for example, by creating opportunities for ineffective family members outside the venture.

Second, our findings will likely be relevant to social enterprises that aim to develop government relationships over time, especially in contexts characterized by weak formal institutions, in which these types of partnerships are crucial (Batjargal et al., 2013). Our findings show how government officials can be turned from foes into supporters, and how related networks can be aligned over time and at scale, for example, by placing them at the core of relevant training programs.

Third, our findings have clear implications for larger (e.g., multinational) companies that aim to operate in the Sub-Saharan African emerging-country context and that aim to engage local communities to gain legitimacy and access to new markets (Ansari, Munir, & Gregg, 2012; George et al., 2012). Given that multinational companies increasingly aim to create social value (captured via terms such as “inclusive business model innovation,” “business model innovation at the base of the pyramid,” and “sustainable enterprises;” Ansari et al., 2012; Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014; George et al., 2012) and often fail to develop strong relationships with low-income communities (Ansari et al., 2012; George et. al., 2012), insights from our study might help these companies develop more inclusive engagement strategies, for example, by making public commitments in front of local community members.

Fourth, our findings will likely be relevant to incubators and government agencies that aim to support social enterprises. Instead of focusing on "one size fits all" solutions, depending on the respective phase of a venture—and the related challenges and needs—support programs could be tailored to the temporal and contextual dynamics that we discuss in this paper.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, opening up exciting opportunities for further research. First, we focused on active network orchestration—but organizational development often happens without proactive thinking at every step (Plowman et al., 2007). Further research could explore the role of serendipity when ventures scale (Busch & Barkema, 2020). Second, we focused on the positive effects of network orchestration; however, it is likely to cost energy and time. Further research could identify drawbacks of the active orchestration processes that we discussed, for example, exhaustion by founders (de Mol, Pollack, & Ho, 2018). Third, future research could explore the external validity of our insights, for instance, for other emerging economies or for immigrant communities in the Global North. Fourth, the issue of firms facing tensions between economic and social objectives extends to other contexts, such as traditional companies aiming to create social value (Ansari et al., 2012; George et al., 2012). For-profit companies operating in emerging economy contexts might face similar challenges, such as limited purchasing power of customers. This points to a major premise of our study: many enterprises are neither strictly "commercial" nor "social," but somewhere in-between. For-profit firms that value a social purpose might apply alignment tactics similar to those of the social ventures in our study. Further research could provide more insight in this regard.

Finally, we hope our study will inspire more inductive research on the Sub-Saharan emerging economy context. Our research design uncovered interesting phenomena deserving further investigation, such as how entrepreneurs restructure tribal networks in response to government changes, for example, shifting toward religion-based networks, to manage risks. Further research could provide inspiring insights in this regard.

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Table 1a Characteristics of the Social Ventures

	Agri-S1	Agri-S2	Agri-T1	Agri-T2	Agri-F1	Agri-F2
Description of venture	Provides fortified staple flours.	Provides farmers with fertilizer and related support.	Providing farmers with beehives and related support.	Produces market information for farmers.	Produces flours.	Provides devices that enable nutritional food to be grown more effectively.
Social mission	Reduce malnutrition and improve farmer income. Main beneficiaries: Farmers.	Improve productivity of farmers. Main beneficiaries: Farmers.	Increase productivity of farmers. Main beneficiaries: Farmers.	Decrease information asymmetry between farmers and consumers. Main beneficiaries: Farmers.	Reduce malnutrition and improve income of farmers. Main beneficiaries: Farmers.	Reduce malnutrition and enable sustainable farming lifestyle. Main beneficiaries: Farmers.
Foundation	2010	2008	2000	1997	2007	2009
Geographical spread	Across Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda.	Across Kenya.	Across Kenya and Tanzania.	Across Kenya.	Across Kenya.	Across Kenya.
Headquarters	Kisumu	Nairobi	Nairobi	Nairobi	Kisumu	Nairobi
Background of the founders	Local entrepreneur; university education.	Local entrepreneur; university education.	Locals and foreigners; university education.	Local entrepreneur; university education.	Local entrepreneur; university education.	Three foreigners; university education.
Activities and effects	Provides farmers with effective fertilizer and related support programs, leading to long-term income enhancement and flexibility.	Changed institutional dynamics by introducing organic fertilizer; yields of participating farmers increased by up to 150%.	Changed market dynamics: new model of organizing and re-definition of the role of the farmer (no expertise and less time necessitated); increased long-term income for farmers.	Changed market dynamics: better access to markets and increased bargaining power leads to higher income of farmers; farmers achieve around 15%-30% higher prices on their produce.	Liquidated.	Ceased operations.
Initial sources of income	Family, friends, small development grants.	Family, friends, small grants.	Investment capital of founders and friends; development grants.	Family savings, development grants.	Family, friends, small development grants.	Family, friends, small development grants.
Sources of income during expansion	Business angels, impact investors, loans, revenue.	Grants, revenue.	Grants, revenue.	Grants, revenue.	Revenue.	N/A
Interviewees (in addition to interviews with experts, local academics)	Founding CEO, senior strategist, funder 1, funder 2.	Founder, CEO, senior strategist, funder.	Founder 1, founder 2, founder 3, CEO, funder.	Founder, CEO, senior strategist, funder.	Founder, CEO, funder.	Founder 1, founder 2, founder 3, advisor.
Assessment	Successful	Successful	Successful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Unsuccessful

