

# **Promoting social entrepreneurship in poor socio-economic contexts: Insights from Southern Africa**

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## **Promoting social entrepreneurship in poor socio-economic contexts: Evidence from an action research project in Zimbabwe — Southern Africa**

The hopes attached to social entrepreneurship for improving disadvantaged environments have spread throughout Africa, but due to the complexities characterising the continent, additional support is needed. This article analyses the promotion of social entrepreneurship led by a non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) through an action research project in Zimbabwe, southern Africa. The results suggest the need to consider the particularities of the context prior to carrying out any support measures for social entrepreneurship in disadvantaged rural areas, and the design of measures in the framework of a flexible support system which involves people from the local context.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship; action research; NGOs; embeddedness; Africa.

### **Introduction**

Social entrepreneurs and nongovernmental development organisations (NGDOs) have been cited as being among the most significant forces for reconfiguring solutions to the gravest social problems in the context of deep poverty (Fowler 1991, 2000; Seelos and Mair 2007; Littlewood and Holt 2015, 2018). In this paper, both forces are intermingled, as we analyse how an NGDO, through an action research project, encourages the creation of social enterprises in the African context. This has required us to see social entrepreneurship from a broad and pragmatic perspective; that is, by considering the African mode of approaching social entrepreneurship, which usually emphasises the social change that it may bring about (Karanda and Toledano 2012; Littlewood and Holt 2015; Maseno and Wanyoke 2020; Urban 2008). Additionally, it

has involved the active participation of one of the authors in the NGDO's action research project. This methodological approach, which advocates collaborative ways of working with community practitioners (Greenwood and Levin 2007), has allowed us to develop practical knowledge and shed some light on the complexities of the support processes required for social entrepreneurship in declining economies.

Most African countries, as poor socio-economic contexts, are research environments that are rich in complexity. In addition to poverty, they face challenges that include chronic unemployment, low numbers for national skilled workers, poor educational levels, a high HIV/AIDS prevalence rate, constraints in basic service provision and poor governance (Kodzi 2015; Mafukata, Dhlandhlara, and Kancheya 2015; Shafik 2016). These challenges have clearly influenced the strategies adopted by development agents such as NGDOs in their attempts to provide solutions. In the last decades, the promotion of social entrepreneurship has gained greater recognition for opening new avenues for how NGDOs can approach development problems (Ashoka Foundation 2017; Lombard et al. 2012; Rashid 2010). Specifically, the promotion of social entrepreneurship has been mainly directed to stimulate solidarity in community-based initiatives related to the cooperative tradition (Nembhard 2014). In fact, a number of notable interventions have been directed to enhance the capacities of a more participatory social economy (Nembhard 2014; Wanyama, Develtere, and Pollet 2009). In these scenarios, action research – as a democratic and participative methodological approach – is considered appropriate to generate changes in social processes as well as new forms of knowledge (Bradbury 2015; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003; Greenwood and Levin 2007).

While action research is a valuable approach for both development programmes (Bradbury 2015) and investigations in the field of social entrepreneurship (Gleerup,

Hulgaard, and Teasdale 2020; Majumdar and Meethal Reji 2020; Tasker, Westberg, and Seymour 2010), it has been sparingly used among entrepreneurship scholars (e.g., Gleerup et al. 2020; Tasker et al. 2010). Evidence from its use in the African context is even more limited in the literature. In fact, in-depth investigations of African areas have been less visible in the broader literature, although several calls have been made for a better integration of studies on under- or misrepresented areas into mainstream research (Littlewood and Holt 2015, 2018; Karanda and Toledano 2018). The present study seeks to fill a part of this gap by examining the strategies adopted by one of the older NGDOs in Zimbabwe to promote social entrepreneurship within its rural areas, in the framework of an action research project.

Zimbabwe currently has one of the lowest incomes among southern African countries<sup>1</sup> and, like many other African nations, it faces the problem of chronic unemployment. Zimbabwe has also a long history of failures in enterprise and development policy (Bomani, Fields, and Derera 2015). These particularities make the consideration of the NGDO's experience in Zimbabwe highly significant, especially, to increase our understanding of the mechanisms for promoting social entrepreneurship in complex and underdeveloped environments. Nonetheless, by focusing on Zimbabwe we do not pretend trivialize the wideness and heterogeneity of poor socio-economic contexts. The decision to deal with Zimbabwe under such an umbrella is made for analytic reasons, meant simply to recognize the fact that despite the heterogenous character that can display the less-developed economies, they do share some characteristics that make them different from developed ones. Drawing from a deep analysis of the Zimbabwe's case, we attempt to respond the following research questions:

1. How does Zimbabwe's rural context influence the NGDO's support measures for social entrepreneurship?
2. How does the NGDO proceed in its efforts to stimulate social entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe's rural areas?

To answer these questions through action research implies relying on analytic induction and return to theory mainly to legitimise an informed type of knowledge generated in the context (Bradbury 2015). To further facilitate the discussion, however, we present the insights that come from literature first. As we assume that the peculiarities of the context of Zimbabwe are important to the design and implementation of support measures for social entrepreneurship, a framework based on the notion of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) is used to provide insight to our interpretations.

The article contributes to the literature by addressing gaps in social entrepreneurship studies carried out in countries outside the developed world. In particular, it provides insights into the dynamic interplay between the promotion of social entrepreneurship and the embeddedness process in a poor socio-economic context such as Zimbabwe. As Back and Janssen (2011) have recognised, researchers from different geographical origins follow different approaches to define concepts, which are of interest to advance the field of social entrepreneurship. A contribution of this study is precisely to extend our understanding of social entrepreneurship beyond Western mindsets. In particular, we see a contribution in how this particular context adds to our understanding of the social entrepreneurial actor as s/he is related to farming practices that can be established in poor rural areas to bring about social change. Another important contribution is a relatively novel way of connecting diverse theorising with practice. In this sense, the paper contributes to extending the methodological approaches

used in the entrepreneurship field by adopting an action research strategy, which has rarely been used in entrepreneurship studies (Leitch 2007; Schultz, Dana, and Hartmann 2016). By examining the topic in a way that goes beyond the objectivation of positivist methods, it has been possible to find out a field of meanings anterior to objectivity as well as a better understanding of the operative life of those involved in the promotion of social entrepreneurship as both promoters and beneficiaries.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. We first review the academic discussions around the concept of social entrepreneurship and its promotion on the African context and introduce the notion of embeddedness that is used as a theoretical framework. We then explain the research context and methodology. Afterwards, we present the main findings of the study and, finally, we discuss the results and highlight the most important conclusions.

