



Worlds beyond scale: Social entrepreneurship and the pluralisation of social value

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Abstract

This article critically examines the epistemic and normative foundations of scaling social value in social entrepreneurship. Over the past two decades, scaling has become a dominant ideal, routinely equated with success, effectiveness, and legitimacy. We argue that this monocultural fixation on growth narrows what can be seen, valued, and supported as ‘social’, obscuring the relational, contextual, and plural character of social value creation. Drawing on critical and decolonial scholarship, we show how prevailing scaling logics generate counterproductive outcomes by privileging replication and expansion whilst rendering alternative forms of social value creation invisible or illegitimate. In response, we advance the ecology of trans-scales as an alternative epistemological orientation that reconceptualises scaling as a relational and dialogical process, rather than a unidirectional, necessary trajectory of growth. We identify four elements that sustain this epistemic turn in social entrepreneurship: trans-scalar linkages, epistemic humility, politics of mutual intelligibility, and plural evaluation of scale effects. Together, these elements reframe scaling as a process of connection, translation, and negotiation across scales, offering a pathway beyond the monoculture of scale in social entrepreneurship research and practice.

Keywords

scaling social value, monoculture of scale, ecology of trans-scale, epistemologies of the south, social entrepreneurship

Introduction

Modern thinking operates through monocultures: of knowledge, of time, of classification, of scale, and of the universal. These monocultures discredit what cannot be translated into their terms. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018)

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Over the past two decades, social entrepreneurship has moved from the margins of community-based action to the centre of global development discourse. Once associated primarily with local initiatives and grassroots organising, it is now actively promoted by governments, corporations, and universities as a legitimate and desirable response to persistent social problems. The idea of using market-based tools to address social needs carries strong intuitive appeal, particularly in contexts where both markets and public institutions are perceived to have failed. This expansion did not occur in a vacuum. The contemporary rise of social entrepreneurship emerged from a period of profound social and economic turbulence, marked most visibly by the global financial crisis and a widespread loss of faith in conventional models of capitalism (Barton and Muñoz, 2023). In this context, social entrepreneurial action came to be framed as an alternative vehicle for social reform, capable of delivering solutions where politics appeared stalled or ineffective. A proliferation of infrastructures followed, including impact accelerators, changemaker programmes, and certification schemes, all reinforcing the idea that social problems could be addressed through enterprise-led innovation.

As these narratives gained traction, social entrepreneurship increasingly took on the character of a moral project as much as an economic one (Lubinski and Tucker, 2026). Social entrepreneurs were celebrated as agents of transformation and redemption, often elevated in public discourse as ‘heropreneurs’ (Papi-Thornton, 2016) who succeed where states and markets fall short (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Dey and Steyaert, 2010). As the field professionalised and scaled globally, these shared moral aspirations and support mechanisms began to converge into a dominant logic of action, one that treats standardisation, replication, and growth as the default, and largely unquestioned, pathways through which social value is assumed to travel across contexts. Reflecting this logic, the past two decades have produced several emblematic social enterprises that captured global attention and were scaled rapidly across regions. The PlayPumps project in sub-Saharan Africa sought to provide clean water by installing merry-go-rounds that pumped groundwater as children played, attracting millions in funding and praise from global donors. The One Laptop per Child initiative aimed to revolutionise education in the Global South by distributing inexpensive laptops to children, promising digital empowerment and a ‘learning revolution’. The Solar Cooker Initiative sought to curb deforestation and improve health by introducing solar cookers in refugee camps, while the social enterprise TOMS Shoes popularised the one for one model, donating a pair of shoes for every pair sold. Each of these interventions began with a compelling moral narrative, technological optimism, and the promise of wide-reaching social benefit. Yet, despite their early acclaim, these ventures produced unintended harms on the ground. PlayPumps fell into disuse as communities struggled to maintain them; OLPC laptops often gathered dust in schools without electricity or teacher training; solar cookers were abandoned because they clashed with local cooking practices and social routines; and TOMS Shoes undermined local shoemaking industries.

What unites these (in)famous enterprises is not the weakness of their ideas but the logic that animated them: an obsession with scale and the belief that social value can be universally replicated. This logic rests on the assumption that what is global and standardised is inherently superior, while what remains local is marginal or obsolete (Nason et al., 2026). Flattening differences in the name of doing good has consequences, as global and standardised solutions end up erasing small-scale, situated practices that generate social value precisely because they are context specific. By privileging a universal and scalable model of impact, this logic renders a wide range of situated social entrepreneurial actions effectively invisible. In so doing, it narrows what is recognised as legitimate or worthy practice, depriving many social entrepreneurs of support and recognition while simultaneously constraining what scholars are able to observe, study, and theorise. As a result, substantial portions of social entrepreneurial activity remain empirically obscured and theoretically underdeveloped.

In this article, we problematise the dominant understanding of social value in social entrepreneurship, particularly the taken-for-granted emphasis on scalability that continues to shape both research and practice in the field. We examine the assumptions underpinning this view and explore why existing critical perspectives, while illuminating, have yet to fully challenge its epistemic foundations. Building on Santos's (2016) notion of the sociology of absence, which examines how dominant forms of knowledge, practice, and evaluation render alternative realities invisible, and his idea of monoculture of scale, we show how the prevailing imperative of scale and logic of universal replication obscure alternative forms of social value. Leveraging from the sociology of emergences, we advance the concept of ecology of trans-scale to reframe our understanding of scaling social value in social entrepreneurship. This perspective understands scales as relational and co-constituted, emphasising the plurality and interdependence of scales. It explains how social value emerges through situated, autonomous practices, rather than uniform models of replication, and how it travels across scales through connections and translations.

Four interrelated elements underpin this view: trans-scalar linkages that connect struggles without erasing specificity, epistemic humility that recognises the partiality of all perspectives, politics of mutual intelligibility that enable dialogue across epistemic worlds, and plural evaluation of scale effects that values multiple, sometimes conflicting, outcomes. Together, they offer a relational and dialogical understanding of scaling social value, shifting the question from how to expand impact to how to connect across scales while sustaining plurality. Our study responds to Mestwerdt et al.'s (2025) call to bring the 'social' back into social entrepreneurship research. We show how dominant scaling logics narrow what counts as worthy social entrepreneurial action and outcomes and offer an epistemological reorientation that shifts attention towards translation, plurality, and relational coordination across scales. This move reconceptualises social value as a negotiated and situated process and outcome, with implications for how social entrepreneurship is theorised, studied, and supported.

This article is structured as follows. First, it reviews and evaluates the prevailing notions of scaling social value in social entrepreneurship. Second, it explores assumptions and further criticises them through Santos's (2016) sociology of absence, showing how the monoculture of scale actively renders certain forms of social value as invisible, residual, or illegitimate. Drawing on the sociology of emergences, Santos's (2018) complementary analytical approach that identifies and nurtures possibilities, we then advance an alternative perspective focusing on the ecology of trans-scale. We conclude by elaborating upon a new research agenda and discussing implications for our understanding of 'social' in social entrepreneurship. This article offers new language and concepts to appreciate and study social value and the idea of scale in social entrepreneurship.

Scaling social value in social entrepreneurship

The idea of social value in social entrepreneurship

Social value refers broadly to positive societal effects that improve collective conditions of life by alleviating social problems or addressing unmet needs. Rather than being confined to economic outputs, social value encompasses changes in well-being, dignity, inclusion, capability, and quality of life (Austin et al., 2006; Santos, 2012). Importantly, social value is not a universal or objective property. What counts as valuable is context-specific, normatively laden, and shaped by the perspectives of beneficiaries, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders. As such, social value is often experienced and evaluated subjectively, even when it produces observable benefits (Hietschold et al., 2023). Taken together, this implies that social value is inherently plural and cannot be reduced to a single evaluative logic or outcome measure. Accordingly, social value is best understood as an

inherently contested and negotiated construct that materialises through social relations and situated practices.