Table 1b Phase and Network Characteristics

	Agri-S1	Agri-S2	Agri-T1	Agri-T2	Agri-F1	Agri-F2
Inception phase						
Phase characteristics: *Framing and legitimizing the idea*	*"The idea stage. There were a lot of uncertainties, because…you don't know where you're heading with [the idea]."* (Founder)	*"Stage one was about research and development…there was [a] focus on establishing what the problem was that explained the low yields for farmers."* (Founder)	*"We had a very short ideation stage...the great opportunity in terms of the demand...the logic of what we were trying to do was so clear and so simple that we didn't spend a lot of time thinking about it. We just decided to go and actually get stuff done."* (Founder)	*"The first stage was kind of the idea."* (Founder)	*"This was about the ideas."* (Founder)	*"I guess the first, so the phases we went through, the first phase would be like 'idea generation and proposal'."* (Founder)
Network characteristics	Main partners: Family members; friends. *"Apart from my family, I have some good friends who helped me at this point."* (Founder) *"[Besides ideas], they also sacrificed their own money...my wife sold even the sofa set. They also sacrificed a bit of their resources and they chipped in their money."* (Founder)	Main partners: Family; friends; local research institute. *"Networks that were important at that point were Agri Research Institutions. For instance, the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute at the...University's Soil Department."* (CEO)	Main partners: Family; friends. *"Dad, who was one of my co-founders, he was very helpful. We have another business partner …they were much older than I was. They were experienced business people, much more experienced than me."* (Founder) *"I think the mentoring and support from both of them [dad and business partner] was very critical. I think it was a good combination with the relative inexperience I had."* (Founder)	Main partners: Family; friends. *"I used my own money, my own resources to set up the firm…[and] I engaged some of my sons and daughters, who helped out."* (Founder)	Main partners: Family; friends. *"I had relatives around, who helped me."* (Founder)	Main partners: Friends; class peers; international startup funder. *"We had access to people who had written business proposals before...and actually having access to funders through the class."* (Founder) *"[Peers] were able to give us a lot of feedback on how to put together a huge proposal."* (Founder)
Scaling phase 1						
Phase characteristics: *Expanding into diverse contexts*	*"How we've started growing."* (Founder)	*"Scaling the networks...the ones that are able to provide the knowledge that we require in terms of business development and the different models."* (CEO)	*"There was a phase where the articulation of organogram really began to take place. We actually had a marketing unit."* (Founder) *"We expanded into different locations, like Tanzania."* (CEO)	*"The demand was there, then scaling it."* (Founder)	*"Then, it was about growing."* (Founder)	*"It was about finding reliable key people on the ground."* (Founder)
Network characteristics	Main partners: Cooperatives; extension	Main partners: Cooperatives; extension officers; shopkeepers;	Main partners: Cooperatives; international NGOs; international development organizations;	Main partners: Cooperatives; extension officers; international	Main partners: Family members; middlemen.	Main partners: Friends; class peers