## **Literature background and theoretical framework**

### ***Social entrepreneurship: preliminary and conceptual issues***

Social entrepreneurship has proven to be a complex, multifaceted, and global phenomenon (Bacq, Hartog, and Hoogendoorn 2013; Chell et al. 2016; Choi and Majumdar 2014; Dacin, Dacin, and Tracey 2011). That the notion of social entrepreneurship has gained global recognition is clearly manifested in the plurality of actors — for instance, politicians, NGOs, and academics — whose discourses around the world emphasise social entrepreneurship's suitability to face social problems and enhance social change (Haugh and Talwar 2016; Light 2009; Urbano, Toledano, and Soriano 2010). From an academic perspective, multifaceted social entrepreneurship has developed into a multidisciplinary scholarly field, leading to disparate descriptions of the phenomenon (Bacq et al. 2013; Choi and Majumdar 2014; Dacin et al. 2011; Nicholls 2010; Teasdale 2012; Teasdale et al. 2020). Broadly, it is accepted that the

main criterion for recognising social entrepreneurship is the creation of a social value that goes further than the economic effects on the transactional parties (Austin, Stevenson, and Wei-Skillern 2006). But despite this general feature, conceptual differences have arisen among schools of thought (Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Defourny and Kim 2011). The Social Innovation School, for example, emphasises the innovative ways in which the founders respond to social problems in line with Schumpeter's (1934) view on entrepreneurs and innovation (Jenson 2015). However, the Social Enterprise School tends to stress the collective nature of governing a social business (Defourny and Nyssen 2010). Different geographical contexts also come with different perspectives of social entrepreneurship (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Karanda and Toledano 2012; Kerlin 2013). Previous studies have noted significant differences between the US's and Western Europe's understanding of social entrepreneurs — for instance, with collective forms in Europe and individual profiles in the US — (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Defourny and Nyssesn 2010; Kerlin 2013) and disparities have been noted among areas with different levels of development (Karanda and Toledano 2012; Urban 2008). The identification of social entrepreneurship may thus be a subject that is nuanced in different ways for different scholars and practitioners.

In Africa, the practice of social enterprise is generally closer to the idea of cooperative initiatives created to address social local problems on a small scale rather than to the Schumpeterian notion of (social) entrepreneurship as (social) innovation, a view which is more typical in developed countries (Karanda and Toledano 2012). In the southern African context, particularly, cultural, historical, and even religious dimensions are strongly intermingled in the attribution of categories to the phenomenon (Littlewood and Holt 2018; Karanda and Toledano 2012; Urban 2008). This adds flexibility and local meaning to the use of the term “social entrepreneurship”, which in

this article is used in a sense that extends beyond what may be understood in the Western schools as social entrepreneurship's purer forms to be conceived through concepts of sociality, such as community or citizenship (Steyaert and Hjorth 2006).

There is also an important aspect of personal identity in play; the occasion for its redefinition is associated with the category of the enterprise, such that a change in the approach of a firm or initiative becomes an important source for self-actualisation (Fletcher and Watson 2006; Haugh and Talwar 2016). In fact, in disadvantaged areas, some support measures for social entrepreneurship have been justified by their connection with these processes of personal transformation (Bhatt Datta and Gailey 2012; Haugh and Talwar 2016; Kiss, Primecz, and Toarniczky 2020). In this vein, social entrepreneurship (albeit from an aggregate perspective) is seen as a well-equipped instrument to effect social transformation and social change, especially in poor socio-economic contexts (Alvord, Brown, and Letts 2004; Bornstein 2007; Seelos, Ganly, and Mair 2006; Rivera-Santos et al. 2015 ). The use of the term "social entrepreneurship" in this paper is precisely motivated and initiated with a view that stresses its possibilities for maximising opportunities for improvement and social change.

### ***The promotion of social entrepreneurship in Africa***

In the last decades, the hopes attached to social entrepreneurship for improving disadvantaged environments have increasingly spread throughout the African continent (Karanda and Toledano 2018; Rambe and Ndofirepi 2019; Rivera-Santos et al. 2015; Thorgren and Omorede 2018; Urban 2008). However, the complexity and magnitude of the social problems in African countries make social entrepreneurship more difficult than in developed areas. African social entrepreneurs often have to reach far more people with far less money. Several scholars have also observed the lack of skills

among young social entrepreneurs as a critical issue for social business consolidation (Karanda and Toledano 2018; Ligthelm 2008). Furthermore, the success of new social enterprises is constrained due to a number of macroeconomic and structural factors: deficient infrastructure, political uncertainty, conflict, crime, immigration and economic incompetence are all problems that make the entrepreneurial process more difficult in Africa than in other parts of the world (Littlewood and Holt 2015; Karanda and Toledano 2012, 2018; Masendeke and Mugova 2009). Therefore, although there may be a number of potential social entrepreneurs, the African context lacks an appropriate ecosystem in which social entrepreneurship can grow (Stam 2015), thus demanding the creation of a space for a diversity of intermediaries (e.g., universities, public administrations, NGOs) to be called to unify around a seemingly common cause: the promotion social entrepreneurship.

Despite the general interest in promoting social entrepreneurship across the African continent, the measures to stimulate the creation of social enterprises and enable social change may differ, as does the conception of social entrepreneurship (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Choi and Majumdar 2014; Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Kerlin 2013) and the beneficiaries who may assume the role of potential or actual social entrepreneurs (Dolan and Rajak 2016; Fury 2010; Nega and Schneider 2014). In fact, while some agents and strategies may be highly valued for communities that are very proactive, other communities might need a different approach. For example, Yunus, Moingeon and Lehmann-Ortega (2010), referring to the world's poorest countries, have emphasised the importance of innovative approaches for bringing about social change in peripheral rural areas.