In the social entrepreneurship literature, social value is commonly distinguished from broader processes of social change. Social value is typically understood as benefits or surplus generated for specific beneficiaries or communities, often within existing institutional arrangements, and usually observable in the short to medium term (Hietschold et al., 2023; Muñoz et al., 2022; Santos, 2012). Such benefits include improvements in access to goods and services, enhanced capabilities, empowerment, and positive spillover effects for actors not directly involved in market transactions. In this sense, social value goes beyond private or financial gain by prioritising improvements in the beneficiaries' life circumstances rather than organisational performance alone. At the same time, social value in social entrepreneurship is relational, contextual, and multidimensional. It is co-created through interactions between entrepreneurs, beneficiaries, partners, and the wider ecosystem, rather than produced unilaterally by the venture (Austin et al., 2006; Hietschold et al., 2023). Social value emerges through multiple pathways, including the provision of new products and services, access to resources, and the development of human and social capital, all of which rely on ongoing engagement with beneficiaries and local contexts (Hietschold et al., 2023). As a result, social value cannot be fully specified *ex ante*, nor detached from the processes through which it is generated. Understanding social value in this way highlights its dual character as both outcome and process. It captures what changes, such as increased employment, reduced exclusion, or enhanced agency, as well as how those changes come about, including participatory practices, empowerment dynamics, and relational forms of organising. Equally, social value may address the symptoms of social problems without necessarily transforming their underlying causes, a distinction that becomes critical when differentiating social value from longer-term processes of social change (Hietschold et al., 2023; Wry and Haugh, 2018).

Core ideas and assumptions

In the mainstream entrepreneurship discourse, scaling remains a dominant imperative¹ (Palmié et al. 2023; Somaya and You, 2024). Scaling is an organisational process through which managers rapidly expand outputs by transforming internal structures and leveraging digital resources without a corresponding *ex-ante* increase in inputs (Coviello et al., 2024). Scaling, therefore, denotes a form of growth that generates returns to scale, differentiating it from mere expansion or high growth. Bohan et al. (2024) add to this definition by framing scaling as a time-limited process of exponential growth. In addition to distinguishing scaling from general growth, the authors emphasise its proportional, self-reinforcing, and time-bound nature. Bohan et al. (2024) and Coviello et al. (2024) see scaling as central to the contemporary meaning of entrepreneurship, representing the transition from creation to transformation. For them, scaling is the generative engine of entrepreneurship, rather than a mere outcome of it. It is the ultimate test of entrepreneurial agency and the process through which entrepreneurial ideas become economically and socially significant. Not surprisingly, the idea of scaling has also permeated social entrepreneurship. In this case however, scale is more complex given the dual (social-economic) objectives that characterise social entrepreneurial action (Battilana and Lee, 2014). Unlike their commercial counterparts, social entrepreneurs are compelled to scale social value, as it provides a means of appreciating and measuring how social enterprises extend their impact (Chliova and Ringov, 2017). The legitimacy of social entrepreneurship is often granted by its ability to grow and expand its social value (Nicholls, 2010). In this context, scaling of social value refers to the deepening, broadening, and systemic amplification of social change. Scaling allows social entrepreneurs to spread the solutions they create and increase the impact of their work as they grow. Scaling social value can take several forms: scaling

up, scaling out, or scaling deep. These three expressions of scale arguably reflect the full scope and reach of social entrepreneurial action and the corresponding potential breadth and depth of impact of the social value social entrepreneurs create.

Scaling up social value requires expanding the reach and influence of a social enterprise by increasing its organisational capacity, resources, and institutional presence. Typically, scaling up involves organisational growth, policy influence, or systemic integration to enhance the depth and sustainability of impact. This form of scaling focuses on strengthening the organisation itself through expansion, partnerships, or advocacy to embed the value created by social entrepreneurs within broader institutional or policy frameworks (Dees et al., 2004).

Scaling out social value involves moving successful social solutions across different contexts or communities. Rather than deepening the impact in one context, scaling out aims to multiply impact horizontally through replication, franchising, open-source models, or collaborative networks. It is about extending proven social innovations across geographical or sectoral boundaries, enabling broader access and adoption while maintaining the core principles of the original intervention (Smith and Stevens, 2010).

Scaling deep social value focuses on transforming the underlying cultural, relational, and normative structures that sustain social problems (Kim and Kim, 2022). Scaling deep seeks to change hearts, minds, and social relationships by fostering learning, empathy, and cultural shifts that enable lasting transformation (Andre and Pache, 2016). This form of scaling targets the qualitative depth of change in values, beliefs, and social connections, recognising that enduring social impact often depends on shifts in meaning and relationships, not only in size or reach (Kim and Kim, 2022). Because of this, scaling deep is seen as an antecedent of scaling up and out.

Several ontological and epistemological assumptions underlie these ideas. First, much of the social entrepreneurship literature has normalised scaling as the ultimate indicator of success (Andre and Pache, 2016; Bloom and Chatterji, 2009; Dees et al., 2004). Frameworks such as ‘scaling up’, ‘scaling out’, and ‘scaling deep’ have become shorthand for effectiveness and legitimacy (Moore et al., 2015). This view assumes that the primary goal of social initiatives is to extend their reach and influence, and that the magnitude of beneficiaries served is a proxy for the quality or depth of social change achieved. It positions growth in scope or size as a self-evident measure of accomplishment, embedding within the field a teleology of expansion where success is defined by the ability to reach ‘more’ or ‘deeper’ rather than to constitutively transform the forms of social value and change. Such a view presumes that social innovation progresses through accumulation and diffusion, reflecting an underlying belief in scalability as both desirable and achievable.

Second, dominant scaling models assume that what works in one context can be replicated elsewhere with minimal adaptation (Bradach, 2003). This portability logic stems from a managerial and technocratic approach that frames social problems as technical puzzles that can be solved through standardised solutions (Nicholls, 2010). It presupposes that interventions possess universal features that remain stable across settings, and that knowledge can travel intact from one site to another. This reflects an epistemology of generalisation, where the social world is viewed as sufficiently uniform for best practices to be abstracted, codified, and reapplied. The assumption carries an implicit ontology of control, suggesting that social systems can be engineered or optimised through the replication of proven models.

Third, scaling is often presented as a linear, stepwise process that moves from pilot to replication to institutionalisation (Bloom and Smith, 2010; Uvin et al., 2000). This view assumes that scaling can be managed rationally through planning, control, and measurement. It rests on a sequential understanding of time and causality, where progress follows an ordered path and each stage builds predictably upon the previous one. Embedded in this logic is a belief in human agency as directive and intentional, capable of steering change through the design of processes,

milestones, and performance indicators. This assumption mirrors broader modernist traditions of social planning and development, which treat complex social change as a controllable system amenable to managerial intervention.

Fourth, prevailing approaches to scaling rely on quantitative performance metrics such as beneficiaries reached, cost per outcome, or social return on investment (SROI) to assess ‘social value’ (Emerson et al., 2000; Nicholls, 2009). These managerial tools assume that value is stable, measurable, and comparable across contexts. They imply that social value can be captured through objective indicators, aggregated across populations, and expressed numerically. This assumption reflects a positivist epistemology in which knowledge about impact is produced through measurement and verification, rather than through interpretation or dialogue. It also carries an implicit ontology of value as a discrete property that exists independently of the social relations that generate it.

Fifth, most scaling frameworks assume that all stakeholders (i.e. funders, entrepreneurs, policy-makers, and communities) share a common vision of value and how such value will create impact if delivered at scale (Bloom and Smith, 2010; Dees et al., 2004). This presupposes a shared rationality and alignment of interests, suggesting that diverse actors can be coordinated towards a singular goal once the appropriate mechanisms are in place. The assumption implies that value is universally recognisable and that social change is an outcome of collective agreement rather than negotiation or contestation. It reflects an ontology of coherence, where the social world is treated as a system of complementary actors working towards a unified end.

Finally, these ideas assume that social value can be abstracted from its context and scaled as a discrete unit (Nicholls, 2010). This view conceptualises value as a portable entity that can be separated from the specific social, cultural, and institutional conditions in which it was created. It assumes that the essence of a social innovation or practice lies in its core model rather than in its embedded relationships or situated meanings. This assumption draws from a realist ontology of social interventions, in which outcomes are seen as properties of interventions themselves rather than as co-produced effects of context, practice, and interaction.