	officers; cooperatives; international funders. *"The government got interested in the whole arrangement…because they've seen the concept was going to work."* (Founder) *"Through the Farmer's Association, we're able to collaborate with Moringa farmers, mushroom farmers, and Amaran farmers."* (Senior Strategist).	distribution outlets; agri-vets. *"We're working with the cooperative movements, for instance, to access the market, because our production has to be driven by the market demand."* (CEO)*"* *"We [have been] reaching out to [government] extension officers"."* (CEO)	extension officers; international donors; community groups; business schools. *"A lot of [international] development organizations and NGOs...the network of small-holder farmers…going hand in hand with the NGO money."* (Founder) *"Government as a very familiar stakeholder along with non-governmental organizations, development agencies, and donors."* (Founder)	development organizations; international funders. *"The extension officers of the Ministry of Agriculture became very good partners."* (Founder) *"Important partners when growing were often coops and local partners."* (Founder)	*"We had the relatives involved."* (Founder) *"We worked with [unaligned] middlemen."* (Founder) *"There are not many stakeholders there…I thought that he who had listing would introduce me and once I have the product and push it in the market it will sell. But that was a mistake."* (Founder)	international startup funder. *"Although the residents were very welcoming of the product…[there were] challenges in how we would be able to massively distribute them."* (Founder)
Scaling phase 2						
<u>Phase characteristics:</u> *Creating and aligning the ecosystem*	*"Most specifically...we've expanded...[further]…one thing that cuts across these associations [is] that they are all willing to impart from us, economically et cetera."* (Founder)	*"We've developed a whole what you could call perhaps 'system' of different players that are working with us on lifting farmers out of poverty."* (Founder)	*"We're rebuilding....[including] extension services, collection centers, intensive support, and engaging farmers..[also] relationships with a lot of community-based organizations and NGOs."* (Founder)	*"So, the next stage then, say the stable growth stage."* (Founder) *"It's about looking at the whole value chain of the agriculture."* (Founder)	*"We knew we had to be more expansive in our efforts but struggled in broadening up [sic]."* (Founder)	N/A
<u>Network characteristics:</u>	Main partners: Cooperatives; retailers; agri-dealers; extension officers; higher-level government officials; international funders; international NGOs. local NGOs. *"We try to have influence on the whole system...it helps us to help others."* (Senior strategist) *"The contract is between us and the farmer. But we don't handle that contract directly...the cooperatives will…get some centralized way of collecting the produce…[and] manage the inventories…They are better placed than us."* (Founder)	Main partners: Cooperatives; extension officers; entrepreneurial agents; higher-level government officials; international development organization; local NGOs; researchers. Observation: *Partners included cooperatives, government officials, NGOs; often included profit sharing arrangements.*	Main partners: Extension officers; higher-level government officials; agri-dealers; retailers; collection centers; local NGOs; micro-franchisees; international NGOs; international funding platforms. *"Building new relationships with financial institutions that can work with farmers at financing. We have a relationship with [local bank] [and] our partnership with [international funding platform]..very important."* (CEO) *"We're leading the development of a value chain alliance with [NGO]….layering [our product] on top of all of these other value chains...[our product] becomes exceptionally scalable." (CEO)*	Main partners: Extension officers; higher-level government officials; entrepreneurial agents; international funders; international NGOs; local entrepreneurs. *"The relationship...with the government has actually continued to grow…I was appointed as director of [Government Board] to have [it] improve its services."* (Founder) *"Bypass the third party…we source now SMS and short calls direct [sic]…that way we'll be able to control the revenue…this help is coming from [international NGO]."* (Founder)	Main partners: Family members; friends; middlemen. *"We were just not important enough to partners, and did not bring in the stakeholders."* (Founder)	N/A

