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**Project Submission Sheet**

**Student Name:** Muhammad Naeem

**Student ID:** 23413239

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# **The role of social entrepreneurship in driving social change; A case study of the As I Am Foundation**

**Submitted by Muhammad Naeem**

**MSC Entrepreneurship**

**Submitted to the National College of Ireland, August, 2025**

# **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the role of social entrepreneurship in Ireland, with a focus on AslAm foundation, the national autism charity, to explore how social entrepreneurs drive societal change, the ways their activities differ from traditional entrepreneurship, and the challenges faced by these entrepreneurs in achieving business goals. Through an extensive literature review and thematic analysis of ten interviews with individuals engaged in with this foundation, the research provides a detailed understanding of how social entrepreneurs work in Ireland to bring change in society.

The literature review highlights conceptual foundations of social entrepreneurship, differentiating it from traditional entrepreneurship in terms of mission, strategies, stakeholder engagement, and impact measurement. It also examines theoretical frameworks such as Schumpeterian Innovation, Social Innovation Theory, and Systems Change Perspective, providing a basis for understanding how social entrepreneurs create transformative outcomes.

The results of thematic analysis have revealed five core themes: commitment to inclusion, differentiated goals and strategies from traditional business models, funding and sustainability challenges, the role of advocacy in societal transformation, and the impact of public attitudes on social change initiatives. Participants consistently highlighted the dual necessity of financial stability and mission-driven focus, while underscoring persistent barriers such as funding insecurity, societal stigma, fragmented policy environments, and organisational identity ambiguity.

The study concludes that while social entrepreneurs like Adam Harris are instrumental in addressing unmet societal needs, their effectiveness depends on overcoming structural and cultural constraints. Recommendations include diversifying income streams, fostering public awareness, developing policy partnerships, and strengthening organisational narratives to clarify hybrid business models.

This research contributes to the existing studies on Irish social entrepreneurship, offering both academic insights and practical guidance for funders, and practitioners which aim to scale social impact in the face of systemic challenges.

# Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

## National College of Ireland Research Students Declaration Form (Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

**Name:** \_Muhammad Naeem\_\_\_\_\_

**Student Number:** 23413239\_\_\_\_\_

**Degree for which thesis is submitted:** MSc Entrepreneurship\_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Thesis:** The role of social entrepreneurship in driving social change; A case study of the As I Am Foundation

**Date:** 15<sup>th</sup> August 2025

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## **Acknowledgement**

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	6
Acknowledgement.....	8
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	11
1.0 Background.....	11
2.0 Aims and objectives.....	13
3.0 Significance of research .....	13
4.0 Research Outline .....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	15
2.1 Social Entrepreneurship definition .....	15
2.2 Historical background of social entrepreneurship .....	17
2.3 Social entrepreneurship vs traditional entrepreneurship.....	18
2.4 Theoretical framework .....	20
2.4.1 Theory of Schumpeterian Innovation and Creative Destruction .....	21
2.4.2 Social Innovation Theory.....	21
2.4.3 Theory of social change and impact pathways.....	21
2.4.4 Systems change perspective .....	22
2.4.5 Institutional Theory.....	22
2.5 Social entrepreneurship in Ireland .....	23
2.6 Social change and creating social value by Irish social entrepreneurs .....	24
2.7 Challenges encountered by Irish social entrepreneurs .....	25
2.8 Summary .....	26
2.9 Study Gap.....	28
Chapter 3: Research Questions .....	29
Chapter 4: Methodology .....	30
4.1 Research Philosophy .....	31
4.2 Research Approach .....	32
4.3 Research Strategy .....	34
4.4 Data collection .....	34
4.5 Data analysis .....	35

4.6 Ethical considerations .....	36
4.7 Research Limitations .....	36
Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis.....	37
Theme 1: Understanding of Mission and Motivation to Engage.....	38
Theme 2: Contribution to Social Change .....	39
Theme 3: Social vs. Traditional Entrepreneurship .....	39
Theme 4: Measuring Social Impact .....	40
Theme 5: Challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland .....	41
Theme 6: Future Trends .....	42
Summary of thematic analysis .....	42
Chapter 6: Discussion .....	44
6.1 Relevance to research objectives .....	45
6.2 Relevance to research questions.....	49
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	54
7.1 Practical Implications .....	56
7.2 Limitations and Future Research .....	56
8.0 References .....	57
9.0 Appendices .....	62
9.1 Appendix 1: Interview Questions .....	62
9.2 Appendix 2: Initial coding .....	62

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.0 Background

According to Sabri & Mohamad (2024), the environmental problems like climate change, resource depletion and pollution have become common and present-day entrepreneurs are seeking new ways to resolve these problems. The main motive behind social entrepreneurship is to utilise cutting edge technology to solve environmental and social challenges while making money at the same time. The research in the field of entrepreneurship has shown that social entrepreneurship tends to have positive impact on society, the economy and the environment. Although the main objective of social entrepreneurs relates to solving societal and environmental problems, there is still some room for these entrepreneurs to understand what kind of projects they may take up to scale their efforts and make the social projects successful (Ellenwood & Addae, 2021).

The increasing number of entrepreneurs in the society has changed the way they can contribute to the innovation and social developments. The status of women in society has changed due to restrictions on their educational rights and entrepreneurship is playing an important part in creating awareness among the society members through the development of multiple not for profit organisations (NGOs). They tend to improve the economic value of a country by creating more employment opportunities, exhibiting productivity, innovation and growth opportunities (Ghazali, 2022).

As opposed to the simple term entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship is the more defined term to address the existing issues in the society. Social entrepreneurs reflect the skill to utilise any service in such a way that its social effect is retained on the society and its people (Defourny, 2020). Youth play an important part in promoting this concept of social entrepreneurship allowing them to serve the organisations and society with their innovative ideas and solutions. The present-day NGOs experience problems related to funds and resources and social entrepreneurship can provide the best solution to these problems (Dacin, 2021).

The field of entrepreneurship is rapidly growing in the world around and in many countries, specifically in the Asian region, people do not understand the concept of social

entrepreneurship the way they should. Mair (2016) has defined social entrepreneurship as the way adopted by entrepreneurs to address the cultural and societal issues using an innovative solution. Some countries are still in the developing phase and they need a lot of improvements in terms of economic and human resources to develop their economy. But in these countries, the situation of social entrepreneurs is not very pleasing because they experience multiple issues like lack of financial resources, gender inequality, cultural issues and many more. The societal issues are not resolved in the way they should be and therefore social entrepreneurship proves to be a great way to resolve the societal issues (Austin, 2016).

The basic motive behind conducting this research study is to understand the prospects and challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland to bring about change in the society and resolve the underlying societal problems. The one such issue which has been targeted for this study is the increasing ratio of autism in children (Austin, 2016). According to the census figure, 5.25% of children in the age group 0-14 year have a diagnosis of autism as compared to 0.32% of children within the age group 40-64 years. Against every one female, three male members are diagnosed with autism in Ireland according to 2024 statistics (Irish Society for Autism, 2025). Thus, social entrepreneurs in the country have dedicated their efforts to improve the ratio of autistic children in the country by providing them opportunities for skill development and social inclusion. These entrepreneurs provide them tailored programs within the business setting, to improve their overall wellbeing. Thus, these kinds of initiatives help them to address the significant employment gap faced by autistic children as compared to non-disabled peers in the country (AsIAm , 2023).

