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Social Entrepreneurship as a Driver of Social Innovation in Post-Revolution Tunisia: Evidence from Ten Enterprises in Gabes

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Abstract

This article examines how social entrepreneurs in Gabes (Tunisia) generate and sustain social innovation under institutional fragility. Drawing on an exploratory qualitative study of ten social enterprises supported by the ESS/EV program, we analyze how found-ers identify unmet needs, structure organizational processes, and navigate financing con-straints. The study reveals four features: (i) multidimensional social needs spanning youth unemployment, women's and disability inclusion, environmental protection, and the valorization of local heritage; (ii) participatory yet vulnerable innovation processes marked by experimentation under scarce resources; (iii) organizational arrangements shaped by territorial context and weak public support; and (iv) reliance on grants with limited access to hybrid finance. Theoretically, we conceptualize the entrepreneur-as-pivot in territorially embedded social innovation and identify financing as a moderator that conditions diffusion and scale. Empirically, we provide rare field-based evidence from the MENA region. Practically, we derive policy implications: hybrid finance mechanisms (e.g., matching grants with revenue-based finance or first-loss guarantees), SSE-specific legal recognition and fiscal incentives, and territorial intermediation to link entrepreneurs with markets and institutions. Together, these measures can convert fragile, do-nor-dependent prototypes into scalable, durable social innovations in Tunisia and com-parable developing economies.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Social Innovation, Institutional Voids, Solidarity Economy, Tu-nisia, Gabes, Hybrid Finance.

Introduction

Since Schumpeter's 1934 reflections, entrepreneurs have been viewed as agents of creative destruction who disrupt established routines through novel solutions. Over time, innovation has shifted from an individualistic to a more open and collaborative process that mobilizes actors across firms and institutions (Chesbrough, 2003) and is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for creating social value (Dandurand, 2005). Despite a growing literature, most studies still focus on Western settings, while much less is known about post-revolutionary developing economies where institutional voids as defined by Khanna and Palepu (2010) in the form of underdeveloped markets, financing, and regulatory frameworks oblige entrepreneurs to improvise with scarce resources and shape what innovation can become.

Tunisia provides a critical context. The 2011 revolution foregrounded social justice despite years of macroeconomic growth (Elhidri, 2017), yet unemployment, regional inequality, and environmental degradation remain acute in Gabes where industrial pollution coexists with high joblessness (European Commission, 2018). Within this setting, initiatives in the social and

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solidarity economy have expanded, including ESS/EV program overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia, a program implemented by Handicap International that supports vulnerable founders to co-produce social innovation when state and market solutions are insufficient.

This study examines how social entrepreneurs in Gabes operate within these constraints. It asks how they identify and rank the most pressing social needs in their communities, how they design and organize processes, partnerships, and work arrangements that enable innovation and diffusion in territorially embedded settings, and how financing structures with particular attention to hybrid finance condition diffusion, scale, and the sustainability of outcomes. In doing so, the article conceptualizes the entrepreneur as a pivot anchoring locally grounded social innovation and argues that financing functions as a moderator rather than a simple enabler of the conversion from invention to durable innovation. The analysis also provides field-based evidence from the MENA region and derives implications for ecosystem building in Tunisia, including hybrid finance platforms that combine grants with revenue-based finance or first-loss guarantees, SSE-specific legal recognition and fiscal incentives, and territorial intermediation that connects entrepreneurs to markets and institutions.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 1 reviews conceptual foundations of social entrepreneurship and social innovation and links American and European traditions to developing-economy contexts and to the SSE lens. Section 2 sets out the national and regional context for Tunisia and Gabes. Section 3 details the qualitative methods. Section 4 presents the findings along four themes needs, processes, organization, and financing with illustrative quotations. Section 5 discusses theoretical, empirical, and policy contributions and concludes.

Conceptual Foundations of Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation

The modern idea of the social enterprise emerged in the 1990s through initiatives at Harvard and by foundations such as Ashoka and Schwab (Sibille, 2009), while the EMES network systematized the European research agenda (Defourny & Nyssens, 2013). In the American tradition, the earned-income school broadened the definition to include both profit and non-profit entities pursuing a social mission, and the social business model (Yunus, 2007) emphasized self-sufficiency and reinvestment of surpluses. A complementary social-innovation school foregrounds the entrepreneur as the prime mover who initiates, diffuses, and sustains socially valuable practices (Sottini, Zupic, & Giudici, 2025; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). By contrast, the European tradition stresses collective, institutional, and territorial anchoring, with public–private partnerships and participatory governance seen as key levers for social value creation (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025 ; Subirats, 2020; Defourny & Nyssens, 2013).

