

Strategic Dimension of Social Entrepreneurship in Vietnam

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Abstract—This article delivers a full insight into the concepts of social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, their sustainability issues and strategic understanding. Despite different nature, determinant factors, motivation and purpose, as well as orientation towards sustainable development of commercial and social enterprises the results of analysis show that both form of extant entrepreneurship could stay together to successfully bridge, create synergy effect between social and commercial capital for the mutual development. However, the article revealed that in contrast to the commercial entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship currently lacks and needs more strategic understanding (and its reflection in the reality) to be benefitted from in order to support overall sustainable entrepreneurship development in rural areas of Vietnam. Finally, the article proposed solutions to enhance social entrepreneurship and promote its expansion for the purpose of sustainable development.

Index Terms—Social entrepreneurship, strategic dimension, sustainable development, Vietnam.

I. INTRODUCTION

World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainability or sustainable development as the development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [1]. The concept of sustainability or sustainable development has been profoundly analyzed in many academic studies at both macroscopic level and microscopic level (corporate sustainability or corporate sustainable development). The idea of sustainability or sustainable development is very popular today as it sets common trends for all the spheres of business activities, in all fields of contemporary research and development, both academic and practical. Academic scholars and business practitioners of different fields are very much interested and concerned about the sustainability issues, among others, of the real estate market, healthcare sector, natural resources, energy consumption, climate change, higher education institutions, transport and tourism industry, technology development, architecture and civil engineering, general socio-economic and organizational development,

human resource deployment and employer branding with unique perception and understanding related to each field [2]-[7]. At the microscopic level, corporate sustainability is viewed as new management paradigm that recognizes corporate growth and profitability, but at the same time requires corporations to pursue non-profitable activities, social goals, specifically those relating to the issues of sustainability, such as: environmental and Earth planet protection, ecological integrity, social justice and equity, society and community's development [8]. In the same spirit, for the purpose of corporate sustainability measurement and management, Bell and Morse [9] have recommended the following criteria of sustainable development: a) social justice; b) local government and democracy; c) balance between domestic and imported resources consumption; d) exploring local economic potential; e) environmental protection; f) protection and regeneration of cultural heritage.

The presented above concept of sustainable development is closely related to the sustainability issues of social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, strategic social entrepreneurship (strategic understanding of social entrepreneurship as an alternative and even co-existing form of traditional commercial entrepreneurship), social value and social capital presented in details and investigated further in this paper. All of them are main subjects of our interest, analysis, theoretical consideration and practical implication in a hope to contribute significantly to the body of knowledge of management science and to further the frontier of contemporary business research.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Social Entrepreneurship

Social enterprises, in order to remain sustainable, should become entrepreneurial. Social entrepreneurship is emerging as a viable alternative to the traditional institutional setups for making a sustainable impact and reaching towards the underserved needs of the low-income population living mostly in far-off regions of the developing economies [10]. Social entrepreneurship is associated with the ability to discover new opportunities for self-realization and creation of economic and social value for all stakeholders within the society as the entrepreneurship is a qualitative social feature that includes human abilities to creatively build and develop innovations into the business and society [11].

Social entrepreneurship is a relatively new subject of research and, despite the growing interest it generates in the literature over more than 20 years, there is a diversity of its definitions and approaches [12], [13]. Social

Manuscript received March 25, 2019; revised December 15, 2019.
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entrepreneurship is seen frequently as a socialized and community phenomenon. Social entrepreneurs are often prone to identify and accept their proactive role in the local community, to feel a sense of attachment and belonging to this place where they one used to be with and now want to be members of [14]. Social entrepreneurship is expressed by conscious willingness and readiness to help the local society, to be focused on social and environmental implications of business decisions, operations and activities [15]. Practically understanding, social entrepreneurship is an engine of local development as it has been a strategic driver in facilitating the adjustment to multidimensional change and supporting competitiveness of the local region [16]. Indigenous people in far-off regions throughout the world suffer from many disadvantages such as: chronic poverty, lower education levels and poor health due to their local socio-economic underdevelopment. Great efforts contributing to the rebuilding of local environment and to the improvement of indigenous community are done mostly through social enterprises and social entrepreneurship rather than government initiatives [17]. In a globalizing world, the importance of geographic proximity and regional agglomerations as well as the role of small and micro businesses and their entrepreneurial activity are increasingly growing. Social enterprises and social entrepreneurship initiated and developed in smaller peripheral localities can take over local government and become a change agent for the community development [18].