One such foundation in Ireland which is working to address the social issue of autism in children is the As I Am Foundation, founded by Adam Harris. This foundation is regarded as the National Autism Charity in Ireland and Adma has founded this organisation on the basis of his own experience growing up in the spectrum of autism. With the motive to help autistic children and encouraging them to take initiatives for themselves, he set up this foundation to provide a clear direction for autistic children in the country (AsIAm , 2023).

## **2.0 Aims and objectives**

This research will achieve the following aims and objectives

- To understand the differences between social entrepreneurship and traditional entrepreneurship in Irish context
- To study the working patterns of social entrepreneurs in Ireland to bring societal change
- To understand the difficulties experienced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland to bring any change in the society.

## **3.0 Significance of research**

This study is aimed to check the creativity and ideas of social entrepreneurs in Ireland to help individuals devise better strategies who are thinking about new ways to bring social change to the society and are eager to understand how social entrepreneurship is growing in the country. The findings of this study will help social entrepreneurs in Ireland to evaluate their motives and highlight their efforts to legal authorities like government employees, NGOs in the country, religious bodies who are constantly working on the social change and aim to bring about the change in the society.

## **4.0 Research Outline**

This study comprises of seven chapters with each chapter discussing a different aspect. The first chapter is the introduction chapter which discuss the research background, research aims and objectives. The second chapter is the literature review which compare the opinions of different authors regarding social entrepreneurship in Ireland. This chapter critically reviews the findings of other authors and summarise the existing literature to identify the research gap that has been addressed in this study. The third chapter provides the research questions derived from literature review while the fourth chapter targets to discuss research method adopted for this study. It includes details on chosen research approach, research strategy, research philosophy and research limitations. This chapter follows the Saunderson's research onion framework. The fifth chapter applies thematic analysis method on the collected information and present the findings of this study. The

sixth chapter is based on discussion to discuss the findings with relevance to research objectives and literature review. The last chapter presents the conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Chapter 2 is related to review the peer reviewed journal articles on social entrepreneurship and how it contributes to bring change in the society. It encompasses wide range of peer reviewed journal articles to compare and contrast their findings to draw deduce reliable conclusion and identify the gap in existing literature.

### **2.1 Social Entrepreneurship definition**

In existing literature, multiple definitions of social entrepreneurship have been discussed in different contexts. Peredo (2016) has regarded social entrepreneurship as the way to resolve social issues existing in the society. While according to Lanuza (2018), social entrepreneurship is not only about solving the existing societal problems but instead it is related to strategies adopted by entrepreneurs to boost up the economy as more and more opportunities are created for the people in a country. Charles Leadbeater was the first individual to discover this term who has addressed how social entrepreneurs adopt innovative business approaches to resolve societal issues in a different way. Thus, Roy, (2022) has regarded social entrepreneurship as the technique adopted by entrepreneurs to execute different solutions to the ongoing societal problems.

Following the definition proposed by Wang (2023), social entrepreneurship is all about creation of the socio-economic relations, and organisational practices to yield sustainable benefits to the society and the economy of a country. Further building upon this definition, Yee (2023) has stated that social entrepreneurs create innovation solutions to existing societal problems and mobilise the business ideas to implement sustainable social transformation.

Ilahi & Mohammed (2022) has regarded social entrepreneurship as the way for entrepreneurs to add benefit to society in different sectors like the education sector, health and agriculture department. It is regarded as the best way to address the social challenges and bring social change in the society. These kinds of entrepreneurs are responsible for addressing the neglected public issues and solve these issues using their innovative ideas. However, Ellenwood & Addae (2022) has proved through his findings that social entrepreneurs encounter different challenges such as lack of support by

government authorities, resistance to new ideas, and problems in changing the status of women in the society.

To effectively explain the concept of social entrepreneurship, Saebi (2019) has elaborated that the activities of these entrepreneurs is affected by social and cultural values of entrepreneurship such as the social responsibility, self-reliance and stewardship. Thus, social entrepreneurship is regarded as the best way to undertake developments in the country and solve societal issues. The increasing trend of social entrepreneurship has created many employment opportunities for the people in the society and this perspective of social entrepreneurship has been supported in the literature by Gupta & Chauhan, (2020).

The table below has summed up the multiple definitions of social entrepreneurship discussed by different authors in existing literature

Author	Year	Definition Summary
<b>Leadbeater</b>	1997	Describes social entrepreneurs as entrepreneurial (spotting unused resources), innovative (creating new services/products), and transformative—revitalizing institutions and communities
<b>Seelos &amp; Mair</b>	2005	Creation of new models to provide products/services that meet basic human needs unmet by existing institutions
<b>Ashoka</b>	2012	Social entrepreneurs are individuals who craft creative answers to societal, cultural, and environmental issues—persistently pursuing solutions for large-scale systemic change.
<b>Dacin et al.</b>	2019	Definitions focus on four core aspects: characteristics of social entrepreneurs, activity field, processes and resources, and social mission.

<b>Dees &amp; Battle-Anderson</b>	2020	Social entrepreneurship sits between two schools: (1) social enterprise (earned income for mission support), and (2) social innovation (novel ways to address social issues)—blending business and philanthropy.
<b>Osberg &amp; Martin</b>	2024	Three components: (1) identifying a stable, unjust equilibrium impacting a disadvantaged group; (2) spotting opportunity and deploying creativity and courage to challenge it; (3) establishing a better, sustainable equilibrium with broader societal benefits

**Table 1: Summary of definitions of social entrepreneurship**

**Made by author**

## **2.2 Historical background of social entrepreneurship**

Since the past few decades, social entrepreneurship has been regarded as a promising avenue to tackle a range of social issues. According to author, the inception of this concept can be dated back to 1970s and 1980s but this notion has undergone multiple transformations over time (Agarwal & Mulunga, 2022). Over the recent developments in the field of social entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs have developed remedies to address the social concerns like the environmental issues in more productive way. Zeyen & Beckman (2025) has claimed that organisations following the hybrid structure are the perfect blend of social entrepreneurship integrating the features of conventional businesses and not for profit organisations. Thus, social entrepreneurs develop the behavioural abilities to propel constructive transformation in the most effective way (Bacq, 2021).

The history of social entrepreneurship can be dated back to the time period of Philanthropic Reformers including figures like Florence Nightingale (founder of modern nursing) and Robert Owen (pioneer of cooperative movements in 19th-century Britain) who set examples of social-minded innovators in the society. In the mid of 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, multiple missionary societies were developed to promote innovative approaches

to address poverty and health related issues (Austin, 2016). From 2000 onwards, dedicated research centres have been established such as Skoll Centre at Oxford and Schwab Foundation at WEF to create recognition and funding channels for the existing and emerging social entrepreneurs. These developments in social entrepreneurship are also accelerated by the United Nation's agenda in 2015 which boosted the profile of mission driven innovation in the country (Defourny, 2020).

