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# Empowering Africa's Social Enterprises for Lasting Change



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**With the right support, religious sisters are transforming charities into sustainable social enterprises, increasing female leadership along the way.**

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Many assume that faith-based charity projects, especially those run by women, are funded by their umbrella church. In reality, these projects are expected to sustain themselves or be funded by the earnings of the respective congregations. As such, religious women involved in social ministries aren't just caregivers reliant on "financial manna" falling into their laps. They are running self-sustaining enterprises that make a real-world impact.

Another fact that deserves more recognition is that faith-based social enterprises play a vital role in advancing female leadership. While only 20 percent of conventional businesses globally are led by women, **half of social enterprises** have female leaders. These organisations empower women to lead and shape their communities, particularly in religious-led

initiatives where female leadership tends to be higher.

## **Building sustainable social enterprises**

Like all social business entrepreneurs, religious women must balance their social mission and commercial goals. However, they must also integrate a third dimension: their vocational calling. This calling is tied to their **charism**, or “spiritual gifts”, which are central to their identity. Supporting women of faith in a way that integrates their mission, spiritual gifts and financial sustainability is **crucial**.

In 2022, as part of the **Sisters' Blended Value Project** (SBVP), funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Strathmore University Business School studied how to best help religious sisters turn their charity work into sustainable social enterprises. The team developed a four-step approach:

1. Creating a training programme tailored to the specific needs of these women.
2. Offering a new type of social fund designed to meet those needs.
3. Building lasting partnerships and networks to help the sisters reach markets and access resources.
4. Conducting ongoing research to ensure the support is evidence-based and results in the adoption of best practices.

## **Teaching leadership and business skills**

The SBVP's primary aim is to empower religious women with leadership and entrepreneurship skills. The programme began with projects in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia. By mid-2024, over 690 sisters had received training tailored to meet their needs for launching, growing or scaling a project.

By teaching sisters critical leadership and business skills, the SBVP helps them build sustainable foundations. This training addresses not only social and economic challenges but also the significant funding constraints often faced by **social enterprises**.

Co-created with religious women, faculty and business experts, the curriculum focuses on practical learning. The sisters apply their training to real-world challenges, reinforcing lessons through case studies from both religious-led and conventional social enterprises.

## Access to sustainable funding

Receiving sufficient funding is a major challenge for social enterprises. Those run by religious women face similar issues, including limited access to sustainable funding, low visibility and inadequate legal frameworks.

Traditional bank loans aren't always a good fit due to the unique risk profiles of their projects. In response, SBVP offers better options like seed grants and impact funds, as well as tailored incubation and acceleration programmes.

Through SBVP, 61 congregations received seed grants. These helped fund projects that provide quality education, healthcare and healthy food for communities. Even small grants – around US\$5,000 – made a big difference. However, some needed more creative and innovative funding options that could support larger projects.

To make sure the funding worked, SBVP provided repayment terms to fit the values of the congregation and the needs of their work. In addition, the religious women involved received business advisory services, market connections and ongoing capacity-building support to help de-risk their social projects.

## Raising awareness and supporting success

Social enterprises face challenges with **public awareness and visibility**. A **2022 British Council survey** highlighted the need to show how such organisations blend business with tackling social and environmental issues.

The SBVP worked to increase awareness and outreach through webinars, conferences and networking events. By mid-2024, these events had attracted over 700 participants, allowing the religious sisters to showcase their work, learn from others and develop valuable partnerships.

These platforms also allowed them to collaborate with others in the social enterprise space, sharing ideas and learning new ways to improve their ventures. Insights from enterprises led by marginalised communities were seen as especially valuable.

The SBVP provided mentorship and coaching to encourage a mindset shift. These efforts helped religious women gain the confidence needed to lead their enterprises successfully. The SBVP's support further resulted in job creation and greater economic stability for both the congregations and the communities they serve.

As part of its long-term strategy, SBVP developed 13 case studies that offer insights into the challenges and achievements of religious women in social enterprise. These case studies can inform future efforts, ensuring continued progress in the three focus areas of training, collaboration and finance. In all, SBVP has produced over 17 research and technical papers to guide and improve the support provided to religious women.

## **A blueprint for the future**

Social enterprises around the world, especially those led by religious sisters, are critical players in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to a 2024 World Economic Forum [survey](#), around 10 million social enterprises globally generate US\$2 trillion in revenue and create 200 million jobs each year. With a focus on improving social and economic well-being in underserved communities, social enterprises have an oversized impact in Africa.

Such enterprises also play a key role in closing the leadership gender gap – a crucial contribution, as global gender parity could still be [134 years](#) away. For religious sisters, balancing social missions, business needs and vocational callings brings unique challenges. Transforming their projects into sustainable enterprises enables them to fulfil their calling, uplift their communities and advance the SDGs, including Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

Maximising impact will require collaboration with funders, governments, research institutions and social enterprise stakeholders. The efforts of Africa’s religious sisters can serve as a model for other minority communities seeking to create lasting and meaningful change. Their experiences offer valuable insights that can be applied to other social enterprises across the continent and beyond.

### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/empowering-africas-social-enterprises-lasting-change>

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## About the series

### Crossroads: Business & Society

The **Hoffmann Institute** at INSEAD explores the intersection of business and society. The challenges of our times are unprecedented, and the decisions made by leaders today determine the future. The institute aims to equip these leaders to make decisions in ways that deliver positive outcomes for business, communities, people and our planet in line with globally agreed sustainability goals.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals offer a cohesive and centralised framework for discussing a new development model that is good for all people and the planet. INSEAD is aligning more closely with the SDGs as more businesses use the 17 global goals to enhance their contributions to society.

This series provides much-needed clarity regarding what the SDGs mean for strategies, operations and business models.