The problems with scaling social value

An illustration

To open our discussion of the problems with scaling social value, let us briefly return to one of the cases we mentioned in the introduction. PlayPumps was once celebrated as one of the most elegant solutions to the global water crisis. The idea was simple. Instead of relying on hand pumps operated by women and girls, children’s play could be harnessed to generate clean water. A merry-go-round attached to a borehole would pump water into an elevated storage tank as children spun it. The tank itself doubled as advertising space, generating revenue that would fund maintenance while also broadcasting public health messages. By centring social value on the scalability of a single device, PlayPumps promised clean water, children’s play, gender relief, community education, and financial sustainability across the whole of Africa. We use this case not to illustrate a failed implementation, but to show how the pursuit of scalability can organise social value around replication, shaping what counts as valuable, legitimate, and worthy of support.

The scalable concept resonated powerfully with donors, policymakers, and global audiences. It aligned neatly with emerging enthusiasm for scalable market-based solutions to social problems. The appeal of PlayPumps intensified as the initiative became explicitly framed as a scalable solution. The model was designed to scale, with the latter becoming a necessary condition underlying the promised value, meaning there is no value without scale. Its promoters argued the technology worked and could be rapidly replicated across contexts with minimal adaptation. The

scaling strategy was appealing in its simplicity. First, PlayPumps was positioned as a modular, standardised technology that could be installed wherever a borehole existed. Second, a growth narrative was constructed around ambitious targets: 4000 pumps across ten countries could provide clean water to up to ten million people within a few years. This promise of size managed to translate a complex development challenge into a simple, countable outcome that resonated strongly with funders and policymakers. Third, the initiative adopted a portfolio of scaling channels that combined large foundation grants, bilateral aid funding, celebrity philanthropy, and cause-related marketing campaigns (Zenios et al., 2012). High-profile endorsements, media coverage, and fund-raising initiatives such as ‘100 pumps in 100 days’ reinforced the sense that rapid expansion was both feasible and desirable. These strategies aligned PlayPumps with the assumptions outlined above, which equate impact with scale, success with replication, and legitimacy with growth metrics. These dynamics did not only support large-scale implementation but also shaped the design choices, evaluation criteria, and perceived legitimacy of the intervention itself. So far, so good.

As PlayPumps scaled however, cracks began to appear. Independent evaluations and field reports revealed that the technology rarely scaled as imagined. Children did not play long enough or frequently enough to generate sufficient water. Ironically, as a BASEflow’s leader in Malawi explains, ‘to meet the basic needs of 200 people, children would have to ‘play’ for 27 hours a day to pump enough water into the tank to meet the bare minimum’ (Lang, 2023). When they naturally stopped, women and men were left to rotate the heavy wheel manually, often finding it more exhausting and slower than traditional hand pumps. In many communities, PlayPumps disrupted established water-collecting practices, reduced cooperation, and excluded those unable to operate the system (Graham Saunders and Borland, 2013). Some users reported dizziness, injury, and social embarrassment (Obiols and Erpf, 2008). In several locations, functioning hand pumps were removed and replaced without meaningful consultation, despite being better suited to local needs. While some of these issues may appear as design flaws, their significance lies in how the logic of scalability reduced their perceived importance relative to the promise of rapid replication, standardisation, and measurable growth.

The revenue model also failed to scale (Graham Saunders and Borland, 2013). Advertising income proved highly uneven and largely absent in remote or poorer areas. Where billboards did exist, they sometimes promoted products misaligned with community wellbeing. As a result, maintenance funding was unreliable, accountability for repairs was weak, and many pumps fell into disuse. Over time, the very features that made PlayPumps attractive to donors and global audiences became disconnected from everyday use and local realities. The spectacle of children at play, the promise of self-financing scale, and the simplicity of a scalable model simply backfired. Notably, the pursuit of scale amplified these problems by reproducing them across multiple communities, replacing context-sensitive alternatives with a standardised solution that was easier to count, communicate, and fund than to locally adapt. In retrospect, experts and observers converged on a shared diagnosis. PlayPumps did not fail because of a single design flaw, implementation error, or lack of good intentions. It failed because a complex, situated problem was reframed as a single scalable solution. Scaling targets, media narratives, and funding logics privileged rapid expansion over contextual fit, local choice, and long-term care. As critics noted, PlayPumps used scale to address a problem that was never central to water scarcity; that is, human energy, while leaving untouched deeper issues of infrastructure, maintenance, governance, and dignity. As in most cases, social entrepreneurship action can do very little if broader structural issues are not resolved in a context-sensitive manner. The case shows not only how social innovation failed to scale, but how defining social value through scalability can render alternative forms of value both invisible and illegible.

Told this way, the PlayPumps story invites a familiar set of research questions. Why did scaling up fail? Why did replication not travel? How did incentives distort implementation? What went wrong in translating an innovative pilot into a global solution? These questions matter, but they also anchor analysis firmly within the logic of scale itself. Failure is thus rendered as a failure *to scale well*, rather than as a signal that scaling may not be the appropriate horizon through which social value should be understood in the first place.

Critical entrepreneurship scholarship and scaling social value

As the PlayPumps case reveals, assumptions about scalability, replication, and growth actively shape how social problems are framed, which solutions are legitimised, and whose forms of value creation matter. The same assumptions have also shaped much of the scaling literature in social entrepreneurship.

With the consolidation of scaling as a dominant organising principle in entrepreneurship research and practice, a growing body of critical entrepreneurship scholarship emerged to question its conceptual core. It developed largely in response to mounting empirical and normative concerns about what prevailing models of entrepreneurship privilege, overlook, and produce in practice. This community has sought to interrogate the epistemic foundations of the field, challenging the scaling imperative (Dey and Steyaert, 2010; Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018; Nicholls, 2010). Authors argue that the underlying assumptions constrain how scholars and practitioners understand the creation and diffusion of social value and fundamentally narrow the epistemic space of inquiry, framing scaling as a technical and managerial problem rather than as a situated and relational process of social change. In broad terms, they explore how dominant concepts such as scale, impact, and success have come to be treated as universal benchmarks, and how these benchmarks can generate exclusionary, reductive, or even harmful outcomes when applied across diverse social contexts. In what follows, we problematise the assumptions by looking deeper into this body of critical scholarship.

First, the conflation of scale with success obscures critical questions about quality, adequacy, and unintended consequences (Westley et al., 2014). By privileging expansive over localised solutions, this view risks devaluing forms of impact that are contextually grounded and relational (Desa and Koch, 2014; Smith and Stevens, 2010). It assumes that ‘more reach’ implies ‘more good’, thereby overlooking the potential harms caused when interventions destabilise local arrangements or displace existing practices of care (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018). When scaling is treated as an inherent good, success becomes detached from the lived realities of the communities it claims to serve, reducing transformation to replication.

Second, ethnographic and critical research has shown that interventions are always socially and culturally embedded (Dey and Lehner, 2017; VanSandt et al., 2009). Attempts to transfer ‘best practices’ across geographies often disregard the co-constitutive relationship between social solutions and their environments (Westley et al., 2006). When solutions are treated as portable and context-independent, they risk being imposed rather than co-created, reifying universal templates of change while silencing local epistemologies. Scaling thus, becomes a process of translation; one that requires constant negotiation between global models and situated ways of knowing and doing.

Third, empirical studies reveal that scaling processes are rarely predictable. They are non-linear, emergent, and iterative, unfolding through cycles of experimentation and adaptation (Baker and Nelson, 2005; van Wijk et al., 2019). Progress is not a smooth trajectory from pilot to institutionalisation, but a series of provisional steps shaped by uncertainty, serendipity, and continual learning. The linear model underplays these dynamic and improvisational aspects of practice, and in doing so, overestimates the degree to which social innovation can be managed or controlled. In

complex social systems, scaling is better understood as an ongoing negotiation among actors embedded in evolving networks and institutional landscapes (Westley et al., 2014).

Fourth, social value is not a fixed or measurable quantity but a relational and negotiated phenomenon (Rawhouser et al., 2019; Zahra et al., 2009). Quantification, while useful for comparison and accountability, tends to simplify the moral, emotional, and contextual dimensions of social impact (Dey and Teasdale, 2016). Metrics such as SROI privilege what can be measured over what is meaningful, often translating qualitative experiences of wellbeing, empowerment, or justice into standardised indicators (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014). This economisation of value can inadvertently reinforce existing power asymmetries, privileging the evaluative frameworks of funders and investors over those of practitioners and communities (Rawhouser et al., 2019).