Bacq (2021) has demonstrated through his research that purpose of social innovations is to pertain the novel endeavours by businesses to achieve a specific social objective. This term circulates around individuals who stand to gain the social benefits and therefore Weerawardena (2016) has regarded this term as the catalyst for change which facilitates the continuous process of innovation.

### **2.3 Social entrepreneurship vs traditional entrepreneurship**

Multiple scholars have discussed the differences between social and traditional entrepreneurship highlighting that traditional entrepreneurs are focused on generating economic profit and value for the business while the social entrepreneurs are more concerned about creating value for the society and addressing the societal issues (Santos, 2022). According to Alvord (2024) the general definition of entrepreneurship defines it as a term to identify, develop and exploit opportunities to create value. But this definition does not apply to all categories of entrepreneurs. Instead, there exist prominent differences behind the objective of entrepreneurs which has helped practitioners in this field to differentiate between types of entrepreneurs. Traditional entrepreneurs aim at profit maximisation and wealth creation for owners and stakeholders of business. In contrast, social entrepreneurs aim at value creation addressing the unmet societal needs, reducing inequalities and resolving environmental challenges (Defourny, 2020). However, Salamzadeh (2023) has claimed that profit values are applicable to both types of entrepreneurs but the difference lies in sustaining the entrepreneurial mission.

Sullivan Mort (2023) has proposed that in traditional entrepreneurship, financial indicators such as profitability, return on investment, and market share are used to measure the success of the business whereas in social entrepreneurship, impact matrices are used to evaluate the business success. These matrices could include number of beneficiaries

served, improvements made to the community wellbeing, and environmental restoration. Salamzadeh (2023) has criticised these differences by author and concluded through his study that for social entrepreneurs, financial success is equally important but it lies secondary to mission fulfilment.

While both forms of entrepreneurship involve opportunity recognition, but they differ in terms of sources. García-Jurado (2021) has stated that traditional entrepreneurs work to identify the gaps in the market while keeping in view the profit potential. Contrary to traditional entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs work to identify market failures in the societal areas where the needs of people are unmet. Further extending upon these findings, Ellenwood (2022) has stated that in traditional model of entrepreneurship financial rewards and autonomy are valued while in social entrepreneurship models, the main motive of the entrepreneur is to generate systematic change in the already existing processes in the society (Bacq, 2021).

Fransiscus (2021) has differentiated traditional entrepreneurship from social entrepreneurship in terms of stakeholders' relationship. The primary focus of traditional entrepreneurs are the customers, business stakeholders, and employees who form transactional relationship with the business. In contrast to this, social entrepreneurs are engaged with a broader network of stakeholders which could include their beneficiaries, donors, public institutions and community partners. Thus, they are emphasised on collaborative partnerships rather than only focus on revenue generation for the business (Dahiya, 2022).

In terms of resources and business model, traditional entrepreneurs rely on equity resources, debt and reinvestment profits. This helps them to gain competitive advantage through scalability. In contrast to this, social entrepreneurs prefer to work on hybrid models, which provide the combined benefits of income, grants, volunteer contributions, and social investment. Therefore, it can be said that these entrepreneurs rely more on non-market resources including the goodwill, and advocacy market values (Wang, 2023).

The table 2 summarises the differences between both types of entrepreneurships as derived from the study of existing literature.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Traditional Entrepreneurship</b>	<b>Social Entrepreneurship</b>
<b>Primary Purpose</b>	Profit maximization	Social value creation
<b>Success Measure</b>	Financial returns	Social impact (plus financial sustainability)
<b>Opportunity Source</b>	Market gaps	Social needs / market failures
<b>Stakeholders</b>	Customers, investors, employees	Broad multi-sector partnerships
<b>Financing</b>	Equity, debt, reinvested profits	Hybrid: grants, donations, earned income, investment
<b>Innovation Context</b>	Market competitiveness	Mission-driven, systemic change
<b>Risk Type</b>	Market risk	Mission & market risk

**Table 2: Social vs Traditional entrepreneurship**

**Made by author**

## **2.4 Theoretical framework**

The intersecting fields of social entrepreneurship and social change have captured the attention of various scholars over the last two decades. The researchers have focused to understand how entrepreneurial initiatives can help to generate systemic societal transformation.

### **2.4.1 Theory of Schumpeterian Innovation and Creative Destruction**

Joseph Schumpeter's (1934) has discussed the theory of creative destruction in relation to social entrepreneurship. His findings have revealed that social entrepreneurs play the role of agents of change and replace the change with innovation specifically the social benefits. Most of the activities executed by the social entrepreneurs is directed to provide any social benefit to the society. While the commercial entrepreneurs disrupt the market efficiency, social entrepreneurs aim at equity, inclusion and sustainability. This theory does not regard entrepreneurship to be a product or a service but instead, it is about restructuring the social relationships and institutional arrangements (Kwabena, 2021).

The greatest strength of this theory lies in considering entrepreneur as an agent of change and explaining the role of innovation. However, this theory has been criticised by Wuebker (2021) for overemphasising the individual heroism and paying less attention to incremental changes.

### **2.4.2 Social Innovation Theory**

In the context of social innovation theory, the main motive of a social entrepreneur is to drive novel solution to the unmet needs of the society. This theory encourages societal wellbeing and considers social change as the outcome of innovation. This theory promotes the concept that long term systematic impact of innovation is prioritise over short term innovation (Pittaway, 2023). Therefore, this theory considers innovation as an iterative process which include identifying needs, co-creating stakeholders and allow social entrepreneurs to alter the existing social dynamics. This theory has been criticised by Weerawardena (2024) mentioning in his study that it fails to clearly describe the concept of innovation limiting the predictive power to entrepreneurship.

### **2.4.3 Theory of social change and impact pathways**

This theory is used widely in development studies to articulate different pathways that a social entrepreneur could adopt from input to long term social impacts. This approach is helpful for social entrepreneurs to align the entrepreneurial activities with the intended social change. This theory reinforces the idea that social entrepreneurship is both intentional and strategically designed. However, this theory does not consider the risk parameters and heavily relies on assumptions only (Dacin, 2021).

#### 2.4.4 Systems change perspective

Considering social entrepreneurship from the lens of systems change, this theory pays attention to identify the root cause of the existing social problems by influencing the policies, cultural narratives, power structures and resources flow (Dahiya, 2022). Those social entrepreneurs who opt for this framework demand transformative changes by re-engineering the systems which produce the change. Criticising this theory, Alvord (2024) has stated that this theory is difficult to implement and measuring the systems performance can be challenging. It can demand higher resources and time.

#### 2.4.5 Institutional Theory

This theory was proposed by DiMaggio & Powell in 1983, and provide insights into how social entrepreneurs transforms the formal and informal institutional arrangements. Social entrepreneurs may prefer to undertake incremental changes or radical changes while challenging the norms, policies and cultural beliefs. In this context, this theory promotes the idea that social change can result from compliance and contestations (Roy, 2022).

