

Business, Environment, and Social Responsibility:  
A Case Study of Five Women Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs

By

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*Dedicated to those who believe that this world can be a regeneratively flourishing world.  
And who work tirelessly to bring us closer to this ideal state. I see you. You living meaningfully  
is an essential component of the renaissance. I send you love and blessing for the journey.*

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## Abstract

The profit-first business model, the bedrock of capitalism, has become the dominant force shaping the world. Societies in which profit-first businesses dominate—largely industrialized nations—have garnered the economic agency to escape systemic poverty. However, The profit-first business model’s extractive and wealth concentrating practices have been the main contributors to numerous environmental crises and social inequalities. In contrast, Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBEs) produce approaches to business that are profitable, have positive social impact, and protect the environment. In particular, SBEs create innovative initiatives, reconstruct social institutions, and mobilize resources to establish legitimate alternative approaches to profit-first business formation, practices, and outcomes. This research project posits to transition society into a more sustainable world, it is important to understand why SBEs become involved in various activities to alleviate the social and environmental crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Through pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism theory, I explored women SBE’s interpretive processes and behavior. And using this symbolic interactionism lens I uncovered the formation of five women SBEs’ success factors—visionary leader, locality, collaborative internal teams, symbiotic external partnerships, and technology—that appear across the cases. As well as, three barriers—blocked impulse, lack of established networks and limited technology—that appear across the cases. These findings illustrate how SBEs advanced their normative position through reciprocal interaction and how they developed their everyday social practices, how those relate to their success in business, and how their success is driving new assumptions and practices of a model of business to replace the profit-first business model.

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## Preface

### Pragmatism as the Theoretical Orientation

One of the most important applications of pragmatism to our current social and environmental crises lies in its capacity to identify which theoretic debates really matter and to mediate these debates in terms of shared pragmatic goals (Guedes-Neto; 2017, Reitan, 1998)—in particular, the goal of conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social constraints for a shared prosperity. While this research project posits that Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBEs) will transition society into a more sustainable world, it is important to understand why SBEs become involved in various activities to alleviate the social and environmental crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Mead's pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism is especially useful for understanding and interpreting this complex nature of human action and interaction in general (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Morales, 1998, 2010) and sustainable practices in particular. The core ideas of symbolic interactionism are intersubjectivity and reciprocal orientation. Language makes possible intersubjective agreement regarding an activity, and it establishes the basis for collective action. For interpretivists, language and social rules vary across situations and thus are open to interpretation, albeit not completely. Institution-coordinated complexes of human interaction are formed by those people and places party to the language of that collective activity.

Additionally, Mead's work of role-taking and interaction are particularly salient to theorizing about what attributes make for successful SBEs because it explains how people learn from interacting with each other and how people relate to each other in organizing activities. Mead comprehends interaction as the "flow of action" that governs creativity involving a number

of reciprocal interactions (Morales, 1998, 2010). The reciprocal interaction includes two key elements of Mead's theory: the social act (blocked impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation) and taking the role of the other. The social act is generally initiated during a blocked impulse, which compels some emotion and implies a course of action. Perception and manipulation, through taking the role of the other, transform the emotion into action until the impulse is consummated or diminished. Thus, Mead's theory shows how interaction produces common goods, like public responsibility, or public services, such as the way SBEs create their respective businesses to produce a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing society.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

As exploratory and applied dissertation research, this study is grounded in philosophical pragmatism. A central feature of pragmatism is fostering an understanding of situations to convert knowledge into action (Morgan, 2014). Guided by the pragmatist lens, my research aims to amplify and call into action systems that recognize the interdependencies between all things in order to promote shared prosperity and equity for all. Ultimately, I hope to affect public policy and/or influence the direction of social change by making various stakeholders aware of their connection to the problem with the hope that awareness will motivate them to create sustainable and regenerative systems. To transition to this new reality, governments cannot rely solely on pursuing greater governmental regulation. Instead, governments would benefit from designing incentive-driven, self-regulating systems that find ways to effectively balance freedom for innovation with the constraints needed for productive collaborative communities.

Ragin & Amoroso (2019) refer to this kind of action-oriented research as public sociology, "research that is conducted and written . . . with the hopes that their findings will lead directly to social change" (p. 29). In such research, Ragin and Amoroso (2019) emphasize that

the researcher's own voice must be addressed openly in the research project. Ragin and Amoroso (2019) caution that action-oriented researchers "must be vigilant in their efforts to represent their groups appropriately" (p. 42). They also recommend that the researcher be careful to not whitewash the cases, to present the good and the bad, to be wary of how people rationalize what they do, to maintain skepticism and examine the same events from several points of view (p. 42). In this regard, I use triangulation, use of multiple sources of data—archival data, internet sources, and published reports—to confirm my findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ragin & Amoroso, 2019). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stress that the researcher is an instrument of data collection in which the data is mediated through the researcher. In addition, they suggest that a researcher should openly discuss aspects of self, including bias, assumptions, expectations, and experiences as relevant to the study. In this regard, I share my lived experience that has led me to study sustainable business below.

### *Personal Experience*

Like the sustainable entrepreneurs in my research project, I too came to the conclusion that escalating societal problems—poverty, climate change, pollution, and inequality—are unintended consequences of the global profit-first economic principles. These problems are unacceptable and need systemic correction to create a sustainable and flourishing society for all. These normative positions are developed through my lived experience as a daughter of a developing nation (Ethiopia) and developed nation (United States of America).

Growing up in Ethiopia, I was afforded the many amenities children enjoy in industrialized nations. However, each time I left our home, I was confronted with a different reality of the larger community. For example, while en route to school, I would see children going to fetch water or carry firewood back to their homes. Puzzled, I would ask my parents why

this was the case and why these children were not also going to school like me? While I did not fully understand my parents' response, I gathered it had something to do with poverty.

Shortly after, my family and I moved to the United States. I became convinced that duplicating the United States' development model was the way out of poverty for less industrialized nations like Ethiopia. However, I was confronted with a sobering reality that challenged my romantic idea of development. If less industrialized societies developed following the industrialized nations' economic development model, there will not be enough of earth's resources to meet everyone's demands. Furthermore, the planet is now faced with numerous environmental and social crises that are threatening life as we know it globally.

This reality made me readjust my romantic beliefs about development. I started looking for alternative systems that would allow society as a whole to coexist holistically and abundantly. In my pursuit, I found multiple burgeoning communities throughout the world building holistic models and systems that recognize the nexus between all things. These initiatives were building products and services to serve communities while balancing societal, ecological, and economic constraints simultaneously. These communities became my anchor to envision a new form of development and prosperity for all.

## **Structure of this Dissertation**

### ***Paper 1***

In paper one I examine the root causes of the environmental and social crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, synthesize the philosophical ideas of pragmatism and articulate how pragmatism applies to sustainability research while illustrating how it is linked to the pursuit of social progress through the lens of SBEs.



### ***Paper 2***

In paper two I explore Mead's pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism as a theory concerned with women SBE's interpretive processes and behavior. Using this symbolic interactionism lens, I reveal the formation of five women SBEs and how they developed their everyday social practices, how those relate to their success in business, and how their success is driving new assumptions and practices of a business model to replace the profit-first model.

### ***Paper 3***

In this paper, using Mead's Social Act—blocked impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation—I discuss how my research complements existing sustainable entrepreneurship literature. My research also illustrates and adds the importance of micro-level interactions of meaning making and shared purposes for macro-level changes, as illustrated through the SBEs of this research project, to the literature. Additionally, I present and discuss possible alternative SBE success explanations.

### **Conclusion**

My research findings illustrate how SBEs advanced their normative position through reciprocal interaction. This research project posits that having multiple successful sustainable initiatives can serve as a multiplier effect to catalyze a larger flourishing society for all. Thus, through this dissertation I share my theory of SBEs: 1) the communicative behavior enacted, developed, and changing in the practice of a collective activity—SBE meaning system, and 2) the people that are a part of that and that are practicing that system—the intersubjective SBE community practitioners—are one mechanism that can accelerate sustainable societal transformation.

## **Recommendation and Future Directions**

Practitioners interested in advancing the normative position of SBEs should focus on creating systems that are governed by shared meanings within the organization and shared purposes across the organization. Specifically, symbolic interactionism highlights how micro-level reciprocal interactions construct macro-level changes. Thus, society, largely, is a shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another. However, there are many barriers to establishing sustainable and regeneratively flourishing systems in the profit-first economic model that does not prioritize these principles. Further research is needed on this topic to better understand how small, local reciprocal interaction efforts can become a global force for change.

**Paper One: Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm and its Applications to Research on Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBE)**

*Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish been caught, and the last stream poisoned, will we realize we cannot eat money.*

Cree Indian Prophecy

**Abstract**

Pragmatism has an interest in what the world might be; it orients itself toward a prospective world, a world not yet realized (Guedes-Neto, 2017; Mintz, 2004; Reitan, 1998). Thus, pragmatism focuses on meaningful research, which for early pragmatists began with the desire for social progress (Lawhead, 2018). One of the most important applications of pragmatism to current social and environmental crises lies in its capacity to identify which theoretical debates matter, and to mediate these debates in terms of shared pragmatic goals—in particular, this research’s goal of *conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity*. In this article, I examine the root causes of the environmental and social crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; synthesize the philosophical ideas of pragmatism; and articulate how pragmatism applies to sustainability research while illustrating how it is linked to the pursuit of social progress through the lens of Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBEs).

## Introduction

This research project posits that society has tacitly accepted social inequality, poverty, environmental degradation, and climate change as if these are out of human control. They are not. These social and environmental crises are failures of our economic system. Specifically, of our economic system that holds profit-first business assumptions of utility maximization via reductive, extractive, and externalizing practices in pursuit of exponential growth all governed by shareholder primacy as its driving principles. These assumptions relegate humans and society to the status of property. Distressingly, the profit-first principles have become a dominant global phenomenon and have resulted in adverse social and environmental impacts in every aspect of life and in every region of the world (Hawken, 2000). These persistent environmental and social crises create an urgency to make changes in how we live, and there is considerable merit to the claim that we cannot make the changes that are required if we do not change how we think about the relationship of humans to the rest of nature.

Given that the profit-first business principles are created by human beings, these failures can be corrected if human beings choose to replace the profit-first economic system with a new system that more accurately reflects the intrinsic inter-connection between humanity and the larger ecosystem. Specifically, poverty, social inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change can be dramatically reduced if we are willing to reconsider the assumptions underlying the dominant profit-first business principles. Many people around the world are eager to pursue alternative business principles in pursuit of a sustainable and regenerative society for all (Yunus, 2018). That is where SBEs can create a domino effect in this transition. SBEs offer advantages that are available neither to profit-first businesses nor to traditional charities in addressing the 21<sup>st</sup> century's social and environmental challenges.

One of the most useful roles of pragmatism for the emerging sustainable and regeneratively flourishing business philosophy lies in its capacity to identify which theoretical debates matter and to mediate these debates in terms of shared pragmatic goals—in particular, the goal of cultivating sustainable and regeneratively flourishing business practices. Specifically, the value of pragmatic principles helps critique the profit-first assumptions based on the pragmatist’s core principle of “what works,” and serves to guide the ongoing process of developing alternative sustainable business practices (Morales, 1998; Morgan, 2014; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The choice of pragmatism as an overarching philosophical orientation for this research project was strongly influenced by my desire to contribute useful and actionable knowledge anchored in SBE experience. In this research project, pragmatism’s inherent focus on experience and action helped refine the research problems under investigation and in establishing research objectives.

Grounding this research project in pragmatism provided a number of benefits. For example, pragmatic truth is not reductionist, but pluralistic (Morales, 1998). Initial inquiry into SBEs revealed pluralistic distinctions, meaning no two SBEs were the same but they did espouse similar shared meanings. Pragmatism acknowledges that there is more than one set of human practices that works in terms of promoting a healthy human-natural system. Additionally, the pragmatism principle of actionable knowledge helped me target data collection and strengthen the depth and quality of analysis. The principle of actionable knowledge anchored the research in SBE experiences. At the design state, this principle enabled me to unpack the research problem and identify elements of the problem that were the most relevant. As the research progressed, this principle helped me determine the research questions and methods. By emphasizing the principle of actionable knowledge right through the research process, this research contributes to

the growing literature supporting pragmatism as a potential paradigm for sustainable and regenerative research to solve the 21<sup>st</sup> century's social and environmental problems.

### **The Pragmatic Basis for Changing Our Worldview**

The central problem with business, as it is now practiced, is that the system recognizes the assumptions of only one worldview—the selfish pursuit of profit and that efficiency is the only way to maximize profit. As a result, only businesses designed around this goal are recognized and supported. While the profit-first worldview may have worked in the past, at least to some degree, relying on it produces more problems than it solves. This worldview is built upon a paradigm of dominating and of transforming and controlling nature to suit human preferences—human preferences that inspire ever-increasing rates of environmental degradation and are largely responsible for the persistence of social inequality (du Plessis, 2012; Ferdig, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2016). The interactionist methods assume our worldview impacts how we live our lives, meaning that there is an intrinsic link between our outlook on the world and our behavior (Guedes-Neto, 2017). Thus, the most useful roles of pragmatism lie in 1) its capacity to identify which theoretic debates really matter, and to mediate these debates in terms of shared pragmatic goals—in particular, the goal of *conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity*; and 2) helping provide a method for investigating shared meaning and its connection to social institutions. Using both, we can evaluate and judge worldviews.

The pragmatic method asks us to interpret each action by tracing its respective practical consequences: what difference it would make if one notion rather than another was true? If there is no practical difference, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing and all dispute is idle (Guedes-Neto, 2017; Mintz, 2004; Reitan, 1998). When there is a difference, in practice,

there should also be a consequential difference between one and the other (Lawhead, 2018).

Therefore, when pragmatically evaluating a worldview, we must evaluate how well it works out in lived experience and with respect to broad goals. Does it enable us to sustainably act in ways that are compatible with the dictates of the worldview itself and the rest of our experience? From this pragmatic framework, the critique is that the profit-first worldview's activities radically transform the ecosphere, delineating human communities and habitats from natural ecosystems. Human beings evolved in the natural environment. We evolved to be dependent upon that natural environment for our physical as well as psychological well-being (Guedes-Neto, 2017; Reitan, 1998). These unsustainable practices are therefore self-defeating. Through this lens the assumption governing the profit-first worldview is bankrupt and we judge it for its social and environmental failures.

This research's pragmatic position posits that the 21<sup>st</sup> century's environmental and social crisis can only be solved if we adopt new assumptions and foster new ways of acting that bring us into harmony with the ecosystems and ourselves (Guedes-Neto, 2017; Reitan, 1998). The fundamental justification for changing our worldview, then, is that making such a change is the only realistic way to sufficiently change our harmful behavior (Meadows, 1999). Specifically, pragmatism sheds light on why SBEs and many others are advocating that the only realistic way to move from the current unsustainable social and environmental practices of profit-first business principles to genuinely sustainable ones is to abandon the worldview that drives our unsustainable lifestyle. Then, we could replace it with a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing worldview that inspires a caring and nurturing relationship with nature and ourselves.

## **Profit-First Worldview Failures**

The profit-first worldview has produced amazing advancements and wealth but at the cost of creating massive social inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation. The need to review and reevaluate the basic structure of our economic system has been felt on many occasions. But it has never been felt as strongly as it is being felt today, with many coming to the consensus that profit-first principles are the root cause of these crises (Yunus, 2018).

### ***Social Inequality***

The troubles plaguing poor people are exacerbated by a broader economic and social problem—the problem of rising wealth concentration. As the economy grows, so does the concentration of wealth. For example, the world’s 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet’s population (Oxfam, 2020). As wealth concentration increases within countries, it also increases between nations. In the global profit-first economic system, wealth concentration is an inevitable process. The economic system is built for one-way wealth concentration (Yunus, 2018). When wealth is concentrated in a few hands, it creates a condition in which political power is also controlled and used by a few (du Plessis, 2012; Ferdig, 2007). People around the world have risen up against the unfairness of the current economic system. Distressingly, as the wealth gap and the power gap grow, mistrust, resentment, and anger inevitably deepen threatening social cohesion, human rights, and democracy.

### ***Climate Change and Environmental Challenges***

Just as people are aware of the problem of growing social inequality, people around the world have been increasingly aware of the dangers posed by the profit-first principle’s impact on climate change. In recent years, our planet has experienced the hottest temperatures on record,



arctic sea ice has reached record low levels, ocean levels continue to rise, and extreme weather conditions are becoming more common. Additionally, climate change and drought are turning fertile farmlands into arid lands (Letzing, 2019). Again, distressingly, regions most vulnerable to loss of farmland are some of the most economically troubled, even though these regions have had minimal contribution to climate change (Ekins, 1987, Woetzel et al., 2020).

Climate change is not the only environmental problem the human species faces. Practices affecting the relationship between humans and the natural environment must also be examined with our long-term survival in mind. For example, we must not continue to cut down the world's forests at the current rate, harvest the world's fish and other ocean life as we are now doing, or continue to practice chemical-based monocultures that deplete the soil and increase the vulnerability of crops to diseases. In addition, if we continue to let plastic waste into our water systems, we run the risk of drinking water containing microfibers of plastic and contaminating marine life with indigestible plastic microgranules (Yunus, 2018).

### ***Interlinked Challenges***

History shows that when destructive environmental policies are pursued, the poor suffer most. For example, politicians and business leaders tend to make choices that put polluting, dangerous, toxic, and destructive industries and facilities in communities where poor people live (Marcal & Hearn, 2021; Yunus, 2018). Environmental degradation, climate change, and social inequality pose serious dangers to the future of human society (Morales, 2021). They pose a physical threat against the natural systems that make life on this planet livable, constituting a social, political, and economic threat against the right of all people to live in dignity (Dumas 1986, Fullerton, 2015). If we chase economic growth in ways that destroy the environment and

communities, we will be faced with the reality that profit-first business practices have destroyed the planet and resources on which all life ultimately depends.

## **Root Causes of Profit-First Worldview Failures**

### ***Mechanistic Worldview***

The conceptual framework of capitalism was originally laid out by Adam Smith, primarily in his 1776 book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (*The Wealth of Nations*). Smith asserts that an “invisible hand” ensures competition in the economy, contributing to equilibrium in the markets. Since then, under the guise of Smith’s form of capitalism, free market assumptions dedicated solely to profit have become the dominate and global economic system (Fullerton, 2015; Graafland & Wells, 2020; Sinek, 2019), even though Adam Smith’s collective writings challenge imperialism and domination and concern themselves with societal flourishing. Scholars familiar with Smith’s holistic writing argue that this self-interest and profit-centric evaluation of Smith is incomplete and an overrepresentation of a few selected quotations from *The Wealth of Nations* (Graafland & Wells, 2020, Postigo, 2014). For example, a quantitative references analysis within *The Wealth of Nations* of “self-interest” vs. virtues—which Smith wrote about more explicitly in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1756), and which scholars familiar with Smith’s collective writing argue is supposed to be a prologue to *The Wealth of Nations* (Hall, 2020), show that:

Smith makes a total of 240 references to virtues in relation to societal flourishing, of which the overwhelming majority (over 90%) associate virtues positively with flourishing (or associate vices with societal failure) . . . Thus, while it is true that Smith made a few remarks consistent with Mandeville’s—[public benefits depend on private vices]—hive thesis . . . he had far more to say about the opposite thesis that societal flourishing relies on the presence of individual virtues (Graafland & Wells, 2020, p. 39).

This quantitative analysis of *The Wealth of Nations* is a more accurate representation of Smith as a critic of the unfairness of mercantilism of his day (Hall, 2020). Furthermore, scholars who study Smith's holistic body of work, in particular, Smith's two major works, the assumption of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the assumption of self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations*, argue that these two schools of thought are not only related but are supposed to work in tandem with one another (Hall, 2020). In addition, they argue that this tandem working of sympathy and self-interest is what is supposed to lead to Smith's view of the wealth of a nation (Graafland & Wells, 2020; Hall, 2020). This holistic interpretation of Smith's work contrasts with the economist dominant profit-first and shareholder supremacy thesis that Smith is often presented as endorsing (Fullerton, 2015; Graafland & Wells, 2020; Sinek, 2019).

Nonetheless, economist Milton Friedman's profit-first doctrine (1970), under the guise of Smith's form of capitalism, has become the dominant and global economic system (Fullerton, 2015; Sinek, 2019). In particular, Friedman cemented what is considered the accepted responsibility of business in "A Friedman Doctrine" (1970), arguing that the primary goal of a business was to maximize profit at all costs and not concern itself with society's problems. Friedman writes, "there is one and only one social responsibility of business, to use its resources to engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game" (Friedman, 1970, p. 126). Unquestioned, this belief became a norm in business along with an increase in the concept of shareholder supremacy in which companies prioritize the interest of an external shareholder over the interests of employers, customers, or the environment.

Friedman's declaration was embraced by Wall Street, and taught in business schools (Sinek, 2019). This profit-first worldview assumption has had significant influence on the world. For example, family businesses have been replaced by international agribusinesses where "food is not produced . . . to feed a hungry world, but to make a profit" (Kalob, 2012, p. 109) while simultaneously millions go hungry (Fitzgerald, 2016) or where mom and pop restaurants have been replaced by franchises (Benjamin, 2014). In addition, through marketing, advertising, and globalization, we are all encouraged to have similar desires and to pursue similar goals, typically the desire to have more of everything (du Plessis, 2012, Fitzgerald, 2016). This pressure to have more of everything has come at a cost to human relations and damage to the environment and other species (du Plessis, 2012; Ferdig, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2016).

### ***Assumptions of Human Nature – Selfishness***

On a more fundamental level, the failures of this economic theory can be traced to a blind spot in the assumptions it makes about human nature. A businessperson is supposed to be driven solely by self-interest. It assumes that humans are solely personal gain-seeking beings who seek to maximize personal profit at all cost. According to the dominant economic theory, selfishness is not a problem; it is, in fact, the highest virtue of capitalism (Yunus, 2018). Furthermore, the present theory of capitalism holds that the marketplace is reserved only for those who are interested in profit only—an interpretation that treats humans as one-dimensional beings. The deeper problem with this economic theory is that only selfishness-driven players are supported and acknowledged (Fullerton, 2015). This assumption, in turn, ignores humans' multidimensional nature and instead encourages an exploitive form of behavior toward other human beings and the larger ecosystem (Eisler, 2021).

