

The Global Knowledge Base of Social Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development: Trends, Collaboration Networks, and Future Research Directions

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KEYWORDS

Social entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development, Bibliometric Analysis, Biblioshiny, VOSviewer

ABSTRACT

This study presents a bibliometric analysis of global research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development using publications indexed in the Scopus database. A total of 664 documents, comprising 362 articles, 184 book chapters, and 118 conference papers published between 2003 and 2026, were analyzed using Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. The findings reveal a substantial increase in scientific production after 2019, with the highest publication output recorded in 2025, indicating rapidly growing scholarly interest in the field. The dataset involved 1,764 authors, an average of 2.85 co-authors per document, and an international co-authorship rate of 23.04%, demonstrating the collaborative and globally connected nature of the research domain. Sustainability (Switzerland) emerged as the leading publication source, while Dieguez T, Ramírez-Montoya M.S., Sergi B.S., and Tien N.H. were identified as the most productive authors. The keyword analysis showed that social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, sustainability, social enterprise, social innovation, and entrepreneurship constitute the central intellectual structure of the field. Trend topics and the thematic map revealed a shift from traditional themes such as business models, corporate social responsibility, and development toward emerging areas including digital transformation, circular economy, sustainable business models, poverty alleviation, social entrepreneurial intention, women empowerment, and the Sustainable Development Goals. The study concludes that future research should give greater attention to digital technologies, impact measurement, climate resilience, educational innovation, gender equality, rural and Indigenous entrepreneurship, and the development of inclusive policy and support systems for sustainable social enterprises

1. INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary entrepreneurship research, representing a unique approach that combines entrepreneurial innovation with the creation of social value (Peredo & McLean, 2006). Unlike conventional entrepreneurship, which primarily focuses on profit maximization, social entrepreneurship seeks to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges through innovative and sustainable business solutions (Certo & Miller, 2008). Social entrepreneurs identify unmet societal needs and develop scalable initiatives that generate measurable social impact while ensuring economic viability (Méndez-Picazo et al., 2021). Their activities contribute significantly to poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, environmental conservation, gender equality, and community empowerment (Seelos & Mair, 2004). As societies increasingly confront global challenges such as inequality, climate change, resource scarcity, and unemployment, social entrepreneurship has gained widespread recognition as an effective mechanism for achieving inclusive and sustainable development (Galindo-Martín et al., 2020). The concept of sustainable development has further strengthened the importance of social entrepreneurship in both academic and policy discussions (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011). Since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987 and the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, sustainability has become a central objective for governments, businesses, and civil society organizations (United Nations DESA, 2018). Sustainable development emphasizes the balanced integration of economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Tessema et al., 2022). Social enterprises naturally align with these principles by developing innovative products, services, and business models that simultaneously create economic opportunities, enhance social well-being, and promote environmental stewardship (Ramadani et al., 2022). Consequently, social entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a vital contributor to achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals.

Over the past two decades, scholarly interest in social entrepreneurship and sustainable development has expanded rapidly across numerous academic disciplines, including entrepreneurship, management, economics, public policy, environmental science, sociology, innovation studies, and development studies (Lubberink, 2020). Researchers have investigated a broad

spectrum of themes such as social innovation, sustainable business models, hybrid organizations, impact investing, corporate social responsibility, circular economy, green entrepreneurship, stakeholder engagement, social value creation, institutional support, and inclusive innovation (Diaz-Sarachaga & Ariza-Montes, 2022). Advances in digital technologies, artificial intelligence, crowdfunding, and social media have further transformed the way social enterprises operate and scale their impact (Singh & Reji, 2021). The interdisciplinary nature of the field has resulted in a substantial increase in research publications, creating a rich but highly diverse body of scholarly literature.