Social entrepreneurship is determined by various factors, among them most frequently are: cultural, institutional and economic determinants, access to knowledge and finance beside entrepreneurial capability [19]. Social entrepreneurs are motivated by a combination of both *push* factors (economic dimension such as to create own job) and *pull* factors (territorial and social dimensions, it is more about a desire to improve surroundings and to play there social and territorial role in changing everyday life of people in the community and immediate environment) and drivers of motivation are not only at an individual level (personal needs) but also at a social level through the recognition of social needs [12], [20]. Social entrepreneurship is related with passion, tenacity, individual and social innovations, especially in the field of social inclusion [21], [22]. The capacity of innovation of social entrepreneurs may be boosted by informal social networks and social capital typical for their inner circle [23]. Social entrepreneurs should collectively define, create and deliver the social values or/and social wealth to the society [13]. The social values co-creation process could be done by using positive collaborative innovation with diverse business and social partners and especially customers [24].

Social entrepreneurship differs very much from the traditional, conventional commercial entrepreneurship in terms of nature, motivation and purpose, as well as orientation towards sustainable development philosophy and practices [25]. Entrepreneurship, especially social entrepreneurship, is considered not as a human innate feature. It must be strengthened and consolidated over time. In other words, entrepreneurship may be trained through and impacted by formal (university) education and informal (off-the-campus) education [26]. Social entrepreneurship

education is needed for sustainable development, especially in terms of identity, knowledge, personal capabilities and social entrepreneurship competence [27]. Discovering the variety of entrepreneurial identity should lead to open mind-sets as regards the sustainability issue. Understanding the complexity of social entrepreneurship needs a complex system of knowledge in terms of content and methods. Context-related elements and personal capabilities are called in because they mark the way for the essence of social entrepreneurship education as an unthinkable journey without ethics, sustainability and social responsibility issues [28], [29]. Social entrepreneurship competence is comprised of a large spectrum of social and functional competences (rather than cognitive competence) and motivations to solve social problems [27]. In the midst of huge expansion of entrepreneurship education in the XXI century we are increasingly witnessed the significant accomplishments in entrepreneurship theory, process, and practice [22]. Social entrepreneurs face the ongoing challenge of validating their visions and purposes both to business and to society. For example, social entrepreneurship understanding could be widened by the biosphere entrepreneurship concept that goes beyond the commercial (traditional, conventional) and social entrepreneurship concept, stressing the issues of climate change, environmental degradation and existential interest of the globe to prevent the threat of catastrophic vision of the end of Earth [30]. Another example is the concept of innovative entrepreneurship promoted and related to adequate skills trained by universities all over the world facing the reality of Industry 4.0 [31]. The social entrepreneur must be able to define, assess and deliver social value or social wealth in contrast to the traditional economic performance expected from commercial entrepreneurs [13]. Despite differing and conflicting philosophy and nature, social entrepreneurship and commercial entrepreneurship could to stay together to successfully bridge social capital leading to the emergence of entrepreneurial capital and the development of both profit and nonprofit entrepreneurial activities [32].

B. Strategic Social Entrepreneurship

The social entrepreneurship concept aforementioned and discussed is inextricably related with traditional, commercial entrepreneurship for the purpose of mutual support and development. However the traditional understanding of entrepreneurship (commercial and business entrepreneurship) is considered to be related with business plan and strategy in terms of vision, mission statement and set of strategic goals. Social entrepreneurship concept also needs such strategic structured approach to benefit from and to develop its full potential. All in all, both these interrelated concepts are community based phenomena in the society and they are based largely on common social background. Compared to the commercial entrepreneurship, at current stage of development, the social entrepreneurship concept need more strategic understanding and highlight to reflect its overarching, multifaceted, multidimensional nature, encompassing and laying ground for business oriented enterprises and entrepreneurship. The vision and mission statement are widely considered an effective strategic communication and management tool in all types of