The table summarises each of the entrepreneurial theories and criticism to these theories.

Theory	Core Idea	Criticisms
<b>Schumpeterian Innovation</b> (Schumpeter, 1934)	Social entrepreneurs disrupt unjust equilibria and replace them with socially beneficial systems.	Overemphasizes individual heroism; less attention to collective and incremental change; neglects non-disruptive social ventures.
<b>Social Innovation Theory</b> (Mulgan et al., 2007)	Social change arises from novel solutions to unmet needs, with focus on long-term systemic benefits.	Often vague in defining "innovation"; may romanticize novelty over scaling proven solutions; limited predictive power.
<b>Resource Mobilization Theory</b> (McCarthy & Zald, 1977)	Success in driving change depends on ability to gather and deploy resources from diverse stakeholders.	May overstate resource availability; downplays innovation and vision in mobilizing support.

<b>Institutional Theory</b> (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)	Social entrepreneurs navigate, challenge, or reshape institutional norms, policies, and beliefs.	Can underplay agency of entrepreneurs; may overemphasize institutional constraints; change often appears slow.
<b>Systems Change Perspective</b> (Meadows, 1999; Westley et al., 2014)	Focuses on altering root causes—policies, power structures, cultural narratives, and resource flows.	Conceptually ambitious but difficult to operationalize; measuring systems change is challenging; high resource and time demands.

**Table 3: Summary of theories**

**Author**

## 2.5 Social entrepreneurship in Ireland

According to Bacq (2021), social entrepreneurship in Ireland is an important component of the visible and policy related aspects of the national economy of the country. In Ireland, social entrepreneurship consists of combination of diverse fields related to co-operatives, charities, companies-limited-by-guarantee and hybrid social enterprises which blend the characteristics of social and traditional enterprises in the country (Fransiscus, 2021). Fitzsimons (2021) has claimed that Ireland lacks a single form of social enterprises and majority of the issues faced by people in different sectors are addressed through policy design and strategic programmes.

In Ireland there is growing interest in social innovation and systems change. While some of the social entrepreneurs in Ireland aim to influence the national policy while delivering services opportunities for entrepreneurs in this sector are shaped by digital transformation and green transition agendas. This helps these entrepreneurs to tackle digital inclusion and rural developments in the area (Salamzadeh, 2023).

Within the social entrepreneurial ecosystem in Ireland, AsIAM proves itself to be a mission driven not for profit organisation which perform social entrepreneurial functions related to advocacy, service innovation, capacity-building and market shaping. In the leadership of Adam Harris, AsIAM has build national presence through its public campaigns and

community-based programs addressing the needs of autistic children in Ireland. Being a social entrepreneur, he tends to mobilise the social capital and influence employer practices in Ireland. The output generated by this organisation provide support to autistic people and systematic interventions which has reshaped the employment opportunities for autistic people in the country (AsIAM , 2023).

The AsIAM foundation in Ireland has provided a two-pathway approach by which social entrepreneurs in Ireland can implement any social change. The first pathway is the service to system approach while the second pathway relates to advocacy to policy pathway. Following the service to system pathway, social entrepreneurs in this foundation work to address the immediate needs of autistic people by providing training and placement assistance. Secondly following the advocacy to policy pathway, this foundation tends to alter the institutional rules and funding priorities (Nodeson, 2024).

## **2.6 Social change and creating social value by Irish social entrepreneurs**

By social norms, Dahiya (2022) has regarded any change in society, norms or behaviour of people in the society. Further extending upon this research, social change is related to changes in human beings' behaviours related to the society such as changes in economic structure, any change in education system in Ireland, changes in values and lifestyles of these individuals. Recent studies in the field of entrepreneurship have suggested that social change strongly impact the lifestyle of children in Ireland as well as social values of parents in the society. The reason for the occurrence of this social change is related to changes in demographics, technology, economic change, organisational innovation and changes in institutional policies (Fransiscus, 2021).

Shah and shubisham (2024) stated that in Ireland, people are willing to invest in the field of education and business schools for social innovation. The reason for this willingness is because by investing in people and organisations, it becomes easy to drive social change in the society. According to Nodeson (2024), multiple case studies have been discussed which throws light on failure of social entrepreneurial culture in Ireland. Melnikovas (2018) has suggested through his research that financial institutions in the country must empower social entrepreneurs by providing them access to capital

resources and financing the entrepreneurial activities. The Irish people must be facilitated by providing access to technical and social skills related to social entrepreneurs.

According to Santos (2022), who has comparatively studied the entrepreneurship in Ireland mentioned in his study that social entrepreneurship should be studied in different sectors like health, and education department in Ireland. Pittaway (2023) has summed up the findings of his study stating that social entrepreneurship can positively impact the Irish youth while creating awareness in the society about social enterprises activities to encourage the youth to get engaged in social activities. It has become the requirement of every country to encourage social enterprises in the state. Those countries develop in less time frame who tend to involve society individuals in development activities. However, the main hinderance in the execution of social entrepreneurial activities in the country is the lack of resources for social entrepreneurs. Therefore, the implementation plan set by these entrepreneurs must include mitigation strategies to overcome the consequences (Weerawardena, 2016).

## **2.7 Challenges encountered by Irish social entrepreneurs**

As agreed, upon by most of the scholars, social entrepreneurs are the agents of change in a country. They tend to address the gap in society but despite of their important contribution to the society, they encounter a range of challenges which can impact their survival and sustainability in the Irish market (Salamzadeh, 2023). Discussing the various challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland, Sullivan Mort (2023) has mentioned in his study that securing loan term and reliable funding is the main hinderance for social entrepreneurs in the country. Discussing the analysis of multiple sectors in Ireland, many social enterprises in Ireland struggle with financial sustainability where 40% of these entrepreneurs report an annual income below €100,000. Therefore, social enterprises in Ireland seek help from corporate giving and philanthropy which is still insufficient to meet the growing demands of social entrepreneurs in the country (Wang, 2023).

According to Wuebker (2021) besides having difficulty in rising finances, social enterprises also face challenges in misunderstanding the niche where they operate such as some social entrepreneurs in Ireland consider them under not-for-profit organisation while some consider themselves under commercial businesses. This hybrid business

model create confusion for investors, stakeholders and funders about the purpose of these enterprises and their business legitimacy. Therefore, to bridge this gap in understanding the business model, Agarwal & Mulunga (2022) has proposed that social entrepreneurs in Ireland must have a clearly stated mission and narratives which can have a robust impact on the society.

Contrary to the opinions of Agarwal & Mulunga (2022), Alvord (2024) has stated in his research that it is critical for the Irish social entrepreneurs to articulate and demonstrate the social impact that they tend to have on the society. This is important but at the same time critical for social entrepreneurs in Ireland. Extending upon this concept, Lanuza, (2018) has highlighted that Irish social enterprises must adopt the clear theories of change and adopt the appropriate change measurement framework to effectively communicate the funding options. But these entrepreneurs do not have enough resources to develop and adopt such sophisticated approach.