Despite this remarkable growth, the literature on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development remains fragmented across various disciplines, theoretical perspectives, geographical contexts, and publication outlets (Garg & Kumar, 2023). Existing studies often focus on specific dimensions such as entrepreneurial intention, organizational performance, sustainability practices, environmental innovation, or policy interventions, making it difficult to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the field's overall intellectual structure (Garg & Kumar, 2023). Furthermore, emerging themes including climate entrepreneurship, digital social innovation, sustainable finance, resilience, impact measurement, and regenerative entrepreneurship continue to reshape the research landscape (Rey-Martí et al., 2016). As the volume of publications increases, there is an increasing need to systematically organize and evaluate the existing body of knowledge to identify influential contributors, collaboration networks, research hotspots, and evolving thematic directions (Rey-Martí et al., 2016; Wahyuni et al., 2022).

Bibliometric analysis has become one of the most reliable quantitative approaches for examining the development and structure of scientific research (Maliha, 2024). Unlike traditional literature reviews, bibliometric techniques utilize publication metadata, citation patterns, co-authorship networks, co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, keyword co-occurrence analysis, and thematic mapping to objectively evaluate the evolution of a research domain (Aravind et al., 2025). Advanced visualization software such as Biblioshiny, and VOSviewer, enables researchers to identify influential authors, leading journals, productive institutions, collaborative countries, emerging research clusters, and thematic evolution with greater precision (Mondal, 2025). These analytical tools provide a comprehensive overview of scientific productivity and intellectual relationships while revealing hidden patterns that may not be evident through conventional review methods (Yan & Wang, 2023).

Considering the rapid expansion of research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, a comprehensive bibliometric analysis is both timely and necessary. Such an investigation provides valuable insights into publication growth, citation impact, international collaboration patterns, influential journals, leading researchers, and emerging thematic trends that have shaped the development of this interdisciplinary field. The findings will help researchers identify knowledge gaps and future research opportunities, assist policymakers in formulating evidence-based strategies that support sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems, and enable practitioners to better understand evolving research priorities. By systematically mapping the intellectual landscape of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, the present bibliometric study contributes to a deeper understanding of the field and provides a valuable foundation for future academic inquiry and practical implementation.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study adopted a bibliometric research design to systematically analyze the scientific literature on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. The Scopus database was selected as the source of bibliographic data because of its comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed publications across multiple disciplines (Guz & Rushchitsky, 2009). The literature search was conducted using the query ("TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social entrepreneurship") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("sustainable development")), which retrieved 749 records. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was employed to ensure a transparent and systematic screening process. Publications categorized as Book (42), Review (34), Editorial (4), Note (2), Erratum (2), and Short Survey (1) were excluded from the analysis. Following the application of these inclusion and exclusion criteria, a final dataset comprising 664 publications was obtained, including 362 articles, 184 book chapters, and 118 conference papers. The cleansed dataset was exported in CSV format to facilitate detailed bibliometric analysis and ensure compatibility with specialized bibliometric software.

The bibliometric analysis was carried out using Biblioshiny and VOSviewer, two widely recognized software applications for quantitative science mapping and knowledge visualization (Husain & Mustafa, 2023; Mondal, 2025). Biblioshiny, the web interface of the Bibliometrix R package, was used to generate descriptive bibliometric indicators, annual scientific production, source and author analyses, citation metrics, and thematic evolution (Guleria & Kaur, 2021; Hair Jr et al., 2021). VOSviewer was employed to construct and visualize collaboration and knowledge networks, including co-authorship, co-occurrence of author keywords, citation analysis, co-citation analysis, and bibliographic coupling (Thomas et al., 2025). The combined application of these tools enabled a comprehensive assessment of publication trends, influential authors, leading journals, productive countries, institutional collaborations, and the intellectual structure of research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, thereby ensuring a robust and reproducible bibliometric investigation (Rahmiyati et al., 2025).