In southern Africa, a critical mass of NGDOs and non-profit organisations are increasingly adopting innovative roles in the promotion of social enterprises (Ashoka

Foundation 2017; Lombard et al. 2012; Nega and Schenider, 2014; Rashid 2010). From the well-known example of the Ashoka Foundation, one of the most significant organisations supporting social entrepreneurs in this part of the African continent (Ashoka Foundation 2017), it is deduced that in some circumstances, organisations in the third sector can originally support the development of social entrepreneurship ecosystems. This acknowledgment is based on the idea that these third-sector organisations can serve as intermediaries between local social entrepreneurs and other actors in entrepreneurial arenas, including governments and other relevant stakeholders such as foundations, donors, financial institutions, suppliers and clients (Brass 2016; Nega and Schenider, 2014). They are recognised for being strategically positioned to form close connections with local communities and engender their interest to participate in processes of social transformation (Gaist 2010; Karanda and Toledano 2018; Makongoso, Gichira, and Orwa 2005; Ogeh Fiador 2013). The attempts to construct sustainable rural livelihoods through the transformation of small-scale informal farmers' activities into initiatives oriented towards satisfying basic needs are typical examples of processes of social change supported by NGOs (Lanfranchi and Giannetto 2014; Pascucci et al. 2013; Migliore et al. 2014, 2015). Although this inclusive view of social entrepreneurship stressing the social entrepreneurial role of the farmer is rarely mentioned in the academic literature (Fletcher and Watson, 2006; Hudcová et al. 2018; Migliore et al. 2015), it is still significant in African countries. It is this ordinary version of social entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector — called “social farming” by some scholars (e.g. FAO 2015; Hudcová et al. 2018) — and how it responds to the lack of basic goods provision in poor rural areas that has called the attention of NGOs' support programmes and action research initiatives to providing for social enterprise ecosystems in agriculture (Griffin-El and Darko 2014; Mirvis and Googins 2018;

Tasker et al. 2010).

In particular, action research, as a democratic and participative methodological approach, allows NGOs to come together along with researchers and other development agents from the local context in the search for understanding, improvement, and practical solutions that may change situations of pressing concern (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2001). However, the ideas of the importance of context draw on the concept of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990), which has been acknowledged in the sociological literature and applied to the wider field of entrepreneurship. Therefore, before explaining the characteristics of action research and presenting the results of the project analysed in this paper, we will clarify some conceptual issues concerning the notion of embeddedness and its dimensions.

### ***Embeddedness: concept and dimensions***

While the introduction of the term “embeddedness” is typically attributed to Michael Polanyi (Roy and Grant 2020), the sociologist Mark Granovetter’s (1985) classic essay has served as a more proximate and accessible stimulus for modern research on the topic (Dacin, Ventresca, and Beal 1999). Granovetter (1985) presents the argument of embeddedness by placing the economic relationships in a wider context of on-going social relations. From his perspective, economic activity is embedded in networks of interpersonal relationships, and the relational aspect of embeddedness (the personal relationships) becomes as important as the structure of the overall network of relations (Granovetter 1985). In Granovetter’s (1985) terminology, this situation is referred to as structural embeddedness, which can work as both a stimulus for and constraint on economic decisions and activity.

Economic decisions may also be influenced by other contextual dynamics. Zukin and DiMaggio (1990) add three other forms to the domain of Granovetter's (1985) structural embeddedness: cognitive, cultural, and political. Cognitive embeddedness refers to the symbolic representation of meanings, while cultural and political embeddedness involve shared understanding, and struggles for power or politics of distribution, respectively (Zukin and DiMaggio 1990). A focus on cognitive embeddedness draws attention to how local understandings and behaviours come to be taken for granted within a given community. Cultural embeddedness implies that diverse forms of culture in a region (e.g., categories, values, beliefs, informal norms) enable communities to claim their local distinctiveness (Dequech 2003). Political embeddedness refers to as the rules and regulations that form the framework within which local actors interact, but because political institutions have an ideological dimension, political embeddedness may also shape social values that are embodied in such rules (Zukin and DiMaggio 1990). Indeed, different dimensions of embeddedness usually overlap and interact simultaneously to shape standards of behaviours, economies, and organisational forms and strategies (Dacin et al. 1999; Gemici 2008; Johannisson, Ramírez-Pasillas, and Karlsson 2002).

The literature referring to contexts with high entrepreneurial activity has shown the importance of embeddedness to the entrepreneur (e.g., Greenman 2013; Jack and Anderson 2002; Levine Daniel, and Galasso 2019; McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015). McKeever, Jack, and Anderson (2015), for example, have acknowledged that being embedded in the rural Scotland has shaped and facilitated the entrepreneurial process in the area. There are some advantages related to recognising opportunities and obtaining information, knowledge and financial resources through exchanges based on trust and reciprocity instead of being based on rigid and impersonal markets. However,

in contexts lacking an entrepreneurial tradition, being embedded is interpreted negatively because it might discourage any deviant or entrepreneurial behaviour (Greenman 2013; Seelos et al. 2011). Seelos et al. (2011), referring to environments of absolute poverty, have noted that the over-embeddedness of people in these contexts effectively prevents them from getting out of poverty.

Analogously, embeddedness also plays a role in social entrepreneurship. Scholars who adopt an embeddedness perspective focus on a more contextualised view of social entrepreneurship, which leads to re-establishing concerns with the social, cultural and symbolical position of places and the ways in which places influence the creation of social businesses (Seelos et al. 2011; Smith and Stevens 2010). Although there is no unique consequence of being embedded – it can have positive or negative effects – most findings suggest that embeddedness is an important factor in understanding the varieties of social entrepreneurship's success or failures in different contexts (Smith and Stevens 2010). Consequently, embeddedness might also be an important factor in the design and implementation of support NGDO measures for social entrepreneurship. The relationships between contexts and promotion approaches to social entrepreneurship are still underexplored, however, especially for the African continent. In the remainder of the article, we attempt to shed light on this issue by exploring the interventions that an African NGDO has carried out to promote social entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe's rural areas.