Another challenge faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland relate to setting up the governance structure and deciding on an appropriate legal form such as the charity organisation, social enterprise or others. This carries the implication for governance and regulatory burden (Peredo, 2016). Social enterprises in Ireland may need guidance and expert advice to pass through this phase of business set up. Under such circumstances, organisations like Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) play critical role in providing strategic guidance and scaling support to social enterprises in the country (Yee, 2023).

## **2.8 Summary**

Summarising the findings of existing literature, social entrepreneurship is widely conceptualised as the application of entrepreneurial methods to achieve the social, cultural and environmental objectives. Although multiple definitions of entrepreneurship exist in literature all these definitions revolve around the concept of social change and creation of social value over the pursuit of profit figures. As the primary objective of social entrepreneurship is to meet the unmet needs of the society, these entrepreneurs prefer to use innovative and resourceful approach as compared to traditional entrepreneurs in Ireland (Austin, 2016). In the existing literature, the social entrepreneurship has been distinguished with traditional entrepreneurship provided that traditional entrepreneurs

focus on identifying market opportunities which are identifiable and measure their success in financial terms whereas social entrepreneurs aim to address the market failure and evaluate success through the social impact that their business will have on the society (Kwabena, 2021). However, researchers in both types of entrepreneurship have agreed that both share the characteristics of general entrepreneurship which involve risk taking, and recognising the opportunities, the main difference between the two types lies in financial returns. In social entrepreneurship, financial returns are secondary to mission fulfilment while they adopt the hybrid business models and combine the revenue earned to the social benefit that they have delivered (Roy, 2022).

In literature different theoretical perspectives have been discussed which can explain how social entrepreneurship can lead to social change. Firstly, Schumpeterian innovation theory has regarded social entrepreneurs as the drivers of change in the society while social innovation theory has emphasised on the importance of long-term benefits and collaborative solutions which are delivered by the social entrepreneurs to the society (Dacin, 2021). The theory of change has mapped the causal pathways adopted by a social entrepreneur from day-to-day activities to desired outcomes. In contrast to this theory, systems theory has discussed structural transformation in culture, policy and power relations. But each of these theories linking social entrepreneurship to social change has its own limitations which restrict researchers to follow their outcomes (Defourny, 2020).

In Ireland, social entrepreneurs experience multiple challenges in executing their ideas and one of the main challenges they encounter relates to sustainability funding which remains the most pressing issue in literature (Fransiscus, 2021). As social entrepreneurs rely on hybrid business model, it can create misunderstanding among stakeholders influencing their choices and limiting their capacity for measuring the impact of their efforts on funding and partnership opportunities. Other challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland include choosing an appropriate legal structure, and maintaining cross sector partnerships with industry experts and resources. Thus, to wrap up the findings of literature, social entrepreneurship proves to be a critical mechanism, and is mission driven rather than opportunity aware (Nodeson, 2024).

## **2.9 Study Gap**

Although the study of existing literature has provided clarity on the concepts of social entrepreneurship and its associated terms but gaps exist in linking theory to the practice. The complexity of addressing the social change process has not been addressed in literature while majority of the existing literature has focused on high level debate and theoretical perspective of the term. Theoretical propositions have not been tested systematically in the existing literature which has limited the development of predictive models in literature. The policy interventions have remained underdeveloped in this particular area of study. The literature has highlighted the success stories of social entrepreneurs but fail to highlight the reasons behind the failure of some social entrepreneurs in Ireland. By studying the reasons behind failure, one could better formulate the risk mitigation strategies and adaptive strategies. Hence it remains a neglective topic and this study will address this gap in literature discussing the social entrepreneurial trends in Ireland considering the case of As I am Foundation.

## Chapter 3: Research Questions

By reviewing the existing literature, following research questions have been developed

**“How social entrepreneurs like Adam Harris can drive social change in Ireland?”**

- How the activities of traditional entrepreneurs differ from those of social entrepreneurs in Irish context?
- How social entrepreneurs work to transform social and economic conditions for different groups of people in the society?
- What challenges are encountered by social entrepreneurs in Ireland in introducing any change to the society?

## Chapter 4: Methodology

This section of dissertation is related to discuss the research method following which this study has been completed. Saunder's research onion framework is used in this study. It defines a research methodology as series of specific steps which are executed in a particular order to achieve the research objectives and find answers to the research questions. Researchers prefer to use this model to design their research defining different components underpinning philosophical and practical techniques. Each layer of this model (as given in figure 1 below) overlays the other layer. Thus following this model allow researchers to ensure a coherent and rigorous research design (Askarzai & Unhelkar, 2020).

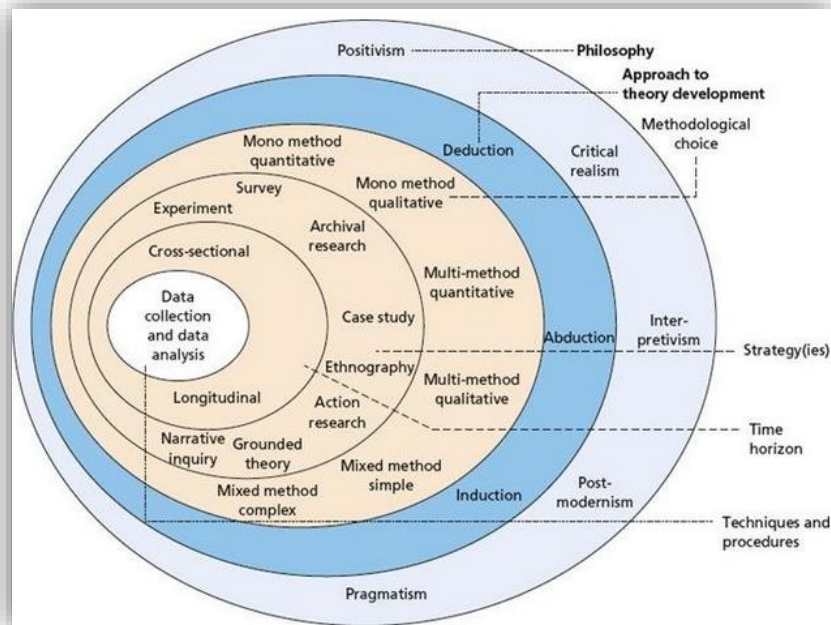
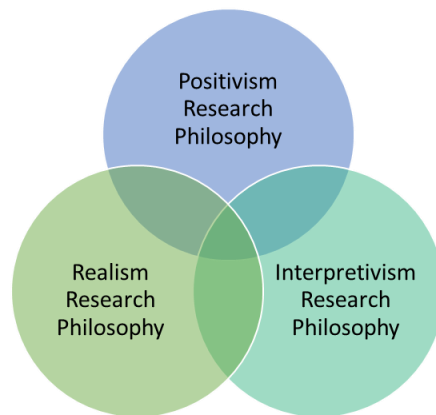


Figure 1: Research Onion Framework by Saunder (Askarzai & Unhelkar, 2020)

## 4.1 Research Philosophy

According to author, the approach adopted by the researcher to get knowledge in a specific area is regarded as a research philosophy. The research philosophies that are used by researchers include positivism philosophy, interpretivism philosophy, pragmatism philosophy and realism philosophy. Each of these philosophies offer a different perspective on how knowledge has been generated and interpreted (Patel & Patel, 2019).