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Main Information of the Investigation

The bibliometric dataset on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development comprises 664 publications indexed in 412 different sources between 2003 and 2027, demonstrating the broad interdisciplinary nature of this research domain. Although the annual growth rate is reported as 0%, the dataset reflects a well-established field with a relatively young average document age of 4.33 years, indicating that much of the literature has been published recently. The publications have collectively cited 55,868 references, highlighting a strong theoretical foundation, while the average of 18.74 citations per document suggests considerable scholarly influence and academic impact. The dataset contains 1,721 Keywords Plus and 1,609 author keywords, revealing substantial thematic diversity and active exploration of topics related to social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. A total of 1,764 authors contributed to the publications, with only 135 single-authored documents and 130 authors producing single-authored works, demonstrating that research in this field is predominantly collaborative. The average of 2.85 co-authors per document and an international co-authorship rate of 23.04% indicate a healthy level of interdisciplinary and cross-country collaboration, reflecting the global relevance of sustainable development challenges. Regarding document types, journal articles (362) constitute the largest share of publications, followed by book chapters (184) and conference papers (118), suggesting that peer-reviewed journal literature serves as the primary medium for disseminating research findings while books and conference proceedings also contribute significantly to the advancement of knowledge in this rapidly evolving field.

3.2. Annual Scientific Production

Figure 1 presents the annual scientific production on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development from 2003 to 2026, demonstrating a clear upward trajectory in scholarly output. Research activity remained relatively low during the initial period (2003–2013), with annual publications ranging from 1 to 6, indicating that the field was in its early stage of development. Publication output began to increase steadily from 2014 onwards, rising from 14 publications in 2014 to 36 in 2019, followed by a substantial surge after 2020 with 54 publications in both 2020 and 2021, 60 in 2022, and 78 in both 2023 and 2024. The highest research productivity was recorded in 2025, with 125 publications, reflecting the growing global academic interest in the intersection of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, likely driven by the increasing emphasis on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainable innovation, and social impact initiatives. Although 2026 shows 69 publications, this lower figure is likely due to the incomplete indexing of publications for the ongoing year. Overall, the figure indicates that social entrepreneurship and sustainable development has evolved into a rapidly expanding and influential interdisciplinary research area, with particularly strong growth over the past decade.

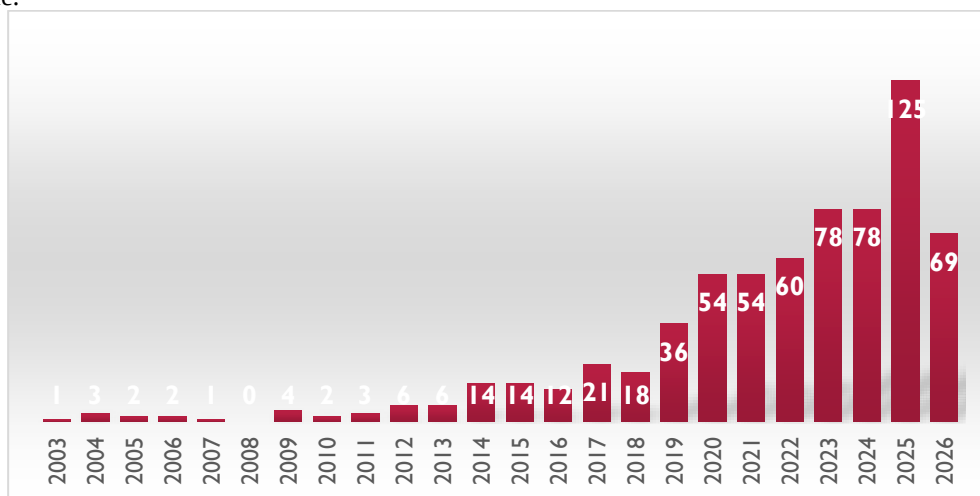


Figure1. annual scientific production

3.3. Most Relevant Authors

Table 1 presents the most productive authors in the field of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, highlighting the leading contributors based on the number of publications. Dieguez T, Ramírez-Montoya M.S., Sergi B.S., and Tien N.H. emerged as the most prolific authors, each contributing four publications, demonstrating their consistent engagement and significant scholarly influence in this research area. They are followed by Ambati N.R., Badillo-Piña I., Brandão F., Breda Z., Costa C., and Holt D., each with three publications, reflecting their active participation in advancing knowledge on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. Although the publication counts among the leading authors are relatively close, the findings suggest that the research domain is characterized by a diverse group of contributors rather than being dominated by a few highly prolific scholars. This pattern indicates a collaborative and multidisciplinary research landscape in which expertise is distributed across researchers from different institutions and countries, contributing to the continuous expansion and diversification of the field.