Table 2a **Mechanisms: Scaling phase 1**

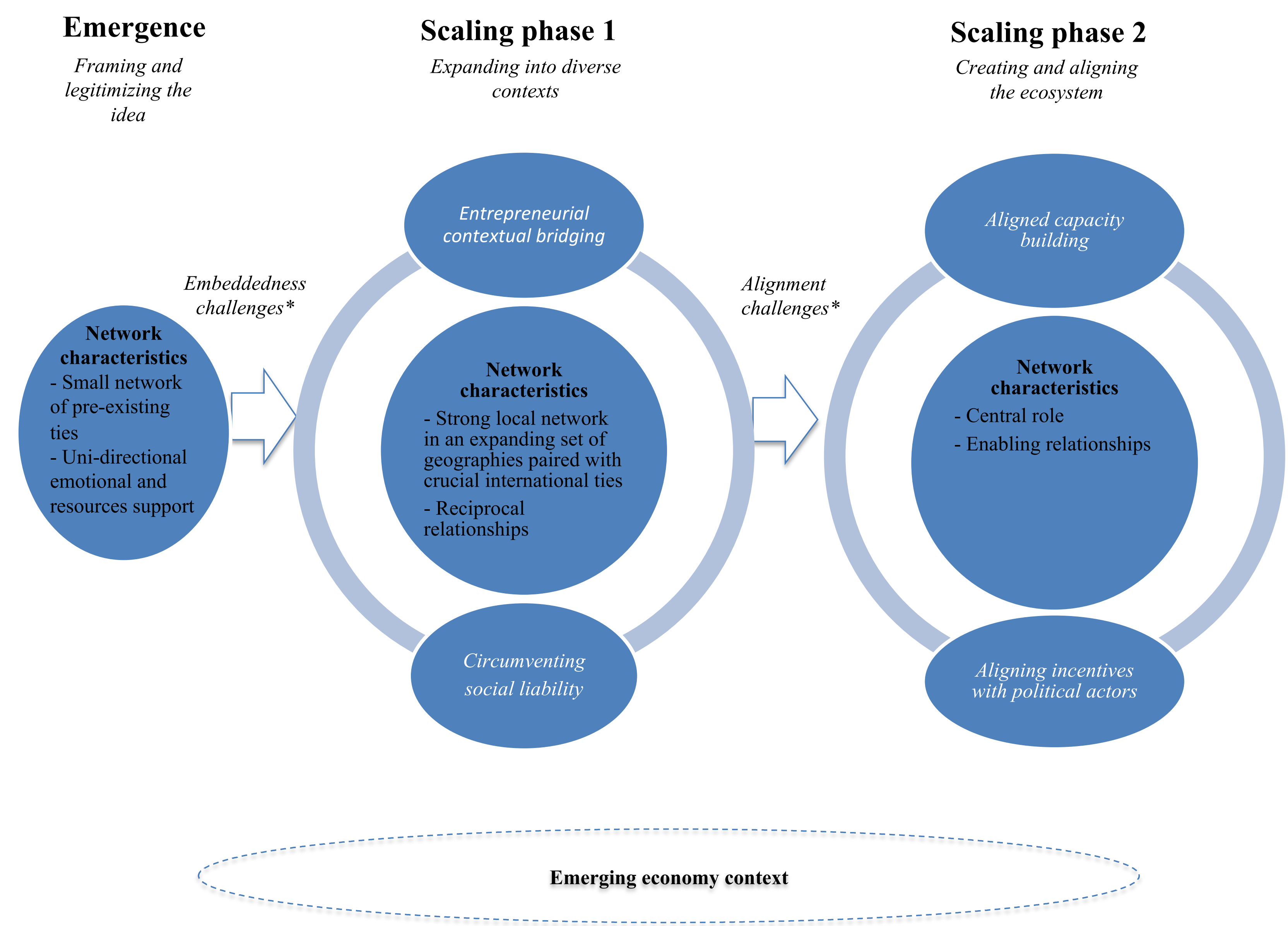
Company	**Entrepreneurial contextual bridging**	**Circumventing social liability**
Agri-S1 (successful)	Observation: *Team members adjusted to local contexts and established rapport (e.g., speaking the different local languages).* *"There are people who...associate mushrooms with...evil...Awareness is…caused by ventures like [us]."* (Founder)	*"A relative or any other friend who…purposely comes there to wreck or to eat, yeah, we've seriously avoided that."* (Founder) *"We needed to work with the farmer cooperatives, not the middlemen…the cooperatives want the same like us, they want farmers to produce and sell much...this is good for them and for us."* (Chief Strategy Officer)
Agri-S2 (successful)	Observation: *Residents mentioned the venture as major contributor to the well-being of the local community.* *"Right now, if you want to ask the government, 'can you give us a loan of this much', I'm sure they'll do that very fast, contrary to where we came from where nobody had any trust."* (Founder)	*"[Coops] are buying the products from us and they are distributing it to the members. They are collecting money from the members. They are paying…we avoid the middlemen."* (CEO)
Agri-T1 (successful)	*"We had a great partnership with [international agency that operated across different geographies]."* (Founder) *"Our deliberate local partnerships and activities helped us connect with locals better."* (CEO, during 'Turnaround') *"[There was] deconstructing what exactly is the…social aspect".* (Founder).	Observation: *Worked with aligned middlemen such as farmer-driven cooperatives; abstained from working with unaligned middlemen.*
Agri-T2 (successful)	*"It was easier for us to be accepted by farmers, because the Ministry of Agriculture extension workers say, '[Agri-T2] are good people'."* (Founder, during 'Turnaround')	Observation: *Worked with aligned farmer-driven cooperatives.*
Agri-F1 (unsuccessful)	Observation: <u>*Lack of local relationships.*</u> <u>*"We realized [too late] that, if you want to reach these people...reach them through their mother tongues."*</u> (Founder)	<u>*"They [family members] don't have the slightest idea of how the venture started…All they do is come here and say, 'Okay, now [that] this thing is established, we are here to eat'...Nobody wants to commit."*</u> (Founder) <u>*"We trusted so much the middlemen. Whatever we were doing, we were getting [it] from the middlemen. The middlemen have no fixed price, there's simply no way of going to control that…Now that fluctuation in the input price, eventually contributes to your collapse."*</u> (Founder)
Agri-F2 (unsuccessful)	<u>*"To get buy-in…can be a big hurdle...we were a bit disconnected."*</u> (Founder) <u>*"Challenges in how we would be able to massively distribute them…[and] who should bear the burden of building these structures."*</u> (Founder)	Observation: <u>*Did not develop meaningful relationships with cooperatives or other aligned middlemen.*</u>