### ***GDP – Misleading Measurement***

The measurement systems we have created to gauge economic growth are another symptom of the problems caused by our flawed economic thinking. Gross domestic product (GDP) measures the monetary value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period (Dumas, 1986). It holds the false assumption that there is an inherent conflict between economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity (Eisler, 2021; Madalina, 2015). Overall, GDP promotes unsustainable growth not just in environmental terms but in practical long-term economic terms (Daga, 2014). Still, GDP is carefully measured by government agencies and it is often treated as a measurement of the success of a country's economic system. The profit-first model's sole measurement of economic output has led to economic activity being hailed as the most important activity of humanity and the largely accepted belief that economic growth is done in the name of progress and modernity (Fullerton, 2015).

However, GDP does not and cannot tell the whole story of society. Activities that do not require money changing hands are not counted as part of GDP (Daga, 2014; Dumas, 1986; Eisler, 2021,). This means that, in effect, many of the things real human beings cherish most are treated as having no value (Dumas, 1986; Eisler, 2021,). By contrast, money spent on weapons of war and other activities that harm people's health or destroy the environment are counted as part of GDP (Dumas, 1986), despite the fact that they produce suffering and contribute nothing to human happiness (Madalina, 2015). Furthermore, GDP fails to include the huge economic contribution of caring for people and for nature (Eisler, 2021). Human society is an integrated whole. It consists of much more than the economic activity measured by GDP.

GDP may accurately measure the selfish behavior of capitalism (Raghunathan, 2017), but it does not capture the success and contribution of humanity and the larger ecosystem. Its success or failure should be measured in a consolidated way, not purely on the basis of narrowly selected economic performance.

### ***The Paradox of Technology and Globalization***

Misleading measurement systems are just one symptom of the problems caused by our flawed economic thinking. Another is our failure to channel technological advancements to benefit all people rather than a chosen few (Rushkoff, 2019). Technology is a tool designed for a purpose, and its purpose comes from human beings. Unfortunately, under the current economic system, technology's primary purpose is profit-centric. Some may be tempted to argue that technological advancement will "save" us from society's presently unsustainable practices. However, this thinking is challenged by the Jevons Paradox. Jevons Paradox shows that technological advancement may delay the speed of unsustainability but may not stop society from continuing to move toward unsustainability (Dumont et al., 2013). In some cases, it may accelerate the process to unsustainability due to ease/efficiency of technological advancement making it readily available to more people, i.e., a more "unsustainable" use-rebound effect (Dumont et al., 2013).

Technology does not have a mind of its own. If we build the new economic and social system needed to channel these technologies in the right directions, there is reason to believe that technology can play a big role in catalyzing a world that is sustainable and regeneratively flourishing.

## ***Unemployment***

The United Nations estimates the world needs 400 million new jobs by 2030 (Yunus, 2018). The problem of unemployment is created by our grossly flawed economic conceptual framework. Traditional—profit-first—economic principles give too much weight to big corporations to generate jobs in the economy (Eisler, 2021; Yunus, 2018). The present theory assumes that people are born to work for a few big capitalists that are believed to be job creators of society (Marcal & Hearn, 2021). Because these few job creators are seen as the drivers of the economy, all policies and institutions are built for them (Yunus, 2018). However, when these big companies, in pursuit of profit maximization, move overseas, automate their plants, or shut down altogether, entire communities can be destroyed (Eisler, 2021). This reductionist view of humans as solely job seekers is a misreading of humanity's potential.

Human beings are packed with unlimited creative capacity and can create locally flourishing economies. For example, rather than seeing 40 million people looking for employment, we can envision 40 million new entrepreneurs entering the global market by creating new businesses that really meet the needs of the communities where they live (Yunus, 2018), thereby, giving the community a healthier and more sustainable local economy.

## ***Women***

Many cultural and gender assumptions create barriers for women to achieve success (Alene, 2020; Johnson et al., 2008). This gendered assumption marginalizes women and is primarily espoused by profit-first business model (Marcal & Hearn, 2021). Women, like nature, are seen as tools to the profit-first business model (Eisler, 2021). Women's work, which is primarily care oriented, is undervalued. Moreover, many times women are expected to perform this work for free (Eisler, 2021; Marcal & Hearn, 2021). Additionally, even when women

participate in “GDP” economic activity, research has documented that women face the greatest challenge in starting businesses, with challenges ranging from securing financial investment to creating meaningful partnerships (Giglio, 2020). Without women entrepreneurs, economies could not achieve complete sustainable success (Orobia, 2020). The profit-first systematic marginalization of women, like that of nature, is self-defeating.

### ***Charity and Welfare Programs***

Profit-first economics proclaim that free-market capitalism is a perfect mechanism that only needs to be fully unleashed to solve all of humanity’s problems (Marcal & Hearn, 2021). Yet at the same time our society tacitly confesses the shortcomings of the free market and gives billions of dollars every year toward charity and welfare programs (Yunus, 2018). Charity and welfare programs may be well intended efforts to lessen the damage done by the current economic system. Unfortunately, these efforts are largely ineffective (Marcal & Hearn, 2021). Of course, when people are hurting, charitable efforts to help relieve the problem is necessary and important. However, charitable efforts and government programs cannot solve systemic problems (Eisler, 2021; Meadows, 1999). The much higher responsibility is to help people escape dependence on charitable programs (Yunus, 2009). Dependence diminishes a human’s dignity and creates complacency (Marcal & Hearn, 2021). A real solution requires a change in the system by addressing the root causes instead of addressing the symptoms.

### **Change in Our Worldview is Necessary**

We live in a challenging era, a time when our world lurches from one crisis to another. With the world’s population approaching 8 billion people, it is more crucial than ever that we reevaluate the concept of our economic system. Rethinking and remaking our economic system is not simply a nice idea. There really is no viable alternative if we hope to enjoy a sustainable



and regeneratively flourishing future on this planet (Eisler, 2021; Marcal & Hearn, 2021). This is not just a problem that affects the “losers” in the game of profit-first economy (Rushkoff, 2019; Sinek, 2019). It impacts the global social, environmental and economic progress of life for all—including those in the wealthy minority (Yunus, 2018). We have the technology and the pragmatic methodology needed to bring an end to the scourge of social and environmental crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All that is lacking is a framework and a new (sustainable and regenerative) worldview.

### ***Envisioning a New Economic System***

There is not an inherent conflict between economic wellness, social equity, and environmental protection (Marcal & Hearn, 2021; Rushkoff, 2019). In fact, it is possible to have a viable economy and lift communities and nations out of poverty while also protecting the environment (Yunus, 2018). To do this, a more fundamental change in the way we think about economics is necessary (Meadow, 1999). For example, we should explore ways to calculate a new measurement of GDP that takes out the harms done to human beings and nature. This will be a GDP minus behaviors that prevent humans from fulfilling their potential — poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, crime, violence, racism, oppression of women, and activities that destroy the environment (Eisler, 2021). What we need is a new system that provides us a holistic way of looking at social systems embedded in the larger ecosystem.

### ***Systemic Causes Need Systemic Solutions***

Is change possible? Yes, change is possible. We have the power to ensure the elimination of human made social and environmental challenges from this planet. Over the long arc of human history, progress has been made. For example, we overcame slavery, we overcame apartheid, we put human beings on the moon—all achievements that were once considered

impossible. But the commitment to holistic progress around the world unfortunately ebbs and flows (Eisler, 2021). We need systemic solutions to address root causes of the social and environmental failures of the profit-first business paradigm. We cannot rely on the system that created all these problems to solve those same problems (Meadows, 1999). Even if the problems do get solved, we cannot guarantee that the same system will not create the same problems all over again (Eisler, 2021). An old system always leads to an old destination.

If we want to reach a new destination very different from the old one, we have to build a new system (Meadows, 2018). The 21<sup>st</sup> century's social and environmental challenges are not an unalterable fate. Because these challenges are our own creation, we can solve it through our own efforts. The real solution is to address the cause, not the effect (Meadows, 2018). We need to redesign the economic framework of our society by moving from a system driven purely by personal interest to a system in which both personal and collective interests are recognized, promoted, and celebrated (Marcal & Hearn, 2021; Rushkoff, 2019). Unless we shift the foundation from half-built self and profit-first driven economic systems to holistic sustainable and regenerative system, we will continue to have regressions (Eisler, 2021; Meadows, 1999).

### ***Role of Technology and Opportunity to Leapfrog***

Scientists and engineers have made huge progress in developing renewable, sustainable sources of energy, less polluting systems for manufacturing and shipping products, and techniques for agriculture, fishing and mining that do not degrade the environment (Rushkoff, 2019). Thanks to these breakthroughs, today's developing nations are better positioned than the older industrialized nations to enjoy clean growth (Yunus, 2018). This means they can leapfrog directly to more efficient, cleaner technologies that modern science has made available. Moreover, many economic arenas from healthcare to education can be revolutionized globally

through the combined power of business and technology (Rushkoff, 2019). A business owner who devises a product or service that helps the poor or benefits society in some other way may be able to attract a wide market by using social networking and other online tools to spread the word. We live in a particularly suitable time for these experiments with new forms of business. Thus, electronic technologies for information and communication can play a huge role in amplifying the power of entrepreneurs (Yunus, 2018).

For example, in a world of technological entrepreneurship, women, who have been marginalized by the profit-first economic system, can design their work lives as appropriate to them. In doing so, aspects of the economy not known to men can be revealed by women, and the fresh engagement of millions of women can help improve the economic outlooks of villages, cities, regions, and even entire countries (Eisler, 2021; Orobia, 2020).

### ***Role of Women***

Statistical studies show a relationship between a higher status of women and national economic success leading to a higher quality of life for all (Eisler, 2021). In order to create and accelerate the transition to sustainable and regenerative human society embedded in a flourishing natural environment, we need to recognize and value women's contributions in this role (Giglio, 2020; Marcal & Hearn, 2021). Additionally, it has been observed that women entrepreneurs are not only an essential part of economic development but also have the greatest impact on the social well-being of a society (Pallares-Blanch, 2014). In other words, women's participation in entrepreneurial activities not only supports their families but also plays a significant role in economic development and the social well-being of society (Orobia, 2020). Women's success in entrepreneurship essentially serves as a positive multiplier effect in their respective communities.

### ***Role of Caring***

Caring pays, not only in human and environmental terms, but in purely financial terms as well (Finster & Hernke, 2014; Marcal & Hearn, 2021). For instance, companies regularly listed as Fortune 500 Best Companies to Work for have a substantially higher return to investors (Eisler, 2021). Nations that espouse caring policies like universal health care, high quality childcare, and generous paid parental leave, are also caring for nature and cutting carbon emissions (Eisler, 2021). For example, countries like Sweden, Norway, and Finland, all of which suffered famines at some point, are today in the highest ranks of the World Economic Forum's global competitiveness reports (Eisler, 2021). These nations have thriving businesses because they invested in caring for their human and natural infrastructures through counter-profit-first business practices.

### **Counter-Profit-First Businesses**

Now it's time to apply the potential of counter-profit-first business principles to solving the problems of inequality, unemployment, and environmental degradation—all primary failures of the global economic system. All the creative power of business could be marshaled behind the cause of making the world a better place. Businesses can play a key role in this transition because businesses are naturally organized to achieve concrete goals: to provide goods or services that people need, want, and will pay for (Yunus, 2018). Additionally, successful business concepts are readily adopted and spread (Sinek, 2019). The same tool can be used for a completely different purpose—namely, to solve the social and environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Specifically, sustainable business entrepreneurs (SBE) can solve it through actions that break away from the traditional capitalist mindset. In particular, SBEs espouse the normative

position—*conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity for all*. It is exciting to observe how these new economic concepts have been spreading around the globe through the efforts of entrepreneurs. SBEs entrepreneurs are creating a new economic system that allows them to realize their potential as job creators rather than job seekers and paving a new path for positive social and environmental change in the rest of the world (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Yunus, 2018). The holistic position SBEs take, to focus on the world beyond self-interest, is ethics in practice and an opportunity to create something new (Mead, 1908). Thus, an accumulation of such holistic “bigger than self-interest business practices” can build the necessary momentum for societal transformation.

### ***SBE – Holistic Systems Thinking***

SBEs are able to achieve both short term and long term impacts because they understand not only [the] immediate problems but also the larger social systems and interdependencies (El Ebrashi, 2012). This allows them to introduce new paradigms at critical leverage points that in turn lead to cascades of mutually reinforcing changes in social arrangements and shifts in the societal context within which the original problem is embedded and sustained (Alvord et al., 2004 ). In this regard, SBEs catalyze systemic societal transformations well beyond the solution to the initial problem, while also changing the social systems that created and maintained the problems (Alvord et al., 2004; Mair & Noboa, 2006).

### ***Connection between (Pragmatist Inspired) Symbolic Interactionism, SBE and Systems Thinking***

SBE’s critical reflection and an awareness of connectedness and systems thinking practices are regarded as fundamental to transformational change towards sustainability and

regenerative society (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Laszlo et al., 2012). Systems thinking is an interdisciplinary philosophical paradigm that approaches every system in nature and society “as a whole” by focusing on the interactions and interrelationships among all elements of its subsystems (Mele et al., 2010). Specifically, systems thinking acknowledges the interrelationship among multiple systems, such as the economy, wider society, and ecological life-support systems (Costanza et al., 2014). In practice, SBE’s systems thinking embraces the understanding that humans are embedded in the ecosystem (Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2003). Such thinking is in stark contrast to the profit-first reductionist and mechanistic view that has dominated business thinking and research (Ehrenfeld, 2012; Roome, 2012; Welford, 1998). SBEs acknowledge this interrelationship through a holistic and complex systems view of business and the wider economy (Costanza et al., 2014)—a view that embraces nonlinearity, uncertainty, and surprise (Berkes et al., 2003; Davidson-Hunt & Berkes, 2003).

### ***Ecological Systems Thinking—Symbolic Interactionism—Indigenous Worldview***

The ecological systems theory is particularly useful for understanding human activities as it relates to the larger ecosystem of the world. According to ecological systems theory, human beings are embedded in multiple nested systems and human development is the result of the complex interactions between and within these systems over time (Ali et al., 2021; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, ecological systems theory does not specify how exactly these interactions occur (Ali et al., 2021). Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) sheds light onto the specific nature of the interactions within and between human-made systems. Blumer suggests that human beings subjectively construct the meaning of what they experience and then act based on these meanings. These meanings arise from the interaction of interpretive, reflective processes and linguistic and behavioral interactions with and between other people within the diverse

systems people live in and constantly interact with (Morales, 1998, 2010). Interpretations and social interactions interact in a dialectic, reciprocal, and transactional process over time. That is, people continuously construct society and society continuously constructs peoples' perceptions and their experiences (Morales, 2010).

This connection between systems theory and symbolic interactionism is not new. Rather, it is an ignored practice in the reductionist profit-first global economic model. For example, indigenous philosophical worldviews suggest that “every creature is an interconnected part of one universal system or web, that every creature contributes to the function of the system, and that each is critically important for all parts of the whole to be in balance principle” (Ali et al., 2021, p. 7). Thus, the strong focus of systems theory that understands the connections that affect and are affected by interactions within the web, represents an appropriate framework for examining and understanding SBE. Specifically, the pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism's focus on interactions among selves as a base of a society, and continuity of these interactions for the survival of a society (Michaels, 2008), complements SBE relationality to become one catalyst toward sustainable and regeneratively flourishing society.

## **Pragmatism's Fit with SBE Research**

### ***Brief History of Pragmatism***

Pragmatism developed in the late 19th and early 20th century originally to focus inquiry on issues of human significance rather than on metaphysical debates about the nature of truth and reality (Lawhead, 2018). Pragmatism holds that our ideas, theories, and worldviews should be examined and evaluated in the light of their impact on lived experience, according to how well they enable us to maneuver through experience successfully (Morales, 1998). As a paradigm, pragmatism grapples with analyzing contemporary social issues and engages with themes of

social inequality, power, and politics (Collins, 2017). In this regard, pragmatism is interested in what the world might be; it orients itself toward a prospective world, a world not yet realized (Guedes-Neto, 2017; Mintz, 2004; Reitan, 1998), or if you will, a normative north star for society to move toward. This ideal north star destination is tied to pragmatism's argument that knowledge is continuous and not absolute.

For example, a salient pragmatist ideal normative position is the American idea that “all men are created equal, endowed with certain unalienable rights, that amongst these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” from the Declaration of Independence (1776). This ideal vision of the future States is so ideal that for all practical purposes we will never actually achieve that vision. Instead, the ideal offers a north star to continuously strive for, one that ideally improves with each iteration. Anchored in this ideal normative position, although there is much progress still to be had, is that United States has overcome many of its shortcomings, from slavery to the women's suffrage. Similarly, the pragmatism perspective would describe SBE's normative position—*conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity for all*—as an ideal state that may never be fully realized. However, SBE's pragmatist north star provides a holistic worldview and a code book for the idealists to operate in a world that is telling us we should be realistic. It's a code for people who believe in an unrealizable vision that's worth devoting our lives to iteratively get closer to the ideal state.

For those who may criticize ideal worldviews, the pragmatist would argue that our society is socially constructed and it is in a constant state of becoming (Morgan, 2014; Morgan, 2020). In addition, the pragmatist would point out that the world is also changed through actions and action is the way to change existence (Maxcy, 2003). Thus, actions are pivotal in



pragmatism (Goldkuhl 2012; Maxcy 2003; Morgan 2014). Therefore, re-envisioning a different society through action is not only possible, but given our current reality, a must. The progression toward an ideal state can be accomplished by revising the shortcomings of the profit-first worldview through the pragmatist inquiry methodology.

### ***Pragmatist Inquiry***

Pragmatist philosophy views inquiry as a natural part of life aimed at improving our condition by adaptation and accommodations in the social world in which we live (Cronen, 2001). A major contention of pragmatist inquiry is rooted in humans' ordinary initiatives for betterment and that philosophy is that meaning of human actions and beliefs is found in their consequences (Lawhead, 2018). In this regard, pragmatism appeals to activists who have found in it a movement within which they could work for a new social order (Seigfried, 1996). Thus, there is a strong fit between pragmatism and advocacy of social progress (Morgan, 2014). However, pragmatists do not hold the assumption that their approach involves the ultimate or the best knowledge (Morales, 1998). Instead, they start with an ethics-based pursuit of democracy, equality, justice, and freedom for everyone (Morgan, 2014).

In other words, pragmatism focuses on meaningful research. What appealed to pragmatists was the concern with the social issues and its practical decision-making processes attached to research aimed at improving social problems combined with its ethical basis of "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Maxcy, 2003, p. 55). In this regard, the primary goal of pragmatism is to create practical knowledge that has utility for action and makes purposeful difference in practice (Goldkuhl, 2012). Dewey (1954) advocates for an inquiry in which individuals and communities are able to identify the issues that matter most to them, define those issues, and pursue them in ways that are the most meaningful to them.

Dewey's version of inquiry emphasizes the capacity for growth (Morgan, 2020). He opposes any use of force or economic hegemony that may limit growth opportunities for other social groups (Morgan, 2014). Likewise, Dewey's version of democracy calls upon people to build communities that make necessary opportunities and resources available for each individual such that they fully realize their capacities through participation (Westbrook, 1991). Taken together, pragmatism promotes a problem-solving, action-oriented process of inquiry based on democratic values and commitment to progress (Biesta 2010; Greene & Hall 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2007).

With Dewey (2008 [1922]), pragmatism advanced beyond the individual, psychological realm towards an emphasis on individual as well as shared human experience. Pragmatist epistemology does not view knowledge as reality (Morgan, 2014). Rather, it is constructed with a purpose to better manage one's existence and to take part in the world (Goldkuhl, 2012). Therefore, through inquiry, experience, warranted knowledge, and shared meanings, humans can alter societal norms through shared beliefs (Morgan, 2014).

### **Pragmatism in this Research**

Following Dewey, pragmatism has contributed to movements such as symbolic interactionism, action research, and grounded theory. Symbolic interactionism and grounded theory create room for the exploration of how experience, knowing, and acting are shaped through social interaction (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). In this regard, pragmatism is a particularly worthy paradigm to guide research that seeks to provide a public good by improving practice and policy while remaining true to the quality-driven rigor of academia (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). In this research, I use pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and grounded

theory to understand how SBEs construct their world. Specifically, understanding the interconnectedness of experience, knowing, and acting guided my research design.

This research project examines the work of five successful women-owned sustainable entrepreneurs who have been recognized by local and national authorities in their respective fields. The project reveals and discusses their experiences in building sustainable businesses that balance economy, social equity, and environmental health. This study particularly focuses on women owned businesses in marginalized communities because research has documented that woman from these communities face the greatest challenges in starting businesses, with challenges ranging from securing financial investment to creating meaningful partnerships (Giglio, 2020). Thus, this research uses sustainable women entrepreneurs who have overcome such hurdles as its case study parameter, believing that substantial lessons for success can be garnered from these cases.

Through pragmatism, I was able to be flexible and adaptive throughout the research process as iterative inquiry, experience, knowing, and acting informed ways to improve the research projects' usefulness and value. Pragmatism's endorsement of pluralism helped ensure the sampling process uncovered a diversity of SBEs most likely to provide useful practice-based knowledge. Pragmatism helped with the development of an analysis plan by focusing examination of the data on the principle of actionable knowledge with a focus on research transferability (I discuss my methodology further in paper two of this research project).

By emphasizing the principle of actionable knowledge throughout the research process, I was able to achieve research outcomes that were relevant, transferrable, and contribute to both the theory and practice of SBE. Specifically, pragmatism, which provides a guiding framework anchored in practicality, has enabled me to frame SBE processes as social practices and arrive at

a dynamic and multifaceted understanding. Using pragmatism to underpin my research has strengthened its ability to capture elements of practice that are important to SBEs, turning practice-based evidence into theory (I discuss this theory further in paper three of this research project). By demonstrating the suitability of this approach for research on SBEs, this paper contributes to the growing literature supporting pragmatism as a potential paradigm for sustainability research.

### ***Critics of Pragmatism***

Some theorists have decried pragmatism, arguing that popular versions of pragmatism focusing exclusively on “what works” can delink pragmatism from its important philosophical roots (Hesse-Biber, 2015). Others contend that the practical, real-world emphasis can encourage researchers to take a “soft” approach and avoid the significance of distinctions at an epistemological level (Denzin, 2010). However, the deep interconnections between experience, knowing, and acting can help combat the perceived limitations of overly “practical” inquiry. In other words, by emphasizing the principle of actionable knowledge right through the research process, I was able to holistically address the knowing, acting, *and* experience occurring among SBEs.

### **Concluding Statement**

Some may argue that social and environmental challenges that SBEs aim to alleviate are normal parts of society, therefore there is no need for “sustainable” specific entrepreneurship. Although my research disputes this belief, my principle purpose is to rally those who are ready to replace the global profit-first business model and its associated assumptions with a model that works in the best interest of individuals, companies, communities, and society at large for a sustainable livelihood for all.