### **Research context**

The research context of this study is circumscribed by the rural areas of Zimbabwe affected by an action research project that was led by one of the older NGDOs in the country. Despite the fact that Zimbabwe was once one of the most flourishing southern African nations, its economy has been steadily eroded in the last two decades, such that

currently it is one of the lowest income countries in the area. Its national poverty headcount ratio for 2011 – the year of the latest available data so far – reached 72.3% (World Bank 2018), which means that for every 100 people, 72 were living below the national poverty line. Since 2010, Zimbabwe's unemployment rate has risen significantly and currently stands at 95% of the potential working population (Trading Economics 2019). This challenging context is compounded by food shortages, environmental degradation, severe droughts and political insecurity worsened by having the same president leading the country for 37 years.<sup>2</sup>

In Zimbabwe's rural areas the situation is even more critical. In west and north-east Zimbabwe – where the present study took place – the poverty headcount ratio achieves the highest levels and the problem of unemployment has become chronic. The distance to urban towns often results in greater suffering for the population in terms of getting basic commodities, access to infrastructure and basic service provision such as electricity or clean water. Although Zimbabwe's literacy rate has reached high rates compared to other underdeveloped countries (90% in all age sectors), the inhabitants of the study area (about 65,000) have fewer educational opportunities and only a minority has completed some kind of formal education. International aid has long been necessary to fulfil the population's subsistence needs. The main economic activity is self-subsistence agriculture and is dominated by informal activities in which most household-family members contribute several tasks.

The NGDO whose action research project we refer to in this work was launched in 1993 in Zimbabwe. Since its inception, its mission has been focused on poverty alleviation and the sustainable development of marginalised communities. It has generally worked with international organisations – mainly from German and Australia – that have collaborated as donors for local interventions. In particular, the action

research project we present here was financially supported by the development and relief agency of the Churches in Germany. It was aimed at regenerating some of the poorest areas in west and north-east Zimbabwe by enhancing the transformation of their rural districts by supporting the creation and consolidation of social enterprises. The identity of the NGDO itself has been disguised by agreement with the parties, and throughout the article we will refer to this organisation as NGDO-SET (non-governmental development organisation for social entrepreneurship).

### **Research method, data collection and analysis**

To deal with the complexity and the evolving nature of the efforts required to promote social entrepreneurship in contexts such as Zimbabwe, a “multimethod insider action research” (Nzembayie, Buckley, and Cooney 2019, 1) was carried out. Action research is a broad classification for a transdisciplinary family of approaches aimed at generating actionable knowledge (Reason and Bradbury 2001); that is, it seeks to contribute both action through problem solving or developing a change initiative and to stimulate the creation of practical knowledge (Coghlan and Shani 2014). It is “multimethod” because it implies a modular research architecture in which different methods can be combined as needed by the phenomenon under study; in this way the whole research design is intertwined with the needs of the project or community studied (Nzembayie et al. 2019). This research method is thus iterative and non-structured; its components are not developed separately or in a precise order, nor is theory separated from practice (Rauch, Doorn, and Hulsink 2014; Toledano and Anderson 2020).

The term “insider” indicates that a researcher is part of the project/community (Nzembayie et al. 2019). In our case, the first author joined as an insider to the NGDO-SET’s action research project in May 2013 and was involved during the three years the

project lasted. In particular, the rationale behind using this approach was derived from the opportunity to get involved in the NGDO-SET's context to better grasp the meanings of the problems around the topic analysed and the possibility to address the research collaboratively *with* people — not on people. Bias in this article is, however, minimised as the author/insider left formal contact with NGDO-SET more than one year prior to the presentation of this research. This period served to ensure the distance required to “uncover significant underlying structures in the situation” (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001, 21). Ethical approval for publishing results was obtained, although the quotes from the interviewees will be referred to using only the name of the person and the date of the interview.

With respect to the data gathering methods, narrative interviews, group discussions, and participant observations were used throughout the action research project to collect relevant information. Regarding the practicalities of the action research's design, and implementation as well as the writing work of this paper, there are three important steps to be distinguished: firstly a pre-step, followed by main steps — as the core project — and a final step in which reflection cycles and data analyses enable the clarification of the ideas for the academic writing.

In the pre-step, the author who participated as an insider researcher interviewed the NGDO-SET's managers to get an appropriate understanding of the NGDO-SET's action research project and the challenges of being involved in a longitudinal participatory study. After readiness was assessed, main steps involved the enactment of the action research's typical cycles by understanding problem statement, collaborative action planning, plan implementation analysis, and evaluation (Greenwood and Levin 2007). Nonetheless, these phases were not developed in a clear linear step-by-step approach, but rather an iterative cyclical approach was needed, so that several phases

were often combined through the collaborative work of understanding and planning, implementation, and evaluation. In these main steps, the departure point was to make the NGDO-SET's project known and to find out ways to involve people who may be interested in taking part as participant-beneficiaries. Six narrative interviews were conducted with the rural leaders of the areas included in the NGDO-SET's field of action —north-east Zimbabwe. Such interviews were crucial to organise, in the following months, six group discussions with an average of 35 participants in each group.

Subsequently, NGDO-SET recruited the beneficiaries of its project —in great part from the participants in the group discussions. These individuals were to receive direct assistance to transform their informal farms into formal social businesses or even to create new small social businesses. They were purposefully chosen, considering their willingness to commit with the project during the whole process, their experience in horticultural and agricultural production —although often informally and self-sufficient—, and their inputs or cash constraints.

During the project's implementation the insider researcher was in charge organising two workshops. Then, several informal conversations occurred with some of the beneficiaries of the NGDO-SET project, staff from other NGOs and people belonging to political parties. Narrative interviews were again conducted with the NGDO-SET's managers and rural leaders who had been previously interviewed. Furthermore, the insider-researcher participated periodically in staff meetings with the NGDO-SET's people in charge and field workers over the course of the three years that the project lasted. He was also given access to internal documents, and was invited to conferences, presentations, and events, in which was involved as observer. Most of the conversations were conducted in English, but some information was interchanged in

‘Shona’, a vernacular language spoken by both the insider researcher and some of the informants. In all of this participatory movement, an important amount of data was generated and recorded. Further details regarding the data sources and data collection are summarised in Table 1.

[Table 1 Here]

Finally, once the action research project was completed, and for the purposes of this article, we analysed all the data over several sessions. The details from the most important events and personal experiences lived during the action research project were translated, transcribed and interpreted. We drew from Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton’s (2013) analysis guide to transform the amount of information into insightful themes which fitted with our research questions – the influence of Zimbabwe’s rural context in the NGDO-SET’s actions to promote social entrepreneurship and the implementation of such actions – and our conceptual framework – based on the notion of embeddedness. All the information gathered was read and re-read to organise data around categories related to these concerns. The analysis process involved underlining affirmations and comments that explained behaviours related with patterns of actions associated with or suggested in the existing literature, while also identifying emergent initiatives that came into existence out of events, including those prior to the development of the NGDO-SET action project. The interpretative work – including translations from Shona – was made to reflect the spirit and tone of all the conversations and dialogues that took place throughout the fieldwork. Figure 1 is an illustration of how the different steps interacted in the multimethod insider action research.