organization. Specifically, mission statements are also relevant to social entrepreneurship in the social enterprises. In different organizations, different visions are put forward and different components of mission are stressed. The adequacy of vision and the quality of mission statement are important and they should be properly elevated to guarantee a strategic understanding of the essence of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship [33]. Social entrepreneurs as they must operate across multiple and increasingly internationalizing contexts to achieve desired outcomes (social goals) should also manage the implicit duality of maintaining a commercial mission in order to achieve their social mission and retain a strategic trade-off between them [34], [35]. Strategies deemed even more important by social entrepreneurs in contrast with those of commercial entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs, in contrast to commercial entrepreneurs, value externally- focused strategies more highly than internally- focused strategies [36]. Strategy itself and its components such as vision, mission statement, given set of objectives (goals) significantly affect social entrepreneurs and the process of value recognition and values creation in social enterprises [37]. Thus, the traditional strategic business management instruments and approach should be fully applied towards social entrepreneurship in the social enterprises to a greater extent than both researchers and practitioners have ever done.

III. METHODOLOGY

The literature review reveals a lack of interest in or even a trouble of understanding conceptual foundations of social entrepreneurship, corporate sustainability and their mutual interrelation, focusing instead on description of common, popular social entrepreneurship notions, sustainable development practices, particularly in developing countries [38]-[42]. This tendency to understand what companies are doing is related to the type of methodology that most research papers applied. Case studies discussion, comparative and systemic analysis, synthesis and abstraction of previous researches are frequently used to find the answers to “why” and “how” questions as well as to offset the lack of sufficient findings in the literature [43], [44].

The vast preference for qualitative research methods in developing countries may indicate the difficulty of conducting precise empirical research on a wide scale, both spatial and temporal, due to the cost issue and complexity that might appear [45], [46]. Without exceptions, systemic analysis of scientific literature, general analysis and logical reasoning, comparison and abstraction are research methodology designated for the purpose of this article to study and find out adequate solutions and to propose suitable recommendations to boost strategic understanding and to enhance the social entrepreneurship practices and their sustainable development in business. Hence, our research subject is the concept and contents of social entrepreneurship, its strategic dimension and related sustainability issues seen from corporate microscopic perspectives. The research object embraces two groups of 20 randomly selected, known to the author, entrepreneurs of newly established enterprises situated in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest megacity in

Vietnam and those situated in the far-off countryside of Mekong delta westwards from Ho Chi Minh City. A series of personal interviews has been carried out with all entrepreneurs of selected enterprises and followed by structural questionnaire delivered to lower level management staff (if any) and operational employees in order to confirm the exactness of the interview results. The purpose of all interviews and surveys is to examine the main characteristics and differences among commercial and social type of entrepreneurship. The aim of this research is, as a result of theoretical analysis and empirical investigation, to reveal practical implications of social enterprises and social entrepreneurship and their strategic understanding of sustainability issues.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Entrepreneurship is the most essential driving force reflected in the current cultural, socio-economic and institutional settings of a given business environment, embedded in business philosophy and business culture of enterprises operating in highly developed market economies. Entrepreneurship is quite new but fast growing in importance skills, quality and competency of managers-entrepreneurs in developing countries and emerging market such as Vietnam. As such, it needs a strategic approach and understanding, especially when it comes to social entrepreneurship. Whereas, the idea of sustainable development is a very popular management paradigm worldwide and as such it is now being imported into Vietnam. Sustainability issues are not only increasingly gaining in importance and becoming global. The scope of these issues is continually expanding, including also entrepreneurship. Increasingly and obviously, Vietnamese enterprises are becoming aware of the impact of sustainability issues on their business as they gradually become global players in their national and regional marketplace and due to the growing international pressure from multinational corporations coming from developed countries to operate in Vietnamese market. Corporate sustainable development (sustainability) requires sustainable and strategic social entrepreneurship that poses a new big challenge for many organizations [47]. Sustainable, strategic entrepreneurship as such should become multifaceted, multidimensional, including inseparably at least commercial and social aspect.

