

Social Entrepreneurship as a Space for Empowerment and Agency Among Youth With Disabilities in Cameroon: A Capability-Oriented Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

In low-income countries, young persons with disabilities face persistent structural, social, and symbolic barriers that limit their access to economic participation and social recognition. While entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted as a pathway to inclusion, little is known about its potential as a space for empowerment and agency beyond economic outcomes. Drawing on empowerment theory and the capability approach, this qualitative study explores how social entrepreneurship contributes to the development of agency, perceived freedoms, and social inclusion among young persons with disabilities participating in Cameroon's Plan Triennal Spécial-Jeunes (PTS-Jeunes). Based on semi-structured interviews conducted in the Centre Region of Cameroon, the findings reveal that social entrepreneurship functions as a multidimensional process of empowerment, enabling participants to redefine their social roles, expand their capabilities, and negotiate structural constraints. However, empowerment remains fragile and uneven, highly dependent on collective support structures, institutional arrangements, and social recognition. The study highlights the importance of moving beyond individualistic models of entrepreneurship toward inclusive and capability-enhancing ecosystems.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, disability, empowerment, capability approach, youth, Cameroon

INTRODUCTION

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, youth unemployment constitutes a major development challenge, exacerbated for young persons with disabilities by structural inequalities, stigma, and limited access to education and labor markets. In Cameroon, despite legal frameworks promoting inclusion, persons with disabilities continue to experience marginalization in economic, social, and civic life.

In this context, entrepreneurship has been increasingly promoted by public policies as a solution to youth unemployment and social exclusion. The Plan Triennal Spécial-Jeunes (PTS-Jeunes), launched in 2016, reflects this policy orientation by aiming to facilitate youth economic integration through entrepreneurship, vocational training, and institutional support. However, dominant policy narratives often frame entrepreneurship as an individual responsibility, emphasizing motivation, resilience, and self-reliance, while overlooking structural constraints and unequal power relations.

For young persons with disabilities, entrepreneurship and particularly social entrepreneurship may represent more than an income-generating activity. It can function as a space for empowerment, identity reconstruction, and social participation. Yet, empirical research examining entrepreneurship through the lenses of empowerment and capability development among persons with disabilities in African contexts remains scarce.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how social entrepreneurship contributes to the development of agency, empowerment, and capabilities among young persons with disabilities participating in the PTS-Jeunes program in Cameroon.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Empowerment and Agency

Empowerment is commonly defined as a process through which individuals and communities gain control over their lives, access resources, and participate meaningfully in social and political processes (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is not a static outcome but a dynamic and context-dependent process that unfolds across psychological, organizational, and community levels.

Agency, closely related to empowerment, refers to individuals' perceived and actual capacity to initiate actions, make choices, and influence their life trajectories despite constraints (Bandura, 2001). For persons with disabilities, agency is often restricted by social norms, institutional barriers, and internalized stigma.

The Capability Approach and Disability

The capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Martha Nussbaum (2011), provides a normative framework for evaluating social arrangements based on individuals' real freedoms to achieve valued ways of being and doing. Unlike resource-based or utility-based models, the capability approach emphasizes the interaction between personal characteristics (such as disability) and social, economic, and institutional environments.

In the context of disability, the capability approach highlights how impairments become disabling through social arrangements that restrict opportunities, participation, and choice. Entrepreneurship, when supported by inclusive policies and collective structures, may contribute to expanding capabilities such as economic security, social recognition, autonomy, and participation.

Social Entrepreneurship as a Transformative Space

Social entrepreneurship is particularly relevant in contexts where state capacity and formal labor markets are limited. It combines economic activity with social objectives, often rooted in community needs and collective action (Mair & Marti, 2006). For young persons with disabilities, social entrepreneurship may function as a platform for renegotiating social identities and challenging dominant representations of dependency.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive research design was adopted to explore participants' lived experiences of social entrepreneurship and empowerment. This design allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective meanings, social interactions, and contextual factors shaping agency and capability development.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in the Centre Region of Cameroon, including Yaoundé and surrounding peri-urban areas. This region hosts a significant concentration of PTS-Jeunes initiatives, entrepreneurial clusters, and youth support institutions.

Participants

Participants were young persons with disabilities aged 18–35 who were beneficiaries of the PTS-Jeunes program and involved in social entrepreneurship projects. Purposeful sampling ensured diversity in gender, type of disability, entrepreneurial sector, and level of project advancement.