[Figure 1 Here]

## **Findings**

The findings included in this section are presented by distinguishing the two main questions raised in this research. First, we focus on the particularities of the context of Zimbabwe; second, we consider the support measures that NGDO-SET designed and applied to encourage social transformation through the creation of social businesses in Zimbabwe's rural areas.

### ***Understanding the context: Opportunities and challenges for NGDOs' actions***

A relevant part of the NGDO-SET's action research project for the promotion of social entrepreneurship was to identify the problems of the greatest concern for the rural areas. The purpose of this identification was twofold: first, to recognise social needs that may be addressed by entrepreneurial initiatives that could receive some support from NGDO-SET; and second, to determine constraints that might hinder the involvement of local rural people in social change. To fulfil these goals, NGDO-SET adopted an inclusive strategy that gave room for a dialogue with rural people and practitioners.

Group discussions in the rural areas were the platform for NGDO-SET to be inclusive. These discussions not only allowed people's opinions to be heard but also took advantage of the experience and knowledge already in place among the local people. As one of the rural leaders interviewed noted, "*everybody knows something that others do not know, any person can provide an opinion, a personal view that, at least, should be heard, despite the place where one lives, the economic conditions or education*" (Tinashe, 28 August 2014). While a range of diverse people (e.g., rural leaders, churches' pastors, farmers, households' members) were involved in group discussions, there was a common view concerning the main problem in all rural areas: food insecurity. The situation was extremely serious in Goromonzi – east Zimbabwe –

where at times people suffered from food shortages for consumption, with the yield lasting four months in a year. Normally, households with land tried to be self-sufficient, but this did not solve the problem of food insecurity, especially for producing sufficient amounts of nutritious food.

At this stage, it was very important for NGDO-SET to encourage further discussions so that the roots of the problem could be found out and possible alternative solutions identified. The NGDO-SET's staff led rural people in deconstructing the problem of food insecurity through sequential "why" questions, pushing people to reflect and discuss the topic in relation to their common life and daily routines. Following this pattern of action, the evidence showed that food insecurity was related, in some manner, to four other problems that were hindering the opportunities to creating social farm enterprises: poor quality seeds, poor choice of drought-tolerant crops, poor conservation agricultural techniques – including post-harvest handling techniques – and lack of entrepreneurial and cooperative abilities that could undertake agricultural initiatives that meet the needs for producing a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

The problem of poor quality seed appeared to be associated with a great dependence on political assistance in gaining access to seeds. The issue was not only that the inputs distributed by the government was unsuitable for the area, but also that the political distribution was interpreted by recipients as a limitation on producing other types of crops. As one of the informants stated, "*the Government gives us seed because we have no money, and we grow that seed because we do not want to risk being sued for failure to produce if we do not use what we receive*" (Chigovera, 24 September 2014).

In addition to dependence on the government, poor choice of farming crops was also noted among people who had more resources and some freedom of choice. In this

case, the growth of drought-tolerant crops was often disregarded to ensure the growth of maize, which despite its poor profitability is used in the preparation of the Zimbabweans' staple food, *sadza*. As one of the participants noted, "*I just need to assure my family that they will have sadza on the table*" (Murkuruve, 24 September 2014). However, mono-cropping also seemed to be behind both wastage of land potential and poor dietary diversity among children, which compounded the problem of food insecurity.

Food insecurity was also related to a lack of technical abilities and the lack of a collaborative tradition among community members. As one of the participants in group discussions noted, "*there is a clear concern for extended family members, but beyond that there is no interest in each other's situation or activities*" (Marian, 28 January 2015). Similar comments were heard from other informants, making clear that the rule of engagement – in terms of reciprocity, mutuality and common purpose – was truthful among rural people but only among family members.

The problems were also aggravated by a lack of entrepreneurial abilities mainly associated with problem solving, technology implementation and use, organisational skills and customer relations. Most rural people did not know how to adapt to other crops or adjust for the negative effects of the climate change, for example, as this did not benefit their traditional farming models. There was also no link between markets and farmers. According to one of the rural leaders interviewed, agricultural purchasing companies failed to engage smallholder farmers due to the farmers' disorganisation and small output on land holding. The country's road networks were also not well maintained and there was limited transport available to carry goods. Table 2 presents other illustrative comments from our key informants that shed some light on these problems.

[Table 2 Here]

### ***Designing and implementing social entrepreneurship support measures***

The experiences and problems of rural people became the basis upon which NGDO-SET designed and implemented initiatives to support social entrepreneurship within the action research's cycles of planning action and implementing (Greenwood and Levin 2007). Specifically, NGDO-SET's main support measures were developed in the framework of understanding agriculture from its social and environmental function (Hudcová et al. 2018; Migliore et al. 2015), stressing the potential value of family farms as sources for food production and supply and the worth of informal farmers pursuing sustainable rural development. In particular, a core element of the NGDO-SET was to enhance the transformation of informal farming practices into formal social and sustainable agribusiness. The idea was that the new agribusiness would prioritise a social and sustainable approach, so that a social entrepreneurship favourable ecosystem could begin to develop in the rural areas. This led to a consideration of those who were able to commit to work in line with the creation of formal social agribusiness as direct beneficiaries of NGDO-SET's action research project. NGDO-SET's interventions aimed to involve as many people as possible, so that everyone could have the opportunity to learn and contribute to the betterment of life in rural areas. The key message of NGDO-SET is reflected in the words of one of its managers: "*we seek to help build a model of social farming that can grow sustainably with market demand and benefit the rural areas while serving as an educational platform for small informal farmers who wish to work for a more social and green Zimbabwe*" (Johanne, 28 August 2014). To fulfil these objectives, NGDO-SET set up three types of measures: sensitisation towards social entrepreneurship, creation of social networks and capability building.