**Paper Two: Understanding Women Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBE) Barriers  
and Success Factors from a Symbolic Interactionist Lens**

*The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it.*

David W. Orr

**Abstract**

There have been very few studies conducted on women sustainable business entrepreneurs (SBEs) in general, and their success factors in particular. To create and accelerate the transition to sustainable human society embedded in a flourishing natural environment, we need to recognize and value women's contributions in this role. Through a symbolic interactionism lens this research uncovers the formation of five women SBEs and how they developed their everyday social practices, how those relate to their success in business, and how their success is driving new assumptions and practices of a model of business to replace the profit-first model. Through this research, I uncovered five SBE success factors—visionary leader, locality, collaborative internal teams, symbiotic external partnerships, and technology—that appear across the cases. I also identify three barriers—blocked impulse, lack of established networks, and limited technology—that appear across the cases. Pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism and grounded theory were especially helpful in uncovering these SBE behaviors from their perspective, their truths, how it relates to their purposes, and how those unfold in establishing a successful business.

## Introduction

The reductive profit-first business model (Friedman, 1970) has become the dominant force shaping the world in areas ranging from health, education, and agriculture to society at large (Benjamin, 2014). Although there has been a global expansion of economic wealth through the pursuit of the profit-first business model, income disparities between the wealthy and the economically marginalized have continued to increase both within and between nations (Ferdig, 2007). Furthermore, the profit-first business model's extractive and wealth concentrating practices have been the main contributors to numerous environmental crises and social inequalities (Hawken, 2000). Leading economists, social scientists, and ecologists warn that the current economic model inevitably leads to rampant inequality, massive unemployment, and environmental destruction (Yunus, 2018). We need a model whose practical consequences produce sustainable activities and behaviors.

Taking on this mission, sustainable business entrepreneurs (SBEs) feel the call to change the world for the better while balancing social, environmental, and financial imperatives (Gibbs, 2006; El Ebrashi, 2012). Specifically, SBEs create innovative initiatives, reconstruct social institutions, and mobilize resources to establish legitimate alternative approaches to profit-first business formation, practices, and outcomes. Although the importance of sustainable business entrepreneurship has been firmly established as an alternative to the profit-first business model for creating socially and environmentally flourishing communities (Robinson, 2006), there have been very few studies conducted on sustainable women entrepreneurs (Giglio, 2020).

Understanding and identifying success patterns of women entrepreneurs is important to achieve holistic economic viability of a nation (Orobia, 2020). This research project examines the work

of five successful women sustainable entrepreneurs who have been recognized by local and national authorities in their respective fields.

This study particularly focuses on women-owned businesses in marginalized communities because research has documented that woman from these communities face the greatest challenges in starting businesses, with challenges ranging from securing financial investment to creating meaningful partnerships (Giglio, 2020). Thus, this research uses sustainable women entrepreneurs who have overcome such hurdles as its case study parameter, believing that substantial lessons for success can be garnered from these cases. Pragmatist-inspired symbolic interaction and grounded theory helps us understand these SBEs' behavior from their perspective, their truths, how it relates to their purposes, and how those unfold in particular processes. I deploy these tools to understand the formation of SBEs and how they developed their everyday social practices, how those relate to their success in business, and how their success is inspiring new assumptions and business model practices to replace the profit-first model.

In this paper, I examine the literature on the 21<sup>st</sup> century's environmental and social crises, with an emphasis on SBE issues. Next, I describe the symbolic interaction perspective, along with a discussion of the links between symbolic interactionism, grounded theory, and pragmatism for understanding and interpreting the complex nature of human action and interaction in general, and SBE practices in particular. Finally, I present the success factors—visionary leader, locality, collaborative internal teams, symbiotic external partnerships, and technology—that appear across the cases. I also identify and discuss barriers—blocked impulse, lack of established networks and limited technology—that appear across the cases.

## **Literature Review: Profit-First Model, GDP, its Key Concepts and Assumptions, and How Challengers are Reconstructing Both**

### **Profit-First Business Model and GDP**

Since the Industrial Revolution the world has been pursuing exponential economic growth as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the aggregate of all services and production within a country and the economic gains of business (Dumas, 1986; Madalina, 2015). GDP's guiding principle is to maximize profits for corporate shareholders (Friedman, 1970). The profit-first model is grounded in the assumption that the economy is separate from the environment, and that maximizing profits, growing GDP, and optimizing consumerism will all lead to prosperity (Eisler, 2021; Fullerton, 2015). However, this reductionist approach fails to recognize that many negative externalities follow from the model. Social problems, such as network effects that can dominate hiring decisions—"the boys club," or ecological problems such as the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, are externalities of business practices (Dumas, 1986; du Plessis, 2012; Elkington, 2008). Notably, this form of business and globalized economic activity has brought the earth to its biosphere limits, (Fullerton, 2015, Meadows et al., 1972) with unprecedented destruction to natural habitats as seen through climate change, ocean acidification, ozone layer depletion, and biodiversity loss (du Plessis, 2012).

The profit-first business model's failure to acknowledge the nexuses between economic activity and the biosphere and its subsequent failure to act in accordance has led society down unsustainable paths (du Plessis, 2012; Ferdig, 2007; Marcal & Hearn, 2021). For example, cleaning up an oil spill can be calculated positively in economic development, thereby contributing positively to short-term metrics like GDP (Dumas, 1986; Raghunathan, 2017). Similarly, GDP calculates traffic congestion as positive net gains to an economy due to the



demand increase for gasoline (Daga, 2014). This positive GDP analysis ignores the adverse impact to quality of life and to air quality (Dumas, 1986). Further, GDP fails to measure and account for social and environmental impacts such as inequalities, poverty, climate change, fishery depletion, soil degradation, pollution, and overuse of water supplies (Daga, 2014; Fullerton, 2015; Yunus, 2018). The profit-first models' sole measurement of economic output has led to economic activity being hailed as the most important activity of humanity and the largely accepted belief that economic growth is done in the name of progress and modernity (Dumas 1986; Fullerton, 2015).

Yet, it is clear to the billions still living in poverty that the current economic models are failing to deliver a better life for all. Furthermore, the global environmental crises directly linked to these economic activities disproportionately impacts communities that have been economically marginalized by this pursuit for exponential economic growth (Ekins, 1986). The McKinsey & Company 2020 *Climate Risk and Response: Physical Hazards and Socioeconomic Impact* report notes:

While all countries are affected by climate change, we find that the poorest countries [communities] could be more exposed, as they often have climates closer to dangerous physical thresholds. They also rely more on outdoor work and natural capital and have fewer financial means to adapt quickly (Woetzel et al., 2020, p.19).

Additionally, this environmental crisis is exacerbated by a social inequality crisis.

Specifically, millionaires now own almost half the world's wealth, while half of the world's population owns less than 1% of all wealth (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2019). This income inequality has increased in many parts of the world, helping to stir social unrest and the rise of populist rhetoric (Letzing, 2019). Indeed, the increasing gap between the richest and the poorest in a country is correlated with multiple social problems, including poorer physical and mental health, along with higher rates of drug abuse, incarceration, and mistrust (Daga, 2014; Eisler,

2021). An increasing number of scientists are pointing out that GDP does not show what we need to know about an economy.

The trouble with GDP is not that it is inaccurate; it is that it measures progress narrowly by only measuring economic output and ignoring other important factors like human health and environmental impact (Dumas, 1986; Fullerton, 2015). For example, Nobel Laureate and alternative economic proponent Joseph Stiglitz argues that GDP does not reflect the three biggest crises currently facing the world: climate change, inequality, and challenges to democracy (Letzing, 2019). Stiglitz points out that “a rise in GDP does not mean everyone is benefiting nor does it show how much the environment is suffering, or the rapid decline of the planet’s finite resources,” (Letzing, 2019, 00:05) and that GDP cannot measure lower living standards or the well-being of a society. Recognizing GDP’s limitations, Simon Kuznets, one of the main statisticians of GDP, warned that it was unable to evaluate a society’s holistic wellness (Daga, 2014). Since then, many economists and social scientists have declared that the economic development model the world has followed thus far—relying solely on GDP as a measure of progress—should not continue, and we need a better way to understand society (Eisler, 2021; Fullerton, 2015; Marcal & Hearn, 2021; Yunus, 2018).

Distressingly, economically marginalized communities and nations are increasingly accepting the assumptions of the profit-first business model to escape the traps of poverty (du Plessis, 2012). This is concerning on two main fronts. One, the earth’s resources simply cannot sustain everyone if economically marginalized communities and nations join the bandwagon of profit-first economic principles. Currently, even without additional demands on the earth’s resources, it is estimated that humans are using up to 60% more resources than can be renewed annually (Global Footprint Network, 2020). Two, indigenous communities, many of which are

also economically marginalized communities, represent less than 5% of the world's population but protect 80% of global biodiversity (Laman & Raygorodetsky, 2018). As profit-first business practices continue to encroach on all parts of society, including poverty alleviation efforts in economically marginalized communities, traditional practices of indigenous communities that have maintained 80% of the world's biodiversity are at risk of extinction (Marcal & Hearn, 2021).

For example, in the traditional practice of the Kambata people of Ethiopia, before one cuts a single tree, he or she must first plant at least one tree in advance to replace it (Zewde & Pausewang, 2002). Another widely known example is the Iroquois philosophy, 'the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future' (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2012). Multiple scientific studies have demonstrated that the teaching of these traditional practices and similar ones are essential to living a fulfilling and purposeful life (Waldinger, 2015). However, none of these practices are captured or measured by GDP. One significant difference between the traditional practices of non-industrialized societies and those of industrialized societies (primarily dominated by the profit-first paradigm) is the recognition of the nexus between nature and society.

In recent decades, non-industrialized societies in pursuit of modernization have been encouraged to mirror the techniques of industrialized nations to reach higher GDP (du Plessis, 2012; Fedrig, 2007). In doing so, these societies are simultaneously letting go of customs and traditions that have sustained them as well as ones that are essential for a diverse and resilient global society (du Plessis, 2012). The failures of our current economic model's "relentless drive for global efficiencies and economies of scale, combined with deficient shareholder-governance,

and the short-term bias of capital markets and finance in general” (Fullerton, 2015, p.76), has come to threaten a way of life for all. Simply put, this cannot continue.

### **Challengers to Profit-first Model and GDP**

To create a sustainable human society embedded in a flourishing natural environment, we need to change the profit-first dominant paradigm (Guedes-Neto, 2017). Modest social changes are not enough. What is needed is a change in our worldview (Meadows, 1999). More specifically, we need to recognize humanity’s interdependence with nature and the larger ecosystem (Reitan, 1998). In an effort to address these social and environmental challenges of the 21st century, the United Nations created the Division for Sustainable Development (DSD). The DSD firmly established the interdependences of conservation goals and poverty-reduction goals through its sustainable development agenda: “to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, p. 54). This sustainability agenda satisfies both conservation and poverty reduction goals through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives.

Meeting the DSD’s sustainable agenda, among necessary public policy changes, would require businesses to create conditions that would allow people to have quality jobs that stimulate the economy while also protecting the environment (Yunus, 2018). Entrepreneurship, recognized as the engine of world economies, is seen as a key element to enhance the sustainable capacity of the economy with job creation, creativity, and innovation (Yunus, 2009, 2018). Thus, the concept of entrepreneurship—the creation of value through innovation—has been increasingly applied to the challenges of finding effective and sustainable solutions to social and environmental problems (El Ebrashi, 2012, Yunus, 2009, 2018). However, unlike traditional

entrepreneurship's value of profit as the main driver of the initiative, social impact and societal transformation are the main drivers of sustainable enterprises. A distinguishing characteristic of the sustainable business entrepreneur (SBE) is their sense of mission; they feel the call to change the world for the better while balancing social, environmental, and financial imperatives (Gibbs, 2006; El Ebrashi, 2012).

### **Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBE)**

In particular, scholars describe SBE types of entrepreneurship as a panacea for social and environmental issues (Gibbs, 2006; Hall et al., 2010; Tilley & Young, 2009). SBE's normative vision stands in contrast to most existing research, which portrays sustainability and sustainable development as business-as-usual augmented by incremental environmental or social initiatives (Roome, 2012) that reduce risk/costs or increase reputation and revenues (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Day & Arnold, 1998). In contrast, SBEs are strongly motivated by transformation paths towards a sustainable economy. Specifically, SBEs create innovative initiatives, build new social institutions, and mobilize resources to create sustainable social impact (Alvord et al., 2004; El Ebrashi, 2012) in response to social and environmental externalities caused by market failures (Yunus, 2018).

SBEs range from social enterprises and social venture capital to social purpose organizations that create financial, social, and environmental returns (Robinson, 2006). SBEs measure the success of their organizations based on the creation of societal social impact (Austin, 2006), even if the organization may become less viable as its services transform society (Young, 2006). For SBEs, the ultimate success of the social enterprise is to create sustainable change in society (Alvord et al., 2004; El Ebrashi, 2012). The sustainability focus in SBEs highlights the dedication to balance economic imperatives, environmental considerations, and

social equity factors. For SBEs, the social and environmental impacts of the organization are just as important as the financial return (Austin, 2006; Mair, 2006). As a result, successful sustainable social enterprises are able to achieve profitability, positive societal impact, and environmental sustainability simultaneously (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2006).

### **Gap in the Research**

Although the importance of sustainable entrepreneurship has been firmly established (Robinson, 2006), there have been very few studies conducted on sustainable women entrepreneurs in general (Giglio, 2020), and their success factors in particular. Understanding and identifying success patterns of women entrepreneurs is important to achieving the sustainable agenda set by the DSD. Through this research we aim to discover and uncover the everyday social practices of women SBEs and how those practices account for their success.

### ***Significance of Women Entrepreneurship***

In order to create and accelerate the transition to sustainable human society embedded in a flourishing natural environment, we need to recognize and value women's contributions in this role. Without women entrepreneurs, economies could not achieve complete and holistic success in the broader economy and sustainability as an 'ongoing' success in particular (Orobia, 2020). Additionally, it has been observed that women entrepreneurs are not only an essential part of economic development but also have the greatest impact on social well-being of a society (Pallares-Blanch, 2014). In other words, women's participation in entrepreneurial activities, in general, not only supports their families but also plays a significant role in economic development and the social well-being of society (Orobia, 2020).

For example, although women's motivation to set up business is the same as for men, extrinsic (i.e., economic reward), intrinsic (i.e., independence), or transcendental (i.e., harmony

with oneself and the environment) (Giglio, 2020, Schwartz, 1976), research also showed that intrinsic and transcendental motivation is strongest among women entrepreneurs (Giglio, 2020). The impacts of women's transcendental entrepreneurship extend their individual success to their communities (Siba, 2019). The assumption of women's transcendental entrepreneurship practices, even in the profit-first paradigm, espouse caring for others. In this regard, women entrepreneurs, in contrast to their male counterparts, are more likely to share their success with their families and communities (Sajjad et al., 2020). Women's success in entrepreneurship essentially initiates positive multiplier effects in their respective communities.

### ***Societal Challenges to Women Entrepreneurship***

Research has documented that women face the greatest challenge in starting businesses, with challenges ranging from securing financial investment to creating meaningful partnerships (Giglio, 2020). Furthermore, many cultural and gender assumptions create barriers for women entrepreneurs to achieve success (Johnson et al., 2008; Alene, 2020). This gendered assumption marginalizes women and is primarily espoused by the profit-first business model. Women, like nature, are seen as tools to the profit-first business model (Eisler, 2021). Women's work, which is primarily care-oriented, is undervalued. Moreover, many times women are expected to perform this work for free. For example, a report of Australian households showed that if the unpaid caring work in households, mostly still done by women, was included, it would total 50% of the reported GDP (Eisler, 2021). However, it remains completely invisible in GDP statistics.

### ***The Normative Response***

Instead of the profit-first motivation to reduce women to their contribution to GDP, the pragmatist approach is 'nonessentialist,' meaning just as men, women should be seen in all their

diversity. Nussbaum (2000) is one champion of this position in her book *Women and Human Development*, in which she provides a list of 10 freedoms women (and all people) should enjoy. Thus, the normative position argues that any societal assumptions that constrains women's possibilities is irrational, i.e., it does not work. Dewey, one of the key figures of pragmatism, argued against such subjugation of women—[including] racial and ethnic or other minorities—and the working class, and was instead an advocate for their emancipation and full participation in society (Seigfried, 2002, p. 60). In this sense, pragmatism is strongly bonded to a social justice agenda (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This is also exemplified in the body of work produced by Jane Addams, the feminist mother of social work and a colleague of Dewey (Morgan, 2014). Addams' work was committed to democracy, freedom, equality, and social justice. Her philosophy recognizes that our actions should always seek to maximize and enhance humans lived experience (Morgan, 2014).

In this regard, pragmatism is a particularly worthy paradigm to guide this research as I seek to provide a public good by improving practice and policy to support women SBEs while remaining true to the quality-driven rigors of academic research (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Morgan, 2014). In the next section, I will discuss this research's pragmatist theoretical orientation as well as how the pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism and grounded theory methodology helps us understand SBE behavior from their perspective, their truths, how it relates to their purposes, and how those unfold in particular processes.

## **Methodology and Theory**

### **Pragmatist / Interactionist Inquiry**

The pragmatistic position of this research is to inquire and understand the formation of consensus made between women SBEs and how their everyday social practices account for their



success factors. As a methodological approach to problem solving, pragmatism requires us to situate a problem socially and formulate adequate action to address the problem (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Morgan, 2014, 2020). Dewey (1933) argued that formal research is simply a more careful and self-aware refinement of inquiry as a common form of human experience. Morgan (2020) translates Dewey's five step process of inquiry into a research framework as:

the initial encounter with a problematic situation amounts to the formulation of a research question that has no current answer. Reflecting on the nature of this question leads to a suggested solution in the form of a research design. Followed by, evaluating the likely consequences of acting on this solution requires further reflection on the kinds of results that would arise from pursuing this design. When this dual process of reflection is complete, the final step is to take action in the form of collecting and analyzing data (p. 66).

Using this pragmatic lens, I explored how SBEs make sustainability present as a practice of entrepreneurship. I used a data collection questionnaire (Juma & Timmer, 2003) designed to study sustainable initiatives to collect the research data and to explore the following research questions in depth (Appendix A):

How did the founders create a successful mission-based sustainable business against the odds of the dominant business culture?

What internal factors were essential to their success?

What external factors were essential to their success?

Are there best practices that appear across the different cases?

How do/did the initiatives cope with conflicting or shifting tasks and challenges?

### **Iterative-Case Study**

To conduct the research, I have followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) five case study steps to select, analyze, and report the research findings. Each section is further elaborated on

below. Although the methods subheadings are organized linearly for structural simplicity, the research is emergent and iterative.

### ***1. Determine if a Case Study Approach is Appropriate for Studying the Research Problem***

A prominent component of pragmatism is that it does not dictate choice of methods. Instead, it provides a framework to help researchers choose which methods will be most appropriate (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Morgan, 2020). For pragmatists, the best method is the one that is most effective in producing the desired consequences of the inquiry using the pragmatist credo of “what works” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). In this regard, my choice of method was driven by initial scoping of the research questions. I elected to use a case study approach because of my interest in studying successful sustainable business enterprises and because of my interest in the first-person accounts of those successes and the activity narratives that I can produce.

Additionally, a case study approach makes room for a plurality of agendas of diverse SBEs in the research process. A diversity of data offers a framework to map, triangulate, and sequence the research problem against diverse contexts (Steenhuis, 2015). Further, the case study’s fluidity allows for abductive, inductive, and deductive reasoning, which supports the inclusion of emerging ideas and data (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Steenhuis, 2015).

### ***2. Identify the Intent of the Study and Select the Case(s)***

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that “case study research begins with the identification of a specific case(s) that will be described and analyzed, and that the case(s) need to be bounded within certain parameters. This study used the parameter of women-owned sustainable businesses as its bounding criteria. Women face more challenges in starting businesses, with challenges ranging from securing financial investment to creating meaningful partnerships (Morris & Little, 2005). Understanding and identifying the success patterns of women

entrepreneurs is important to achieve holistic economic viability of a nation (Orobia, 2020).

Thus, I used sustainable women entrepreneurs as the case study parameter, believing that the success lessons that can be learned and shared is greater from women entrepreneurs.

I have selected five women owned SBEs for this research. The five cases were selected using a selection framework (Appendix B) developed by the Equator Initiative project—partner to the United Nations Division of Sustainable Development (Juma & Timmer, 2003). Only cases that met the selection criteria were selected. In doing so, I employed purposeful sampling methodology (Ragin & Amoroso, 2019). Additionally, using a selection framework ensures a set of similar variables that will be measured across all cases, thus enhancing the validity of the findings for the selected cases (Steenhuis, 2015).

Many SBE practices are the same as regular business practices. What distinguishes SBEs is their orientation to sustainability. The five cases' orientation to sustainability are different from one another, and that is to be expected. SBEs are not supposed to be identical; rather they are of similar mind and responsive to context (Morales, 1998, 2010). Furthermore, multiple SBE cases allow for a deeper understanding of some concepts but can also lead to new insights or refinement of earlier insights (Steenhuis, 2015). One challenge of choosing multiple cases for a case study is deciding how many cases to choose. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that there is no one right answer and instead recommend that the researcher choose four or five cases in order to use one's time and resources efficiently while also allowing for a deeper exploration of each case. The selected cases are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Selected Cases*

Name	SBE Concept
Solar Sister	A social enterprise that works to eradicate energy poverty while also empowering women with economic opportunity. A deliberately woman-centric direct sales network that brings clean energy technology to remote communities in rural Africa—Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, Solar Sister’s vision is to provide light, hope, and opportunity.
soleRebels	A social enterprise founded to blend the Ethiopian community’s creative artisan talents with the traditional “barabasso” (Ethiopian recycled tire) shoe. Driven by the ethos of ethical production, sustainable materials, and maximum comfort, soleRebels is committed to using the most sustainable materials in every aspect of production. These methods and materials have stood the test of time in Ethiopia and are by their essence sustainable and low impact. soleRebels provides full medical benefits and education funding for employees and their families and offers wages three times higher than the industry average.
Rising Tide Capital	Rising Tide Capital’s (RTC) mission is to transform lives and communities through entrepreneurship via inclusive communities of resilient entrepreneurs catalyzing a thriving and sustainable economy for all. Rising Tide Capital does this by providing business development services designed to transform lives by helping individuals start and grow successful businesses; building communities through collaborations with other nonprofits, higher education institutions, corporations, and public agencies; and creating a scalable program model with measurable impact that can be replicated in communities of need across the United States.
WeCyclers	WeCyclers is a for-profit social enterprise that promotes environmental sustainability, socioeconomic development, and community health by providing convenient recycling services in densely populated urban neighborhoods in Nigeria. WeCyclers gives households a chance to generate value from their waste and provides a reliable supply of raw material to the local recycling industry.
Mariam Seba Production Factory	Mariam Seba Products Factory (MSPF) is a social-impact organization located in Ethiopia. MSPF manufacturers reusable sanitary pads for girls and women, many of whom do not have access to feminine hygiene products. MSPF sanitary pads are reusable, reliable, and affordable. MSPF also trains and hires local women.