In developing-economy contexts, neither lens is sufficient on its own. Entrepreneurs operate within institutional voids—underdeveloped finance, regulation, and market infrastructure—that shape both opportunities and constraints (Khanna & Palepu, 2010). Under such conditions,

founders draw on bricolage (recombining scarce resources) and embedded agency to mobilize networks and legitimacy (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Mair & Martí, 2009), while organizations often adopt hybrid organizing to balance social and commercial logics (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014). Because resource structures condition whether inventions diffuse and scale, we position hybrid finance—combinations of grants, earned revenue, and investment/impact capital—as a moderator rather than a mere enabler of social innovation outcomes (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025 ; Battilana et al., 2015; Rawhouser, Cummings & Newbert, 2019). Demand-side dynamics also matter: the rise of the social/ethical consumer can accelerate diffusion when supply-side capabilities (design, branding, quality, market access) exist (Nachum, Manning, & Sen, 2025; Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Sinkovics, Sinkovics & Archie-Acheampong, 2021).

This framing is particularly relevant to Tunisia’s social and solidarity economy (SSE) and to ESS/EV (Économie Sociale et Solidaire / Emplois Verts), where entrepreneurs must broker solutions with limited state scaffolding and fragmented markets, while experimenting with organizational hybrids capable of attracting blended resources and absorbing local shocks. Our analysis therefore treats the entrepreneur-as-pivot (orchestrating territorial actors) and hybrid finance (moderating diffusion/scale) as the core mechanisms through which social innovation can move from localized prototypes to durable, scalable outcomes.

Table 1. Comparative Tools for Measuring Social Innovation

Framework	Main Criteria	Evaluation Mode	Analytical Focus
Shared Radar (CRESS-PACA/LEST-CNRS)	Social need; participatory process; territorial anchoring; economic model; collective appropriation	Joint internal/external; 1–4 scale over two years	Territorial legitimacy; novelty–process–results
Godin Institute Markers	11 markers incl. beneficiaries’ role, governance, accessibility, rupture, capacity for social change	External qualitative assessment	Institutional/collective legitimacy
Avisse Characterization Grid	20 criteria across 4 dimensions (rethinking needs; stakeholder involvement; experimentation/risk; externalities)	Structured self-evaluation	Entrepreneurial legitimacy; project profiling

Note. Synthesized from Guérin & Richez-Battesti (2015) and related tool documentation

Context: Tunisia and the Gabes Region

Since 2011, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has gained policy salience in Tunisia and was incorporated into the 2016–2020 development plan (Elhidri, 2017). Structural constraints nevertheless persist, including fiscal pressure, a high prevalence of low-productivity sole proprietorships, limited private investment in the range of 10 to 14 percent, and the absence of a single public authority that regulates and coordinates the SSE field (Dutour and Hajbi, 2019). The region of Gabes epitomizes this paradox. Expansion of the chemical industry contributed to national output yet coincided with serious ecological damage and continued local unemployment (European Commission, 2018). Within this setting, the ESS/EV program overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia was implemented by Humanity & Inclusion (HI), formerly Handicap International, to support vulnerable founders and to fill gaps left by state and market arrangements.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative design to capture processes and perceptions in context. The research focuses on ten social enterprises in Gabes that were supported by the ESS/EV program. Cases were identified in collaboration with the Gabes Employment Office using four selection criteria, namely association membership, social vulnerability of the entrepreneur, residence in the target region, and demonstrable social value.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted [insert months and year]. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were held in Arabic or French according to respondent preference, were audio recorded with informed consent, were transcribed verbatim, and were translated into English with an independent check on a subset to ensure fidelity.

The research team declared saturation when no new codes or themes appeared in the final ten interviews.

Cases were identified in collaboration with Espace Entreprendre Gabes (ANETI) and with program staff from Humanity & Inclusion (HI, formerly Handicap International). HI did not influence interview protocols, coding, or interpretation.