**Sensitisation for social entrepreneurship.** To carry out the sensitisation measures, NGDO-SET's workers and direct beneficiaries worked closely to push awareness of influential groups in Zimbabwe that ranged from Christian pastors to political influential groups within political parties, all which were identified through a process of manifold chain referral. The main idea was to develop a process of "conscientisation" about rural problems. As an example, it is worth noting how one of the pastors who agreed to collaborate with NGDO-SET made his church a platform for helping to create greater sensitivity about the importance of social entrepreneurial initiatives linked with the agricultural sector. As he pointed out, *"for us, agriculture is vital, and it is important that each one of us assumes a responsibility for the improvement of our places, to give a hand in whatever one can do"* (Rujeko, 3 February 2015). It was also possible to collaborate with the people in charge of the New Partnership for Africa's Development – Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). Because the sensitisation initiatives fit well with their policies for agricultural transformation, food security and prosperity for all, CAADP worked along with NGDO-SET to awaken consciousness about the problems faced by rural areas by adding information to their forums. Financial entities were also approached to make them aware of the difficulties of rural areas and the possibilities of overcoming problems through collaborative strategies with small farmers—social entrepreneurs.

**Creation of social networks.** There were two purposes behind the creation of social networks: first, to enhance the emergence of different patterns of behaviours by giving legitimacy to operational rules such as coordination, cooperation and reciprocity among all rural inhabitants – beyond family circles – and, second, to mobilise people and organisations that could disseminate social business support information. To this

end, NGDO-SET held two workshops in Harare, providing rural people with the resources to attend. The workshops became spaces in which some people who had never come together could share knowledge and perspectives about how to improve local agriculture and make it more align with the entrepreneurial character of social businesses. The encounters were also important as a means to provide legitimacy to rural people's work and to building confidence in the benefits of collaboration. Indeed, other informal encounters took place among participants apart from the workshops. As one of the attendees of the second workshop said, "*our meetings are becoming more frequent; we talk more openly about our problems and the ways to solve them, I can tell you, ideas are not lacking in Zimbabweans' minds*" (Farai, 12 September 2015). Similar comments shed light on how participants' self-confidence grew as their relationships with other stakeholders were transformed. The observation of one of the rural women involved in NGDO-SET's actions illustrates this idea: "*I see that we are all travelling on the same 'bus' (...) meeting people like me makes me feel that we are all driving in the same direction*" (Ruvashwe, 12 September 2015).

**Capability building.** NGDO-SET's training action was aimed to provide rural people with opportunities to improve their technical skills, learn about entrepreneurial means to meet social needs and increase their participation in decisions affecting their rural areas. As one of the NGDO-SET's managers commented, "*even though most of the people have experience as farmers, they have no business knowledge, they are not familiar with transactions in commercial markets*" (Mapfumo, 9 June 2014). The greatest constraint was thus the fact that, while rural people had skills, the skills were difficult to employ in a social entrepreneurial context. The products they made were also not of sufficient quality to commercialise in a formal market. It is in this scenario that NGDO-SET delivered education and training services with a specific focus on

social innovation within the agricultural sector. New agricultural technologies for dry weather, strategies for efficient post-harvest handling, innovative methods of increasing crops and crop variety that balanced with the goal of environmental conservation were some of the themes addressed in the training sessions. The training approach was premised on a Farmer Field School concept that implied a twofold learning-system. This meant involving a group experiential learning to enhance the initiative of participants to make decisions and solve problems while learning new techniques. The training also aimed to take advantage of the participants' knowledge and experiences once they were trained. This meant that the training was organised and delivered by more experienced and trained people for those with less exposure to farming or entrepreneurial practices through a successive channel of learners-teachers. This approach allowed not only the multiplication of know-how in rural communities but also increased the opportunities for cooperation and reciprocity beyond family circles. In this sense, it might be said that NGDO-SET's interventions took the form of empowering rural people as an intermediate step to making social entrepreneurship possible.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

As the promotion of social entrepreneurship is increasingly discussed as a means of strengthening African countries (Karanda and Toledano 2012, 2018; Littlewood and Holt 2018; Rashid 2010), the non-profit sector is becoming an intermediate agent in carrying out this supportive task (Ashoka Foundation 2017; Gaist 2010; Littlewood and Holt 2018). This study has presented the action research project carried out by an African NGDO – referred to as NGDO-SET– to promote social entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe's rural areas, in which one of the authors participated as an insider during the period 2013–2016. Contextualisation of the action research project against the

conceptual framework provided by the notion and dimensions of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) raised a number of interesting issues which are illustrated in Figure 2.

First, the evidence showed that at the beginning of the action research project the NGDO-SET's main function in the stimulus of social entrepreneurship involved creating fertile grounds for local inhabitants to think more deeply about the problems in their rural areas (AR<sub>1</sub>). NGDO-SET assisted people in identifying their strengths and opportunities for further growth (AR<sub>11</sub>). An examination of the problems in terms of obstacles to creating social businesses confirmed what previous literature noted regarding the lack of an appropriate ecosystem in the African context for social entrepreneurship to flourish naturally (Stam 2015; Masendeky and Mugonova 2009; Littlewood and Holt 2015).

Considering people's situations in the framework of the embeddedness' concept (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) made clear the strategic importance of embedding as a means of "anchoring" local people's mindsets far from entrepreneurial attitudes (E<sub>1</sub>). The rural people's embedded relationships in the cited four dimensions – political, structural, cultural and cognitive – were vehicles for interpreting their realities and negatively affected their expectations and entrepreneurial behaviours. A wide variety of factors were woven into these embeddedness processes, including episodes in rural people's lives, a scheme of their history, political issues, learnings, previous decisions of rural communities and witnessing people's accounts. The entrepreneurial inefficacy among local farmers appeared to be associated with a political over-embeddedness (Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) in terms of a high dependence on the seeds delivered by the government. The problem of poor choice of farming crops also reflected that rural people had become culturally embedded maintaining particular food

habits. In other words, people were sensible to situational constraints, especially those cognitive, structural, and social aspects associated with cultural embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) which tied them to traditional methods of meeting a family's basic needs while hindering the creation of new social initiatives. Thus, the situation bears out what some scholars have argued regarding the negative effects for entrepreneurship of being embedded in poor environments (Greenman 2013; Seelos et al. 2011).