**Figure 2: Research philosophies (Braun, 2022)**

The **interpretivism research philosophy** help researchers to develop subjective meanings that individuals have attached to their experiences. This approach is common to adopt in studies related to social sciences to understand the social phenomenon. Following this philosophy the researcher relates environmental findings to his research objectives (Melnikovas, 2018).

In **positivism research philosophy**, the researcher considers the research topic from objective perspective. He does not pay much attention to his own perspectives but instead use real term figures to relate his findings to the existing facts (Melnikovas, 2018).

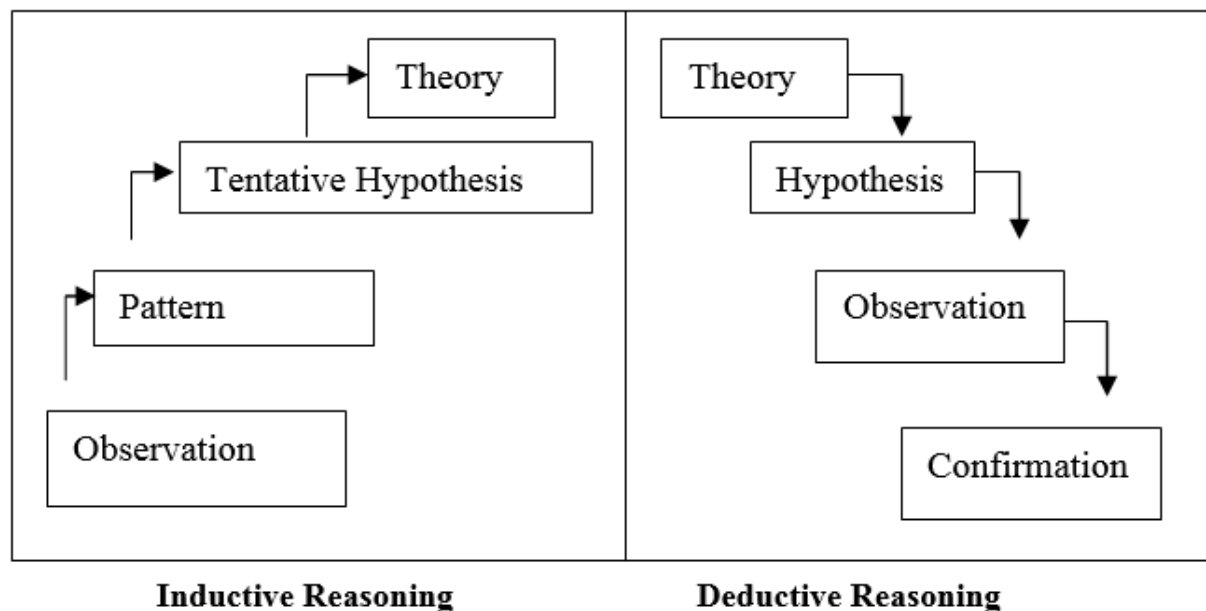
The **realism philosophy** is marked to have characteristics of both interpretivism and positivism research philosophies. Following this philosophy, the researchers value to study the topic from humanistic perspective to get better understanding about the practical aspects of the topic (Melnikovas, 2018).

Since this research is aimed to understand the behaviour of social entrepreneurs to bring change to the society, positivism philosophy is very well suited for this study. The reason for choosing this philosophy over other philosophies is because it supports the qualitative data used for this study. This philosophy has allowed to consider wider data sources and get an in-depth understanding about the scientific methods. The conclusions from this study are supported with empirical observations and objective knowledge about the research topic.

The greatest advantage of using this philosophy over others is that it has produced reliable and generalisable results which interpretivism and realism cannot produce. This approach follows pre-established set of rules and regulations which follow the same data patterns and is helpful for the researcher to set the right direction for study (Melnikovas, 2018). However, this research philosophy has the disadvantage that it does not focus on why, how and where aspects of data collection process. It only generates the descriptive findings which are not sufficient for the researcher to fulfil the research criteria (Mohajan, 2017).

## **4.2 Research Approach**

In the context of research onion by Saunder, a research approach is the collection of steps to be performed in a specific order to analyse the collected information. The research philosophy is different from the research approach in that the research approach is highly focused to explain the how element of the research process while the research philosophy covers the what element of the research process. Research onion by Saunder has covered four types of research approaches which include deductive approach, inductive approach and abductive approach (Mohajan, 2017).



**Figure 3: Types of research Approach**

**Snyder (2019)**

In **inductive research approach**, the purpose is to relate answers to the research questions adopting multiple methods. Research questions and research objectives are linked to the findings of the study. (Mohajan, 2017).

While following **deductive research approach**, research hypothesis is formed and test against the research aims and objectives. This approach helps to prove whether the hypothesis is accepted or rejected (Mohajan, 2017).

In case of following the **abductive research approach**, the facts and figures relevant to the research topic are used to test hypothesis. Mainly the researcher is aimed to answer the research questions (Mohajan, 2017).

Since this research involve finding answers to the research questions and analysing the findings of existing authors related to the research topic, abductive approach has been followed for this study. To fulfil the research aims and objectives, facts and relevant data sources are used to support the entire discussion made in this study. Due to this abductive research approach is used for this study.

Using this research approach, the greatest advantage for the researcher is that reliable results are produced and initial limits are defined which provide clarity to the researcher. This approach helps to clarify the existing theories by using clear and structured research protocols (Agarwal & Mulunga, 2022). But this approach also has some drawbacks such as it may produce biased end results and the assumptions made during the research process are not authenticated. The researchers exhibit limited creativity to deduce results due to which this approach is not suitable for studying the subjective experiences (Melnikovas, 2018).

### **4.3 Research Strategy**

A research strategy, following the concept of research onion, helps to elaborate on how the research has been carried out. Saunderson has proposed three types of research strategies which include qualitative research strategy, quantitative research strategy and the mixed method research strategy. However, before opting for any of these research strategies, the researcher must have complete understanding about the benefits and drawbacks of each of these strategies (Askarzai & Unhelkar, 2020).

For executing this study, a qualitative research approach has been used. In the context of this research strategy, the presented arguments related to the research topic are supported by theoretical frameworks. This helps to understand the research objectives in a better way. This research involves understanding how social change is driven by social entrepreneurs, the findings from this study can be applied in practical setting provided that the research reliability is maintained by an objective approach to facilitate the research process. However, this research strategy also has certain disadvantages making it challenging for the researcher to collect the data. The respondents may not be willing to give authentic opinion. The collected data can fail to address the complex issues and this research method can complicate the study process due to high cost.