Fifth, it is well established that different stakeholders in social entrepreneurship operate within distinct and sometimes competing frames of reference (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Pache and Santos, 2013). Impact investors may emphasise measurable returns and scalability; social entrepreneurs may prioritise experimentation and learning; policymakers may focus on cost efficiency and service delivery; while beneficiary communities often seek dignity, belonging, or the satisfaction of concrete needs. These differing orientations towards value mean that scaling is never a neutral coordination of efforts, but a field of negotiation shaped by asymmetries of voice and control. The assumption of harmony, therefore, conceals the political nature of scaling, where questions of whose value counts and who decides become central.

Finally, the tendency to abstract social value from its context treats impact as an output rather than as a relationship (Nicholls, 2010). This decontextualisation overlooks how meanings of 'good', 'change', or 'impact' are locally produced and continuously renegotiated (Antadze and Westley, 2012). In practice, scaling entails the translation of value propositions across sites, actors, and epistemic worlds. Each translation reshapes the meaning of impact, generating hybrid and sometimes contested interpretations of what is being scaled. Treating value as transferable rather than emergent obscures these interpretive dynamics and risks reducing social innovation to a technical exercise in model replication.

The consequence of these prevailing assumptions is that social entrepreneurial action, in its attempt to prompt social change, will continue to prioritise efficiency, replication, and system-level influence. This is problematic as it reproduces what Santos (2018) calls 'the aegis of the market', meaning that social value operates under the protection, authority, or guiding framework of market logic or market institutions. This inevitably constructs social problems as technical voids to be filled (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018), rather than historical suppressions to be contested, and flattens the plural and context-sensitive nature of social change into universal models of managerial reason (Claus et al., 2021). While these criticisms are well-established, problems prevail, and cases like those highlighted in our problematisation continue to erode value despite their good intentions. We argue that to enable a meaningful conceptual turn, we must interrogate the epistemological foundations that keep the scaling imaginary afloat. Such a turn requires exploring the systemic production of non-existence by scale and reimagining scaling as a plural ecology of interactions across levels, places, and temporalities. Scaling should not be seen as a monolithic entity. In and of itself, scaling is neither good nor bad. We need to appreciate what the current views, even those critical ones, continue to render invisible and what possibilities may remain hidden in that invisible side.

In the next section, we deepen our problematisation efforts and further unpack the challenges of scaling social value through Santos's sociology of absences and monoculture of scale. We then draw on the sociology of emergence and the idea of ecology of trans-scale to open a new avenue for research in social entrepreneurship. In so doing, we invite our colleagues to imagine worlds beyond scale and what might emerge if we embraced the plurality of social value in social entrepreneurship.

Monoculture of scale

The sociology of absences (Santos, 2016) is a conceptual artefact and analytical approach used to examine how dominant forms of knowledge and evaluation actively produce non-existence by rendering alternative realities invisible or unintelligible. Central to this process is abyssal thinking, which draws an invisible line between what counts as valid and what is denied legitimacy. This line casts certain knowledges and practices as ignorance, folklore, inefficiency, or underdevelopment. As an analytical device, it allows us to appreciate how what is presented as universal, neutral, or inevitable constitutes a monoculture, which is the outcome of epistemic power that excludes other ways of knowing, doing, and valuing. The idea of monoculture synthesises how the universalising tendencies of one way of knowing and being marginalise alternatives and erase difference. Monocultures operate as epistemic regimes that reduce plurality by defining what counts as valid knowledge, legitimate practice, and credible success (Nason et al. 2026).

In his work, Santos directly challenges the ‘monoculture of modern Western reason’, focusing on five interlocking criteria: scientific knowledge, linear time, social classification, productivity, and scale. The monoculture of scientific knowledge privileges modern Western science as the sole source of valid understanding, relegating other forms of knowing to the status of belief, tradition, or anecdote. The monoculture of linear time frames development and progress as a single, forward-moving trajectory, casting practices that do not conform to this temporal ordering as backward, residual, or delayed. The monoculture of social classification organises difference through hierarchical categories that naturalise inequality, transforming plurality into inferiority. The monoculture of productivity defines worth in terms of efficiency, output, and measurable performance, excluding forms of care, maintenance, and relational work that resist quantification. Finally, the monoculture of scale elevates growth, replication, and expansion as primary indicators of value, rendering local, situated, or context-dependent practices as marginal or unviable. These monocultures reinforce one another to produce epistemic closure, that is, a narrowing of what counts as legitimate knowledge, action, and success.

In this article, we place the monoculture of scale at the centre of our critique and use the remaining monocultures as conditions that enable and reinforce the scale assumption. This is because the universal validity of growth, replication, and expansion requires: the standardised and generalisable forms of evidence that scientific knowledge provides; an understanding of development as a progressive trajectory in which scaling up appears as both natural and necessary; the social hierarchies that move scalable solutions down into the masses and up into the world and; the necessary efficiency improvements and measurable performance that productivity offers. Through this lens, a scaling monoculture in social entrepreneurship constitutes the hegemonic belief that validity and efficiency of the efforts of social entrepreneurs are determined by scale, meaning that what is larger, more expansive, or more global is inherently superior to what is smaller, local, or situated (Nason et al., 2026). This mirrors the logic of globalisation, which assumes that expansion, replication, and scaling up are signs of success, reducing diverse, context-bound knowledges and practices to mere instances of an inferior or incomplete whole.

In social entrepreneurship, monoculture of scale equally underpins the belief that scaling social value, especially up and out, is the only legitimate pathway to social change, creating an arbitrary hierarchical order of value in social entrepreneurship. It is not surprising that social solutions that emphasise global reach are better appreciated and rewarded by stakeholders. Those who claim either inability or unwillingness to develop standardised solutions with global appeal stand to lose against world-conquering propositions. The promised rapid expansion of PlayPumps indeed illustrates how scalability claims themselves become proxies for social value, long before the realities of use, maintenance, or local fit are known. Monoculture of scale equips us with a powerful lens to

further problematise the assumptions behind scaling social value. This is because, unlike current critical entrepreneurship scholarship, it operates outside Western epistemology, allowing us to uncover what Western rationality renders invisible.

Linear and rational progress. A central assumption sustaining the scaling logic in social entrepreneurship is that progress is linear and rational: a sequential pathway from ideation and piloting, to replication, and ultimately to scaling up. This assumption embodies what Santos (2016, 2018) terms the hegemony of linear time, which privileges acceleration, predictability, and continuous growth as the hallmarks of success. Within this temporal regime, scaling fast becomes synonymous with effectiveness, while the non-linear, cyclical, or emergent forms of social change are rendered inefficient or even obsolete. The literature reinforces this depiction through unidirectional and binary language: scaling ‘up’, ‘out’, ‘wide’, and ‘deep’ (Hietschold et al., 2023), which privileges the idea that greater reach automatically signifies greater impact. Within this regime of linear temporality, transferability becomes a virtue, encouraging replication templates that privilege portable, decontextualised solutions (Dees et al., 2004). Likewise, measurement approaches built on categorisation schemes and single-number indicators further reinforce this point by rewarding temporal smoothing: reducing unfolding, context-dependent processes into quantifiable outcomes (Muñoz and Gamble, 2024). As a result, value is often assumed rather than analysed, leaving unexamined who defines it, where it resides (generation, capture, or sharing), and how it evolves (Hlady-Rispal and Servantie, 2018). Recent evidence further shows how plural goals and temporalities resist the standardisation that linear scaling logics demand (Cosa and Urban, 2025). As a result, obsession with linear progression enacts an epistemic reduction that narrows the temporal imagination of social change to a single trajectory of growth.