<u>Underlined</u>: *Mechanism not present*

Table 2b **Mechanisms: Scaling phase 2**

Company	Aligned capacity building	Aligning incentives with political actors
Agri-S1 (successful)	*“We also want to try and strengthen them [cooperatives], get donors who would be willing to help us [build] the skills of the farmers."* (Founder) *“We...come in and help these farmer groups out in capacity building...teaching them on how well they can do the dehydration."* (Founder) *"We try to have influence on the whole system...It helps us help others...While we try to help them [farmers] out, we also want to ensure that they…come out of poverty."* (Founder)	*“The governor himself is very interested in trying out and figuring out if he’s going to be better positioned.”* (Founder) Observation: *Explicitly related its company strategy to Kenya’s “Vision 2030” (which focused on aspects such as eradicating malnutrition), and connected with politicians promising them that they could be seen as working towards that vision by collaborating with Agri-S1.*
Agri-S2 (successful)	*"The agents were selling the [product] because...farmers who were selling...they can coordinate with the company to have the orders placed with their neighbor farmers, and get a commission. So, in that way your scale will be directly linked to the change maker ability… it grows virally...because it’s going from person to person."* (Founder)	*"Government workers...they’re showing how you can use [our product]…and feel they are taken seriously."* (Founder)
Agri-T1 (successful)	*"New relationships with financial institutions...that can work with farmers at financing. So we have a relationship with [local bank] [and] with [funder]."* (CEO, during ‘Turnaround’) *"To be able to make sure that a beehive is valuable, we must purchase the honey because what you don't want is for the farmer to end up with a dead asset…we add value to the hive by guaranteeing to buy [the honey].”* (Founder, during ‘Turnaround’)	<u>*"[CEO] didn't see value in it…When you go out to the field…you say hello to the sub chief [local government officer] ...and meet people and wait for two hours for a meeting - those are really critical things...If somebody comes in that has a very different orientation and thinks this is a waste of time, that automatically [will destroy] all your goodwill.”*</u> (Founder, during ‘Decline’)
Agri-T2 (successful)	*"We train them on how to do it...Then they generate revenue out of these services. So…they’re doing it as their own businesses and yet in the network with us."* (Founder, during ‘Turnaround’)	Observation: *The team highlighted elements of Kenya’s vision 2030 to government officials and others in order to signal catering to stakeholders’ goals.*
Agri-F1 (unsuccessful)	<u>*"There are not many stakeholders there...I thought that he who had the listing would introduce me and once I have the product and push it in the market, it will sell. But that was a mistake."*</u> (Founder)	Observation: <u>*Did not align with stakeholder goals such as helping officials be seen as working towards the “Kenya 2030” vision.*</u>
Agri-F2 (unsuccessful)	N/A	N/A

<u>Underlined</u>: *Mechanism not present*



* *Pronounced in this phase*

Figure 1. Social enterprise network orchestration