Table 1. Most Relevant Authors

Author	Articles
Dieguez T	4
Ramírez-Montoya Ms	4
Sergi Bs	4
Tien Nh	4
Ambati Nr	3
Badillo-Piña I	3
Brandão F	3
Breda Z	3
Costa C	3
Holt D	3

3.4. Most Relevant Sources

Table 2 presents the most influential publication sources in the field of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, based on the number of published articles. Sustainability (Switzerland) is the leading publication outlet with 36 articles, indicating its prominent role in disseminating research related to sustainability, entrepreneurship, and social innovation. It is followed by Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies with 22 articles, reflecting the growing emphasis on practical and contextual studies of social entrepreneurship in emerging economies. The Proceedings of the European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship (ECIE) ranks third with 15 publications, highlighting the importance of academic conferences in promoting innovative research in this domain. Other notable sources include Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems (14 articles), Social Enterprise Journal (11 articles), and the Journal of Cleaner Production (10 articles), demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of the field by integrating entrepreneurship, sustainability, management, and environmental studies. Additional contributions from CSR, Sustainability, Ethics and Governance (8 articles), E3S Web of Conferences (7 articles), Research Anthology on Approaches to Social and Sustainable Entrepreneurship (7 articles), and Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics (6 articles) further indicate that research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development is disseminated through a diverse range of journals, conference proceedings, and edited volumes. Overall, the distribution of publications across multiple reputable sources reflects the expanding academic interest and multidisciplinary character of this rapidly evolving research area.

Table 2. Most Relevant Sources

Sources	Articles
Sustainability (Switzerland)	36
Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	22
Proceedings of the European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Ecie	15
Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems	14
Social Enterprise Journal	11
Journal of Cleaner Production	10
CSR, Sustainability, Ethics and Governance	8
E3s Web of Conferences	7
Research Anthology on Approaches to Social and Sustainable Entrepreneurship	7
Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics	6

3.5. Trend Topics

Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of major research topics in social entrepreneurship and sustainable development between 2013 and 2026, highlighting the changing thematic focus of the field over time. Early research (2013–2018) concentrated on broad concepts such as business model, development, crowdfunding, environment, and corporate social responsibility, reflecting foundational discussions on sustainable business practices and social value creation. During the period 2019–

2022, the research landscape expanded to include themes such as social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, social innovation, entrepreneurship, social responsibility, social economy, and educational innovation, indicating increasing academic attention to entrepreneurial solutions for societal challenges. More recent years (2023–2026) reveal the emergence of advanced and contemporary themes, including poverty alleviation, social entrepreneurial intention, social enterprises, sustainable business models, circular economy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), digital transformation, and systematic literature review. The prominence of social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and social enterprise, represented by the largest nodes, demonstrates their central role within the research domain. Overall, the figure indicates a clear thematic progression from foundational entrepreneurial concepts toward more specialized, sustainability-oriented, and technology-enabled approaches, reflecting the increasing maturity and interdisciplinary nature of research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