Value can be objectively measured. A related premise underpinning the scaling logic is that social value can be objectively measured through standardised metrics and performance indicators. This belief reflects what Santos (2016, 2018) terms the hegemony of scientific knowledge: the dominant logic that valid knowledge must be codified, quantifiable, and universally comparable. When combined with the *monoculture of scale*, it gives rise to a regime of epistemic standardisation, in which situated and relational forms of value are translated into uniform indicators that can circulate upward through evaluation systems. Within this logic, ambiguity and contextuality are treated as deficiencies rather than as inherent dimensions of social value creation. As Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2018) observe that much of the literature assumes rather than examines the meaning of value, overlooking who defines it and how it evolves across sites of generation, capture, and sharing. Similarly, Rawhouser et al. (2019) demonstrate how social impact measurement approaches rely on aggregation and comparability, privileging what can be counted over what can be experienced, interpreted, or contested. Hietschold et al. (2023) further show that these objectivist tendencies blur the distinction between social value and social change, privileging outcomes that fit measurable frames while obscuring longer-term systemic transformations. In a similar vein, Cosa and Urban (2025) find that efforts to diffuse idealised, homogeneous performance measurement systems are consistently ineffective because they fail to accommodate plural goals, moral commitments, and locally defined success criteria. Taken together, these insights reveal that the aspiration to measure value objectively does not merely enhance accountability; rather, it reproduces an epistemic hierarchy that privileges rational quantification over contextual judgement, thereby reinforcing the monoculture of scale.

Stakeholder alignment. Another premise sustaining the scaling logic is that stakeholder alignment, maintaining harmony across diverse interests towards shared objectives, is both desirable and

achievable through market coordination. This belief reproduces the *hegemony of capitalist productivity* (Santos, 2016), in which efficiency, consensus, and calculative rationality define legitimate forms of collaboration. Within this logic, value creation is recast as a managerial exercise in aligning incentives rather than a political process of negotiating difference. Consequently, alternative economic rationalities grounded in reciprocity, care, or ecological restoration are rendered non-productive or irrelevant. Review studies illustrate how this monoculture permeates social entrepreneurship research: performance measurement frameworks presume goal convergence among funders, ventures, and communities (Rawhouser et al., 2019), while integrative models of social value creation privilege complementarity over contestation (Hietschold et al., 2023). Even studies attentive to relational dynamics often reproduce hierarchy by depicting beneficiaries as recipients rather than co-producers of value (Hlady-Rispal and Servantie, 2018). Yet, as Cosa and Urban (2025) demonstrate, attempts to impose standardised alignment mechanisms fail to translate across contexts in plural, morally diverse environments, where actors mobilise distinct evaluative principles.

From a post-abyssal perspective, stakeholder alignment erases non-dominant voices and ways of knowing (Santos, 2016), because alignment functions as a form of epistemic ordering. It privileges positivistic rationalities and technocratic vocabularies such as impact metrics and social accountability framework,) that translate otherwise diverse communities of beneficiaries into the language of performance and productivity. Through this translation, local forms of knowing and caring become unintelligible to such evaluative systems. It is not that they are not taken into account; they simply go unnoticed. Alignment ends up disciplining plural actors into a single morality of social value, one calibrated to the expectations of those placed higher up in the hierarchy of value. As a result, the epistemic sovereignty of those who are supposed to benefit from social value is lost. Communities lose the capacity to define what counts as value, success, or transformation on their own terms.

Social value is context-free. A core assumption underpinning the scaling logic in social entrepreneurship is that social value is context-free; solutions proven effective in one setting can be universally transferred and replicated elsewhere. This belief amplifies the monoculture of scale as it privileges the universal and the replicable as evidence of truth and progress. Within this logic, contextual diversity and adaptive experimentation are treated as inefficiencies to be minimised, while incomplete or hybrid solutions are erased in favour of polished models that appear universally valid. Assuming that value can travel intact across contexts erases the situatedness of moral reasoning and community-defined development (Santos, 2018). This flattening of complex meanings into managerial indicators contributes to the coloniality of value, a process by which dominant definitions of 'impact' overwrite local knowledge systems and conceptions of care. As Hietschold et al. (2023) demonstrate that the literature often conflates *social value* with *social change*, presupposing that standardised interventions can generate impact independent of local institutional, cultural, or moral contexts. Similarly, Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2018) show that processes of social value creation are frequently abstracted from their social settings, as managerial and design frameworks privilege transferability over embeddedness. Measurement approaches reinforce this universalist orientation: as Rawhouser et al. (2019) argue, metrics designed for comparability translate situated experiences into generalised indicators, while Cosa and Urban (2025) find that such systems consistently fail to gain traction in morally plural environments. According to Santos, this assumption enacts an epistemic erasure in which local knowledges, relational practices, and emergent forms of experimentation are neglected.

Ecology of trans-scale and social entrepreneurship: An epistemological turn

The ecology of trans-scales consists in recognising the plurality of spatial and temporal scales that make up the social world and in promoting the translation among them. The local is no less true than the global; they are different truths that coexist and require each other to become intelligible. (Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2016)

In the previous section, we leveraged the sociology of absences to further problematise assumptions by looking at what remains hidden from Western rationality. Now, we draw on Santos's sociology of emergences to facilitate an epistemological turn. The sociology of emergences is a complementary analytical approach that focuses on identifying, nurturing, and amplifying alternative possibilities that are already present but not yet fully articulated or recognised. In the context of scaling social value, we use sociology of emergences as a vehicle for generative conceptualisation, to represent an emergent reality that embodies different logics of life. To do so, we pay careful attention to situated practices – often latent, fragile, or marginalised – that have been rendered invisible and are impossible to visualise through a Western epistemological lens. In this sense, we do not stand in stark opposition to scaling (up, out or deep) social value or seek to erase and reinvent current social entrepreneurial practices and intended outcomes. Rather, we use sociology of emergences to expand the present by embracing plurality and reconstructing the scope of possibilities that Western modernity has narrowed.

Reimagining scaling social value requires a conceptual move towards an ecology of plural and situated practices that value relationality and reciprocity, as well as reach and replication. By an ecology of plural and situated practices, we mean an understanding of social value creation that recognises multiple forms of organising and knowing as legitimate, interdependent, and contextually grounded. Rather than assuming that value must travel unchanged across contexts, an ecological view treats practices as embedded in specific social and institutional relations. Relationality and reciprocity are central here because social value travels through adaptation and reciprocity as much as through replication and reach. This is what Santos calls the ecology of trans-scales. In his use of the term, *ecology* denotes the coexistence of multiple scales of action and valuation that are not ordered hierarchically but relate to one another through ongoing interaction, mutual dependence, and partial alignment. *Trans-scale* refers to the capacity of practices, actors, and meanings to move across scales without being reduced to or dominated by one of them. An ecology of trans-scales constitutes an epistemic turn because it shifts attention from how social value can be scaled to how social value comes to be known across different scales.

If the monoculture of scale renders the local residual and the global superior, the ecology of trans-scales offers a conceptual transposition, proposing a plural and relational understanding of scale. Rather than privileging any single scale as the primary locus of value creation, an ecological perspective recognises that different scales enable different forms of social value, each with its own logics, temporalities, and evaluative criteria. The epistemic focus thus, moves to the articulation, translation, and maintenance of social value across interconnected scales, while remaining responsive to contextual difference. In the monocultural imagination, scaling social value functions as a hierarchy; large, general, global is simply better than small, specific, or local. To scale up, social entrepreneurial solutions are required to shed specificity, gradually erasing what makes them unique. Social entrepreneurs often see scaling as a linear process, moving from small to large, from local to global, from pilot-testing to system change. They measure success by reach, replication, or growth, and standing still is perceived as lacking progress, at best.

The ecology of trans-scales invites a fundamental rethinking of what it means to create and develop social value in social entrepreneurship. First, it shows that scales are relational and co-constituted, not hierarchical and fixed. Local and global continuously shape each other and so, cannot be seen as separate levels of action. This is evident, for example, in the Zapatista movement,² whose influence does not stem from replication and global reach but rather from a pluriversal infrastructure that connects community-level governance with global solidarity networks. Members of the movement create linkages across scales without erasing differences. Their autonomous municipalities operate according to local needs, temporalities, and epistemologies, while simultaneously engaging diverse international allies and activists in shared dialogues of resistance.