The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth exploration of what it takes to build successful sustainable businesses, which limits the number of businesses that could be engaged in the study. Furthermore, the five selected businesses represent only a portion of total qualified women-owned sustainable businesses. I selected these five cases in particular because, as I discuss in the preface section, though I am the researcher of this research project, I also identify as a member of the larger group these SBEs represent; I am also interested in such SBE practitioners having an expressed voice in society. Ragin & Amoroso (2019) stress that when a

researcher studies a group not simply to learn more about it but also to contribute to its having an expressed voice in society . . . it is important for the researcher to try to see the world through their eyes, to understand their social world as they do. To achieve this level of in-depth understanding, researchers must gain access to the everyday world of the group. . . . The researcher may already be a member of the [marginalized] group (p. 40-41).

To reduce the potential confounding variables of the selected SBEs relation to me as the researcher and as a member of the group; I selected five cases that have been recognized by local and national authorities in their respective fields and that are from diverse backgrounds—covering two continents, five countries, and five different industries.

### ***3. Data Collection Drawing on Multiple Sources***

In pragmatist research, flexible and adaptive form of data collection and analysis is referred to as abduction. Abduction allows researchers to move from observations to theories, by reasoning at an intermediate level (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). This involves collecting pertinent observations about the study phenomenon and, at the same time, applying concepts from existing fields of knowledge instead of either relying solely on abstract concepts (deduction) or developing propositions based solely on observations (induction). Abduction also enabled me to

combine macro- and micro-level perspectives within the case study to answer key research questions around SBE success practices.

To collect research data, I used a case study data collection questionnaire (Juma & Timmer, 2003) developed by the Equator Initiative project and designed to investigate sustainable initiatives (Appendix A). Data was managed using Microsoft Excel™ spreadsheets. Table 2 describes the data in detail for each case. Appendix C presents data references for each case; Appendix D holds answers to the questionnaire; derived from the data; and Appendix E holds raw data for each case. Data was collected primarily between September 2020 and March 2021 using archival documents, published reports, and internet sources.

It is important to point out that in a grounded case study, data generation, collection and analysis, and theoretical sampling are iterative processes that continue throughout the research process until a theory is fully developed (Steenhuis, 2015). Additionally, in iterative case studies, the analysis of data occurs simultaneously with the collection of data, which is to say that the direction research takes emerges as the research progresses (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Lofland & Lofland, 2006; Morgan, 2014, 2020; Steenhuis, 2015). Thus, concurrently collecting and analyzing data requires continuous interaction with the data. If necessary, the process also requires the researcher to sample additional data to reach theoretical saturation and fully develop a theory from the data (Steenhuis, 2015). I followed this iterative process to gain theoretical saturation and to identify common barriers and success factors found across the five cases.

**Table 2***Data Sources: Active Data Sources until SBE Theory is Fully Developed*

Organization	Source Type	Number
Solar Sister	Webpage (blogs, profiles, articles/stories)	43
	Interview article	4
	Report	9
	Video interview/talk	4
	News article	1
	Total	61
Rising Tide	Webpage (blogs, profiles, articles/stories)	33
	Interview article	1
	Report	2
	Video Interview/talk	2
	News article	1
	Podcast	1
Total	40	
Sole Rebels	Webpage (blogs, profiles, articles/stories)	31
	Interview article	2
	Report	2
	Video interview/talk	4
	Case study	2
	News article	3
Total	44	
Mariam Seba Products Factory	Webpage (blogs, profiles, articles/stories)	20
	Video interview/talk	4
	Case study	2
	Journal	1
	News article	2
Total	29	
WeCyclers	Webpage (blogs, profiles, articles/stories)	29
	Interview article	2
	Report	1
	Video interview/talk	4
	Podcast	1
	News article	1
	Total	38
Grand total	212	

#### *4. Theoretical Orientation, Coding, and Analysis*

**Theoretical Orientation.** I used Mead's (1977) pragmatist-inspired symbolic interaction theory's key elements: intersubjective agreement and reciprocal orientation to code and analyze the data. The core ideas of intersubjectivity and reciprocal orientation are made possible through language (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Language makes possible intersubjective agreement regarding an activity, and it establishes the basis for collective action (Morales, 1998). Thus, the five SBE's definition of sustainability is understood through similar interpretive processes and behaviors, which makes possible an intersubjective and reciprocal agreement between them. In other words, SBEs have a common referent to what they mean by sustainability (Morales, 1998). This common orientation can arise from many things and allows SBE to act collectively.

A major contention of pragmatist philosophy in general, and specifically of symbolic interaction, is that meaning of human actions and beliefs is found in their consequences (Morales, 2010; Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). The philosophy argues that people take actions based on the possible consequences of their action, and they use the results of their actions to predict the consequences of similar actions in the future (Morgan, 2020). People can interpret these consequences in different ways according to their purposes and experiences, but an important question is how those interpretive processes produce new ways of behaving. My coding and analysis process examines SBE's intersection between pre-existing choices, knowledge, and emergence of new possible choices. Specifically, symbolic interactionism helps us understand people's behavior from their perspective, their truths, how it relates to their purposes, and how those unfold in particular processes. Blumer (1969) asserts that the premises of symbolic interactionism—meaning, action, interaction, self, and perspective—are useful ways to understand people and their world:



Human beings act toward things on the basis of the *meanings* that the things have for them . . . the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social *interaction* that one has with one's fellows . . . these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the *person* in dealing with the things he encounters. (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

Therefore, symbolic interactionism is especially useful for understanding and interpreting the complex nature of human action and interaction in general (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Morales, 1998, 2010) and sustainable practices in particular. I deploy this methodology to understand the formation of women SBEs and how they developed their everyday social practices, how those relate to their success in business, and how their success is driving new assumptions and practices of a model of business to replace the profit-first model.

**Coding and Analysis.** For coding and analysis, I used pragmatic abductive grounded theory research strategy. Abductive-driven case study research methods use an interpretivist form of case study (Steenhuis, 2015) following the work of grounded theory pragmatist Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). Abductive grounded theory research is a continuous cycling between empirical data collection and data analysis to develop concepts through a coding process that allows the generation of theory (Morgan, 2014). This means that hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data but are systematically worked out in the relation to the data during the course of the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morgan, 2014, 2020). The benefit of abduction is that it allows for the exploration of how an individual's experience, knowing, and acting are shaped through social interaction (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Rather than becoming overly concerned with generalizability, my data analysis plan looked more practically at the applicability of the research to other contexts and settings.

To manage the data, I used multiple levels of data analysis as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and procedures developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998, 2008). In the first step, I wrote **memos** to capture salient factors and themes of each case. This first level of analysis provided me with a holistic view of the data. I followed this step by conducting **open coding** (breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing) the data, followed by **axial coding** (putting data back together in new ways after open coding by making connections between categories), and finally by **selecting coding** (selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development). This process helped me develop preliminary codes to identify and organize key themes of SBE barriers and success factors.

Following that, I worked with a colleague to open-code one case and met to discuss and clarify meanings of codes and themes that emerged from the data. Inconsistencies were resolved using a consensus-based process. Subsequent cases were coded using the initial codes. This iterative process continued until no additional themes emerged. Using the new set of codes, I double-coded an additional case with a colleague to ensure coding consistency. Finally, I reviewed and summarize the codes in a matrix analysis to tie themes that emerged across the cases (Averill, 2002). Data represented in a matrix analysis table is paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content. Additionally, matrix analysis allowed me to compare coded data in cells to observe themes, triangulate findings, and draw conclusions (Averill, 2002). Triangulation is especially important when the researcher is the main instrument for data collection and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Through this data coding and analysis process I identified three SBE barriers—blocked impulse, lack of established networks and limited technology—that appear across the cases. I also identified five SBE success factors—visionary

leader, locality, collaborative internal teams, symbiotic external partnerships, and technology—that appear across the cases.

### **Findings: Barrier Types and Success Factors**

As discussed previously, Mead’s symbolic interaction work of role-taking and interaction are particularly salient to theorizing about what attributes make for successful SBEs. Role-taking and interaction explain how people learn from interacting with each other and how people relate to each other in organizing some activity (Blumer, 1969). In this section, I use the symbolic interactionist lens to discuss the common barrier types and success factors identified across the cases through thematic analysis, and I provide examples from the selected cases.

Specifically, I present the barrier types and success factors in a matrix table to tie together themes that emerged across the cases. This data in the matrix table is paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content. As a result, the matrix analysis table extends the research findings to “audiences who might otherwise never take the time to examine the voluminous [research] data” (Averill, 2002, p. 864). Additionally, matrix analysis allows for a comparison of coded data in cells to observe themes, triangulate findings, and draw conclusions.

While I present the barriers and success factors separately, they are not static concepts. These elements are cyclical and fluid processes in which SBEs continually adapt or change to fit the ongoing actions of others to implement their respective businesses.

#### **Barrier Types**

Three barriers to advancing sustainability were identified in this study. The barrier themes that emerged from the analysis include blocked impulse, lack of established networks, and limited technology (Table 3).

**Table 3***SBE Barriers*

Type	Definition
Blocked Impulse	SBEs focus on non-community members—subjects and victims, voluntary or involuntary—of the profit-first business model. SBEs also ask the question, “if profit-first economic principles cannot and should not be expanded—how then can economically-marginalized communities and nations gain agency and access for a shared prosperity?”
Lack of Networks	SBEs are presenting new, sustainable ideas that often run counter to profit-first business ideas. Therefore, SBEs are tasked with establishing shared meanings and shared purposes with others in order to create their teams, to establish partnerships, and to ultimately introduce their solutions.
Limited Technology	SBEs have to navigate limited technological services or innovate new technological products to meet their respective business needs.

***Barrier 1: Blocked Impulse***

SBEs take on the role of non-community members of the profit-first business model in response to what Mead (1977) describes as a blocked impulse. When an impulse is blocked, situations become problematic and individuals perceive their options from the perspective of the role they are playing (Morales, 2010). To find a resolution to their respective blocked impulse, SBEs take on the roles of others, view themselves as objects from the standpoints of others, and consider alternative lines of action to resolve the blocked impulse (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Morales, 2010).

Below, I present two cases, Solar Sister and soleRebels, to illustrate the SBEs blocked impulse barrier in further detail. Following that I present this barrier in a matrix table (Table 4) as paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content for all selected cases.

**Example 1: Solar Sister.** Lucey's blocked impulse came while working for Solar Light for Africa, a non-profit Christian organization whose mission is to electrify off-the-grid communities in Africa. During her time there, she saw that their work was transformative but was limited because it was trying to address a global problem that affects a quarter of the world's population through a purely philanthropic model. Additionally, Lucey saw that energy poverty affects women and girls most. For example, women and girls were disproportionately affected by toxic smoke inhalation from kerosene lamps. Lucey also saw that midwives were oftentimes tasked with delivering children in poorly lit houses.

Solar Sister developed a blended approach to build a scalable and sustainable clean energy business. They have a diverse revenue stream that uses both an earned income and philanthropic capital to grow impact. This blended financing matches the hybrid nature of Solar Sister's operations, which are divided into two impact areas: 1) core distribution business, delivering clean energy goods and services to last mile customers, and 2) activities that promote women's economic empowerment through training and talent development, advocacy, research and innovation.

**Example 2: soleRebels.** Alemu's blocked impulse came when she saw that skilled artisans in her small community of Zenebework, Ethiopia lived in chronic unemployment. She founded soleRebels to bring job opportunities to her community by tapping into the community's rich artisan heritage. Discussing her motivation behind soleRebels, Alemu said,

With all the incredible culture, history and talent around me, how was it that we were receiving charity instead of benefiting from our own talent and resources? . . . I wanted to find a way to share my love for the amazing artisanship of Ethiopia with the world while creating well-paid meaningful work for the people in my local community leveraging their immense creative skills . . . I knew that my project had to be truly business-oriented to overcome the complacency and dependency charity had created.

She was also managing how others might respond to her action.

When I started soleRebels many people laughed and said I was crazy. . . . [They asked] “your plan is to remake the barabasso into a global footwear brand leveraging the artisan talents in THAT community? What kind of business idea is that? What did I know about shoes anyway?” I was scared. I didn’t have anything backing me up if I failed.

Despite this, Alemu continued with her plan, anchored in the believe that the best road to true and lasting prosperity lies in communities that produce world class products that leverage local talents and resources.

**Table 4***Barrier 1: Blocked Impulse*

Blocked Impulse	
Solar Sister	<p>Katherine Lucey, while working for Solar Light for Africa, a non-profit Christian organization whose mission is rural electrification in Africa, saw that their work was transformative but limited because it was trying to address a global problem that affects a quarter of the world's population through a purely philanthropic model.</p> <p>Through her work with Solar Light for Africa, she narrowed down energy poverty as a gender issue that affects women and girls most. For example, women and girls were disproportionately affected by toxic smoke inhalation from kerosene lamps. Lucey also saw that midwives were oftentimes tasked with delivering children in poorly lit houses.</p> <p>Solar Sister developed a blended approach to build a scalable and sustainable clean energy business. They have a diverse revenue stream that uses both an earned income and philanthropic capital to grow impact.</p>
soleRebels	<p>Bethlehem Alemu saw that skilled artisans in her small community of Zenebework in Ethiopia lived in chronic unemployment and founded soleRebels to bring job opportunities to her community by tapping into the community's rich artisan heritages.</p> <p>With all the incredible culture, history and talent around me, how was it that we were receiving charity instead of benefiting from our own talent and resources? . . . I wanted to find a way to share my love for the amazing artisanship of Ethiopia with the world while creating well-paid meaningful work for the people in my local community leveraging their immense creative skills. . . I knew that my project had to be truly business-oriented to overcome the complacency and dependency charity had created."</p>
Rising Tide Capital	<p>Rising Tide Capital (RTC) identified that poverty was a large-scale problem and began researching issues of urban poverty and how to translate poverty into prosperity. From their research, they found out that millions adults live below the poverty line in New Jersey and 40,000 entrepreneurs in Jersey City would be interested in their help to get their businesses up and running.</p> <p>As a solution, RTC developed a theory of change that harnesses the power of entrepreneurship to transform lives and communities via inclusive and sustainable economy for all.</p>
WeCyclers	<p>Lagos, with its 25 million residents, suffers from chronic pollution from waste discarded anywhere on the streets. Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola was interested in waste because growing up in Lagos, waste was something she saw everywhere and she wanted to solve that problem. Furthermore, about 70 percent of Nigerians don't have access to basic sanitation and basic healthcare. Adebisi-Abiola wanted to do something that would impact that segment as well.</p> <p>As a solution, Adebisi-Abiola created an accessible model of recycling for those living and working in informal settings to earn income from recyclables.</p>

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	“There is a massive improvement in the communities where we do collections. It’s changing the mindset. It’s changing behaviors. People now realize that there is value in what used to be considered trash. They are earning money by cleaning up. And the environment is benefiting from that as well.”
Mariam Seba Production Factory	Freweini Mebrahtu’s inspiration to create reusable sanitary pads came from her own experience as a child in Ethiopia. Nearly 75% of Ethiopian women and girls don’t have access to menstrual supplies. This meant that having their period was an inconvenient and embarrassing part of their lives. Mebrahtu wanted to develop a product that was affordable, reliable, and environmentally friendly as a solution for women and girls in her community and beyond.

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Though the blocked impulses of the SBEs were all fundamentally different from one another, what was similar was their recognition that of the current system’s failure to meet the fundamental needs of their respective community. Following this recognition, they began to look for solutions that were sustainable and regenerative.

### ***Barrier 2: Lack of Established Networks***

SBEs are tasked with establishing shared meanings and shared purposes with others in order to create their teams, to establish partnerships, and to ultimately introduce their solutions. Below, I discuss two cases, Rising Tide Capital and WeCyclers, to illustrate the lack of established network barrier in further detail. Following that, in a matrix table (Table 5), I represent this barrier in paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content for all selected cases.

**Example 1: Rising Tide Capital (RTC).** While mainstream small business development organizations exist across the country, these resources are primarily oriented to serve individuals whose educational level and business acumen is often a step above the level at which many low-income entrepreneurs begin. The result for many low-income entrepreneurs was often frustration and marginalization because their needs were not being met by a program intended for more advanced participants.



RTC helps those who have business ideas but need more education and support to launch or grow their businesses. By specializing in educational services that are custom-designed for the needs of low- and moderate-income entrepreneurs, RTC represents a critically important part of a larger ecosystem that is still being developed on a national level.

**Example 2: WeCyclers.** In Lagos, the city’s waste collection system required citizens to pay a fee for the service based on the size of their home—payment that many were unable to afford. The road network was also too challenging because of improper parking habits making it impossible for vehicles to get to the trash. As a result, only 40% of the city’s waste was collected and only 13% recycled each year. The rest of the waste accumulated on the streets, increasing the spread of diseases and clogging up drains which led to floods during the rainy season.

Simultaneously, recycling plants in Lagos lacked an adequate supply of recyclable materials for processing. Adebisi-Abiola estimated that metal and plastic waste in Lagos is worth around \$700M.

As a solution, Adebisi-Abiola created an accessible model of recycling for those living and working in informal settings so that they can earn income from recyclables in two ways. First, WeCyclers developed a fleet of relatively cheap and locally-assembled cargo bikes called “WeCyclers” that waste collectors use to pick up recyclable waste from households that municipal waste collectors are unable to get to. Second, WeCyclers developed a collection rewards program to establish a network of waste collectors, subscribers and buyers of recyclable materials.

**Table 5***Barrier 2: Lack of Established Networks*

Lack of Established Networks	
Solar Sister	<p>Lucey saw how important access to energy was for advancing countries into modern eras and how limiting a philanthropic model was in developing energy issues. This experience was the beginning of Lucey's vision to build a network of women who earn income while bringing access to clean energy technologies.</p> <p>Historically, women might not have permission to work outside the home; they might not have agency or control over their household income spending. This issue of agency is why Solar Sister adopted an Avon-style model of female empowerment.</p> <p>Solar Sister believes that centering local women in a rapidly growing clean energy sector is essential to eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable solutions to climate change and a host of development issues.</p>
soleRebels	<p>After successfully establishing soleRebels, Alemu explained her motivations for creating a dynamic supply chain partnership to help other producers around the country: "It took me a decade to employ 400 people but it shouldn't have taken that long—and it wouldn't have either if I'd had access to the right partners."</p>
RTC	<p>While mainstream small business development organizations exist across the country, these resources are primarily oriented to serve individuals whose educational level and business acumen is often a step above the level at which many low-income entrepreneurs begin. The result was often frustration and marginalization on the part of many low-income entrepreneurs, whose needs were not being met by a program intended for more advanced participants.</p> <p>By specializing in educational services that are custom-designed for the needs of low- and moderate-income entrepreneurs, RTC represented a critically important part of a larger ecosystem that is still being developed on a national level.</p>
WeCyclers	<p>In Lagos, the city's waste collection system required citizens to pay a fee for the service based on the size of their home—a charge that many were unable to afford. The road network was also too challenging because of improper parking habits making it impossible for vehicles to get to the trash.</p> <p>As a result, only 40% of the city's waste was collected and only 13% recycled each year. The rest of the waste accumulated on the streets, increasing the spread of diseases and clogging up drains which led to flooding during the rainy season. Simultaneously, recycling plants in Lagos lacked an adequate supply of recyclable materials for processing. Adebisi-Abiola estimated that metal and plastic waste in Lagos is worth around \$700M.</p>
Mariam Seba Production Factory	<p>When Mebrahtu started back in 2005, no one in the community was talking about the sociocultural challenges of menstruation and lack of proper sanitary supplies in the community.</p> <p>Even after receiving a patent for her invention in 2006, Mebrahtu had to continue to educate the larger community before finally receiving a loan from the development bank of Ethiopia in 2009.</p> <p>In addition to making her patented sanitary pads, Mebrahtu continues to educate the broader public about menstruation so as to remove its cultural stigma.</p>

The SBEs solution to their blocked impulses were counter-to-business-as-usual practices. Thus, there were not robust mainstream networks to support the new initiatives, which became an additional challenge SBEs had to strategically overcome to establish their respective businesses.

### ***Barrier 3: Limited Technology***

SBEs have had to navigate limited technological services or innovate new technological products to meet their respective business needs to resolve their blocked impulse. Below, I present two cases, MSPF and Solar Sister, to illustrate the *Limited Technology* barrier in further detail. Following that, in a matrix table (Table 6), I represent this barrier in a paraphrased, synthesized, or as a quoted content for all the selected cases.

**Example 1: Mariam Saba Product Factory.** In Ethiopia, disposable sanitary products are very expensive and often unavailable. Nearly 75% of Ethiopian women and girls don't have access to the menstrual supplies they need. Traditionally, girls have used rags or dry grasses to deal with their period. This meant that having their period was an inconvenient and embarrassing part of their lives.

Mebrahtu developed and patented a product that was affordable, reliable, and environmentally friendly as a solution for women and girls in her community and beyond. In addition to making her patented sanitary pads, Mebrahtu educates the broader public about menstruation so as to remove its cultural stigma.

**Example 2: Solar Sister.** Clean energy technology design and pricing is continuously evolving from large installations to affordable and safer integrated products. Although these new products have the potential to replace popular expensive and harmful kerosene lamps, Lucey realized that the rural communities who needed them most were not adopting them. She solved

this puzzle by identifying that last mile distribution and awareness about clean energy products and utilizing women as the missing links who could directly sell to their communities.

Additionally, although Solar Sister relied on their partners to track data for the women in the program, they found that differences in the format and level of detail meant that the collected data did not provide the level of accuracy they were needed. Solar Sister has now consolidated all of the tracking and their own staff is responsible for maintaining the records, explaining

It was previously complicated to track entrepreneur invoices because, women would come in to pay whatever they had, not associated with any specific invoices. Now [Solar Sister] keeps a rolling sum in which women can pay off debts starting with the oldest bill.

Solar Sister now tracks everything from invoices, inventory, sales, and training attendance. This has allowed Solar Sister to build evidence for impact investing in women-led renewable energy distribution model to deliver reliable clean energy solutions to the most energy poor and vulnerable off-the-grid communities.