The final sample consisted of twenty (20) participants, including twelve (12) men and eight (8) women aged between 18 and 35 years. Participants presented different types of disabilities, including physical, visual, and hearing impairments. All participants were beneficiaries of the PTS-Jeunes program and were engaged in social

or micro-entrepreneurial initiatives supported by the program. This diversity of profiles allowed the study to capture a broad range of experiences regarding empowerment, agency, and entrepreneurial engagement among youth with disabilities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on:

- Personal life trajectories,
- Experiences of disability and social exclusion,
- Motivations for engaging in social entrepreneurship,
- Perceptions of empowerment, autonomy, and social recognition,
- Interactions with institutional and community support structures.

Interviews were conducted in French, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. An inductive-deductive strategy was used, combining predefined concepts (agency, empowerment, capabilities) with emergent themes grounded in participants' narratives.

The analysis was supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated the organization, coding, and comparison of interview transcripts. NVivo enabled the systematic identification of recurring themes related to empowerment, agency, and capability expansion while maintaining a transparent audit trail of the coding process.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed elements of qualitative triangulation. Participants' narratives were compared across interviews to identify convergences and divergences in experiences of empowerment and entrepreneurship. This comparative approach allowed the researcher to validate emerging interpretations and ensure consistency across the dataset. Additionally, systematic coding procedures and iterative analysis contributed to increasing the reliability and transparency of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS

Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Reclaiming Social Identity

Participants described social entrepreneurship as a means of redefining themselves beyond socially imposed identities of dependency or incapacity. Engaging in entrepreneurial activities enabled them to claim social roles associated with productivity, responsibility, and contribution to community life.

This symbolic transformation was often as significant as economic outcomes, reinforcing participants' sense of dignity and social belonging.

Expansion of Capabilities Through Collective Action

Participation in entrepreneurial clusters and collective projects expanded participants' capabilities by facilitating access to resources, knowledge, and social networks. Collective settings reduced isolation and mitigated the

impact of individual limitations, enabling participants to convert available resources into meaningful opportunities.

Agency in the Face of Structural Constraints

Despite persistent barriers such as discrimination, limited access to financing, and infrastructural inaccessibility, participants demonstrated forms of constrained agency. They negotiated obstacles through adaptive strategies, mutual support, and incremental goal-setting.

However, agency remained fragile and uneven, strongly dependent on the continuity of institutional support and social recognition.

Emotional Empowerment and Self-Perception

Participants reported significant changes in self-perception, including increased self-confidence, emotional resilience, and future orientation. These changes were often triggered by recognition from peers, clients, and community members, highlighting the relational nature of empowerment.

Limits and Fragilities of Empowerment

Not all entrepreneurial trajectories resulted in sustained empowerment. Participants operating in isolation or facing abrupt withdrawal of support experienced setbacks that undermined both economic viability and psychological well-being. These findings underscore the risks of over-individualizing responsibility for success.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a space for empowerment and capability expansion among young persons with disabilities in a low-income context. Unlike individualistic models that emphasize self-efficacy or motivation alone, the findings demonstrate that empowerment emerges from the interaction between personal agency and enabling environments.

While participants frequently reported increased confidence, motivation, and aspirations for economic autonomy, it is important to distinguish between perceived empowerment and objectively measurable entrepreneurial outcomes. Although many participants felt more capable of initiating entrepreneurial activities, structural barriers such as limited access to finance, unstable markets, and social stigma continued to affect the sustainability of their initiatives. This distinction highlights that empowerment processes may initially operate at the psychological and relational levels before translating into durable economic outcomes.

Consistent with Sen's (1999) capability approach, the study shows that entrepreneurship enhances well-being not merely through income generation but by expanding real freedoms, including social participation, recognition, and choice. However, these freedoms remain contingent upon institutional arrangements and collective support structures.

The results also align with Zimmerman's (2000) empowerment theory, highlighting the multilevel nature of empowerment processes. Psychological empowerment was reinforced when organizational and community-level supports were present, but weakened in their absence.

Importantly, the study challenges policy narratives that frame entrepreneurship as a universal solution to disability-related exclusion. Without inclusive ecosystems, entrepreneurship risks reproducing existing inequalities and shifting responsibility from structural factors to individuals.

Recent research also emphasizes that inclusive entrepreneurship policies must address both individual capacities and structural barriers affecting persons with disabilities (Halabisky, 2021; Hessels & Naudé, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Social entrepreneurship holds significant potential as a pathway toward empowerment, agency, and social inclusion for young persons with disabilities in Cameroon. However, its transformative capacity depends on the presence of supportive, inclusive, and capability-enhancing environments.

Programs such as PTS-Jeunes should therefore move beyond narrow economic indicators and integrate psychosocial support, collective learning, and long-term institutional commitment. By doing so, social entrepreneurship can contribute not only to individual success but also to broader processes of social justice and inclusive development.

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