Table 2. Overview of the Ten Social Enterprises in Gabes

#	Enterprise (Activity)	Entrepreneur Profile	HI Grant (TND)	Turnover (TND)	Main Innovation	Primary Social Need
1	Dar El Aoula (local organic)	F, 32, MA Fine Arts, 8y unemployed	19,000	35,000	Valorization of terroir foods with organic	Graduate youth employment, vulnerable

	foods)				inputs	women
2	Laine Utile (artisan embroidery)	F, 30, BA English, 4y unemployed	17,500	35,000	Large-scale rural women training	Youth jobs, empowerment of 200+ rural women
3	Goat Milk Valorization	F, 33, illiterate, vocational training	7,000	9,000	Local goat milk processing	Rural women jobs, healthier consumption
4	Green Compost (oasis waste)	F, 32, agronomy engineer, 10y unemployed	17,500	50,000	Bio-fertilizer from oasis waste	Youth jobs, environment
5	ECOPAL (Pallet Décor)	M, 29, cognitive disability, former athlete	6,000	9,000	Furniture made from recycled pallets	Disability inclusion, recycling
6	Le Créatif (paraschool)	F, 35, BA Sociology, 4y unemployed	7,000	9,000	Tools for learners with cognitive disability	Youth jobs, disability inclusion
7	Dar el Margoum (textiles)	F, 25, artisan	9,000	19,000	Recycled carpet off-cuts into new textiles	Rural women artisans, waste reduction
8	La Ruche (honey)	M, 27, disability graduate	3,000	5,000	Eco-friendly honey packaging	Employment creation, valorization of regional products
9	Local Breed Poultry	F, 30, agronomy engineer	6,000	10,000	Conservation and farming of rare poultry breeds	Youth jobs, biodiversity protection
10	Plastics Recycling	M, 28, Technician Diploma in Electrical Engineering	9,000	13,000	Collection and recycling of plastic waste	Youth jobs, environment

Findings

The analysis surfaced four interconnected themes: the multiplicity of social needs addressed, the ways innovation proceeds under constraint, the organization of work and ecosystem support, and the fragile foundations of financing. Together these themes show how entrepreneurs in Gabes operate within institutional voids while striving to generate durable social value.

5.1 Addressing multiple needs

Across all cases, the primary target was graduate unemployment. Seven founders held university degrees but struggled to access formal jobs, which reflects the persistent mismatch between higher education and regional labor markets. As one founder explained, “I studied agronomy but there were no jobs; composting let me use my skills and hire others” (E4). Women’s economic inclusion was a second, equally salient need. *Laine Utile* trained more than two hundred rural women in embroidery, while *Dar El Aoula* seasonally employed close to one hundred women. “By employing rural women, we provide income and dignity” (E2). Disability inclusion was the core mission in several projects. *Le Créatif* co-designed paraschool tools “with and for learners with cognitive disability” (E6), and two founders with disabilities described their firms as “proof that ability is not only physical; it is also about being useful for others” (E5). Environmental protection cut across nearly all cases through composting of oasis waste, recycling of pallets and plastics, eco-friendly packaging, and the promotion of lower-impact local products. “People abandoned goat milk and natural honey; we revive healthier traditions” (E3, E8). A minority of founders noted tensions between affordability for local consumers and fair wages for workers, indicating that meeting multiple needs simultaneously can impose trade-offs that require careful product positioning and pacing of growth (E1).

5.2 Innovation under constraint

Innovation was experiential and iterative yet conditioned by infrastructure gaps and thin supply chains. Training modules helped structure business plans and improved basic processes, but accompaniment was “too theoretical” for daily bottlenecks such as recurring electricity outages that stopped composting machines or the scarcity of raw inputs for recycling (E4, E5). Food ventures faced spoilage risks without reliable cold chains, while home-based embroidery introduced quality variability and delivery delays (E2). Founders routinely practiced resource bricolage, for example repurposing pallets and wool waste, pooling simple tools, arranging micro-storage with neighbors, or testing low-cost cooling. “Every day we face obstacles, but we cannot stop. If we stop, the women lose everything” (E2). Although resilience was common, many founders were cautious about scaling. Investments in machinery, small solar systems, or extended collection routes were postponed because of high upfront costs and the absence of de-risking financial instruments. One contrasting case reported incremental upgrades such as tighter quality checks and prepaid micro-orders from repeat customers, which enabled modest growth without overexposure to risk (E3). Overall, the pattern is consistent with innovation occurring

within institutional voids, where bricolage helps ventures survive but does not by itself unlock scale.

5.3 Organization and ecosystem support

The ESS/EV program overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia overview: Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs in Tunisia created an opportunity space that enabled vulnerable founders to formalize projects, recruit beneficiaries, and access initial training. Beyond this programmatic scaffolding, state support was reported as limited. “If the state recognized us with tax benefits, we could hire more” (E1). Founders requested sector-specific capabilities, especially design and packaging for crafts and food, basic quality systems, and buyer linkages beyond the region. “Generic business courses are not enough; we need design and packaging know-how to reach national markets” (E7). Several entrepreneurs tried to extend reach through social media and local fairs, yet without territorial intermediaries or buyer networks, conversion outside immediate niches remained difficult (E8). A small number described consistent, hands-on accompaniment with practical troubleshooting and introductions to buyers, but most characterized support as uneven over time. These patterns highlight a gap between foundational training and the operational, market-facing capabilities required for diffusion.