### **4.4 Data collection**

Generally, four types of data are available for researchers which could include descriptive data, observational data, experimental data and derived data. Each of these types differ according to the nature of the data. Firstly, descriptive data is the data used during the research process. This type of data includes main features which include examples like

patterns of data and basic view of the data. This type of data is then followed by observational data which covers the events and phenomenon based on the observations made by the researcher. This type of data is not manipulated and involves the evidence of natural occurrences. The experimental data involves covering the results of experiments and explains the differences between the actual and the altered data variables. Lastly, the derived data is expanded from the base data and depending on the collected information from multiple data sources.

For this study, the main objective is to understand the behaviour of social entrepreneurs in bringing change to the society, this study is based on derived data because it covers the findings of existing literature as well as every argument is supported with empirical theories and frameworks.

The primary data for this study has been collected by conducting interviews with the volunteers of AslAm foundation in Ireland. AslAm foundation is a social enterprise founded by Harris Adam to address the social issue of autism. Ten volunteers have been targeted to share their point of view about how this organisation has brought change to the society. The interviews have been conducted using the Zoom Meetings platform and transcript has been generated to conduct thematic analysis. Therefore, it can be said that derived data has been used for this study because it has been collected by studying the published journal articles on social entrepreneurship and from the results of interviews.

The sources for collecting secondary data for this study involves reviewing articles related to social entrepreneurship and published in peer reviewed journals. The journal articles have been selected based on time of publication. Articles are considered which are published from 2015 to 2025. To evaluate the information and deduce comparative results, the findings from these articles are compared.

## **4.5 Data analysis**

This stage is crucial for researcher because it provides presents the findings from multiple data sources. To analyse the collected data, the researchers use multiple techniques such as primary data is analysed through descriptive analysis method. Adopting this method allow researchers to examine the primary properties of data as the part of the

research process (Askarzai & Unhelkar, 2020). Similarly, to analyse the secondary information, researchers prefer to opt for the thematic analysis method which forms themes and codes driven from the collected data. This method is used to analyse the qualitative information and to interpret the patterns of data from the given information set. The process of thematic analysis has been explained in chapter 5 of this dissertation and involves six major steps listed as familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting the findings. However, before using these methods, researchers must also understand its drawbacks like it is a time-consuming process and can present the data in oversimplified form (Patel & Patel, 2019).

## **4.6 Ethical considerations**

Following the research ethics is crucial for a researcher to ensure that his research has been successfully and aligned with the principles of ethics. All research stages must follow the rules of ethics from studying the literature to the data analysis phase. If the research involves any kind of unethical activity, it can put other researchers into doubtful situation and may lead to unreliable results for future. This makes it important for the researcher to stick to the principles of ethics at every stage in the research process (Melnikovas, 2018).

This study does not involve any kind of information which is suspected as biased or is not accompanied by authentic sources. When the interviews are conducted, none of the participant is forced to share his opinions. Instead, all participants were free to communicate their thoughts on the role played by AslAm foundation to bring about social change to the society. The collected for this study follows the ethical guidelines published by National College of Ireland and only used for completing this study. The collected information will be properly discarded after this study is completed. No personal data has been collected from the interviewees.

## **4.7 Research Limitations**

During the research, the researcher face different hurdles such as related to data collection process. In this study, time is the main limitation in completing this study. The research topic has been extensive and ample amount of time is required to conduct

interviews. The study of existing literature is a time-consuming activity. Secondly it was difficult to find volunteers and convince them to record an interview. Therefore, these points prove to hinder the study from producing better results.

## **Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis**

Thematic Analysis model, proposed by Braun and Clarke, is a six-phase method which is used to analyse the qualitative information and interpreting the meanings from the patterns of information. This approach is commonly used by researchers who aim to follow the interpretivism research philosophy and focus on understanding the perspective of participants and their experiences. The six phases which are covered in this model

include familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report (Braun, 2022).

The thematic analysis for this study has been performed on the interviews conducted with the volunteers of AslAm Foundation in Ireland. This method explores the perceptions of the interview participants who are engaged with AslAm foundation, a social enterprise which is advocated for autistic individuals. The key themes which are identified in this analysis help to understand the perceptions of participants about the mission of the organisation, how it contributes to the social change, how it has achieved entrepreneurial distinctions and how the organisation is measuring the impact of change. The results of this analysis also help to clarify what challenges are faced by social entrepreneurs in achieving their objective, what educational strategies do they adopt and what future directions do they tend to follow. Thus, the results of this thematic analysis have provided a comprehensive insight into the operational and strategic direction of social entrepreneurship within the context of autism advocacy.

## **Theme 1: Understanding of Mission and Motivation to Engage**

The interview participants have clearly articulated that they completely understand the mission of the organisation. The foundation is aimed to emphasise on promoting inclusion, fairness and understanding of autistic individuals in Ireland. Participants have regarded the organisation to provide equal opportunities to autistic individuals in terms of acquiring education, employment and community participation. One of the participants has highlighted in his interview that

“They want pupils with disabilities to live with people... with good education and equal values—not different, like all humans.”

“I care about people. I want to help those who are sometimes left out.

Thus, to summarise the findings of this theme, it can be said that participants have clearly articulated that motivation is deeply rooted in the personal values of volunteers of AslAm foundation in Ireland. Seven out of ten participants have agreed that their participation with this foundation is driven by the fundamental belief in equality and social justice with the personal commitment to bring in change to the society. Therefore, it can be said that

this theme has underscore the importance of organisational mission in social entrepreneurship.

## **Theme 2: Contribution to Social Change**

All the participants have clearly recognised the role played by this foundation in brining social change through multiple mechanisms. Five participants have listed out the same set of activities which are executed in this organisation to drive social change. These activities include raising public awareness about autism, advocating inclusive policy reforms, providing training to schools and workplaces regarding autism, and fostering the autism friendly environment in communities.

Four out of ten participants have acknowledged the collective efforts of the organisational staff and the founder to transform the societal perceptions and to improve the living experience for autistic individuals in the society. Notable quotes include:

“They are changing people’s lives and giving good opportunities to live like other people.”

“After working with us, the staff changed their approach... autistic learners felt more comfortable and valued.”

Interviewers have agreed that organisational efforts have led to tangible outcomes such as improved comfort and acceptance for autistic learners in an educational setting provided that they are given training interventions. Therefore, it can be said that this theme has highlighted the multifaceted pathway which social enterprises can follow to keep the systematic social change intact and promote community development in the country.

## **Theme 3: Social vs. Traditional Entrepreneurship**

The volunteers associated with the AslAm foundation have shown clear understanding of existing differences between social and traditional entrepreneurial business model. According to the findings from the interviews, social entrepreneurship is driven by the mission first orientation. These enterprises prioritise social impact over financial gain while reinvesting the profit for achieving the social goals. Contrary to this, traditional

entrepreneurship was more profit oriented and market focused. It emphasises on the financial and individual growth of the shareholders rather than considering the benefits of the entire community. This has been clearly stated in the quotations from interviews

“Social enterprises measure success by the positive change they create in society.”