Vietnam is a rising country, being currently in a transition into the market economy. With imposing rate of GDP growth, many business opportunities wide open, relatively high level of entrepreneurship and economic freedom, it is a promised land for startups and entrepreneurs. However the mentioned GDP growth rate, business opportunities, as well as the level and the nature of entrepreneurship differ very much, depending on specific of regions. The differences are visibly seen, especially in the relatively developed megacities and still underdeveloped countryside's far-off areas. While in megacities the business opportunities are wide open and the standard of living is increasingly high, rivaling with other megacities in the ASEAN, many people still live in poverty in far-off areas where basic social infrastructures is insufficient and underserved. Our research results show that a majority of

analyzed cases of entrepreneurial undertakings in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC megacity) are profit oriented and of truly commercial nature in a bid to explore attractive business opportunities there while only a minority of analyzed cases of them, situated in the HCMC megacity's suburbs, are non-profit and socially oriented. The research results are proved to be reverse for the far-off areas in different locations (provinces) of the Mekong delta. While commercial entrepreneurship is continually expanding at fast and incredible rate, reflecting people's entrepreneurial instinct inside, strong economic growth potential of HCMC megacity and appearing much and diverse business opportunities there, social entrepreneurship in far-off areas of Mekong delta needs further improvement and further investment in order to develop sustainably and fulfill its mission that is to gradually close the civilization gap between the two quite geographically proximate zones (HCMC megacity and Mekong delta) and to contribute to the ongoing process of formation of a role model of regional agglomeration in the Southern Vietnam. Towards that end, first and foremost, social entrepreneurship needs to enhance strategic understanding and to boost strategic awareness of the society, businesses and ordinary citizens. The following things identified in this research need to be done in order to strengthen social entrepreneurship for the purpose of sustainable development of social enterprises operating in the Mekong delta region:

To spread and popularize the knowledge and education on social entrepreneurship to guarantee its proper strategic understanding. Vietnamese business and society must understand the identity and complexity of social entrepreneurship, the importance of social sustainability issues, the social and functional competences and motivational drivers of social entrepreneurs in solving social problems as well as the ongoing changes that challenge the visions, mission purposes (set of goals and objectives), the strategic role of social entrepreneurship and the place of social enterprises in the economy and society. This is the role and mission of Vietnamese universities to deliver knowledge and educate young social entrepreneurs, taking under consideration the specificity of local business context and cultural and institutional settings. Vietnamese typical cultural, institutional settings and socio-economic context are important elements that impact entrepreneurial capability in social enterprises, so they also need a strategic highlight and understanding. The local business context and customs related knowledge and practices should be taught to Vietnamese overseas entrepreneurs with desire to establish their social enterprises in Vietnam on how to take a proactive role and how to be an active member in the local community as a sense of attachment and belonging to the place they had ever been.

a) Mission of social enterprises is to employ vulnerable social groups and realize social projects, significantly promoting and facilitating the idea of inclusive development, delivering social values to different groups in the society. It is unfeasible without access to funding as financial capacity of social enterprises is limited. Public private partnership (with the Vietnamese local government) should be in place to help social enterprises to carry out useful and valuable projects towards their stated mission. Public undertakings should be

engaged to be hand in hand with social undertakings of social enterprises. To do that, a full strategic understanding of mission of social enterprises and the role of social entrepreneurship should be delivered to the public including public and civil servants, society and individual citizens at large.

b) As a result of sustainable development, Vietnamese social enterprises and their social undertakings should become growth engines, change agents of local socio-economic development, serving as strategic drivers in facilitating the adjustment to multi-aspect and multidimensional change to support the competitiveness of local community and local business environment. Sooner or later, Vietnamese social enterprises should proactively take over local government initiatives as the role of social entrepreneurial initiatives and activities are increasingly growing in importance in the economy and society.

c) Furthermore, Vietnamese social enterprises should form their own circles that are, for example, social networks, aiming at boosting mutual supports, cooperation and co-undertakings. Social networks, formal and, more importantly, informal are to create social and entrepreneurial capital to enhance and further social innovations, improve the recognition of social needs, strengthen passion, tenacity of individual Vietnamese entrepreneurs.

d) Vietnamese social entrepreneurs and commercial entrepreneurs should stay side by side to successfully bridge and leverage social capital (created by social networks) leading to the creation of entrepreneurial capital (created by entrepreneurial networks) and the development of for-profit, non-profit and hybrid (semi-profit) forms of entrepreneurial initiative and activities as the entrepreneurship's nature is overarching, multi-aspect, multidimensional and changing its face depending on current global and local business context and condition. A strict cooperation between HCMC megacity commercial entrepreneurs and Mekong delta countryside's social entrepreneurs will be of highest values for the hybrid entrepreneurial initiatives and activities that become increasingly dominant in the reality of Vietnamese business environment and society.

V. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The first and foremost limitation in this article is to assume, for the simplification purpose of this research that only commercial and social type of entrepreneurship exist and are subjects of analysis. However, in this article, author also signaled and pointed out to other kinds of entrepreneurship such as biosphere entrepreneurship [30] and innovative entrepreneurship [31] and the fact that most of the entrepreneurship initiatives and activities are of hybrid (mixed) form. The next limitation of this research is not to conduct empirical study on a wider scale (it does not embrace a larger number of research objects), without referring to different industries (it does not segment the researched enterprises into different business sectors). Furthermore, the research is focused on Vietnamese entrepreneurs and enterprises operating within the territory of Vietnam. Additionally, the research investigated only the Southern economic hub of the country (megacity: Ho Chi Minh City

and far-off area: the Mekong delta). Other national economic hubs should also be analyzed, such as Northern economic hub (megacity: Hanoi capital and far-off area: Red river delta), Central economic hub (megacity: Danang City and far-off area: neighboring localities) to draw similar but probably not exactly the same conclusions. Further international researches should be carried out at least at the regional level, level of ASEAN countries to prove the similarities and/or differences of research results in a wider context and based on a larger sample of enterprises. In researches of this type there is a vast preference of most authors for qualitative methods due to the lower cost and better convenience, especially the case study. The preference of such methodology in researches carried out in developing countries may indicate the difficulty of gathering precise and detailed input data for quantitative researches and limited funds designed for this purpose. Further researches should combine in-depth case studies with statistical analysis of a much larger sample of enterprises. Nonetheless, the research results of this article may serve as preliminary and precondition for such further researches.

The result of this research points out to the fact, that managers-entrepreneurs in relatively developed zone of the country (megacities represented in this article by Ho Chi Minh City), in contrary to the zone underdeveloped (the far-off areas represented in this article by region of Mekong delta), are most effective when they leverage their extant competencies and capabilities (in terms of business and profit making orientation, quick acquisition and adoption of commercial entrepreneurship skills), rather than stretching to build new, much more sophisticated ones (in terms of building social capabilities, sustainable orientation and social entrepreneurship). This is the main reason that strategic understanding of the essence of social enterprise and entrepreneurship, strategic awareness of its sustainability issues should be put to higher place in political agenda and promoted to raise the level of public, business and social concerns.

Certainly, integrated approach in terms of sustainable entrepreneurship development could lead to more viable long-run positions of the enterprises. Especially, due to the geographical (it is only 200 km from Ho Chi Minh City to Can Tho City, the so-called capital of Mekong delta) and cultural proximity (both zones share the similar, if not common, characteristic features of Southern culture of Vietnam), megacity and far-off area, following, for instance, the example of capital Bangkok in Thailand, may be merged together in the near future as communication infrastructure will be improved, technology investment and development will continue to expand further in line with the ongoing Industry 4.0. Alike ODA and FDI mutually supportive investment streams massively pouring into Vietnam and other emerging markets, commercial and social entrepreneurship will mutually supplement and penetrate each other so that the boundary between social and commercial enterprises will start to be blurred as the true nature of entrepreneurship revealed to be overarching and cover all the aspects, facets and dimensions of the sustainability issues. But now, in the current stage of socio-economic development, due to the present science and technology level, and facing actual business context and institutional settings of Vietnam,

still as a developing country, managers and entrepreneurs' natural instinct is to push for making money and accumulating financial capital first, especially when there are too much such diverse possibilities wide open in fast expanding megacities in terms of economic growth, rising income and consumers population's explosion. Furthermore and undoubtedly, commercial entrepreneurship skills are rather easier to adopt and acquire than sophisticated and equivocal social entrepreneurship skills that must be promoted to the strategically important level. Additionally, in comparison to commercial enterprises, social enterprises need more multidimensional, multilevel support from governmental institutions and third parties in order to exist, to develop, to fulfill their specific mission, and finally, to complement, support commercial enterprises and, more importantly, to overtake the roles, activities and initiatives of the local government [48].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Phung The Vinh, Tran Duy Thuc carried out literature overview. Nguyen Thanh Hung, Nguyen Vuong Thanh Long Le Doan Minh Duc analyzed data. Nguyen Hoang Tien wrote the paper. Nguyen Hoang Tien Dinh Ba Hung Anh - responsible for final check and language edition.

All authors had approved the final version.

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