Second, by focusing on co-constitutive processes, it allows each scale (local, regional, national, or global) to retain its own rationalities, temporalities, and moral orders. This way, it preserves the legitimacy of the local without romanticising it and recognises the multiple pathways that connect local and global knowledges, institutions, as well as struggles. Rather than asking how social initiatives can move from the local to the global, an ecology of trans-scale asks how diverse forms of scale can co-exist, co-inform, co-shape, and co-produce social impact without eroding one another. The task at hand is therefore, not to transcend one scale in favour of another but to foster dialogue among scales that preserve heterogeneity and enable coordination. Seen through this lens, scaling social value is about the movement and translation of ideas, practices, and meanings between differently situated actors and places, that is, trans-scalar articulation. From this perspective, scaling social entrepreneurship is not about expanding one model everywhere, but about creating meaningful connections across scales. These connections can take many forms such as local initiatives dialoguing with regional policy, grassroots experiments informing global conversations, or global movements empowering local practices. What matters here is how ideas, values, and practices adapt as they move through different contexts.

Four elements can lay the ground for a new understanding of trans-scaling social value in social entrepreneurship: trans-scalar linkages, epistemic humility, politics of mutual intelligibility, and plural evaluation of scale effects. In the same way we use monocultures of scientific knowledge, linear time, social classification, and productivity as conditions that enable and reinforce the dominance of the scale assumption, here, we weave in the concepts of knowledges, temporalities, recognitions, and productivities to articulate the four elements underpinning the ecology of trans-scales. Each of these concepts challenges a different form of epistemic closure and, at the same time provide complementary lenses for understanding how social value emerges, persists, and transforms across contexts. We elaborate these ideas in the next four subsections.

Social value and the identification of trans-scalar linkages

Accordingly, we propose that attention should shift from the vertical ascension across scales, from small to large, to the emergent linkages that connect them. These trans-scalar linkages, formed through alliances among local ventures, regional networks, and global movements, constitute the living infrastructure through which social value travels without losing its specificity. These linkages also operate across multiple temporalities, where slow community processes, organisational cycles, and episodic global attention intersect without being synchronised. Rather than rejecting scale, they reconfigure it by rescaling imagination away from linear growth towards relational coordination. In this sense, the ecology of trans-scales transforms the very question of scaling, from how to expand social impact to how to sustain plurality while connecting struggles. This move enables a more reflexive and politically conscious understanding of scaling social value, one

that emphasises translation, reciprocity, and cognitive justice as the true engines of social transformation.

Social value and epistemic humility

Within an ecology of trans-scales, impact cannot be captured by metrics of reach or replication alone because value itself changes across scales. What counts as improvement or transformation in one context may carry different moral and practical implications elsewhere. Recognising this multiplicity calls for a politics of plurality and epistemic humility. From an ecological perspective, epistemic humility reflects an ecology of knowledges in which multiple ways of knowing coexist without being ranked or subsumed under a single evaluative regime. This suggests that social change does not emerge from a single universal solution but from the interaction of multiple situated knowledges, and also, that no single vantage point, including the global, can claim epistemic privilege over others. Instead, value emerges through the interplay of multiple scales, each contributing partial yet essential insights into what social change means. For social entrepreneurs, this requires valuing collaboration and dialogue across contexts above replication or uniformity, and letting local experiences redefine what social value and impact mean. It also stresses the relevance of retaining the social entrepreneur's humility regarding their own vantage point, and also, understanding that every scale is partial, since what appears small in global terms may be profound in its local ecosystem.

Social value and the politics of mutual intelligibility

To counter the scalar hierarchy that underpins most scaling models, ecology of trans-scales advances a politics of mutual intelligibility; one that restructures who defines what counts as social value and how that definition shapes the possibility of dialogue and collaboration across difference. So far, this process has been governed by managerial and market logics. Ecology of trans-scales opens a dialogical space where translation sustains difference as a source of cognitive justice. Unlike alignment that privileges smoothness, harmony, and consensus, an ecology of trans-scales approach strives for heterogeneity, epistemic friction, and contestation. The outcome is always co-produced this way, not by agentic social entrepreneurs, but by interdependent practices of care, negotiation, and shared authorship. Here, social entrepreneurship becomes a process of negotiation and translation across epistemic worlds, where interventions are continuously reinterpreted considering local histories and knowledges. For example, when a social innovation developed in one community is adopted elsewhere, it is rarely transferred wholesale. Instead, local actors reinterpret the idea, adapting its methods, symbols, and purposes to fit their own cultural and institutional realities. What scales, then, is not a fixed intervention model but a living idea that evolves through ongoing dialogue among diverse contexts.

Social value and plural evaluation of scale effects

Within an ecology of trans-scales, the evaluation of impact cannot be confined to a single register of value. Traditional evaluation systems privilege quantifiable growth, such as numbers of beneficiaries reached, ventures replicated, or policies influenced, assuming that expansion necessarily equals improvement. Yet, the effects of scaling are neither uniform nor unidirectional; they are plural, context-dependent, and often contradictory. What constitutes progress for one group may generate loss, dependency, or displacement for another. Therefore, plural evaluation calls for recognising multiple evaluative principles such as economic, social, ecological, cultural, and affective, each grounded in distinct moral and epistemic orders. Instead of seeking a single measure of

success, social entrepreneurs must trace how interventions reconfigure relationships, meanings, and power across scales. This involves asking not only how much value is created, but also whose value, where, and at what cost. Attending to these distributed and sometimes opposing effects transforms evaluation from an exercise in measurement to a process of collective reflection and negotiation. By engaging with a plural evaluation of scale effects, social entrepreneurs can make visible the diverse consequences of scaling and, at the same time, cultivate forms of accountability that honour plurality rather than suppress it.

Studying trans-scaling social value: A different research approach

These four elements – trans-scalar linkages, epistemic humility, politics of mutual intelligibility, and plural evaluation of scale effects – offer the foundations for a more relational, reflexive, and context-sensitive understanding of how social value is created, transformed, and sustained across scales. Applying these ideas to social entrepreneurship shifts the question from *How can we scale up?* to *How can we connect across scales without losing difference?* It reframes social impact as a process of mediation, where social value travels across scales through relationships and translations.

To illustrate how our approach works in research practice, let us momentarily return to the PlayPumps case. Had this initiative been guided by trans-scalar articulation rather than the logic of replication, its trajectory might have unfolded very differently. Instead of treating the merry-go-round water pump as a universally applicable solution, the project could have evolved through sustained dialogue with local communities, engineers, and governance structures at multiple scales. Local actors could have translated the core idea of using playful energy for water access, into forms that fit their own material conditions, maintenance capacities, and cultural meanings of play and labour. Regional networks could then have connected these diverse versions, allowing technical insights and social practices to circulate horizontally rather than vertically. Global partners, in turn, would have acted less as funders of a single model and more as facilitators of mutual learning among locally adapted experiments. In this trans-scalar configuration, scaling social value would not have meant multiplying identical pumps across Africa but cultivating a constellation of situated innovations; each resonant with its context yet connected through shared principles of participation, creativity, and health. *So, what would we have studied had this case unfolded as described?*

Trans-scalar linkages

In the PlayPumps counterfactual, we would have studied how linkages across scales emerge, stabilise, and transform as the idea of ‘play-powered water access’ travels through diverse contexts. Instead of focusing on the antecedents, mechanisms, or outcomes of replication, the inquiry would have traced how local solutions, maintenance routines, and governance practices circulate horizontally among villages, and how these local practices connect upward to regional networks and global facilitators. The aim would have been to understand what types of relationships and infrastructures enable learning without homogenisation. Social entrepreneurship researchers would have asked: How do cross-scale alliances form and sustain mutual accountability? Which configurations of actors, for example, local technicians, regional NGOs, and international donors, facilitate or constrain knowledge translation across sites? And under what conditions do trans-scalar linkages enhance local autonomy rather than reproduce dependency? Examining these processes would have potentially revealed how social value can scale relationally through networks of solidarity rather than through vertical expansion.

Epistemic humility

In this alternative trajectory, we would have studied how epistemic humility shapes design and decision-making as the PlayPumps idea travels and translates across contexts. The focus would have been on how different agents learn to defer to local expertise, and how community members exercise authority over the meanings of play, labour, and water access. By attending to moments of doubt, realisation, and recalibration, research would have looked at humility as a practical competence rather than a moral stance. Social entrepreneurship research would have examined: What practices and governance mechanisms allow external experts to yield authority to local knowledge? How do communities articulate their own criteria of success, and how do those reshape design choices? And when, how, and by whom are decisions made to stop or reverse scaling efforts that prove misaligned? Answering these questions would have helped uncover how humility operates as both an epistemic and political condition in social entrepreneurship.