Understanding how rural people live in particular places defined culturally, economically, politically and also religiously, as well as how these elements interacted to constrain rural people's activities was key for allowing NGDO-SET to adapt to the situation and create original ways of encouraging social enterprises. To pay attention to the context thus implied incorporating the personal and family identities of rural people as well as their cultural, social and political processes of embeddedness. Interpretations also came out of NGDO-SET's special circumstances as an intermediary agent to stimulate social transformation in the rural areas. All of these aspects called for engagement with diverse possibilities to support farmers in transforming agriculture into a kind of social enterprise that could lead to social change in rural communities. In this sense, it is important to stress that the implementation of support measures for social entrepreneurship was driven by a vision of what it could be possible to accomplish with a small number of people who committed to adopt a leading role within the rural communities. In turn, this mode of understanding the promotion of social entrepreneurship, shapes – and is shaped – by the local use of social entrepreneurship itself.

Second, as the steps of the action research project unfolded through collaborative communicative processes (Greenwood and Levin 2007), the importance of

designing and implementing support actions that could benefit diverse stakeholders — beyond the direct beneficiaries — was recognised (AR<sub>2</sub>). Three measures were chosen: sensitisation, creation of networks and capability building (AR<sub>21</sub>). Although it is arguable that all the measures provided the expected outcomes, in general, there were positive effects that lead us to consider NGDO-SET's interventions as legitimate. For example, there were local informal farmers who managed to set up agribusiness shops, produce grains and other crops, and sell them at small shops through the networks that NGDO-SET helped to put in place. Additionally, while the issue of suitable seed was recognised as one of the main reasons for poverty, the training sessions developed through actions related to capability building appeared to be useful both for increasing savings and reducing dependency on government.

From a methodological point of view, it is worth emphasising that the action research approach enabled dealing with the complex relationships that governed Zimbabwe's rural situation. Moreover, conceptualising NGDO-SET's support measures in relation to the notion and dimensions of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990), we can assert that its interventions paved the way for necessary cognitive, political, cultural and structural disembedding processes to evolve (E<sub>2</sub>), so that a more favourable ecosystem for social entrepreneurship could be developed.

Our discussion therefore leads us to the conclusion that context turns out to be vital to putting in place any support measures for social entrepreneurship. Due to the close relationship that our evidence showed between the measures that NGDO-SET developed for the promotion of social entrepreneurship and the situation of the Zimbabweans in the rural areas, it is particularly important to stress two main aspects: on the one hand, the relevance of action research as a methodological approach that allows the integration of people from the local environment in the generation of

knowledge and actions. On the other hand, the significance of considering the embeddedness (processes) of people in their contexts should also be considered; yet this is a context that includes not only economic data (e.g., poverty headcounts) but also the peculiarities of the persons and their social life (e.g., the relationships of individuals and families, including their traditions). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the promotion of social entrepreneurship in poor rural areas should be designed as a flexible support system, since both action research projects and embeddedness processes (Dacin et al. 1999; Gemici 2008; Johannisson, Ramírez-Pasillas, and Karlsson 2002) involve and affect people's lives transforming them as they personally commit to the support initiatives. This, however, raises the question of how much an NGDO's actions are, or should be, identified with the historically embedded communities which it is trying to empower to contribute to social change. This may be an interesting question to address in further research and may enable the adoption of a wider concept of social enterprise, including sectors that at first might not appear associated with what generally is included in the social arena, such as the agriculture sector considered in this study (Lanfranchi and Giannetto 2014; Pascucci et al. 2013; Migliore et al. 2014, 2015). At the same time, such a question might also involve an attempt to compromise with the social innovation dimension that is also involved in the concept, especially from a Western perspective (Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Kerlin 2013).

There are, of course, methodological limitations to our study. It is important to stress that the developments we explored in this article are context dependent; they are Zimbabweans ways of promoting social entrepreneurship in poor rural areas of Zimbabwe. The results should thus be interpreted cautiously. Because we focused on one case, it is difficult to speak in terms of generalisation of results. Nonetheless, the study has allowed to approach individuals and address questions about meaning and

perspectives that were central to this explorative work. Indeed, what a single case study can provide is a better understanding of processes in action (Yin, 2003).

There are other limitations that deserve to be mentioned. While we focused on how an NGDO in Zimbabwe approached the promotion of social entrepreneurship in rural areas, an in-depth discussion of the impact and results that NGDO-SET's measures achieved in terms of creating social agribusiness or regarding the profitability and sustainability accomplished in the rural areas exceeded the scope of this article. Indeed, because we did not use impact assessment to measure NGDO-SET's effectiveness, there may be a critique that builds on how consolidated the changes can be after the NGDO-SET's programmes have withdrawn their support. Zimbabwe's stagnant economy, alongside the economic situation of other African countries, does not help in this regard. There will always be a risk that the improvement trajectories that NGDO-SET put in place cannot be self-sufficiently maintained.

Additionally, important groups of people whom the action research project analysed set aside (e.g., those in remote rural areas) might consider these types of selective interventions more critically. There are thus promising avenues for future investigations in this field, and the promotion of social entrepreneurship by NGDOs may be problematised following this line of research. This might open discussions, for example, about the transformation of non-profit organisations into more socially entrepreneurial organisations, which is an issue that has not been treated in this paper but that is gaining interest among scholars (e.g. FAO 2015; Mirvis and Googins 2018). It is also worth insisting that our understanding of social entrepreneurship has been based on particular behaviours – entrepreneurial, rural and social – which led to identifying social businesses in rural Zimbabwe as formal agribusiness concerned with the problem of food insecurity that affects rural areas. As scholars have recognised,

social entrepreneurship's meaning is not conceptually autonomous (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Teasdale 2012) but grounded within certain fields of experience that manifest themselves between the meaning of the words "social entrepreneurship" and its use. Hence, because social entrepreneurship means different things for different people (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Kerlin 2013), other investigations could examine the issue from a different angle. Finally, further researchers might address different populations of NGOs in other African countries.

This research contributes to the current literature by shedding some light on a topic – the promotion of social entrepreneurship through action research by African NGOs – that had not been widely treated previously (Littlewood and Holt 2015) and allows an understanding of important wider issues. Specifically, the dimension of context brought by the action research project and the notion of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) helps us recognise the peculiarities derived from considering the promotion of social entrepreneurship within the life and culture of a specific people and specific context. This brings insights into the fact that contextual interpretations can also contribute to fuller interpretation of social entrepreneurship as a complex phenomenon, as well as speaking to the academic community as a whole on the link between agriculture life orientations and social entrepreneurial activities.