**Table 6***Barrier 3: Limited Technology*

Limited Technology	
Solar Sister	<p>Clean energy technology design and pricing is continuously evolving from large installations to affordable and safer integrated products. Although these new products have the potential to replace popular expensive kerosene lamps, Lucey realized that the rural communities who needed them most were not adopting them.</p> <p>She solved this puzzle by identifying that last mile distribution, awareness about clean energy products, and utilizing women as missing links who could directly sell to their communities.</p> <p>Early on, Solar Sister relied on their partners to track data for the women in the program, but they found that differences in the format and level of detail meant that the collected data did not provide the level of accuracy they were looking for. They consolidated all of the tracking and now their own staff is responsible for maintaining the records.</p>
soleRebels	<p>To establish an international market, soleRebels had to work through the challenge of accessing limited internet availability in Ethiopia to find a global stores that could stock their shoes.</p> <p>In 2013 soleRebels discovered that a Canadian company had created a website with soleRebels' company name and was selling imitations of their products online. soleRebels filed a lawsuit through U.S.-based attorneys. soleRebels won the arbitration proceeding and said that they would take action on anybody threatening their intellectual property.</p> <p>"It isn't the first time someone has tried to threaten our intellectual property and we know it won't be the last. But at least the record is clear—mess with our brand and we will take action against you. And win. For Ethiopia and Africa to truly prosper, creating potent homegrown globally successful brands is key and protecting those brands is an equally crucial piece of that endeavor," Alemu said.</p>
RTC	<p>RTC realized the demand for entrepreneurship support will only increase in the coming decades as automation and other technology innovations change the global economy, national labor market, and the future of work.</p> <p>RTC began to develop the necessary backend database to transfer their organization's knowledge system to replicate their model through others in order to maximize and sustain greater social impact.</p>
WeCyclers	<p>In order to solve the logistical problem of collecting the waste, WeCyclers developed a fleet of relatively cheap, locally assembled cargo bikes called "WeCyclers" that waste collectors use to pick up recyclable waste from households that the municipal waste collectors cannot access.</p> <p>The rewards for waste collection works by a point system. WeCyclers built the backend database management systems for subscriber point aggregation.</p>
Mariam Seba Production Factory	<p>In Ethiopia, disposable sanitary products are very expensive and often unavailable, so nearly 75% of Ethiopian women and girls don't have access to the menstrual supplies they need. Traditionally, girls have used rags or dry grasses to deal with their period.</p> <p>Mebrahtu wanted to develop a product that was affordable, reliable, and environmentally friendly as a solution to women and girls.</p>

Similar to the lack of established networks barrier, SBEs solution to their technological needs were counter-business-as-usual practices. Thus, they were tasked with inventing, reconfiguring and/or re-envisioning technological solutions to establish their respective businesses.

### **Discussion: Barrier Types**

While all SBEs may not suffer from the same barriers in their efforts to advance sustainability, understanding how some barriers were overcome may be useful in addressing other barriers across SBEs with a range of contexts. Additionally, while I presented these barriers separately, they are not static concepts. These elements are cyclical and fluid processes, in which SBE continually adapt or change their actions to fit the ongoing actions of others to implement their respective businesses.

The purpose of identifying barrier types in this work was to better understand how to overcome the challenges SBEs face. SBEs practiced and continue to practice new roles and responsibilities to overcome the barriers they face. One very salient factor in how SBEs resolved barriers was through creating shared meanings and purposes as well as reciprocal orientations within and across the organization that help reconcile differences. These processes are exemplified in SBE success factors that are identified in my thematic analysis, which I will discuss next: SBE Success Factors.

### **Success Factors**

Now that I have presented the barriers the selected SBEs faced in this study, I will present the success factors SBEs leveraged to establish successful enterprises. Mead's (1977) symbolic interaction theory shows how interaction within a community of practitioners with a similar referent, such as SBEs, can produce common goods like public responsibility or public

services from their normative position. Mead comprehends interaction as a “flow of action” that governs creativity involving a number of reciprocal interactions (Morales, 2010). Thus, goals or outcomes arise out of experience and social interaction in reciprocal relationship. Using this interactionist lens, I uncovered five SBE success factors—visionary leader, locality, collaborative internal teams, symbiotic external partnerships and technology—that appear across the cases.

These five success factors are in a cyclical and fluid process in which participants continually adapt or change their actions to fit the ongoing actions of one another. It is important to note that these success factors are not static. They are in continuous interactions with one another, working toward the common good. In this case, the common good is the normative SBE position: *to conserve natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity for all.*

Below, I discuss each success factor in detail and provide examples from the selected cases. I also present these success factors in a matrix table to tie themes that emerged across the cases. As discussed in the barriers section, data presented in a matrix table is paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content intended for a broad audience (Averill, 2002) (Table 7).

**Table 7***SBE Success Factors*

Type	SBE Success Factors
Visionary Leader	Built bridges through shared meanings, intersubjective agreements, and reciprocal orientation among diverse stakeholders.
Locality	Built locally situated and coordinated practices by leveraging local assets through reciprocal orientation and intersubjective agreements. These coordinated efforts gave [local] dignity and pride to their employees and customers—which in turn created a “buy in” for the business and trust in the vision of the business.
Collaborative Internal Teams	Created a “team of practitioners” through situated reciprocal orientation and intersubjective agreements with a discrete cluster of shared meaning strains. These <i>shared meanings</i> evolved through SBE’s iterative complex coordinated practices within the business.
Symbiotic External Partnerships	Through intersubjective agreement and reciprocal orientation, SBEs created <i>shared purposes</i> with external partners to expand their impact. Language allowed for <i>shared purpose</i> connection among diverse external partners with similar “sustainable” mind and habits.
Technology	SBEs used technology to innovate their solutions and amplify their shared meanings and purposes within and across the organization to produce their respective public common goods.

***Success Factor 1: Visionary Leader***

SBE founders built bridges through shared meanings, intersubjective agreements, and reciprocal orientation among diverse stakeholders. This dimension of leadership that is characteristic of successful SBEs illustrates the role symbolic interactionism plays in building intersubjective and reciprocal agreements with others. Interactions are symbolic because they occur in the mind before they occur in reality.



Below, I discuss Solar Sister founder Katherine Lucey's visionary leadership success factor. Following that, in a matrix table, I present the visionary leadership success factor of the selected cases in a paraphrased, synthesized, or as a quoted content for all the selected cases.

**Example: Solar Sister.** In 2010, Lucey founded Solar Sister to provide rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa—Uganda, Nigeria, and Tanzania—with solar lighting solutions. Solar Sister believes everyone, everywhere, deserves clean energy and works to bridge the gender and technology divide in some of the hardest to reach, most energy-poor communities in Africa. Specifically, by recruiting, training, and supporting rural women to be business technology solutions providers in their community, Solar Sister was able to create a system of women entrepreneurs who disrupted clean energy solutions to the last-mile rarely reached communities.

Initially, Lucey piloted her idea with one person, a Ugandan rural farmer, Rebecca who had a chicken coop business. Lucey and Rebecca implemented solar light in Rebecca's chicken coop and the chickens produced more eggs as a result of the increased lighting. And leveraging the sales from the eggs, Rebecca built a profitable farm, improved her family's standard of living and built a community school. With this positive outcome, Lucey was motivated to scale solar energy solutions to a larger network of women. To do this, Lucey connected with Neha Misra, an energy economist from India who was committed to applying her experience in the renewable energy sector and working at the intersection of energy justice, climate justice and women's rights movements. Leveraging their backgrounds, Lucey and Misra worked together to build the foundation for a unique organization: a social enterprise that centered local women in the distribution of solar energy solution—Solar Sister. Following that, Evelyn Namara, Fatma Muzo

and Olasimbo Sojinrin joined the team as Directors in Africa making Solar Sister what it is today.

Namara led Solar Sister's very first pilot program in 2010, forming Solar Sister's proof of concept. Muzo, Solar Sister Tanzania Director, grew operations since opening the office in Arusha in 2013. Sojinrin, Solar Sister Nigeria Director, grew operations since opening the Lagos office in 2014. Solar Sister's directors recruit and train Business Development Associates (BDAs), who are locally hired field staff. In turn, each BDA recruits, trains, and supports a group of 1 to 25 women entrepreneurs. To train the BDA staff, Solar Sister partnered with Blue-Drop Learning Networks to develop an interactive online curriculum. Through this training BDA were able to connect classroom knowledge to field practice. This increased their adaptability when they begin to lead trainings at the community level.

At the grassroots level, Solar Sister partners with local women's groups to benefit from their existing infrastructure and deep roots in the community. For example, one of their key initial partnerships was with The Mother's Union of Uganda. The Mother's Union has provided family support services for over 100 years to over 60,000 rural communities in Uganda. With the assistance of the Mother's Union Solar Sister identify a woman or a group of women in each village to sell the solar solutions under a micro-consignment model. At the international level, Solar Sister, for example, partners with Women for Women International to expand clean energy access and provide women in impoverished communities with access to concrete economic opportunities. This partnership resulted in positive impact both in the longevity of entrepreneur's businesses and in overall sales. Solar Sister entrepreneurs from Women for Women International's network have remained active longer in their businesses than a typical Solar

Sister entrepreneur, with 93% remaining active (in contrast to 73% remaining active in the same timeframe in Solar Sister's broader Nigeria network).

Through partnering with other organizations, like the Mother's Union or Women for Women International, Solar Sister has a collaborative approach for scaling its gender-inclusive solutions to make the sustainable energy for all vision a reality. On the implementation side, this means joining hands with local women's groups such as the Mothers' Union of Uganda and conservation organizations such as the African Wildlife Foundation. On the technology front, Solar Sister partners with the world's leading clean technology manufacturers. For example, Solar Sister is the World Bank's Lighting Global Associate, which means that Solar Sister's product portfolio is made up of products that meet the highest quality standards to best fit the needs of customers across rural Africa.

Additionally, Solar Sister is working closely with the International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy program to scale up its impact and share best practices on building a gender-inclusive sustainable energy sector. In the clean cooking sector, Solar Sister is partnering with the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves to apply the innovative human-centered design principles to empower women entrepreneurs. Moreover, Solar Sister is working with the International Center for Research on Women to compile evidence on the importance of women's role in clean energy value chains. Through these initiatives, Solar Sister centers local women in a rapidly growing clean energy sector to eradicate poverty and to achieve sustainable solutions to climate change and many development issues. Lucey, reflecting on her decision for focusing on women entrepreneurs, explained, "If women are not intentionally included in technology, then they are unintentionally excluded." Therefore, Solar Sister empowers women entrepreneurs through a direct-sales network that is key to its customer-centric approach.

This interaction between the women entrepreneurs, the last-mile communities, the multiple stakeholders and the need to balance complex and sometimes conflicting demands for economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable solutions happen through what Mead (1977) calls a “flow of action.” Mead comprehends interaction as the “flow of action” that governs creativity involving many reciprocal interactions. Through this “flow of action,” Solar Sister provides rural women with clean energy livelihood opportunities, opening a door to greater energy security, financial savings, health, educational opportunities, and climate resilience. Lucey’s visionary leadership capacity illustrates the role interaction plays in Solar Sister’s development and provides insight into the importance of social interactions for establishing shared meanings and shared purposes. These shared meanings and purposes in turn led to coordinated practices within Solar Sister and across Solar Sister’s partners to establish a successful organization.

**Table 8***Success Factor 1: Visionary Leader*

	Visionary Leader
Solar Sister	<p>In 2010, Katherine Lucey founded Solar Sister to provide rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa—Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania—with solar lighting solutions.</p> <p>Solar Sister believes everyone, everywhere deserves clean energy and is working to bridge the gender and technology divide in some of the hardest to reach, most energy poor communities in Africa.</p> <p>Solar Sister believes that centering local women in a rapidly growing clean energy sector is essential to eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable solutions to climate change and a host of development issues.</p>
soleRebels	<p>In 2005, Bethlehem Alemu saw that skilled artisans lived in chronic unemployment in her community and founded soleRebels to bring job opportunities to some of the most marginalized citizens in Ethiopia. She wanted to find a way to share her love for the amazing artisanship of Ethiopia with the world while creating well-paid meaningful work for the people in her local community and leveraging their immense creative skills.</p>
RTC	<p>In 2004, Alfa Demmellash and Alex Forrester started RTC to help those who had ideas and abilities but needed education and support to launch or grow their businesses. RTC believes everyone is infinitely valuable, entrepreneurship is for everyone not just the elite, and communities are transformed by social capital.</p> <p>RTC works with individuals and communities to build strong businesses which transform lives, strengthen families, and build sustainable communities.</p>
WeCyclers	<p>In 2012, WeCyclers was founded to address the challenge of urban waste in Lagos, through convenient recycling services that give households a chance to generate value from their waste. Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola identified that waste was a big problem for people living in poor conditions and wanted to turn it into a solution. She created a simple, open and accessible model of income for those living and working in the informal setting of the slums.</p> <p>“Thanks to what we started, plastic here has become a resource that allows people to send their children to school, have a stable income, afford medical care,” Adebisi-Abiola said.</p>
Mariam Seba Production Factory	<p>In 2005, Mariam Seba Products Factory was founded by Freweini Mebrahtu to change the cultural stigma around women’s periods and provide women with sanitary pads that were easy to wash, reliable, and most importantly, affordable.</p> <p>Nearly 75% of Ethiopian women and girls don’t have access to the menstrual supplies they need. This meant that having their period was an inconvenient and embarrassing part of their lives. Mebrahtu's goal was not only to make the pads, but to also transform the cultural baggage attached to it.</p>

From the stories above, we see that SBEs developed their vision for their business through interaction with others by sharing and adjusting their vision. Thus, SBEs' vision for their businesses served as a *symbol* to galvanize support for their business, creating a shared meaning system. These meanings arose through SBEs' interaction with others through an interpretative process. Through this symbolic interaction, SBEs were able to build bridges effectively across many diverse constituencies and within the organization to establish their respective businesses.

***Success Factor 2: Locality***

SBEs built locally situated and coordinated practices by leveraging local assets through reciprocal orientation and intersubjective agreements. These coordinated efforts gave [local] dignity and pride to their employees and customers—which in turn created a “buy in” for the business and trust in the vision of the business. In particular, the symbolic interactionist lens posits that these intentional local interactions help construct a new reality. As a result, reality is situational and is constructed, interpreted, and assessed by its members. Below, I present soleRebels locality success factor in further detail. Following that, in a matrix table (Table 9), I present the locality success factor as paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content for all selected cases.

**Locality Example — soleRebels.** soleRebels embraced the country's craftsmen and women and their utilized rich and environmentally sustainable manufacturing tradition for handmade products to inspire new creations for a regional and international footwear market. In doing so, the company revived and rejuvenated Ethiopia's traditional crafts industry, expanded and modernized its own product range. They took the indigenous age-old recycling tradition, fused it with Ethiopian artisan crafts and excellent modern design and turned it into footwear that has an international appeal that is now a market beating export brand being enjoyed by people

around the globe. In addition they were helping to preserve important local cultural arts while giving citizens a sense of pride and doing this as they sold the footwear to worldwide customers.

The design of the footwear draws on the traditional “barabasso” shoes, a recycled tire soled shoe that has existed in Ethiopia for a long time even worn by Ethiopian fighters who opposed Italian forces attempting to colonize the country nearly a century ago. soleRebels shares that their name soleRebels derives in part from this historic connection:

the name [soleRebels] honors the country’s long history of independence and its unique, proud culture. The company’s image, the Ethiopian koba tree—a plant species indigenous to Ethiopia, reinforces a brand that is ancient yet youthful and rebellious. The tree-like soleRebels itself—nurtures enduring roots to produce its fruits. Its slogan—roots; culture; tires—is simple, emphasizing a certain strength in self-generation and self-renewal.

Alemu had observed that the recycled tire shoes had been worn in Ethiopia and more specifically in her village for a long time and were still in use. Although, they were affordable and durable the product was not marketable to the international market. soleRebels combined the traditional expertise of several traditional Ethiopian artisan areas from hand spinning organic cotton to artisan looming fabrics and on to footwear hand crafting to launch the product. They fused these arts with unique and innovative and contemporary design which they call FUSIONFASHION. Alemu was then able to mobilized artistically-gifted members of her community and founded soleRebels.

soleRebels selected shoes as its product because footwear was an excellent platform to begin to share many of Ethiopia’s indigenous eco-sensible craft heritages and artisan talents with the world. Their approach to footwear creation—hand-crafted and eco-sensible—meant they could source and make almost all the materials locally, thereby creating an export product from

100 percent local inputs. Alemu's decision to bridge the gap between these artisans and global commerce led to a highly successful business.

Additionally, soleRebels are pioneers and big proponents of producer direct Fair Trade where there is no middleman to absorb profits. They do this with many global customers including Amazon, Urban Outfitters and Whole Foods to whom they ship directly, handling all the account functions- from order intake, to production, media, marketing and invoicing locally at their headquarters in Ethiopia. In doing so, soleRebels is creating a local value chain which is beneficial to many people and does this in a very sustainable vision and making great contributions to prosperity shared by the local people in Ethiopia. Reflecting on her business, Alemu said,

We have created world class jobs, a world class company and brand, while empowering our community and country. We have done this while simultaneously presenting a galvanized, dynamic face of African creativity to the global market. These actions, I believe, have forever shifted the discourse on African development from one of poverty alleviation orchestrated by external actors, to one about prosperity creation driven by local Africans maximizing their talents and resources. And that's key because no one was positioning things like that before soleRebels emerged and certainly no one was implementing it on the scale we have.

These intentional and reciprocal local interactions that Alemu highlights in the above quote help construct a new elevated local value that is constructed, interpreted and assessed by multiple local stakeholders.



**Table 9***Success Factor 2: Locality*

	Locality
Solar Sister	<p>Solar Sister continually adjusts processes, programs, and technology to align with the cultures in which they operate. For example, Solar Sister's model works differently depending on the country it operates in. In Uganda and Tanzania, the \$8 to \$10 solar lamps are the most popular items. In Nigeria, customers are more likely to buy the higher-output systems. That's not a function of higher incomes in West Africa. Nigeria has more un-electrified people than any other African country and Solar Sister's customers are similar to those in East Africa. The difference is more cultural.</p> <p>"There's a big gap [in Nigeria] between the people who have money and the people who don't and that inequality gap can actually cause some market disruption. You've got people [for whom] this product would be really interesting, but they have aspirations beyond the scope of the product. There's more affluence and visible consumption, so they set their sights higher," Lucey said.</p> <p>Solar Sister's impact on its end customers shows that by reducing or halting the use of kerosene, solar lanterns improve the health and safety of rural households. Solar Sister reports that from 2010 to 2019, 4,565 rural women entrepreneurs have been supported to kickstart clean energy microenterprises, and 0.5M metric tons of CO2 have been avoided. Additionally, 546 extra study hours were generated over the lifetime of one solar light, \$2,042 was saved on kerosene per solar light, and overall 1.72 million people were reached with clean energy products.</p>
soleRebels	<p>soleRebels embraced the country's craftsmen and women and their utilized rich and environmentally sustainable manufacturing tradition for handmade products to inspire new creations for a regional and international footwear market. In doing so, the company revived and rejuvenated Ethiopia's traditional crafts industry while expanding and modernizing its own product range. They took the indigenous age-old recycling tradition, fused it with Ethiopian artisan crafts and excellent modern design, and turned it into footwear that has universal appeal that is now a market beating export brand being enjoyed by people around the globe. In addition they were helping to preserve important local cultural arts while giving citizens a sense of pride and doing this as they sold the footwear to worldwide customers.</p> <p>Additionally, soleRebels are pioneers and big proponents of producer direct Fair Trade where there is no middleman to absorb profits. They do this with many global customers including Amazon, Urban Outfitters, and Whole Foods, to whom they ship directly. They also handle all the account functions, including order intake production, media, marketing and invoicing locally at their headquarters in Ethiopia.</p> <p>soleRebels company is creating a local value chain that is beneficial to many people. soleRebels does this in a very sustainable way by making great contributions to prosperity shared by the local people in Ethiopia.</p>
RTC	<p>RTC invests in the success of low-income entrepreneurs by providing hands-on training and coaching in business management and planning through its signature programs: The Community Business Academy, Business Acceleration Services, and Rising Tide Network.</p> <p>Using best practices in adult participatory education methodology, RTC's model is built around an understanding that capital comes in three dimensions—knowledge,</p>

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social, and financial—and the organization has developed an expertise around building knowledge and social capital for low-income entrepreneurs while partnering with community lenders to bridge the financing gap when needed.

RTC’s entrepreneurs, within two years of graduating, experience an average of 112% increase in business revenue and 58% increase in household income. As a result of these strong outcomes, RTC produces \$3.80 in local economic impact for every dollar invested in its programs.

For example, in 2018, RTC graduated 455 entrepreneurs from its Community Business Academy and saw 106 of its entrepreneurs start new businesses, 328 strengthen existing businesses, and 339 businesses expand their sales or staffing. A total of 425 jobs were created by Rising Tide entrepreneurs as a result of these activities. And within 2 years of enrollment at RTC, people in business at intake observe a 95% increase in average business sales, a 63% increase in average household income and a 59% reduction in graduate use of public assistance.

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WeCyclers WeCyclers has created a network of communities working together to address issues of health, wellbeing, and urban resilience in Africa’s largest city.

“Giving back to the community is in the DNA of WeCyclers,” Wale said.

WeCyclers has provided a structured approach with more opportunities and benefits, including healthcare for their waste workers.

“We want to expand our business to other neighborhoods. In the mid-term, we want to be big enough to build our own recycling plant. Growing more for WeCyclers, means being able to give back even more to the community,” Wale said.

Earlier in 2020, WeCyclers made a call for franchises and selected seven individuals. The franchise program partnered with Unilever and expanded their efforts by empowering more individuals to create recycling enterprises. With adequate training, funding and guidance, these individuals have become waste entrepreneurs. They enable the creation of additional jobs through these enterprises, and increased public awareness about recycling and environmental sustainability in the communities where Franchises are established.

Additionally, believing much remains to be done to protect and advance decent work for waste workers. In February 2021, WeCyclers teamed up with the Fair Plastic Alliance outreach to 10,000 waste workers to provide much needed medical attention, food supplies and safety equipment.

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Mariam Seba Production Factory Mebrahtu chose to design pads instead of menstrual cups or tampons because she was conscious of cultural taboos associated with different menstrual products in Ethiopia.

The initial package entailed a set of four pads, packaged in an appealing small feminine cloth bag. She piloted the product with great success in the community.

In addition to making sanitary pads accessible and affordable, CNN Hero recognized Mebrahtu for her work in educating girls as well as the broader public about menstruation so as to remove its cultural stigma and to improve the understanding of menstruation by all students—male and female—to foster gender equity and to create a society more understanding and accepting of menstruation.

MSPF reports that the effect of the provision of sanitary pads on women's education, sense of self-worth, and the overall economy has been immense. For example, improved education about menstruation appears to have a positive impact on menstrual-related absences by adolescent school girls. MSPF said that more than 1 million girls have been reached and that there has been a 24% reduction in girls’ school absenteeism.