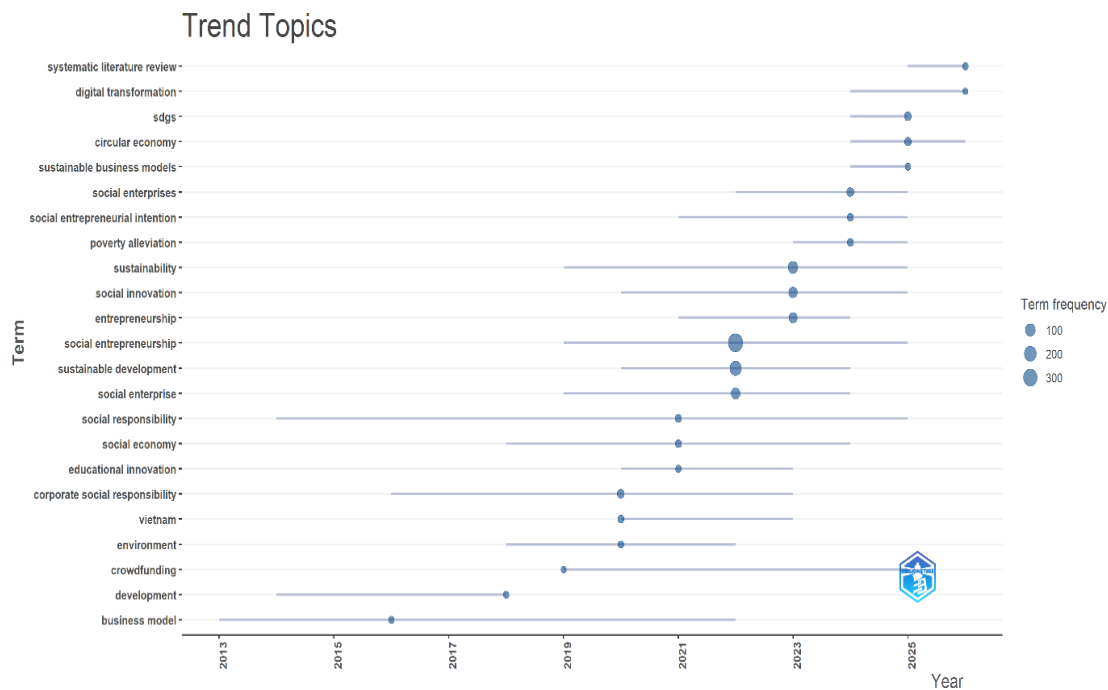


Figure. Trend topics

3.6. Thematic Map

Figure 3 presents the thematic map of research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, classifying research themes according to their centrality (relevance to the field) and density (degree of development). The Basic Themes quadrant (lower-right) contains the largest and most central research cluster comprising social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and social innovation, indicating that these topics form the intellectual foundation of the research domain and are extensively studied despite having relatively lower internal development. Closely associated with this cluster are themes such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social enterprises, circular economy, and environmental sustainability, highlighting the growing emphasis on sustainability-driven entrepreneurial practices. The Motor Themes quadrant (upper-right) includes social enterprise, entrepreneurship, social entrepreneur, sustainable entrepreneurship, environment, and women empowerment, suggesting that these are well-developed, highly connected themes that currently drive research and significantly influence the evolution of the field.

The Niche Themes quadrant (upper-left) comprises specialized but well-developed topics such as financing, rural areas, technology, social inclusion, governance, and bibliometric studies. These themes possess strong internal cohesion but relatively lower connectivity with the broader research landscape, indicating specialized areas of investigation. In contrast, the Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant (lower-left) includes higher education, educational innovation, competencies, gender equality, innovation, and sustainability, suggesting that these themes are either emerging as new areas of scholarly interest or experiencing reduced research attention. Overall, the thematic map demonstrates that research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development has evolved around strong foundational concepts while progressively expanding toward sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship, environmental responsibility, and the Sustainable Development Goals, reflecting the increasing maturity and interdisciplinary nature of the field.