Politics of mutual intelligibility

Under a trans-scalar articulation, we would have examined how Playpumps actors negotiate meaning and coordination without assuming consensus. Research would have focused on the communicative and institutional processes that enable PlayPumps to be reinterpreted and redefined as they move across linguistic, cultural, and moral worlds. Rather than treating disagreement as a barrier, it would have analysed friction as a productive site of translation and co-production. Social entrepreneurship researchers would have explored how key concepts like ‘play’, ‘work’, ‘community benefit’, or ‘ownership’ are translated across social groups and community levels. Which mechanisms, for instance, dialogues, fora, participatory workshops, support intelligibility without erasing difference? And how do conflicts over interpretation lead to redesign, renegotiation, or withdrawal? By focusing on the politics of communication, this agenda would have illuminated how social entrepreneurship can sustain plurality and cognitive justice while still enabling coordination across scales.

Plural evaluation of scale effects

Finally, we would study how the outcomes of scaling are experienced and assessed by different actors across moral, social, and ecological spaces. In the PlayPumps counterfactual, evaluation would not be reduced to counting installations or beneficiaries but would include community-defined criteria such as dignity and participation. The analysis would trace how diverse evaluative principles whether technical, cultural, affective et cetera interact and sometimes clash as the initiative unfolds. Some questions would arise: How do different groups define and measure value, and how are conflicting evaluations reconciled or left open? What trade-offs emerge when benefits for some entail burdens for others? And how can evaluation itself become a dialogical process that redistributes voice and accountability? Studying these plural effects would reimagine social impact assessment as collective reflection, revealing how trans-scaling social value always entails choices about whose values prevail and whose remain invisible.

Discussion

We wrote this article inspired by and in direct response to Mestwerdt et al.’s (2025) call for new research capable of changing the conversation by bringing the ‘social’ back into social entrepreneurship studies. We did so through problematisation and conceptual transposition. Thus, we

challenge a deeply entrenched assumption in social entrepreneurship research and practice that scaling social value is the natural, necessary, and superior pathway through which social entrepreneurial action proves its worth. By examining scaling through the lens of Santos's sociology of absences, we show how the monoculture of scale narrows what can be seen, valued, and supported as 'social' in social entrepreneurship. In addition, we advance the ecology of trans-scales as an epistemological reorientation that shifts attention from expansion and replication towards plurality and relational coordination across contexts. This move repositions social value in social entrepreneurship as something that is continuously negotiated, redefined, and sustained across scales. In the following, we discuss conceptual and practical implications, as well as new research possibilities.

Conceptual implications and future research direction

This article offers new language and concepts to study social value and scale in social entrepreneurship by proposing the ecology of trans-scales as a theoretical reorientation. Rather than treating scale as a neutral measure of effectiveness, this perspective politicises scale by revealing it as a historically contingent and epistemically constructed ordering device. This helps explain why unintended consequences persist: why dominant scaling logics reproduce market rationalities and universalist assumptions that strip social value of its relational and situated character. By reconceptualising scaling as a communicative and political process, the ecology of trans-scales shifts analysis beyond contextual adaptation towards the trans-scalar processes through which social value circulates, is negotiated, and accrues meaning across contexts. In doing so, it opens a distinct theoretical space for examining social value and scalability. One that neither glorifies growth nor dismisses it but instead theorises the socio-spatial negotiations through which plurality is sustained. Thus, our contribution does not lie in applying Santos's ecology of trans-scales to social entrepreneurship. Instead, we extend his boarder epistemological criticism by translating it to the specific problem-space of scaling social value. In doing so, we analytically reorganise his framework by positioning the four monocultures as conditions that enable and reinforce the scale assumption in social entrepreneurship, and by delineating the four elements through which social value can be created, recognised, and sustained across pluriversal contexts.

This reorientation aligns closely with Mestwerdt et al.'s (2025) call to pluralise the 'social' in social entrepreneurship. We respond to their invitation for contextual and reflexive engagement by reframing scaling not as linear expansion, but as dialogue across diverse epistemic worlds. Drawing on Santos (2016), we show how prevailing scaling models depoliticise and universalise social value by reproducing epistemic hierarchies that erase situated knowledges and relational practices. By contrast, our proposal restores the 'social' as a contested, negotiated, and locally meaningful category of analysis. While we criticise the literature for reinforcing a unidirectional and binary imagination of scale through notions such as scaling 'up', 'out', 'wide', and 'deep', we do not discard these distinctions. We simply unsettle the hierarchical assumptions attached to them. From an ecology of trans-scales perspective, these expressions are reframed as non-linear, interdependent, and relational processes rather than as indicators that greater reach, breadth, or depth necessarily signify greater impact. This move breaks the prominence of expansion whilst retaining their descriptive value.

In Table 1, we provide an overview of the proposed shift. It shows how dominant assumptions in the literature reproduce specific monocultural logics, the absences they generate, and the counter-emergences that arise from the four elements of the ecology of trans-scales. It closes with illustrative directions for future research. Together, these elements delineate a plural framework for

understanding how social value is created, translated, and sustained across scales. In what follows, we focus on the future research directions opened by each counter-emergence.

Trans-scalar linkages. Challenging the assumption that social value unfolds through linear and rational progression, we propose trans-scalar linkages as a counter-emergence to the hegemony of linear time that structures dominant scaling logics in social entrepreneurship. Here, scaling does not solely privilege speed and expansion; it actively erodes temporal infrastructures through which emergent forms of social value are constituted and sustained. This perspective invites future research to examine how social value unfolds through reiteration rather than upward acceleration. Such inquiry can shed light on how global–local collaborations strengthen social entrepreneurial action without standardising solutions, and how designing trans-scalar infrastructures enables forms of sustained action that equally enable plurality. More broadly, this line of research opens space to conceptualise scaling as a temporal and relational process through which different forms and rhythms of social value can co-exist, without being prematurely absorbed into dominant trajectories of growth.

Epistemic humility. Challenging the assumption that social value can be objectively measured, we propose epistemic humility as a counter-emergence to the hegemony of scientific knowledge that dominates impact assessment in social entrepreneurship. Rather than treating value as a stable outcome that can be captured through standardised metrics, epistemic humility embraces the situated and relational character of all knowledge claims. Recognising these limits allows for more reflexive engagement that brings to the surface what remains unseen and untranslated. This shift invites future research to examine how participatory, narrative, and dialogical forms of evaluation reconfigure power relations among funders, entrepreneurs, and beneficiaries. It further encourages inquiry into how ventures experiment with hybrid accountability systems that combine quantitative indicators with lived experience, local judgement, and moral reasoning. Theoretically, epistemic humility reconceptualises cognitive justice as a core organising principle of social value creation, raising questions about how legitimacy is negotiated across communities, rather than secured through compliance with dominant evaluative measures. This perspective opens a space to examine how differences between scientific, experiential, ecological, and moral logics of assessing social value unfold across scales. Within this space, we can also explore how epistemic differences and tensions shape the trajectory through which social value is either recognised or marginalised.

Politics of mutual intelligibility. Challenging the assumptions that effective scaling requires stakeholder alignment around shared objectives, we offer politics of mutual intelligibility as a counter-emergence to the hegemony of capitalist productivity that underpins extant organising logics in social entrepreneurship. Currently, productivity is defined through efficiency and adequate coordination, marginalising alternative economic rationalities grounded in, for example, reciprocity, care, and ecological restoration. As such, this obscures the agency and legitimacy of non-dominant actors. By contrast, a politics of mutual intelligibility reframes collaboration as a process of negotiation across differences rather than alignment towards a singular goal. This perspective invites future research to examine how alternative forms of social value, such as community-based arrangements and community-led initiatives, redefine productivity beyond market-based metrics and how social ventures redistribute epistemic authority among founders, funders, and communities without erasing differences. More broadly, this line of inquiry opens space to investigate how practices of mutual recognition emerge within scaling processes, and how such practices may disrupt, reproduce, or reconfigure hierarchical relations as social value travels across scales.