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From the above stories, we see that SBEs focused locally to identify assets and gaps within the community to build capacities for a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing community. This process occurred through direct social interaction in the local settings. The interaction involved working closely with local groups around issues that those groups deemed important. This approach is based on the assumption that given access and agency in local capacities, local actors may solve many of their own problems. In particular, SBEs' intentional local interaction through reciprocal orientation and intersubjective agreements alters local norms, roles, and expectations to transform the local culture to successfully establish a respective SBE.

### ***Success Factor 3: Collaborative Internal Teams***

SBEs created a “team of practitioners” through situated reciprocal orientation and intersubjective agreements with a discrete cluster of shared meaning strains. These shared meanings evolved through SBE’s iterative complex coordinated practices. That resulted in a shared understanding of SBE normative positions within the business. Collaborative and intentional interactions established the SBEs vision. This intentional interaction allowed for complex and coordinated activities to manifest toward a shared goal. Below, I present RTC’s Collaborative Internal Teams in detail. Following that, in a matrix table, I present this success factor in a paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content for all selected cases (Table 10).

**Example: Rising Tide Capital.** RTC provides training in business management and planning through its focus programs: The Community Business Academy, Business Acceleration Services, and Rising Tide Networks. Alex Forrester, Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer, explained RTC’s purpose and internal operation processes:

We’ve always believed that if you want to make a difference in the world, investing in the people that are already moving in that direction and helping them bring others along

is a huge and often untapped energy that you could harness and invest in and have a big multiplier effect.

To accomplish the above mission, RTC consists of a wide network of internal teams with complex, yet similarly coordinated, shared meanings system. In particular, Demmellash and Forrester formalized RTC as a non-profit Organization in 2004 with the financial support of Forrester's father, Doug Forrester. The senior Forrester also helped to create a board of trustees, comprising of friends and donors; he continues to serve as founding chairman of the Board. The Board of Trustees, the Strategic Advisory Board and administration staff. The Board of Trustees are the advocates for RTC's mission, vision, and work to ensure that Rising Tide Capital remains transparent and accountable to their various stakeholders, funders and entrepreneurs. Additionally, they oversee strategic operations, are invested in RTC's growth, and measure the organization against the highest ethical standards.

In particular, in the early days of RTC, Matthew Barnes, a member of the Board of Trustees, established a fundraising strategy and founded a Strategic Advisory Board (ASG) of leading young professionals for RTC. Both Barnes and ASG Advisors provide strategic planning, research, program design, and impact assessment services to RTC. These programs were critical in the development of RTC. The Strategic Advisory Board is a group of accomplished individuals interested in micro-enterprise and community development. This group espouses and reciprocally develops shared meanings with RTC. Specifically, members of the Strategic Advisory Board volunteer their time to ensure that as RTC grows, it builds upon the quality of the service it provides. Aside from enhancing RTC's fundraising and development efforts by leveraging personal and professional networks, the Strategic Advisory Board also provides strategic counsel on a variety of RTC's growth and replication initiatives.

RTC pursues its model within a larger ecosystem approach, collaborating with lenders, incubators, government agencies, pro bono services, and re-entry organizations to build sustainable communities from within. This approach emphasizes RTC's belief that the only strategy that can generate sustained, long-term impact is one that leverages local vision, local knowledge, and local ownership. In particular, RTC's administrative staff works with local community leaders to promote awareness and tailor delivery of services; contracts experienced local business owners as instructors and coaches; and works with local universities and economic development agencies on neighborhood-focused initiatives. The administrative staff consists of the administration (CEO, CSIO, Chief of Staff), Finance and Operations, Development, Programs, National Program Partnerships, Future Tide Partners, Communications, Program Analytics and Evaluation, and coaches and instructors. These multiple and diverse set of internal teams operate via a situated reciprocal orientation and intersubjective agreements. This results in a discrete cluster of shared meaning strains that continue to evolve through RTC's iterative processes.

**Table 10***Success Factor 3: Collaborative Internal Teams*

Collaborative Internal Teams	
Solar Sister	<p>Training and ongoing mentoring equip Solar Sister entrepreneurs with important skills like financial management and technical product knowledge. As a result, women gain confidence and often serve as role models and change agents in their communities. Additionally, the women entrepreneurs have access to key tools, skills, and technology to run a business that will earn extra income, save money, and allow them to step into their power. For example, the income Solar Sister entrepreneurs generate allowed the women to start to play a larger role in household decision-making. For villages that had community-based cultures and that did not accommodate independent female entrepreneurs, Solar Sister relied on selling to groups of women who would then receive the commission as a discount.</p> <p>Solar Sister has piloted and tested a variety of different strategies. For example, in 2013, Solar Sister used Pilot Innovation Fund Round I (PIF) grant to refine Solar Sister's distribution model, by testing and evaluating the performance of a variety of distribution channels in order to create an evidence base of best practices for the scale-up of cookstove distribution across the growing Solar Sister network. They learnt that education and awareness for new clients were crucial in order to drive the sale of cookstoves, and that the efficiency of operations in a country was positively correlated to the level of Solar Sister staff presence. A hub and spoke distribution model that works well for rural distribution and one time training of entrepreneurs is not sufficient to achieve sustained sales.</p>
soleRebels	<p>Alemu worked with her team to leverage the utility of their talents. She started with building her team to believe in her vision.</p> <p>"We had a grand idea and vision. We aimed from day one to create, grow, and control a world-class footwear brand that would craft creative and comfortable footwear while generating more jobs and growing prosperity for our workers, and all this from our own community by leveraging its artisan skills and the natural resources of the nation. We wanted to show people that it is possible to be local and at the same time globally successful. Our vision created an intoxicating sense of motivation and ambition among our team who stayed focused on creating something world class," Alemu said.</p> <p>soleRebels is also setting a high standard for workers' rights, providing free medical coverage for employees and their families and free doctor-run medical checks, as well as providing transport to and from the worksite for workers with disabilities. Additionally, soleRebels pays all workers based on negotiated wages that are not subject to quotas but rather on mutually agreed company-wide goals. The enterprise offers four to five times the legal minimum wage and over three times the industry average salary. They also offer a Children's Education Fund which provides grants for the children of the artisans as well as children of their close relatives.</p>
RTC	<p>RTC provides training in business management and planning through its focus programs: Community Business Academy, Business Acceleration Services and Rising Tide Network.</p> <p>"We've always believed that if you want to make a difference in the world, investing in the people that are already moving in that direction and helping them bring others along is a huge and often untapped energy that you could harness and invest in and have a big multiplier effect," Forrester said.</p> <p>RTC's internal team consists of the Board of Trustees, Strategic Advisory Board and administration staff. The Board of Trustees are the advocates for RTC's mission and vision and work to ensure that RTC remains transparent and accountable to their various</p>

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stakeholders, funders, and entrepreneurs. They oversee strategic operations, are invested in RTC's growth, and measure the organization against the highest ethical standards.

The Strategic Advisory Board is a group of accomplished individuals interested in micro-enterprise and community development, volunteering their time to ensure that as RTC grows, it builds upon the quality of the service it provides. Aside from enhancing RTC's fundraising and development efforts by leveraging their personal and professional networks, the Strategic Advisory Board also provides strategic counsel on a variety of RTC's growth and replication initiatives.

The administration staff consists of the administration (CEO, CSIO, Chief of Staff), Finance & Operations, Development, Programs, National Program Partnerships, Future Tide Partners, Communications, Program Analytics & Evaluation, and coaches and instructors.

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WeCyclers As of December 2020 WeCyclers have 7 franchises located in 4 states:—Ogun, Lagos, Adamawa, and Abuja State—offering over 150 new jobs with over 400 tons of plastics collected.

All franchisees are provided with logistical, financial education, environmental education, business planning, and management support. These 7 franchisees in total have over 17,000 subscribers and they register around 200 new members each month.

Every three months WeCyclers does a points redemption where their customer base is rewarded for all the recyclables they collect. These points act as a savings account for the majority of their subscribers and in many cases, it's the sole source of income. The subscribers depend on earnings from recycling for rent, fees and business capital.

In 2017, the Governor of Lagos State appointed Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola to head the Lagos State Parks and Gardens Agency as General Manager with a mandate to transform the environment through a greener healthier environment. Olawale Adebisi took over as CEO of WeCyclers after Adebisi-Abiola stepped down.

“Wale has made a considerable contribution towards the growth of WeCyclers. He has a record of outstanding leadership and the ability to innovate and execute. He demonstrated this in his role as COO by helping to structure WeCyclers to a point where our managers are more empowered, our staff is much better equipped, and the company is running quite smoothly It's now time for us to scale up,” Adebisi-Abiola said.

Commenting on his new role, Adebisi expressed his commitment to helping WeCyclers reach its strategic objectives. He stated that he will continue to work and live by the company's vision, while honoring the company's commitment to create jobs, community empowerment, and improve the quality of life of all Nigerians through recycling.

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Mariam Seba Production Factory Since MSPF began operation, Mebrahtu has employed local women and helps them to be economically independent by providing them with free training, premium wages, paid vacation, and the opportunity to grow.

For example, MSPF also promotes women within the organization empowering young women as the company continues to scale. The women also get four months of paid maternity leave and a free daycare center thereafter so the women can continue to work and raise their children without worry.

Additionally, Mebrahtu supports her workers to increase their knowledge through training and mentorship. She even plays educational tapes over the factory loudspeakers, along with news programs and popular and traditional music that the workers enjoy.

“I want them to just crave coming to work,” Mebrahtu said.

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Through these examples we see that over time, SBE's shared meanings accumulated and served existing and emergent purposes, making the SBEs recognizable and learnable. This led to

further exchanges of understandings and ideas internally. This process illustrates the interactive and reciprocal nature of symbolic interactionism in constructing a new reality.

***Success Factor 4: Symbiotic External Partnerships***

Through intersubjective agreement and reciprocal orientation, SBEs create shared purposes with external partners to expand their impact. Language allows for shared purpose connection among diverse external partners with similar “sustainable” mind and habits. Even though SBE experience is pluralistic and dependent on context, shared purposes resolve ambiguity. This resolution leads to the opportunity for SBEs to work with and build bridges among very diverse stakeholders to build successful partnerships for greater and [shared] social impact.

Below, I present the WeCyclers case to illustrate the Symbiotic External Partnerships success factor in further detail. Following that, in a matrix table, I presents this success factor with paraphrased, synthesized, or quoted content for all the selected cases (Table 11).

**Example: WeCyclers.** WeCyclers symbiotic external partnership started from the beginning and continues as a central success factor. The idea for WeCyclers was developed while Abiola was a student at the MIT Sloan School of Management in 2012. She was assigned to a study project to solve problems faced by people at the base of the pyramid—people living on less than \$2 a day. In this class, Abiola's and worked with Alexandra Fallon to do further research on waste recycling in Lagos, Nigeria. They saw the huge potential in the waste recycling sector in Nigeria, especially among manufacturing plants who were looking for cheaper and easily available source of raw materials due to local and foreign demand for end products. Abiola's project team—Jonathan Kola, Alexandra Fallon, Diana Yousef, Faith Keza, Venkat Ramachandran—spent considerable time analyzing the Lagos waste ecosystem with her.



Over the course of their final semester, the WeCyclers team became a semi-finalist in the MIT \$100,000 Entrepreneurship Competition, won \$7,500 from the MIT IDEAS Global Challenge and were accepted into the Martin Trust Center for MIT Entrepreneurship's pilot Founders' Skills Accelerator Program. Through the program, they were given space to work, mentorship and a \$1,000 monthly stipend. WeCyclers also received MIT Legatum Center seed grant, a D-Lab Scale-Ups Fellowship and the MIT Sloan Africa Business Plan Competition.

Additionally, WeCyclers received crucial support from the very beginning from Joost Bonsen, Bill Aulet at the MIT E-Center. A research and teaching center at the MIT Sloan that focuses on commercializing technologies that are invented by MIT students. And from the staff at the MIT Legatum center a global community that is based at MIT. WeCyclers drew on the Institute's talent, networks, and expertise to move their ideas toward scalable impact. In order to test the project, they travelled to Lagos, Nigeria and began the initiative in a low income area of the state. Here the team held their first event, encouraging people to bring their recyclables in exchange for tickets. These tickets were entered into a raffle and gave participants a chance to win prizes. At this event the WeCyclers provided food and music, allowing the team to comfortably interact with the community, gain their trust and receive feedback on the enterprise.

The immediate feedback showed that people did not want to bring their recyclables to a location, but rather preferred a home collection system. Many people also felt that the raffle ticket system was undesirable as there was no guarantee that they would win a prize for their recyclables. From this feedback, WeCyclers pivoted the business plan to pick up waste from people's homes and offer them guaranteed incentives through the use of a points system.

Additionally, WeCyclers opened up Recyclables Drop Off (WeCyclers Recycling Exchange -

WREX) which targeted those who wanted to properly dispose their waste without the need for the redemption points.

Following this pivot in their business plan, they joined the inaugural class of MIT's Founders Skills Accelerator summer program, which gives MIT entrepreneurs skills and resources to launch startups. With this funds and a better developed business, Adebisi and Fallon soon returned to Lagos, and officially launched WeCyclers. WeCyclers collects recyclable waste, including plastic bottles, plastic bags, and aluminum cans, at the household level using low-cost bicycle-powered collection vehicles which are designed and manufactured locally. They recruit WeCyclers operators to cover specific neighborhood collection routes and collect material from households.

Since demonstrating its success in collecting waste from the harder-to-reach streets of Lagos, WeCyclers captured attention in Lagos. This led to a partnership with the Lagos Waste Management Authority to improve the city's collection services. Additionally, WeCyclers and Nestlé partnered in waste recycling in Nigeria following an agreement that was signed in 2019 between the two entities. The alliance allows WeCyclers to expand its plastic waste recovery systems in the country. This facilitates the creation of jobs in the country and the registration of new subscribers in the WeCyclers circuit.

Additionally, Africa Cleanup Initiative, an NGO with focus on sustainability, partnered with WeCyclers to improve education by using plastic bottles as a substitute for tuition fees to encourage parents to send their children to school. Parents collect plastic waste and drop it at a WeCyclers location. WeCyclers then ensure those bottles are converted to reusable materials. Furthermore, WeCyclers is part of the Fair Plastic Alliance, which brings together for-profit and

non-profit international stakeholders with the common goal of developing a fair and inclusive production chain for plastic recycling.

WeCyclers and Fair Plastic Alliance Nigeria, in partnership with the Lagos Waste Management Authority and the Lagos State Ministry of the Environment, hosted the first Plastic Waste Management Policy Workshop in line with the Lagos State Governor's Traffic Management and Transportation, Health and Environment, Education and Technology (T.H.E.M.E.S) agenda. This workshop's key objective was to develop a common set of procedures and goals to be used in negotiation and decision making to guide a more detailed set of policies for plastic waste management in the state. These partnerships offer men and women who operate in the informal waste collection sector the opportunity to have a fully recognized job and a dignified lifestyle. The process of developing shared purpose across external partners happened through interaction governed through a complex yet discrete cluster of shared meaning strains. These shared purposes establish the condition for mutual advancement of shared objectives.

**Table 11***Success Factor 4: Symbiotic External Partnerships*

Symbiotic External Partnerships	
Solar Sister	<p>Solar Sister partners with organizations and individuals around the world who share their passion and practice to democratize energy for all. Together they create a diverse, global, and grassroots movement of makers, advocates, practitioners, and stewards of people and planet.</p> <p>For example, in 2019, Solar Sister joined forces with BRAC and Signify to create Women Entrepreneurship through the Solar Value chain for Economic development, (WE SOLVE) and get over 1 million Tanzanians on to clean and renewable energy.</p> <p>“I’m very happy to see how joining our forces, covering every segment of the value chain, has now resulted in the start of such an impactful project, enabling so many more women in Tanzania to become solar entrepreneurs,” Lucey said.</p> <p>In 2018 Solar Sister partnered with Women for Women International to expand clean energy access in rural Nigeria and provide women in impoverished communities with access to concrete economic opportunities. The partnership resulted in positive impact both in the longevity of entrepreneurs businesses and in overall sales. Solar Sister entrepreneurs from Women for Women International’s network have remained active longer in their businesses than a typical Solar Sister entrepreneur, with 93% remaining active (in contrast to 73% remaining active in the same time frame in Solar Sister’s broader Nigeria network.</p> <p>Solar Sister has established relationships with partner organizations, both on the ground with implementation partners, with inventors, technology providers and institutional partners, with funders and social impact investors as well as with everyday changemakers committed to addressing the extreme global energy poverty. The conscious creation of trusting networks and entrepreneurial solutions to poverty add value to Solar Sister through empowering women to create new economic and social opportunities.</p>
soleRebels	<p>soleRebels underwent a rigorous auditing process to ensure that all of their products are made in accordance with sustainable working conditions and sound environmental practices through the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). This led to soleRebels becoming the first ever footwear brand to be fair-trade certified. Through this partnership, soleRebels adheres to the WFTO’s 10 principles of Fair Trade, which cover a range of categories such as working conditions, wages, the environment, and gender equality.</p> <p>Discussing her desire to build a sustainable brand, Alemu said, “If I put up a sustainable way of working, a sustainable lifestyle brand, then people will aspire to follow that lead.”</p> <p>Through its Fair Trade designation, soleRebels established Ethiopia’s traditional crafts industry products for a regional and international market.</p> <p>Following that, Alemu consulted with governmental and industry leaders and formed the concept for the Made by Ethiopia project. With the active support of the Ministry of Industry and the Leather Industry Development Institute she established Made by Ethiopia to leverage her and her team’s deep experience in Ethiopian footwear manufacturing and their WFTO Fair Trade operational ethos in order to assist brands to produce the best Ethiopian footwear factories under the same Fair Trade ethos.</p>

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In 2013 Alemu joined the advisory board of the Green Industry Platform, convened by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the UN Environment Programme. As a member of the Green Industry Platform's Advisory Board, Alemu worked alongside other government, business, and civil society leaders to help guide the direction and strategy of the Platform's activities and to advise on how to most effectively meet the Platform's objective of scaling up and mainstreaming green industry policies and practices on a global level.

"I am extremely honored to join the Advisory Board and I am looking forward to working with a diversity of international actors and using soleRebels' experience to help benefit others," Alemu said.

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RTC

RTC provides training in business management and planning through its focus to scale solution, RTC added more partners and created a larger ecosystem approach, collaborating with lenders, incubators, government agencies, pro bono services, and re-entry organizations to build sustainable communities from within. As a result of the success of RTC's programs throughout New Jersey and the national publicity the organization has garnered over the years, RTC received invitations from organizations and government agencies in over 50 cities to expand or to help others to start local chapters of RTC.

RTC chose a careful growth trajectory 3-year strategic plan focused on capacity-building: increasing staff, building systems, and laying groundwork for future expansion. This strategy culminated with launching of services out of Jersey City for the first time to serve the needs of the neighboring Essex County. This national work is just beginning to bring the Rising Tide Model into new communities and they are sparking new conversations about the future of work, inclusive economics, sustainability, and strong local communities.

For example, RTC licensed the Rising Tide Model to partner organizations in communities nationwide to accelerate their development and impact as local entrepreneurship support hubs.

In 2018, RTC, through financing from public and private sector, acquired the building that hosts their permanent national headquarters in Jersey City, in the community where they have existed for the past 15 years. The building is comprised of 10 affordable housing units, bringing a unique live/work lifestyle into the Greenville community as well as a sustainable strategy for local economic empowerment. "This was a true example of the promise of collaborative restorative investments for long-term, sustainable impact for community and economic revitalization.

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WeCyclers

Since demonstrating its success in collecting waste from the harder-to-reach streets of Lagos, WeCyclers captured attention in Nigeria from the state level. They also partnered with the Lagos Waste Management Authority to improve the city's collection services.

Additionally, WeCyclers and Nestlé partnered in waste recycling in Nigeria following an agreement that was signed in 2019 between the two entities. The alliance allows WeCyclers to expand plastic waste recovery systems in the country. This facilitates the creation of jobs in the country and the registration of new subscribers in the WeCyclers circuit.

Additionally, Africa Cleanup Initiative, an NGO with focus on sustainability, partnered with WeCyclers to improve education by using plastic bottles as a substitute for tuition fees to encourage parents to send their children to school and then save more money to fix other challenges at home. Parents collect plastic waste and drop it at a WeCyclers location. WeCyclers ensure that bottles are converted to reusable materials.

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Furthermore, WeCyclers is part of the Fair Plastic Alliance, which brings together for-profit and non-profit international stakeholders, with a common goal: to develop a fair and inclusive production chain for plastic recycling. For example, the partnership between WeCyclers and Fair Plastic Alliance Nigeria in partnership with the Lagos Waste Management Authority and the Lagos State Ministry of the Environment hosted the first Plastic Waste Management Policy Workshop in line with the Lagos State Governor's T.H.E.M.E.S Agenda. This workshop's key objective was to develop a common a set of procedures and goals to be used in negotiation and decision making to guide a more detailed set of policies for plastic waste management in the state.

These partnerships offer men and women who operate in the informal waste collection sector the opportunity to have a fully recognized job and a dignified lifestyle.

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Mariam Seba Production Factory	<p>After receiving a patent for her product in 2006, Mebrahtu developed a business plan for a factory. She received a loan in 2009 from the development bank of Ethiopia for 150,000 USD and built a factory to produce her patented pads.</p> <p>Following that, Mebrahtu met Dr. Lewis Wall, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology from the United States. He was greatly impressed with how much she was doing and in 2014, he and his wife created a nonprofit, Dignity Period, as a partner to her work.</p>
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The Dignity Period Project: is a collaborative community development project between Mekelle University, the Mariam Seba Sanitary Products Factory and Dignity Period which seeks to improve knowledge about menstruation in northern Ethiopia and to provide free, locally-produced, environmentally friendly, reusable menstrual hygiene products to schoolgirls.

According to Dignity Period, "the project works to improve the psychosocial environment of Ethiopian girls with respect to menstruation, to reduce school absences from menstruation-related causes, and to stimulate the growth of a viable commercial industry that someday can meet the need for menstrual hygiene supplies in an efficient, locally-sourced, and cost-effective manner."

Through the Dignity Period project, they have provided educational materials about menstruation to girls and boys in Ethiopian schools through a bilingual (English/Tigrigna) educational booklet and on-site, in-school training on menstrual hygiene management. Dignity Period has distributed more than 150,000 free menstrual hygiene kits purchased from MSPF.

Following Mebrahtu's 2019 CNN Hero award for her work on reducing the cultural stigma attached to menstruation in parts of rural Ethiopia, a Menstrual Hygiene and Health taskforce was formed under the leadership of Mebrahtu with the support of Sahle-Work Zewde, Ethiopia's first woman president, to spearhead MSPF's menstrual hygiene work in Ethiopia.