5.4 Financing fragility

Financing was the most decisive constraint. All ten enterprises relied exclusively on the Handicap International grant, and none reported successful access to commercial bank loans or investment capital. “When the grant stops, what will I do” (E5). Even when sales covered wages, several founders noted that margins rarely generated the surplus required for reinvestment, tooling, or market development. Banks were perceived to view such ventures as too small and too risky, and most teams lacked channels or skills to attempt crowdfunding or approach impact investors. One founder experimented with small pre-payments from loyal customers to finance inputs for the next batch, which offered a limited buffer but did not materially change the growth trajectory (E9). In effect, financing operated as a moderator rather than a neutral enabler. Without hybrid instruments that blend grants, earned revenue, and patient capital, inventive solutions remained localized prototypes that struggle to diffuse and scale.

5.5 Synthesis

Across themes, founders acted as entrepreneurs-as-pivots who coordinated beneficiaries, suppliers, and support actors in a territorially embedded process. Their creativity and perseverance were evident, yet institutional voids in infrastructure, inputs, and buyer linkages, combined with the absence of hybrid finance, shaped the ceiling of what was feasible. The presence of a nascent social or ethical consumer segment suggests demand-side leverage, but without design, branding, export-readiness, and de-risked capital, diffusion and scale remain constrained. These findings motivate the discussion that follows, where financing is theorized as

a moderator of the conversion from invention to innovation and where policy levers are specified to move promising prototypes toward durable, scalable outcomes.

Discussion

The evidence from Gabes shows that social entrepreneurs act as pivotal agents who coordinate beneficiaries, suppliers, and support actors to address overlapping social, economic, and environmental needs. Their practices are territorially embedded and unfold within institutional voids where infrastructure, input markets, buyer linkages, and regulatory support are weak (Khanna & Palepu, 2010; Filippi, Bidet, & Richez-Battesti, 2023). In such environments, entrepreneurs rely on bricolage and embedded agency to keep projects viable, recombining scarce resources and mobilizing local legitimacy to move forward (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Mair & Martí, 2009). Bricolage helps ventures progress under scarcity, yet it also sets a ceiling on what can be achieved without changes in the resource structure or in the institutional scaffolding available to them.

Financing emerges as a moderator of outcomes rather than a simple enabler. When funding is limited to a single grant, innovation tends to stall at the prototype stage. Diffusion and scale require instruments that reduce risk at the moment of investment and at the point of market entry, consistent with work on hybrid organizing and the financing of social enterprises (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana & Mair, 2014). Three channels are suggested by the findings and by the hybrid-finance literature (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025) : first, matching or staged finance lowers the threshold for initial investments in machinery, basic quality systems, or cold chain; second, patient or revenue-based instruments smooth cash flow and make incremental expansion feasible when margins are thin; third, the presence of a first-loss or guarantee layer changes the risk calculus of lenders and buyers and can unlock complementary resources such as supplier credit or small pre-orders (Battilana et al., 2015; Rawhouser, Cummings & Newbert, 2019). The isolated attempts at prepayment by repeat customers illustrate micro-hybridization, yet without a broader hybrid architecture these experiments remain too small to shift trajectories.

Demand-side dynamics also matter. Several cases point to a nascent social consumer willing to pay a premium for products perceived as ethical, artisanal, or environmentally responsible. Such willingness can accelerate diffusion, but only if ventures possess supply-side capabilities that make quality and differentiation legible to broader markets, notably design, packaging, branding, certification, and export readiness (Nachum, Manning, & Sen, 2025; Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Sinkovics, Sinkovics & Archie-Acheampong, 2021). Territorial intermediaries that connect entrepreneurs to buyers, testing labs, designers, and logistics can translate willingness to pay into repeat purchasing and stable contracts. In other words, demand-side signals are necessary but not sufficient unless they are matched with capability building and market access (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2014).

Taken together, the results refine existing views of social innovation in developing economies. First, the entrepreneur-as-pivot remains essential because networks and practices must be orchestrated locally when formal institutions are thin (Sottini, Zupic, & Giudici, 2025 ; Mair & Martí, 2009; Battilana & Lee, 2014). Second, the transition from invention to innovation is non-linear and path dependent: it hinges on whether hybrid finance is present at the right time and whether ecosystem actors provide operational capabilities that entrepreneurs cannot build alone (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). Third, small signs of micro-hybridization and ethical demand show that diffusion is possible, but they also reveal where systemic constraints still bind. These insights motivate the implications that follow, specifying how legal recognition, market-facing capabilities, territorial intermediation, and hybrid finance can be combined to move promising prototypes toward durable and scalable outcomes (Filippi, Bidet, & Richez-Battesti, 2023).