Table 1. From the monoculture of scale to the ecology of trans-scales: Mapping assumptions, absences, counter-emergences, and future research directions.

Literature assumptions	Monoculture manifestation	Absences	Counter-emergences	Future research directions
Linear and rational progression	Hegemony of linear time	Non-linear, cyclical, emergent forms of social change.	Trans-scalar linkages	How do trans-scalar linkages among ventures, networks, and movements shape social change and value? How do global—local alliances evolve through iterative, non-linear experimentation? How can trans-scalar infrastructure sustain plurality rather than impose uniform expansion?
Value can be objectively measured	Hegemony of scientific knowledge	Situated, experiential, and relational ways of knowing are silenced by metric-driven validation.	Epistemic humility	How do participatory or narrative forms of evaluation challenge dominant impact measurement frameworks? In what ways can cognitive justice become operationalised within social impact assessment? How does integrating experiential and situated knowledge into accountability systems influence ventures' legitimacy?
Stakeholder alignment	Hegemony of capitalist productivity	Alternative economic rationalities such as reciprocity, care, and ecological restoration are marginalised. Non-dominant actors' agency, voice and epistemic authority are obscured or patronised.	Politics of mutual intelligibility	How do alternative forms of organising for social value (e.g. commons, communities) redefine productivity in social ventures? How do social ventures redistribute epistemic authority between founders, funders, and communities without erasing difference? What forms of organising foster mutual recognition, disrupt or reproduce hierarchical relations in scaling?
Social value is context-free	Monoculture of the dominant scale	Context diversity, adaptive experimentation, erasure of incomplete or hybrid solutions in favour of polished, replicable templates.	Plural evaluation of scale effects.	How do plural evaluative principles (economic, ecological, affective, cultural reshape how impact is assessed? Under what conditions can plural evaluation uncover hidden trade-offs or unintended consequences of scaling? How can plural evaluation practices make visible the distributed and contested effects of social change?

Plural evaluation of scale effects. Challenging the assumption that social value is context-free and can be uniformly assessed across settings, we propose a plural evaluation of scale effects as a counter-emergence to the monoculture of the dominance of universal replication as evidence of success. Here, contextual diversity and adaptive experimentation are rendered inefficient or illegible, erasing locally meaningful solutions in favour of polished and replicable templates, often described as ‘scalable social innovation’. Instead, plural evaluation highlights the heterogeneity and situatedness of value by recognising that scaling generates uneven, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory effects across places and actors. This perspective invites future research to examine how economic, ecological, affective, and cultural evaluative principles can be simultaneously mobilised to reshape how impact is assessed. Similarly, we can explore the conditions under which plural evaluation practices surface hidden trade-offs or unintended consequences of scaling. Collectively, these questions shed light on the distributed and contested effects through which social value is produced, negotiated, and sustained across scales.

While our argument builds closely on Santos’s concepts, our contribution lies in reworking them for the specific theoretical problem of scaling social value in social entrepreneurship. Santos developed the monoculture of scale as part of a broad epistemological critique of Western reason. We take this as a point of departure and conceptualise and operationalise the ecology of trans-scales into four concrete, actionable elements that directly address the challenges facing social entrepreneurship. We then map these onto a research agenda for advancing our field. In addition, we make the specific move of positioning the remaining four monocultures as conditions that enable and reinforce the scale assumption, thereby offering an analytical reorganisation of Santos’s framework for examining social value and scalability.

Practical implications

The shift our work proposes comes with important practical implications. For social entrepreneurs, the ecology of trans-scales reframes what it means to succeed. Instead of treating growth, from small to large, as a default aspiration, social entrepreneurs are invited to reflect on how their solutions connect across scales while remaining accountable to local meanings of value. This implies valuing relational work such as trust-building, maintenance, adaptation, and care as core entrepreneurial activities rather than as secondary or preparatory steps towards scaling. Practically, this means resisting premature standardisation and allowing solutions to remain open, revisable, and context-responsive as they travel. Success, in this sense, lies in the quality of trans-scalar linkages that sustain translation across contexts, rather than in the fidelity to an assumed scalable model. For globally oriented social entrepreneurs, our proposal invites humble reflection: when not to scale, when to slow down, and when to withdraw in response to local knowledge and evaluation.

Support organisations such as incubators, accelerators, funders, play a central role in reproducing the monoculture of scale through selection criteria, funding requirements, and evaluation frameworks. An ecology of trans-scales invites them to rethink how impact claims are assessed. Rather than solely prioritising ventures with clear replication trajectories or large beneficiary projections, intermediaries should pay attention to how initiatives cultivate durable relationships across scales and sustain plurality over time. This implies supporting portfolios of locally grounded initiatives connected through horizontal learning networks rather than funnelling resources towards a small number of scalable winners. It also means broadening evaluative practices beyond single-number metrics and considering difference and adaptation not as risks to be minimised but as indicators of meaningful engagement with complex social realities.

Finally, for policymakers, the ecology of trans-scales challenges the tendency to equate policy relevance with national replication. Public programmes that privilege scale-ready solutions risk

marginalising precisely those initiatives that are most effective within specific contexts. Instead of asking how social innovations can be rolled out uniformly to the infinity and beyond, policymakers might ask how diverse local practices can be connected, recognised, and supported without erasing difference. By embracing an ecology of trans-scales, policy can shift from governing impact through standardisation towards enabling conditions for plural, context-sensitive forms of social value to persist and interact.

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Notes

1. This section is based on an analysis of recent review papers on scaling in social entrepreneurship (social value) in social entrepreneurship. The 12 review papers included are presented in Appendix A.
2. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation is an indigenous autonomy movement based in Chiapas, Mexico, which launched an armed uprising on 1 January 1994 in protest against the dispossession and marginalisation of indigenous communities. Since then, the movement has governed through a network of autonomous municipalities known as *caracoles*, operating outside the Mexican state according to principles of collective self-governance, indigenous cosmology, and horizontal decision-making. The Zapatistas are widely cited in critical and decolonial scholarship as an example of a pluriversal political project: one that connects local autonomy with global solidarity networks without seeking to replicate or universalise its model.

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Appendix A. Review papers on social value and scaling.

Authors (Year)	Title	Journal	Key themes
Vickers and Lyon (2014)	Beyond green niches? Growth strategies of environmentally-motivated social enterprises	<i>International Small Business Journal</i>	Hybrid models; resistance to growth; green innovation
Lehner and Kansikas (2013)	Pre-paradigmatic status of social entrepreneurship research	<i>Journal of Social Entrepreneurship</i>	Legitimacy Struggles; Transcendence; Advocacy
Doherty et al. (2014)	Social enterprises as hybrid organisations: A review and research agenda	<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	Hybridity; governance; identity tensions
Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2018)	Deconstructing the way in which value is created in the context of social entrepreneurship	<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	Value creation; use vs exchange value; embeddedness
Rawhouser et al. (2019)	Social impact measurement: Current approaches and future directions for social entrepreneurship research.	<i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i>	Impact measurement, performance metrics, hybrid tensions
Johnson and Schaltegger (2020)	Entrepreneurship for sustainable development: A review and multilevel causal mechanism framework	<i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i>	Sustainability; causal mechanisms; institutional dynamics
Turpin and Shier (2020)	Social entrepreneurial orientation in human service organizations: A scoping review	<i>Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance</i>	Entrepreneurial orientation; human services; organisational traits
Islam (2022)	Social impact scaling strategies in social enterprises: A systematic review and research agenda	<i>Australian Journal of Management</i>	Scaling strategies; breadth vs depth; typology of approaches
Hietschold et al. (2023)	Pathways to social value and social change: An integrative review of the literature	<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	Social value; change mechanisms; co-creation
Mohiuddin and Yasin (2023)	The impact of social capital on scaling social impact: A systematic literature review	<i>Social Enterprise Journal</i>	Social capital; networks; enablers of scaling
Palmié et al. (2023)	Clarifying the scaling concept: A review, definition, and measure of scaling performance and an elaborate agenda for future research	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	Scaling configurations; business models; performance
Cosa and Urban (2025)	A systematic review of performance measurement systems and their relevance to social enterprises	<i>Journal of Social Entrepreneurship</i>	Performance measurement system; duality of SEs' performance metrics; holistic approach