Our findings may also have some useful policy implications for NGOs and the non-profit sector within underdeveloped and developing countries that promote social entrepreneurship as a medium to develop those societies. A key idea derived from the study is that isolated interventions to promote social entrepreneurship without considering the particularities of the context are unlikely to result in successful

experiences. Indeed, the main lesson that this study offers is that support measures must be relevant to particular communities to be effective. This study, for example, has shown how embedded ties particularised the economic problems faced by Zimbabwe's rural areas. Organising participative and collaborative ways of working with local people, as the action research approach fosters, can be a first step towards the development of collective solutions that take into account the effect of embeddedness and diversity within the poorest economies. Finally, the approach adopted in this study can help improve the understanding of the links between economic and social problems and their importance for NGOs and other organisations involved in support measures for social entrepreneurship.

### **Notes**

1. Broadly, southern Africa includes the countries of Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Some institutions, however, can take a wider classification.

2. An emergency situation was declared on November 14, 2017, when the army took over the city of Harare – Zimbabwe's capital – with the objective of removing the government. On November 21, this objective was achieved in a peaceful way. On 30 July 2018, Zimbabwe celebrated democratic elections with the involvement of international observers; the ZANU-party – the same party that has been in power the past 37 years – won that elections and remain in power so far.

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**Table 1:** Data sources, data collection methods and key informants

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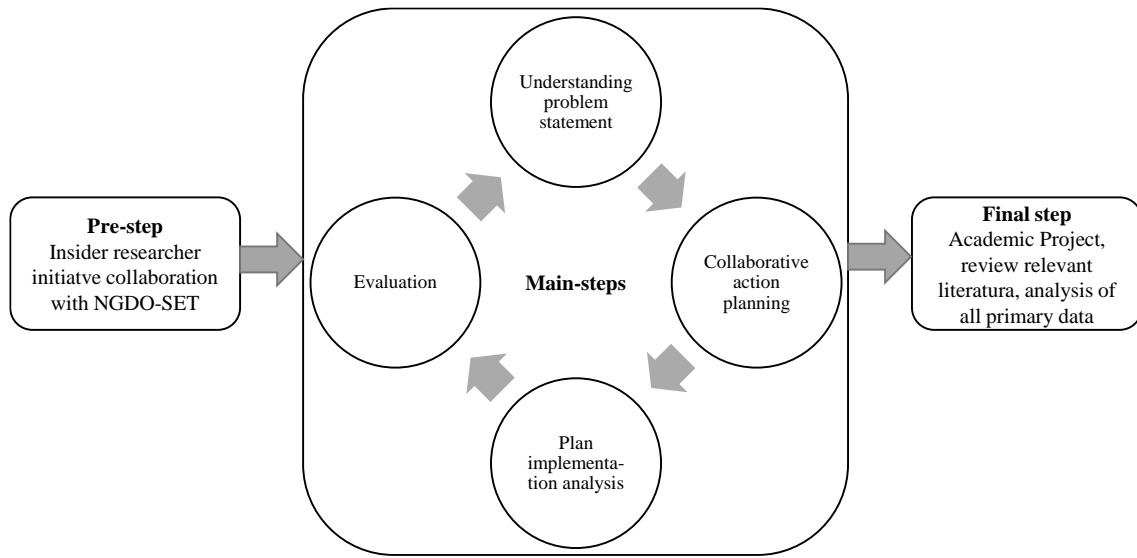
	Narrative interviews	Group discussion	Participant observation	Other methods
May 2014- May 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NGDO-SET managers (3)</li><li>• Rural leaders (3) (two times)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rural people (6 - 243 participants)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 6 days in Group discussion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assistance to formal meetings with NGDO-SET managers and field workers (multiple times)</li><li>• Assistance to presentation and conferences (2)</li><li>• NGDO-SET annual previous reports</li></ul>
Jun 2016- May 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NGDO-SET managers (3)</li><li>• Rural leaders (3)</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2 days in workshops</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assistance to informal meetings with NGDO-SET managers and field workers (multiple times)</li><li>• Informal conversations with other NGOs' members (5), political parties' members, beneficiaries of the project (12).</li></ul>

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**Table 2:** Understanding Zimbabwe’s context from some illustrative quotes of key informants.

Constrains	Illustrative quotes
Poor quality of seeds and policy issues.	<p>“I think that we always grow the same crops because this is what is made available to us by government.” (Chandareva, 24 September 2014).</p> <p>“It is difficult to grow good crops as we do not have good seeds; only God can do miracles!” (Maideyi, 28 January 2015).</p>
Poor choice of drought tolerant crops and cultural attachment to conventional crops and agricultural self-sufficiency models.	<p>“At least, I manage to serve my family, and to be honest, this is all I want to do well.” (Mukwasha, 28 January 2015).</p> <p>“I produce what my family likes to eat.” (Mirirayi, 5 March 2015).</p> <p>“I have never thought of the nutritional values of the crops, but it is true that many times my children fall sick.” (Mutesva, 5 March 2015).</p> <p>“We grew up growing maize, and in fact I have no idea of other crops.” (Paurosi, 3 November 2014).</p>
Poor conservation agricultural techniques and educational issues.	<p>“We farm like other regions in the country and are not aware that the rainfall is different hence we have always wondered why we suffer so much when others on the farms do better.” (George, 3 November 2014).</p> <p>“The land used to experience flooding in the past, now that we can grow crops, we continue working in the same way and getting poor yields.” (Machingauta, 18 March 2015).</p> <p>“Our harvest is eroded, but this is one of those things that we can do nothing about” (Moffat, 28 January 2015).</p>
Lack of entrepreneurial abilities, collaboration, and access to commercial markets.	<p>“The government bought maize from some farmers after a good season and after two years they are still waiting to receive payment from government.” (Tinashe, 24 September 2014).</p> <p>“We hear that some companies in the city use maize for making stock feed and then sell the same, but we have no idea how it is made otherwise we could make our own feeds.” (Eriza, 28 January 2015).</p> <p>“We have never thought of making money out of small grains although we have heard that there is market in the city” (Mukwasha, 3 April, 2015).</p>

**Figure 1.** Multimethod insider action research framework



**Figure 2.** NGDO’s roles in promoting social entrepreneurship through action research and an embeddedness framework