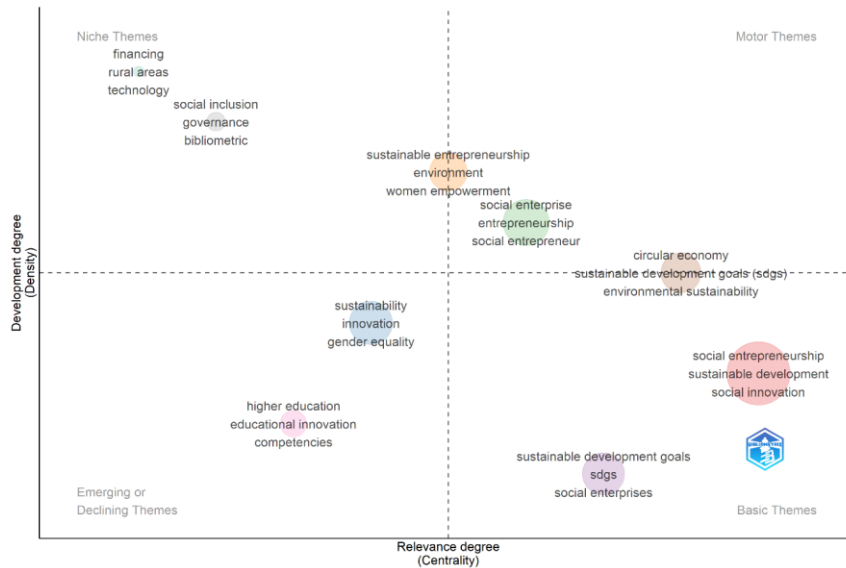


Figure 3. Thematic Map

3.7. Co-occurrence of author keywords

Figure 4 illustrates the co-occurrence network of author keywords in the field of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, revealing the major research themes and their interrelationships. The analysis identifies social entrepreneurship as the dominant keyword with 361 occurrences, establishing it as the central concept around which the research domain is organized. It is closely connected with sustainable development (174 occurrences), sustainability (92), social enterprise (63), social innovation (52), entrepreneurship (49), and innovation (34), indicating that these concepts form the core intellectual structure of the field. Other frequently occurring keywords include Sustainable Development Goals (29), sustainable entrepreneurship (23), corporate social responsibility (19), SDGs (19), social enterprises (18), circular economy (17), and social responsibility (14), demonstrating the increasing emphasis on sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial practices and their contribution to global development agendas. The VOSviewer visualization further groups these keywords into several interconnected thematic clusters representing areas such as sustainable business models, environmental sustainability, digital transformation, innovation, education, social impact, community development, entrepreneurial ecosystems, tourism, and social capital. The dense connections among these clusters indicate a highly integrated and interdisciplinary research landscape in which entrepreneurship, innovation, sustainability, and social value creation collectively drive scholarly inquiry, while emerging topics such as digitalization, circular economy, resilience, and sustainable entrepreneurship continue to expand the scope of future research.