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As seen above, the capacity to establish symbiotic partnership is one of the keys to SBE success. In particular, an SBE's capacity for role-taking produces reciprocal orientations and helps resolve ambiguity through shared purposes with external partners. In doing so, SBEs create systems to communicate with others via recognizable and shared language. This allows the SBEs

to create the desired impact with similar procedures across and through external partnerships. In particular, these interaction align with SBEs actions with external partners to create innovative arrangements *to conserve natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity for all.*

### ***Success Factor 5: Technology***

SBEs used technology to innovate their solutions and amplify their shared meanings and purposes within and across the organization to produce public common goods. The intentional re/configuration of technological tools for this purpose appears in three main ways across the SBEs: (1) by inventing a new technology and/or reconfiguring an existing technology to solve a SBE's respective blocked impulse; (2) by using technology to build alliances through shared meanings and shared purposes with clients and partners to execute SBE's mission; and 3) by systemizing the organization's operations, measurements, and appraisals for intentional replication by other organizations. Ultimately this allows other organizations to create the same impact with the same procedures as the original SBE.

Below, I discuss three sets of examples illustrating these three uses of technology that in SBE context. Following that, in a matrix table, I present this technology success factor in paraphrased, synthesized, or as quoted content for all the selected cases (Table 12).

#### **Example 1: Invent a New Technology and/or Reconfigure an Existing Technology to Solve a SBE's Respective Blocked Impulse.**

***MSPF.*** Using her engineering background, Mebrahtu developed sanitary pads that were affordable, reliable, and environmentally friendly. Mebrahtu's pads cost 90% less than a year's worth of disposable pads and can last up to two years with proper care. She received a patent for her invention from the science and technology ministry of Ethiopia in 2006. After receiving a

patent, Mebrahtu developed a business plan for a factory and received a loan in 2009 from the development bank of Ethiopia to build a factory to produce her patented pads.

***WeCyclers.*** WeCyclers' innovation is a low-tech and high-impact solution that works from the ground up by deploying a fleet of low-cost, environmentally friendly bikes into the narrow streets and alleys of the city's slum neighborhoods, which state-sponsored collection vehicles are unable to reach. The collected material is later delivered to the company's collection site for sorting, packaging, and transporting to various recycling hubs in the city.

***soleRebels.*** soleRebels is committed to using the most sustainable technology and materials in every aspect of their production. These methods and materials have stood the test of time in Ethiopia and are by their essence sustainable and low impact. They source the cotton from small-scale heritage organic and traditional growers and use the organic fabric to hand spin shoe interiors and strap linings. Additionally, inspired by the traditional "barabasso" shoes, soleRebels repurposes recycled old tires and these initiatives divert waste from landfills and save CO2 from being emitted when landfill-bound tires are burned.

**Example 2: Use Technology to Build Alliance through Shared Meanings and Shared Purposes with Clients or Partners to Execute SBE's Mission.** Solar Sister realized how critical data collection and management systems are for their business. Thus, Solar Sister worked with Blue Drop Learning Networks to develop an interactive online curriculum for frontline staff in 2018. The Business Development Associates were able to connect classroom knowledge to field practice. This increased their adaptability when they begin to lead trainings at the community level.

Also, using Gogla, a data management software, Solar Sister also quantifies multi-layer data sets like the number of households reached with clean energy, the resulting cost savings per



household from solar energy, the increased number of available study or work hours from having access to light, and the quantified CO2 mitigation. Solar Sister explained,

Strong monitoring and evaluation enables us to provide individual entrepreneurs with the support they need to grow their businesses. It ensures that as they pioneer new initiatives, incentives and trainings, they are testing and strengthening them based on real time feedback.

Through such data management systems, Solar Sister continues to refine its reporting capabilities by transitioning from a cumbersome product inventory system to a categorical product structure for easy filtering that automatically-incorporates metrics into Salesforce.

**Example 3: Systemize the Organization's Operations, Measurements and Appraisals for Intentional Replication by Other Organizations.** As a result of the success of RTC programs throughout New Jersey and the national publicity the organization has garnered over the years, RTC received invitations from organizations and government agencies in more than 50 cities to expand or to help others to start local chapters of RTC. To address this need, RTC packaged its model and infrastructure for licensed replication by others—including not just its curriculum, but also the entire set of systems, program management processes, and outcome tracking infrastructure needed to carry out this kind of work.

For example, in 2013 RTC piloted their model with Sunshine Enterprises, the small business development arm of a century-old faith-based organization in Chicago. Since then, Sunshine Enterprises has graduated 33 classes of the Community Business Academy, served hundreds of clients through their Business Acceleration Services, and fully adopted RTC's systems and processes for managing the program and tracking outcomes. Over the course of 5 years, Sunshine Enterprises outpaced Rising Tide's historic track record across every metric and milestone. Speaking of RTC's replication efforts RTC's CEO Alfa Demmellash said,

Now we have over 3000 entrepreneurs in New Jersey and we've actually, over the past few years started partnering with other community-based organizations. Right now, we're in three other states—Illinois, South Carolina and North Carolina—where we have active replication efforts going on. So they're supporting hundreds of entrepreneurs in their communities. We work with about a thousand entrepreneurs in six New Jersey cities, in Spanish and in English. So it's a remarkable story that I get to be a witness of.

Demmellash's statement illustrates RTC's realization that the demand for their entrepreneurship development model will continue to increase in the coming decades as automation and other technology innovations change the global economy, national labor market, and the future of work. This also exemplifies the critical role data collection and management systems play in establishing successful SBEs.

**Table 12***Success Factor 5: Technology*

	Technology
Solar Sister	<p>Solar Sister realized how critical data collection and management systems are for their business. Solar Sister worked with Blue-Drop Learning Networks to develop an interactive online curriculum for frontline staff in 2018. As a result, the Business Development Associates were able to connect classroom knowledge to field practice. This increased their adaptability when they begin to lead trainings at the community level.</p> <p>Also, by using Gogla, a data management software, the organization quantifies multi-layer data sets like the number of households reached with clean energy, the resulting cost savings per household from solar energy, the increased number of available study or work hours from having access to light, and the quantified CO2 mitigation.</p> <p>“Strong monitoring and evaluation enables us to provide individual entrepreneurs with the support they need to grow their businesses. It ensures that as they pioneer new initiatives, incentives and trainings, they are testing and strengthening them based on real time feedback,” Solar Sister explained.</p>
soleRebels	<p>soleRebels sells shoes from its online website and its many national and international physical stores. It has grown to employ 300 people in Ethiopia and several hundred more in its international stores. Currently, soleRebels is on track to be a global brand retail chain from a developing nation to achieve over \$200 million in revenue.</p> <p>soleRebels is committed to using the most sustainable technology and materials in every aspect of their production. These methods and materials have stood the test of time in Ethiopia and are by their essence sustainable and low impact. They source the cotton from small-scale heritage organic and traditional growers and use the organic fabric to hand spin shoe interiors and strap linings. All of their hand-loomed fabrics are made using traditional eucalyptus looms that have been used in Ethiopia for centuries leading to a reduction in electricity consumption with zero carbon output from the making of the fabrics. Finally the leather used to make the shoes is derived from small-scale free-range animal raising, where animals freely roam and graze, tended to by their owners.</p>
RTC	<p>RTC realized the demand for RTC’s entrepreneurship development model will continue to increase in the coming decades as automation and other technology innovations change the global economy, national labor market, and the future of work.</p> <p>To address this need, RTC packaged its model and infrastructure for licensed replication by others—including not just its curriculum, but also the entire set of systems, program management processes, and outcome tracking infrastructure needed to carry out this kind of work</p>
WeCyclers	<p>WeCyclers’ innovation is a low-tech and high-impact solution that works from the ground up by deploying a fleet of low-cost, environmentally friendly bikes into the narrow streets and alleys of the city’s slum neighborhoods. The</p>

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collected material is later delivered to the company's collection site for sorting, packaging, and transporting to various hubs in the city.

WeCyclers rewards households with redeemable points based on the volume and quality of recyclables. As households accumulate points over time, they can redeem their points for specific rewards like money, basic household items, etc. making the benefits of recycling tangible. The rewards program is funded by the sale of the collected waste and through corporate sponsorships and managed through data management system that is tailored to WeCyclers needs.

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Mariam Seba Production Factory	Using her engineering background, Mebrahtu developed sanitary pads that were affordable, reliable, and environmentally friendly. Mebrahtu's pads cost 90% less than a year's worth of disposable pads and can last up to two years with proper care. She received a patent for her invention from the science and technology ministry of Ethiopia in 2006.
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These three sets of *Technology* success factor examples illustrate how SBEs used technology to innovate their solutions and amplify their shared meanings and purposes to produce their respective public common goods. An underlying assumption of technology, as a success factor for SBEs, is that it can be purposefully re/configured, in this case through SBEs' normative position, to produce and/or catalyze a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing common good.

### **Discussion: Success Factors**

The interaction between the five success factors created new roles and expectations, producing new activities to establish successful SBEs, SBE meaning systems, and SBE community practitioners. As discussed previously, these success factors are neither static nor mutually exclusive. Rather, these factors develop with one another over time, and continuously evolve in a feedback learning system. For example, the technology success factor amplified and systemized the establishment of symbiotic external partners. Likewise, symbiotic external partners infused resources and expanded the shared meanings of the collaborative internal team's success factor: locally. In collaboration with the other factors, these factors enable the symbolic

and reciprocal communication of the SBE's visionary leadership. Thus, the reciprocal interaction of these factors with one another, within and across the organization produced SBEs' common good.

This study highlights the role symbolic interaction plays in SBEs and provides new insights into the importance that interactions play in introducing and establishing a new system or organization in society. While the five success factors identified from this study may not exactly appear in other SBEs or SBE-type organizations, the significance of reciprocal interactions in creating shared meanings and shared purposes with others can be applied in other contexts to produce public common goods. These findings in particular contribute to the process of building shared meaning systems and a community of these shared meaning practitioners directed toward a public common good, such as SBE's normative position: *to conserve natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social imperatives for a shared prosperity for all.*

### **Conclusion**

The barriers and success factors identified in this study demonstrate the importance reciprocal interactions play in introducing and establishing a new system or organization in society. These elements are not static, but ongoing processes often working in development with one another. In these, symbolic interactionism shared meanings and shared purposes are constructed. Specifically, symbolic interactionism highlights how micro-level reciprocal interactions construct macro-level changes. Thus, society, largely, is a shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another.

However, there are many barriers to establish sustainable and regeneratively flourishing systems in the profit-first economic model that does not prioritize these principles. My research

finding illustrates how SBEs advanced their normative position through reciprocal interaction. Practitioners interested in advancing SBE's normative position should focus on creating systems that are governed by shared meanings within the organization and shared purposes across the organization. Further research is needed on this topic to better understand how small, local reciprocal interaction efforts can become a global force for change.

### **Limitations**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that there is often criticism of qualitative research such as grounded theory. However, this criticism stems from the guidelines based on the (post)-positivist ideology quantitative approach dealing with issues such as hypothesis construction, sampling, reliability, validity, and verification but that is not applicable in iterative pragmatist case study methodology. Although generalizability is not the aim of the study, the small sample number and the study's focus on successes rather than on a mixed group of successful and failed sustainable businesses limits the study's ability to generalize. However, common features of context, ways of thinking, and the relationship of behavior to ideas could make some of these findings applicable in other contexts.

My reliance on data from existing accounts limits my ability to gain precise insight into the process of meaning making illustrated in the SBEs' success factors. Further, the use of existing data subjects me to the biases of multiple observers and may limit my ability to gain equivalent comparisons across cases I accepted these limitations because of the high costs of collecting original data across two continents and five countries. Now that I have identified common success factors across multiple cases, such costs may be manageable to further explore particular SBE interactions in depth through primary data sources and gain an in-depth understanding of intersubjective meaning making processes in future research.

## Future Research Questions

In the next phase of this research project, using the above exploratory findings, I will examine the intersubjective meaning making processes of the SBEs through an open-ended questions to gather details about the activities and interactions that produced the SBEs success factors using the following interview questions:

- How did you build your team and how did you relay your mission to them?
- Can you describe the process that produced your success in detail?
  - Please describe an element of the process clearly and discuss how it developed?
- Can you describe the key internal and external participants of the business?
  - Can you describe the type of agreements you have with them?
  - Can you describe the meetings or interactions between different stakeholders?
    - How long did it take?
    - How many meetings?
    - What problems were overcome?
- How were you able to sustain yourself financially in the development phase?
- What advice would you share with aspiring SBEs?
- Any additional thoughts that we didn't have the opportunity to talk about?

Exploring these questions will provide a first-hand understanding of the processes, language, interactions, and content of meaning making that contributed to the SBEs success.

I will begin the interview with an explanation of the intent and purpose of the study. I will then share my interest in the topic, the exploratory findings of this research, and my story in order to set the tone for an open discussion. To ensure high ethical standards, I will provide a consent form before beginning the interview. The consent form will state that the interview will be recorded and that all recording would be kept confidential.

**Paper 3: How Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs’ “Social Act” Produce Sustainable and  
Regeneratively Flourishing Society**

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world;  
indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

Margaret Mead

**Abstract**

Using Mead’s social act and role-taking, I discuss how Sustainable Business entrepreneurs (SBE) successfully implement their respective sustainable businesses to become a community of SBE practitioners. Those in the SBE community are of similar minds and do similar things. Despite their differences, SBEs in general have recognizably similar orientations. This paper broadly highlights how SBE’s social action, blocked impulses, perception, manipulation, and consummation advance the common good. In particular, I describe a finding of how one SBE, Bethlehem Alemu of soleRebels became successful. Alemu’s success demonstrates how people might learn and practice new roles and responsibilities, and reconstruct themselves to encourage the growing need to transition society sustainably. Following that, I discuss how my research complements existing sustainable entrepreneurship literature. My research also illustrates and adds to the literature the importance of micro-level interactions of meaning making and shared purposes for macro-level changes, as seen through the SBEs. Additionally, I present and discuss possible alternative SBE success explanations.



## Introduction

Sustainable Business Entrepreneurs (SBEs) are part of a larger population of sustainability practitioners, and their behavior creates and is created by intersections of experience, aspiration, and social organization practices. A practice involves integrated aspects of engaging in a distinct activity governed by a specific cognitive style or framework of thought that in turn characterizes thinking while engaging in a given practice (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Morales, 1998; Morgan, 2020). In particular, a practice is:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 1997, p.187).

The pragmatist identifies community of practitioners as recognizable coordinated complexes of human interaction governed by intersubjectivity and reciprocal orientation made possible through language (Morales, 2010). Mead's (1977) symbolic interaction theory asserts that language establishes the basis for intersubjective agreement and reciprocal orientation regarding collective action in a community. It explains how people learn from interacting with each other and how people relate to each other in organizing some activity (Allen, 2017). Furthermore, situated practices are built from participants adjusting their responses to each other within an ongoing social process (Morales, 1998, 2010). These social adjustments are the bedrock to both simple and complex social systems (Allen, 2017; Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Additionally, practice requires the socialization of members.

Following the above symbolic interactionist theory, this research postulates that SBE practitioners are socialized into the practice of the community through a discrete cluster of

shared meaning strains (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Morales, 1998, 2010). Given that social rules across communities are made possible by language, SBEs' experiences change with language and are pluralistic. Though language and usage may differ from person to person in a community, shared purposes resolve ambiguity (Morales, 2010; Morgan, 2020). Thus, although SBE practices vary, they are oriented similarly because they are of similar "sustainable" habits and mind (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Therefore, those in the SBE community are of similar minds, do similar things and have recognizably similar orientations. In this regard SBEs have no particular empirical referent because they can appear in many forms (Morales, 1998). However, they do have some normative reference of sustainability for the community of practitioners, including importantly, orienting aspirations.

Mead comprehends interaction in a community of practitioners as "flow of action" that governs creativity involving a number of reciprocal interactions (Morales, 2010). The reciprocal interaction includes two key elements of Mead's theory: the social act and taking the role of the other. Below, using Mead's social act and taking the role of the other, I discuss how SBEs successfully implement their respective sustainable businesses to become a community of SBE practitioners and how those practices fit into the existing SBE literature.

### **The Social Act and Taking the Role of the Other**

Mead's (1977) symbolic interactionism theory shows how interaction within a community of practitioners with similar reference of sustainability, such as SBEs, can produce common goods like public responsibility or public services from their normative position. Mead highlights two key elements of interaction that allow for the production of common goods: social act and taking the role of the other. The social act comes in four phases (Morales, 2010): impulse (I want to be an entrepreneur), perception (I want to be a sustainable entrepreneur), manipulation

(how do I learn and manipulate my environment in order to be a SBE), and consummation (I opened my business, I made a positive impact). A person's choice of how to participate in social activities relies on taking the role of the other. Thus, actions arise out of social interaction (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Symbolic interaction is an interpretive process that directs the actions of the one doing the interpreting and conveys to the other, or to one's self, how one "is to act" (Blumer, 1969, p. 66). It is a cyclical and fluid process, in which participants continually adapt or change their acts to fit the ongoing acts of one another (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013).

SBEs take on the role of the other in two main ways: one, as the communities the profit-first business model have directly or indirectly marginalized, and two, as the earth's ecosystem and the non-human species that rely on it for survival. Essentially, SBEs take on the role of those who are not part of the profit-first business model, those Dewey (1938) classifies as the non-community members. Non-community members, in particular, are those people who are not socialized into the intersubjective community, who participate in this community as "consumers, or users or subjects or victims, voluntary or involuntary," (Dewey, 1938, p. 150). SBEs take on the role of the non-community members in response to what Mead (1977) describes as a blocked impulse, the first stage of the social act.

Broadly, SBE's blocked impulses present themselves as a recognition of a problem and as an action-oriented question. With roughly half of the world's population living in extreme poverty, SBEs argue that profit-first business principles are socially, economically, and ecologically unsustainable and should not be expanded. However, the problem is how SBEs can help economically-marginalized communities and nations gain agency and access for a shared prosperity?

To find a resolution to the above problem, SBEs take on the roles of others, view themselves as objects from the standpoints of others, and consider alternative lines of action to resolve this blocked impulse (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Morales, 2010). Though we cannot always predict how a SBE will proceed in resolving a blocked impulse, we do know that shared purposes through intersubjective agreements and reciprocal orientations will help reconcile differences to reach a common goal.

Below, using Mead's social act, I describe how one SBE, Bethlehem Alemu of soleRebels became a successful SBE. Alemu's success demonstrates how people might learn and practice new roles and responsibilities, and reconstruct themselves to encourage the growing need to transition society sustainably. Following that, I discuss how my research complements existing sustainable entrepreneurship literature. My research also illustrates and adds to the literature the importance of micro-level interactions of meaning making and shared purposes for macro-level changes, as seen through the SBEs. Additionally, I present and discuss possible alternative SBE success explanations.

### **Bethlehem Alemu's Social Act**

To become a successful sustainable business, soleRebels embraced the country's crafts artisans and utilized their rich and environmentally sustainable manufacturing traditions, created local, national and international partnerships for handmade products, and inspired new creations for a regional and international footwear market. Alemu's blocked impulse came when she saw that skilled artisans in her small community of Zenebework in Ethiopia lived in chronic unemployment. She founded soleRebels to bring job opportunities to her community by tapping into the community's rich artisan heritage. Discussing her motivation behind soleRebels, Alemu shared,

With all the incredible culture, history and talent around me, how was it that we were receiving charity instead of benefiting from our own talent and resources? . . . I wanted to find a way to share my love for the amazing artisanship of Ethiopia with the world while creating well-paid meaningful work for the people in my local community leveraging their immense creative skills . . . . I knew that my project had to be truly business-oriented to overcome the complacency and dependency charity had created.

To brainstorm business ideas during the perception stage of Mead’s social act, Alemu visited popular market shops. From there, Alemu started re-imagining what footwear could be. She scanned her environment to re-imagine strategies to create a successful business idea. She narrowed her idea down to the barabasso, a type of shoe that was handmade from recycled tires. Alemu decided to blend the traditional creative artisan talents from her community with the traditional barabasso into a world-class shoes brand. During this perception process, she tried alternative roles and distinct courses of action to reimagine the barabasso. In the process she was learning the language, ideas, and behaviors associated with creating a sustainable business. During this scanning process she was also managing how others might respond to her action. Reflecting on other’s response to her business idea, Alemu recalled,

When I started soleRebels many people laughed and said I was crazy. . . . [They asked] “your plan is to remake the barabasso into a global footwear brand leveraging the artisan talents in THAT community? What kind of business idea is that?” What did I know about shoes anyway? I was scared. I didn’t have anything backing me up if I failed.

Despite this, Alemu continued with her plan, anchored in the believe that the best road to true and lasting prosperity lies in communities that produce world class products that leverage local talents and resources.

She, along with five workers, set up a workshop on her grandmother’s plot in the village of Zenebework to bring her vision to life. During this manipulation phase of the social act, Alemu worked with her team to discover the utility of their talents through reciprocal orientation. She started with building her team to believe in her vision. Alemu explained,

We had a grand idea and vision. We aimed from day one to create, grow and control a world-class footwear brand that would craft creative and comfortable footwear while generating more jobs and growing prosperity for our workers; and all this from our own community by leveraging its artisan skills and the natural resources of the nation. We wanted to show people that it is possible to be local and at the same time globally successful. Our vision created an intoxicating sense of motivation and ambition among our team who stayed focused on creating something world class.

The first prototype shoes weighed 3 kilos. With time and practice, soleRebels improved the design through making it thinner and incorporating modern design for international appeal. The result is something soleRebels calls FUSIONFASHION—a marriage between traditional cultural crafts and contemporary design. Through the process Alemu learned the concepts common to sustainable business practices in order to communicate and build international and national partnerships. Her experience changed with time and context as her business evolved. Reflecting on her learning process of building the FUSIONFASHION design and developing an international market to sell the finished products, Alemu said, “People say that you need to spend 10,000 hours in your company. For me, I would say I spent 40,000 hours. I would spend hours trying to figure out what is going on in my company, how to win a market, how to create jobs.”

Throughout the process of becoming an international brand, Alemu committed herself and soleRebels to use the most sustainable materials in every aspect of production. For example, soleRebels sources cotton from small-scale heritage organic and traditional growers and repurposes old tires by cutting them into the soles of their footwear. “These methods and materials have stood the test of time in Ethiopia and are by their essence sustainable and low impact,” Alemu explained.