Conclusion

This study advances theory by clarifying the role of the entrepreneur as a pivot who anchors territorially embedded social innovation under institutional voids (Mair & Martí, 2009; Sottini, Zupic, & Giudici, 2025). It shows that financing is not only an input but a moderator that conditions diffusion and scale (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025; Battilana et al., 2015), and it brings the social consumer into focus as a demand-side force that can accelerate adoption when supply-side capabilities are present (Nachum, Manning, & Sen, 2025; Littlewood & Holt, 2018). Empirically, the work contributes rare, field-based evidence from the MENA region, illustrating how institutional fragility, ecological vulnerability, and social inequality intersect to shape entrepreneurial practice across ten cases in Gabes.

The practical and policy agenda that follows is equally clear. Support should move beyond generic training and build sector-specific capabilities in design, packaging, quality management, branding, certification, and export readiness (Sinkovics, Sinkovics & Archie-Acheampong, 2021; Littlewood & Holt, 2018). Territorial intermediation is needed to connect entrepreneurs with universities, municipalities, buyer networks, testing labs, and logistics partners (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025). At the regulatory level, Tunisia would benefit from a coherent legal recognition for social and solidarity enterprises, combined with targeted fiscal incentives (Filippi, Bidet, & Richez-Battesti, 2023). On the financial side, hybrid platforms should blend instruments that reduce risk at investment and at market entry, for example matching grants, revenue-based finance, first-loss guarantees, and supplier or buyer pre-orders integrated into staged contracts (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025; Rawhouser, Cummings & Newbert, 2019). Public buyers can also pilot social-value procurement that rewards verifiable social outcomes, which would create predictable demand and help ventures cross the survival threshold.

In this context, the case of Gabes demonstrates both potential and constraint. Social entrepreneurs mobilize vulnerable groups, revive useful traditions, and experiment with ecological practices to

address intertwined challenges of unemployment, inequality, and environmental degradation. They do so in environments where infrastructure, input markets, and buyer linkages remain thin. Without hybrid finance and market-facing capabilities, many initiatives plateau as localized prototypes (Del Giudice, Foglia, & Gianfrancesco, 2025). With a coherent framework for the social and solidarity economy, a targeted hybrid finance architecture, and active territorial intermediaries, these prototypes can become scalable and durable engines of inclusive development.

Building on these results, future studies should track enterprises over time to observe how hybrid instruments alter growth paths and mission integrity. Longitudinal mixed-methods designs can pair thematic analysis with outcome metrics drawn from established social-innovation tools and with basic financial indicators, which would make it possible to connect process to performance (Sottini, Zupic, & Giudici, 2025). Comparative work across Tunisian regions and across North Africa can identify which combinations of policy, finance, and intermediation travel well and which remain place specific (Filippi, Bidet, & Richez-Battesti, 2023). Designs that test demand-side mechanisms are also needed, for example discrete-choice experiments to estimate willingness to pay for ethical and local attributes, or field trials that evaluate the effect of packaging, certification, and small export-readiness grants on repeat purchasing. Finally, evaluations of social-value procurement and guarantee facilities can use quasi-experimental identification to estimate causal effects on hiring, reinvestment, and survival, thereby informing the design of policy instruments that match the realities of social entrepreneurship in developing economies.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization; methodology; software ; validation ; formal analysis ; investigation .; resources .; data curation ; writing—original draft preparation ; writing—review and editing ; visualization ; supervision ; project administration ; funding acquisition. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

De-identified excerpts supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Full interview transcripts are not publicly available to protect participant privacy and institutional confidentiality.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

Abbreviation	Definition
ANETI	Agence Nationale pour l’Emploi et le Travail Indépendant (Tunisian National Agency for Employment and Self-Employment)
CRESS-PACA	Chambre Régionale de l’Économie Sociale et Solidaire Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur
EMES	European Research Network on Social Enterprise
ESS/EV	Économie Sociale et Solidaire / Emplois Verts (Social and Solidarity Economy / Green Jobs)
EU	European Union
HI	Humanity & Inclusion (formerly Handicap International)
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LEST-CNRS	Laboratoire d’Économie et de Sociologie du Travail – Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RBF	Revenue-Based Finance

RQ	Research Question
SI	Social Innovation
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
SVP	Social-Value Procurement

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