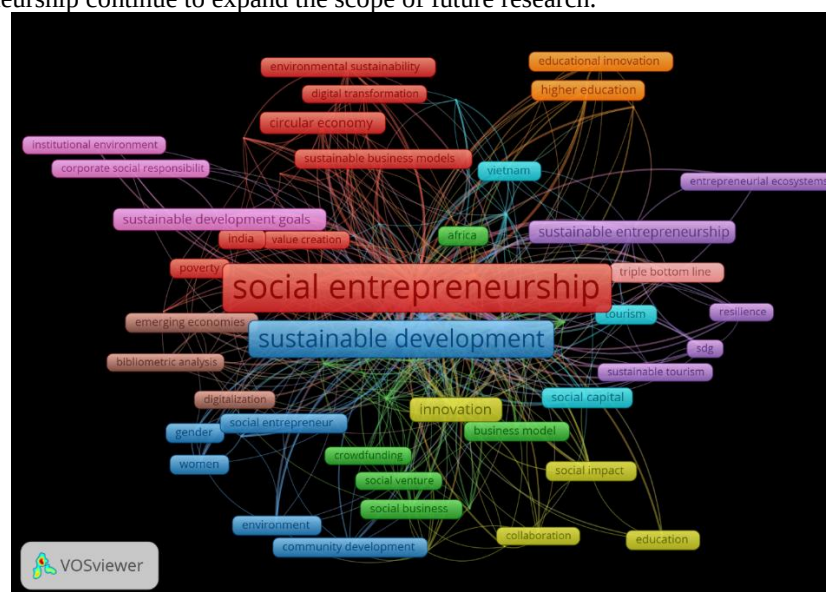


Figure 3. Co-occurrence of author keywords

3.8. Courtiers Collaborations

Figure 5 illustrates the international collaboration network among countries in research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development, highlighting both publication productivity and collaborative linkages. The network demonstrates a high degree of global cooperation, with India emerging as the most productive country with 86 publications, followed by the United States (59), Spain (45), and the United Kingdom (44). Other notable contributors include Germany (27), Mexico (26), China (23), South Africa (22), Canada (20), Brazil (19), Italy (18), Australia (18), Netherlands (16), and France (13). The VOSviewer visualization reveals several interconnected collaboration clusters, indicating strong research partnerships among countries from Europe, Asia, North America, Africa, and Oceania. The United States, United Kingdom, India, and Spain occupy central positions within the network, acting as major hubs that connect multiple international collaborators. Countries such as China, Malaysia, Australia, Turkey, and Vietnam form another active collaboration cluster, while European nations including France, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, and Denmark maintain extensive collaborative ties. The presence of developing economies such as India, South Africa, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, and Vietnam alongside developed countries highlights the global relevance of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development research. Overall, the figure demonstrates that the field is characterized by strong international collaboration, multidisciplinary partnerships, and an increasingly interconnected global research community that facilitates knowledge exchange and advances research on sustainable and socially innovative entrepreneurial practices.

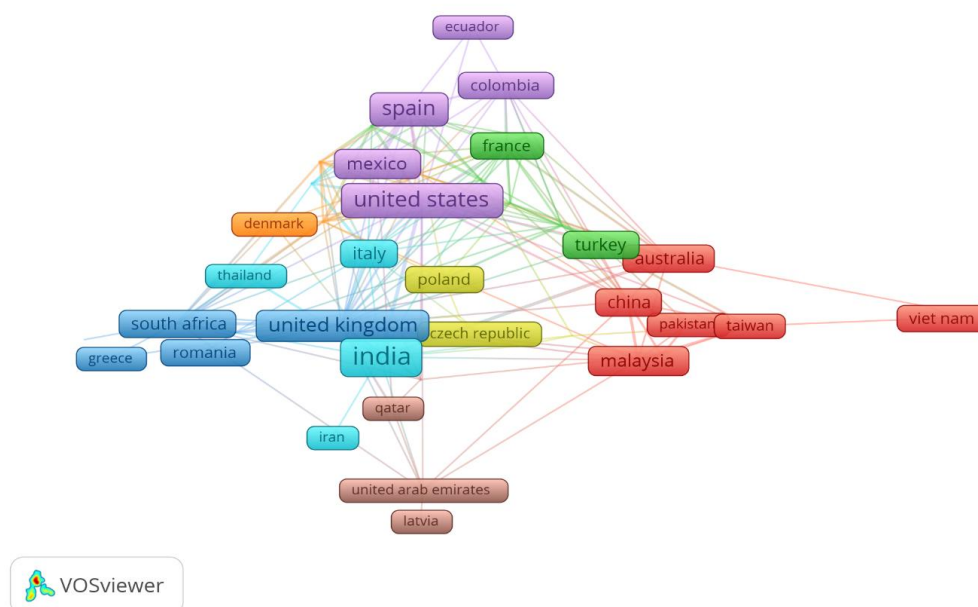


Figure 4. Bibliographic Coupling of Documents

4. DISCUSSIONS

The findings indicate that research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development has experienced substantial growth and has evolved into a mature interdisciplinary research domain. The sharp increase in annual scientific production after 2019 demonstrates the growing academic recognition of social entrepreneurship as a viable strategy for addressing complex societal and environmental challenges. This expansion coincides with the widespread adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and increasing global attention to sustainable innovation, inclusive economic development, and environmental responsibility. The large number of publications, extensive citation base, and wide distribution of publications across diverse journals suggest that the field has established a strong intellectual foundation supported by scholars from multiple disciplines. Furthermore, the relatively balanced productivity among leading authors indicates that knowledge generation is collaborative and geographically dispersed rather than being concentrated among a few dominant researchers, reflecting the broad international appeal and multidisciplinary nature of the field.