To further ensure their sustainability practice, soleRebels underwent a rigorous auditing process to ensure that all of their products are made in accordance with sustainable working conditions and sound environmental practices through the World Fair Trade Organization

(WFTO). Which led to soleRebels becoming the first ever footwear brand to be WFTO fair-trade certified. Through this partnership, soleRebels adheres to the WFTO's 10 principles of Fair Trade which cover a range of categories such as working conditions, wages, the environment and gender equality. Discussing her motivation to build a sustainable brand, Alemu explained, "If I put up a sustainable way of working, a sustainable lifestyle brand, then people will aspire to follow that lead." Through its Fair Trade designation, soleRebels established Ethiopia's traditional crafts industry products for a regional and international market.

To establish an international market, however, soleRebels had to work through many challenges. Mainly, navigating through the challenges of accessing limited internet availability in Ethiopia to email proposals of the FUSIONFASHION styles to over 2,000 contacts to find a store that could stock their shoes. They eventually got a response from Urban Outfitters in the United States of America and established relationships with Urban Outfitters for two years until they got the green light to ship 2,000 shoes in 16 days. With this deadline and only 5 people working at that time, Alemu looked for additional artisans who helped them weave the shoes and deliver the product on time. Urban Outfitters placed them under their social responsibility category and they became the best seller.

Building on their success from Urban Outfitters, soleRebels hired designers and began to diversify their designs. Later, soleRebels partnered with Amazon for 5 years and delivered 5,000 pairs of shoes per month. Today, soleRebels sells shoes from its own website and through its national and international stores. It has grown to employ 300 people in Ethiopia and several hundred more in its international stores. Currently, soleRebels is on track to be the first global brand retail chain from a developing nation to achieve over \$200 million in revenue. Importantly, soleRebels has become a successful global company while providing full medical benefits and

education funds for their employees and their families, and offering wages three times the industry average. Reflecting on the success of her company, Alemu shared,

We have created world class jobs, a world class company and brand, while empowering our community and country. We have done this while simultaneously presenting a galvanized, dynamic face of African creativity to the global market. These actions, I believe, have forever shifted the discourse on African development from one of poverty alleviation orchestrated by external actors, to one about prosperity creation driven by local Africans maximizing their talents and resources. And that's key because no one was positioning things like that before soleRebels emerged and certainly no one was implementing it on the scale we have.

The road to success, however, has not been easy for soleRebels. One of soleRebels hardest battles was to fight for their intellectual property. In 2013, soleRebels discovered that a company in Canada registered the “soleRebels.com” domain and were redirecting web traffic to sell imitations of soleRebels products. Learning of this, soleRebels filed a lawsuit through a U.S.-based law firm against the Canada based company and won the arbitration proceeding.

Reflecting on soleRebels' win, Alemu shared,

It isn't the first time someone has tried to threaten our Intellectual Property and we know it won't be the last. But at least the record is clear – mess with our brand and we will take action against you. And win. [she added] For Ethiopia and Africa to truly prosper, creating potent homegrown globally successful brands is key and protecting those brands is an equally crucial piece of that endeavor.

As Alemu protected her soleRebels intellectual property, she established herself and soleRebels as an international SBE brand, and affirmed her vision of creating a world-class international brand based in a market that is oftentimes only looked at through the lens of charity by the international market.

Building on her success, Alemu is a strong advocate for locally grown sustainable business opportunity beyond her community to create systematic sustainable social change to the larger Ethiopia and Africa context. She also takes on different social roles to share her expertise in building such sustainable business with government and non-governmental entities. For



example, Alemu consulted with the government of Ethiopia and other industry leaders to meet Ethiopia's sustainable Growth & Transformation plan set by the Ethiopian government. With the active support of Ethiopia's Ministry of Industry and the Leather Industry Development Institute, Alemu established "Made by Ethiopia" to leverage her and her team's deep experience in Ethiopian footwear manufacturing and their Fair Trade operational ethos in order to assist brands to produce the best footwear in Ethiopia. Explaining her motivations for creating this dynamic partnership role to help other producers around the country, Alemu said, "It took me a decade to employ 400 people but it shouldn't have taken that long — and it wouldn't have either if I'd had access to the right partners."

Continuing her mission to spread sustainable business practices as an avenue to create local prosperity, Alemu joined the advisory board of the Green Industry Platform, convened by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the UN Environment Programme.

As a member of the Green Industry Platform's Advisory Board, Alemu worked alongside other government, business and civil society leaders to help guide the direction and strategy of the Platform's activities and to advise on how to most effectively meet the Platform's objective of scaling up and mainstreaming green industry policies and practices on a global level. Reflecting on her advisory role, Alemu shared, "I am extremely honored to join the Advisory Board and I am looking forward to working with a diversity of international actors and using soleRebels' experience to help benefit others."

Additionally, Alemu was appointed by the United Nations Development Programme in Ethiopia as the Goodwill Ambassador for Entrepreneurship in recognition of her inspirational role for budding entrepreneurs in the country. Through this role, she hoped to encourage

entrepreneurial energies in Ethiopia and generate a new wave of sustainable entrepreneurs to reach more people and impact more lives. Alemu's capacity to take on multiple roles produced reciprocal orientations in the entrepreneurship space and helped break the social and institutional barriers that hinder others from reaching the knowledge necessary to create successful sustainable businesses in Ethiopia.

In this analysis, I have applied Mead's concept of the social act, role expectations and role-taking to understand how Alemu became a successful SBE. Alemu's example demonstrates how people might learn and practice new roles and responsibilities, reconstructing themselves and creating a nuanced public service in the process and how their new selves as a successful SBE emerge from the old. In particular, the capacity for role-taking produces reciprocal orientations and helps SBEs create systems to communicate with other SBEs.

### **SBEs' Social Act Connection to Sustainable Entrepreneurship Literature**

Recognizable communities are built from participants adjusting their responses to each other within an ongoing social process. Mead assumes social life, thereby society, involves interaction with others and these interaction can be studied using the concept of a "social act" (Morales, 2010). As discussed above, the social act is generally initiated during a blocked impulse, which compels some emotion and implies a course of action. Perception and manipulation transforms the emotion into action until the impulse is consummated or diminished.

### **Blocked Impulse**

Generally, a blocked impulse compels some emotion, the impulse becomes an image or images, and each image implies a course of action, inclusive of others' reactions to the plan. A subsequent impulse transforms the plan to action, combines the plan with another plan, or blocks

the plan (Morales, 2010). A SBE's blocked impulse, in particular, arises from the recognition that society faces an enormous challenge in improving people's lives in a way that is sustainable, equitable, and socially just. In particular, it arises from the adverse impacts of economic policies that trade off social and environmental value creation in favor of profit and continuous economic growth (Schaefer et al., 2015). A study of sustainable entrepreneurs (Biberhofer et al., 2019) found that sustainability driven entrepreneurs,

critically reflect on the current neoliberal market economy and the constant growth paradigm; they are highly aware of the dilemma of a growth-based economic system . . . emphasizing the necessity of transforming one's understanding of how to do business so that it meets the needs of the present on a social, environmental, and economic scale, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (p. 30).

In other words, SBEs see that the profit-oriented business model has led to systemic social and environmental challenges in the 21st century (Berkes & Folke, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Yunus, 2018). To resolve the blocked impulse SBEs take on the roles of others, view themselves as objects from the standpoints of others, and consider alternative lines of action (Mead, 1977).

### **Perception**

During the perception stage of the social act, SBEs scan the environment for what is needed to resolve their blocked impulse. This can be at some distance from the immediate objective and is similarly organized by different sustainability oriented minds with similar objectives (Morales, 2010). This scanning process involves imagination as SBEs conceive how others might respond to some action. SBEs' choice of how to participate in activities relies on taking the role of the other. As discussed above, SBEs take on the role of the other in two main ways: one, as the communities that the profit-first business model has directly or indirectly marginalized, and two, as the earth's ecosystem and the non-human species that rely on it for survival.

The SBE perception is guided through the understanding of the interdependencies of all things in the ecosystem (Berkes & Folke, 2003; Katsikis & Kyrgidou, 2009). Thus, they believe that to solve sustainability-related market failures, solutions need to address social and environmental objectives simultaneously (Biberhofer et al., 2019; Robinson, 2006). Core to SBE's understanding is that humans are embedded within the ecosystem and not apart from it (Berkes & Folke, 2003; Schaefer et al., 2015). Alvord et al. (2004) describe this understanding as:

not only [understanding] the immediate problems but also the larger social systems and its interdependencies, so they can introduce new paradigms at critical leverage points that lead to cascades of mutually reinforcing changes in social arrangements to shifts in the societal context within which the original problem is embedded and sustained (p. 262).

SBEs leverage this interdependency and understand the importance of building alternative systems that function for all. In particular, SBE's alternative lines of action to the blocked impulse revisit profit-first thinking by framing it with the ethos of interdependence—conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods—through the integration of environmental, economic, and social constraints for a shared prosperity.

### **Manipulation Stage**

In the course of manipulation, SBEs discover the utility of their action and the responses of others. As they experiment, they consider the activities of others, as well as the potential resistance to their choices in managing the ongoing responses of others through intersubjective communication (Morales, 2010). Each interaction produces its own nuanced choices, “choices that constitute, intensify, or expand the enduring fabric as a basis for alternative courses of action” (Mead, 1938, pp. 191-92). Specifically, during this stage, SBEs experiment with alternative ideas to create environmental, social, and economic values for a transformative

societal change. They do this by experimenting with and establishing new ventures that are not part of the previously accepted stock of business ideas (Gibbs, 2006; Katsikis & Kyrgidou, 2009). Although these principles of sustainable entrepreneurship are not new, their peripheral status creates a dilemma about how to bring it to mainstream practice (El Ebrashi, 2012; Gibson-Graham et al., 2008). The sustainable entrepreneur focuses on “new products, services and processes for the market or industry but is distinguished from growth-oriented entrepreneurship through a change of values and the manner in which opportunities are discovered and exploited—moving from personal to socio-ecological gain” (Biberhofer et al., 2019, p. 23). In essence, solutions to the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s sustainability challenges require practices that have gone unrecognized or underappreciated in the profit-first economic model.

### **Consummation**

During the final stage of the social act—consummation—SBEs infuse the larger business context with the newly experimented ideas as an alternative institution to the status quo. They do this in the existing socio-regulatory and economic context. This is to say they take existing organizational forms and deploy them towards sustainability. Consummation is successful “by the construction of a new world harmonizing the conflicting interests into which enters the new self” (Mead, 1964, p. 149).

To establish these alternative practices, SBEs build successful partnerships (Alvord et al., 2004; Katsikis & Kyrgidou, 2009; Schaefer et al., 2015) and collaborate with relevant multi-stakeholders (El Ebrashi, 2012; Gibbs, 2006). The ability to work in multi-stakeholder networks is one of the most important factors the sustainable entrepreneur uses to establish alternative solutions (Alvord et al., 2004; Schaefer et al., 2015). Biberhofer et al. (2019) asserts that “sustainable entrepreneurship [requires] building bridges, speaking different languages and

translating between different interests, participating in and sometimes also leading discourses, and last but not least the ability to work in networks” (p. 30).

In this final stage of the social act, SBE’s normative ideals may not fully be realized or realizable, but the attempt to harmonize competing claims toward social progression and movement is at the root of the pragmatist’s principle of finding “what works” (Morales, 1998; Morgan, 2014). Thus, SBEs will continue to experiment and try alternative actions to move society forward sustainably until their social act effectuates the production of public goods that maximize and enhance humans’ lived experience in general and produce the common good of SBE’s normative position in particular.

### **Alternative Explanation to SBE’s Success**

Sustainable businesses are not necessarily successful because they espouse sustainable practices. But like any business, those with greater access to resources and networks are able to reach higher levels of success. For example, research that looked at determinants of success in women entrepreneurs found that those with greater access to education, work experience, access to finance, access to business training, government support, access to information, land ownership, and reasonable levied tax (Alene, 2020) were more successful than women with lower access to these determinants. While having a favorable background definitely contributes to one’s ability to be successful, research on sustainable entrepreneurship, specifically, has shown that their successes are also tied to their counter-status quo innovative strategies (Katsikis & Kyrgidou, 2009). It is also tied to the sustainable entrepreneur’s ability to create cooperative, as opposed to competitive, social networks to meet their business objective (Schaefer et al., 2015).

Others may point out that SBEs are successful because sustainable businesses have been shown to have economic advantages in the long term, many times outperforming their competition (Eisler, 2021; Finster & Hernke, 2014). Thus, one could argue that SBEs are not motivated, necessarily, to create social impact, but rather by profit in a manner similar to traditional entrepreneurs. This argument holds some truth; however, the ethical imperatives for sustainable entrepreneurs, such as social and environmental impacts, are just as important as the financial return found in traditional business models (Austin, 2006; Mair, 2006). The sustainable entrepreneur is keenly aware of the dilemma of needing to secure economic viability for the organization's ultimate success (Biberhofer et al., 2019). Hence, the sustainable entrepreneur experiments with alternative business models, oftentimes drawing on indigenous holistic principles (du Plessis, 2012; Laman & Raygorodetsky, 2018) to balance the constraints of conserving natural resources while improving livelihoods through the integration of environmental, economic, and social constraints for a shared prosperity. In this regard, the most distinguishing characteristic of sustainable entrepreneurs, in contrast to traditional entrepreneurs, is that they measure the success of their business based on the creation of societal impact (Austin, 2006). This is true even if the sustainable business itself becomes less viable as its services transform society (Alvord et al., 2004; Young, 2006).

### **Discussion**

In this analysis, I have applied Mead's concept of the social act and role-taking to understand how SBEs become successful. Additionally, this research project demonstrates how people might learn and practice new roles and responsibilities, reconstructing themselves and creating a nuanced public service in the process. The capacity for role-taking produces reciprocal orientations and helps SBEs create systems to communicate with other SBEs. SBE's success

demonstrates how people might learn and practice new roles and responsibilities, and reconstruct themselves to encourage the growing need to transition society sustainably. Broadly speaking, I highlight how SBE's conscious activities advance the common good. In particular, by connecting SBE's conscious activities to extant sustainable literature, I illustrate how SBEs can help produce a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing society for all.

### **Conclusion**

The existence of the increased number of successful sustainable entrepreneurs is positively correlated with socially and environmentally flourishing communities (Robinson, 2006). In this regard, this research project posits that having multiple successful sustainable initiatives can serve as a multiplier effect to catalyze a larger flourishing society for all. This paper shares our theory of SBE, specifically that 1) the communicative behavior enacted, developed, and changing in the practice of a collective activity—the SBE meaning system, and 2) the people that are a part of that and that are practicing that system—the intersubjective SBE community practitioners—is one mechanism that can accelerate sustainable societal transformation.



## Discussion and Conclusion

*If you focus on the most marginalized, the solutions for them are typically solutions that are going to be able to support everyone.*

Ellonda L Williams

Transformational change toward a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing society involves fundamental change in a society's culture and collective consciousness that enables the creation of new collective beliefs and values. SBEs have the potential to transform industries, institutions, and societies. Research documents SBEs' transforming role in creating new ventures, products, and services in the social domain (Short et al., 2009; Zahra et al., 2009) as well as in the environmental domain (Anderson, 1998). Furthermore, existing literature lays the groundwork for understanding SBEs as a catalyst for establishing sustainable practices (Laszlo et al., 2014). SBEs are proposed to not only reduce *unsustainability* (Dean & McMullen, 2007), but also to create social and environmental values and to bring about societal transformational change.

### **Beyond SBEs**

While I stress the importance of SBEs as a catalyst for sustainable and regeneratively flourishing society, it would be a mistake, however, to think that SBEs alone can solve the environmental and social crises we face. Profit-first economics does not operate in a vacuum. A framework of laws and institutions makes profit-first economics possible. We need to address the issues from all sides, including concerns about lifestyle, government policies about energy, transportation, businesses, and other factors. For example, big businesses have a role to play in creating the new economic system our world requires. Because profit-maximizing businesses

will represent the great bulk of business activity for the foreseeable future, we must insist that they operate in an environmentally and socially responsible fashion. It would make no sense to create a world in which SBEs are working to repair the damage to the environment that human behavior has caused while at the same time profit-maximizing companies are allowed to create fresh damage. Government regulations as well as social pressure from customers and citizens' groups will play an important part in enforcing this norm.

### **Governments**

Even though governments rarely invent solutions, they play a key role in scaling up the emergence of new, effective solutions. Furthermore, the more quickly governments move beyond measuring GDP to using holistic metrics that give environmental sustainability and well-being as much weight as profits, the more quickly society can transition to a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing future for their own citizens and for others throughout the world. To transition to this new reality, governments cannot rely solely on greater governmental regulation. Instead, governments would benefit from designing incentive-driven, self-regulating systems that find ways to effectively balance freedom for innovation with the imperatives needed for productive collaborative communities. These designs are collaborative designs that mimic the larger ecosystem and are found in all mature and sustainable living systems. Many such systems are actively being pursued in a wide number of fields such as natural capitalism, sustainable capitalism, conscious capitalism, doughnut economics, circular economies, sharing economies, cradle to cradle economies, and more.

### **Pragmatism**

My choice of pragmatism as an overarching philosophical orientation was strongly influenced by my desire to contribute useful and actionable knowledge anchored in SBE

experiences. Using this theoretical orientation, I demonstrated how SBEs are constructed from a variety of “coordinated complexes,” which themselves are articulated in different ways depending on the context and their perspective. Pragmatist-inspired symbolic interactionism assumes that social and environmental problems are socially constructed and that these problems are not considered problems unless enough people recognize them as problems. Therefore, to understand how people are creating a sustainable transition in society, symbolic interactionism theory focuses on individuals understanding and acting in their context, with respect to their perspective and purposes, as well as how they create and relate those to the perspectives and purposes others have in the same or related contexts. Thus, SBE practices create and are created by these coordinated complex practices.

### **Final Thoughts and Future Directions**

Everything we do—from building infrastructure and creating new industries to finding cities and developing innovative technologies—affects us and the ecosystem. The ways we choose to employ natural resources, address changing human demographics, and produce and consume products and services all have an impact on the our social and natural environment and therefore on the future viability of all living beings on this planet. We need to start making these decisions not based on immediate or short-term needs but with the needs of future generations in mind. We need new roads to reach a new world. If we are willing to reconsider the assumptions underlying profit-first economics, we can develop a new holistic economic system designed to truly serve the needs of human beings and the larger ecosystem. The only viable path to a sustainable and regeneratively flourishing society is the adoption of a new, environmentally friendly and socially compatible worldview.

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### Appendix A : Data Collection Questionnaire (Juma & Timmer, 2003)

- Who initiated this initiative?
- If there is more than one individual involved in initiating the initiative – what are their relationships with each other?
- What were the institutional origins and arrangements of this initiative?
- What concepts or ethical imperatives provided the motivation for the initiative in the first place? Why did the individuals choose this particular course of action? What were their motivations? Why was the initiative not attempted before?
- Which individuals were instrumental throughout this initiative? Who were the key catalysts in the community? What are their names? What is the background of these individuals?
- Did this individual / these individuals' role(s) change over time?
- Who else was instrumental in this initiative as it developed? Were there other leaders? What are their names? What was their background? What was their relationship to the initiators?
- What is the managerial history of this initiative? In what way were these activities pushed or guided?
- What did leaders do to manage the different actors involved?
- Did the initiative establish a clear and common purpose? What processes did it use to do so?
- Did the initiative scan the external and internal conditions and design an explicit model of the system? How did the initiative do this?
- Did the initiative develop a management plan that maximized results and learning?
- Did the initiative develop a monitoring plan to test assumptions?
- Did the initiative implement the management and monitoring plans?
- Did the initiative analyze data and communicate results?
- Did the initiative use the results to adapt and learn?
- Has the initiative established long-term learning processes and structures?
- Did the initiators experiment and test out ideas during their initial period of the initiative? Were there any failed experiments? What was the response to failure?
- Did the initiative facilitate curiosity and innovation?
- Were there previous attempts at solving the problem the initiative addressed? What did the initiative learn from these?
- Were there any surprises during the initiative? How did the initiative respond?
- Were there any crises? How did the initiative respond?
- How did the initiative respond to scientific, environmental, or political change?
- What opportunities did the initiative take advantage of?
- What obstacles did the initiative face?
- Did the initiatives demonstrate new and adaptable approaches that overcame prevailing constraints?
- Did the initiative offer relevant knowledge, expertise and lessons learned through outreach projects?
- Did the initiative's innovations spread to other communities? If so, how were the lessons scaled up and out?

- Were there learning networks (self-organized groups consisting of people from different organizations, who are engaged in problem-solving, subsequently recycling their experience to tackle new problems)?
- What kinds of information were produced and used in the initiative? Who used the information? How were they linked? Were there any gaps?
- What were the main sources of knowledge for the initiative? (Local/Indigenous, scientific, other)?
- Who are the actors that make up the knowledge system? What capacities do they have?
- Who were the providers of local knowledge?
- Did the knowledge system evolve over time?
- What capacity or training did the initiative engage in? Who provided this training and capacity building?
- Were the technologies / approaches used new to the community and, if so, where did they come from?
- Were there any controversies about the credibility or legitimacy of the knowledge?
- How did the initiative facilitate the gathering of relevant / salient knowledge?
- Were there any knowledge products that were co-produced for the initiative? What impact did these have?
- To what degree were the social, economic and environmental issues addressed in an integrated fashion?
- What kind of structures facilitated integration? Were there barriers to the integration?
- Were there changes in patterns of interaction amongst the actors involved in the initiative?
- Did the initiative build social capability within the community? In the external actors (government, private sector)?
- Did the initiative lead to institutional change?
- Did the initiative lead to policy changes and, if so, how did they come about?
- Did the initiative link to any international program or initiative?
- How is the initiative contributing to global learning about implementing sustainable development?

## **Appendix B: Selection Criteria (Juma & Timmer, 2003)**

**Impact:** Initiatives that have reduced poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and/or through the equitable sharing of the benefits resulting from the use of genetic resources.

**Partnerships:** Initiatives that have adopted a partnership approach through linking activities with nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, the private sector, governments, research and/or academic institutions, and public or private foundations.

**Sustainability:** Initiatives that can demonstrate at least three years of successful and lasting changes in local socio-economic conditions and have positive impacts on biodiversity.

**Innovation and transferability:** Initiatives demonstrating new and adaptable approaches that overcome prevailing constraints and offer relevant knowledge, expertise, and lessons learned.

**Leadership and community empowerment:** Initiatives demonstrating leadership that have inspired action and change consistent with the vision of the Equator Initiative, including policy and/or institutional change and local people's empowerment, especially that of marginalized groups.

**Gender equality and social inclusion:** Initiatives that incorporate diverse social and cultural needs and promote social equality and equity.



## Appendix C: Data Sources

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### **Appendix D: Answers to Questionnaire**

To save space in this document, this appendix has been saved to the following online folder:

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### **Appendix E: Raw Data**

To save space in this document, this appendix has been saved to the following online folder:

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