The thematic analyses provide further evidence of the intellectual evolution of the discipline. The trend topic analysis demonstrates a clear transition from early research focused on business models, corporate social responsibility, development, and crowdfunding toward contemporary themes such as digital transformation, sustainable business models, circular economy, social entrepreneurial intention, poverty alleviation, and the SDGs. Likewise, the thematic map identifies social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and social innovation as the core foundational themes of the field, while

sustainable entrepreneurship, social enterprise, women empowerment, and environmental sustainability have emerged as well-developed motor themes driving current scholarly inquiry. The presence of niche themes such as technology, governance, financing, social inclusion, and bibliometric studies suggests increasing specialization, whereas higher education, educational innovation, competencies, and gender equality appear as emerging themes with considerable future research potential. Together, these findings reveal that the field has progressed beyond conceptual discussions toward practical, impact-oriented, and technology-enabled approaches that integrate entrepreneurship with sustainable development objectives.

The co-occurrence and country collaboration analyses further reinforce the interdisciplinary and international character of this research domain. The dominance of keywords such as social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, sustainability, social innovation, social enterprise, and entrepreneurship demonstrates that these concepts collectively constitute the intellectual core of the literature. Their strong associations with themes including circular economy, sustainable entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, and social impact indicate increasing convergence between entrepreneurship research and sustainability science. Moreover, the collaboration network reveals extensive partnerships among countries, with India, the United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom serving as central hubs connecting researchers across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The growing participation of developing economies alongside developed nations suggests that social entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a globally relevant mechanism for addressing local and international sustainability challenges through collaborative knowledge creation and interdisciplinary research.

Despite the remarkable development of the field, several important research gaps remain. While existing studies have extensively examined social entrepreneurship, sustainability, and innovation, relatively limited attention has been devoted to artificial intelligence-enabled social enterprises, digital platform entrepreneurship, blockchain applications for social impact, climate resilience, impact assessment methodologies, Indigenous and rural social entrepreneurship, and longitudinal evaluations of sustainable social enterprise performance. The thematic map also suggests that emerging themes such as higher education, competencies, educational innovation, and gender equality require deeper theoretical and empirical investigation to strengthen their integration into the broader research landscape. From a practical perspective, governments should formulate supportive policies that encourage social innovation, impact investing, and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems, while universities should integrate sustainability, digital technologies, and social entrepreneurship into entrepreneurship education and capacity-building programmes. Practitioners and social enterprises should adopt innovative technologies, collaborative partnerships, and evidence-based impact measurement frameworks to enhance organizational sustainability and social value creation. Future research should also promote greater collaboration involving underrepresented regions and low-income countries to develop more inclusive, context-specific, and globally applicable models of social entrepreneurship for sustainable development.

5. CONCLUSION

This bibliometric study demonstrates that research on social entrepreneurship and sustainable development has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, evolving into a dynamic and interdisciplinary field characterized by increasing scientific output, strong international collaboration, and diverse thematic development. The findings identify social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, social innovation, sustainability, and social enterprise as the core intellectual foundations of the field, while emerging themes such as digital transformation, circular economy, sustainable business models, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicate promising directions for future research. The study also reveals that research is becoming increasingly global, with collaborative networks connecting both developed and developing countries to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges. It is recommended that future studies prioritize emerging areas such as artificial intelligence, digital social entrepreneurship, climate resilience, and rigorous social impact measurement to broaden the theoretical and practical scope of the field. It is further recommended that governments, funding agencies, and higher education institutions strengthen support for social entrepreneurship through policy initiatives, financial assistance, entrepreneurship education, and international research collaboration to foster sustainable innovation. Finally, social enterprises and practitioners should adopt technology-driven, evidence-based, and sustainability-oriented business models aligned with the SDGs, thereby enhancing long-term social, environmental, and economic value creation while contributing to inclusive and sustainable development.

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