“Normal business is about growing yourself; social entrepreneurship is about helping other people.”

The participants have also highlighted that both types of entrepreneurs differ in terms of adopting the right funding model and use the blend of different models combining the benefits of grants, donations and earned income streams. Some of the social entrepreneurs also tend to earn from training fees and consultancy charges only. The collected grants and donations by these entrepreneurs are then used to fund expansion programs for innovation and to support the long-term financial stability of social enterprises in the country. Key quotes include:

“A combination of funding sources works best.”

“Helping people should always come first... but we also need money to keep working.”

To sum up the findings of this theme, the main difference between social and traditional entrepreneurship lies in the value proposition created by these businesses and their commitments to social missions which allow them to differentiate from conventional business models. This clarifies that participants have highlighted the importance of diversifying the income sources and aligning the revenue generation activities with organisation mission. This helps to maintain the ethical consistence and operational viability in the business. Furthermore, this theme also reflects the social entrepreneurs must strive to maintain balance between organisational mission and financial sustainability.

## **Theme 4: Measuring Social Impact**

When the participants were asked to discuss different metrics that they use to evaluate the social impact that AslAm foundation has on the society, they have highlighted that their presence at social events in Ireland, online engagement on community platforms,

policy influence and getting feedback from beneficiaries are some of the common impact measuring metrics that they use to evaluate how impactful the organisation has been in bringing change to the society.

Three out of ten participants have mentioned that they prefer to use quantitative frameworks to measure the impact of organisational activities on the society. These could include measures like Social Return on Investment (SROI), and multiple activity-based indicators. This has been acknowledged in the interview quotes stated below

“We look at event attendance, online reach, and improvements in access and inclusion.”

“SROI is useful... but requires time and resources to implement effectively.”

This theme has revealed that volunteers use the combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods to measure the social impact of AsIAM Foundation on the society. This helps them to strike a balance between ideal evaluative methods and operational realities.

## **Theme 5: Challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland**

Throughout the interviews, the participants have highlighted multiple challenges that social entrepreneurs might have to face in Ireland. In case of AsIAM Foundation, these challenges could include social stigma and the misinformation that people have developed regarding autism. Furthermore, common challenges also include limited and competitive funding environment for entrepreneurs in Ireland which can make it difficult to run day to day operations for these entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs like Adam Harris sometimes find it difficult to engage in diverse community groups as acknowledged by the participants. Furthermore, seven out of ten participants have highlighted that slow cultural change and incremental process may need strategic patience by these entrepreneurs to succeed in the Irish market. They also encounter challenges related to policy and service provision gaps in the country. This has been illustrated in the quotes covered from the interviews.

“Changing public attitudes takes time and consistent effort.”

“Some people still don’t understand autism... they may believe old ideas.”

To summarise the findings of this theme in relation to the findings from interviews and literature review, social enterprises in Ireland confront multiple external and systematic barriers which can shape their strategic approach and resource allocation in the country.

## **Theme 6: Future Trends**

Looking forward to the future, participants have highlighted the several emerging trends which can shape the future of social entrepreneurship and autism advocacy in the country. Some of the common trends highlighted by participants which can shape the social entrepreneurship industry in Ireland include adoption of technology to support inclusion through the development of up-to-date applications and assistive tools, involvement of people following the co-production models to involve people in service design and decision-making process. Furthermore, the industry trends are also shaped by stronger collaboration between cross sectors which can bridge the gap between government and private sector organisations in the country. The participants have also agreed that following these future trends will help to enhance reach, effectiveness and sustainability of social enterprises in Ireland like AsIAM Foundation.

## **Summary of thematic analysis**

Overall, the results of thematic analysis have revealed a rich and clear understanding of the mission followed by the AsIAM Foundation in Ireland and the critical role that it plays as a social enterprise in the country. It promotes the values of a mission driven motivation in the country followed by comprehensive change management strategies, distinct entrepreneurial identity, impact measurement and diversity in funding strategies. The challenges highlighted by interviewed participants also provide a critical context for strategic decision making by the organisation. Thus the results of thematic analysis have provided valuable empirical evidence to the studied literature on social entrepreneurship specifically in the context of disability advocacy. It will allow the social entrepreneurs in the country to seek balance between the social mission and sustainability.

The table 4 below presents the summary of results of thematic analysis linking themes to relevant quotes from the interviews.

Theme	Key Codes	Representative Quotes
<b>1. Understanding of Mission &amp; Motivation</b>	Inclusion, fairness, equality, autism advocacy, personal values, empathy, social justice	“They want pupils with disabilities to live... with good education and equal values—not different, like all humans.” “I care about people. I want to help those who are sometimes left out.”
<b>2. Contribution to Social Change</b>	Awareness raising, policy influence, training, workplace inclusion, education reform	“They are changing people’s lives and giving good opportunities to live like other people.” “After working with us, the staff changed their approach... autistic learners felt more comfortable and valued.”
<b>3. Social vs Traditional Entrepreneurship</b>	Mission-first, reinvestment of profits, community benefit, profit-orientation in business	“Social enterprises measure success by the positive change they create in society.” “Normal business is about growing yourself; social entrepreneurship is about helping other people.”
<b>4. Measuring Social Impact</b>	Event attendance, engagement metrics, feedback, policy outcomes, SROI use	“We look at event attendance, online reach, and improvements in access and inclusion.” “SROI is useful... but requires time and resources to implement effectively.”
<b>5. Funding Models &amp; Sustainability</b>	Blended funding, grants, donations, earned income,	“A combination of funding sources works best.” “Helping people should always come first... but we also need money to keep working.”

	diversification, mission alignment	
<b>6. Challenges</b>	Stigma, misinformation, funding shortages, policy gaps, slow cultural change	“Changing public attitudes takes time and consistent effort.” “Some people still don’t understand autism... they may believe old ideas.”
<b>7. Future Trends</b>	Technology for inclusion, co-production, cross-sector collaboration, inclusive design	“Co-production and lived experience leadership becomes central.” “Technology-driven inclusion, such as accessibility tools and apps.”

**Table 4: Summary of thematic analysis**

**Summed up by Author**

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

This chapter discuss the findings of this study relating it to what has been studied from the existing literature. The discussion in this chapter has been made relating the findings to the research objectives and elaborating on the answer to the research question.

## **6.1 Relevance to research objectives**

- **To understand the differences between social entrepreneurship and traditional entrepreneurship in Irish context (Theme 1,2,3)**

The findings of this study suggests that significant differences exist between social and traditional entrepreneurship in Irish context as elaborated in theme 1, 2 and 3. The participants have articulated these differences in terms of Organisational mission and contribution to social change in the society. These findings have been supported in the literature by Alvord (2024) who has stated that the direction of strategic orientation is the main point of difference between social and traditional entrepreneurship in Ireland. Unlike traditional businesses, social entrepreneurs do not prioritise profit generation, instead they measure success through positive societal change that they create. The literature by Bacq (2021) has also supported this providing the context that addressing systematic needs is deeply rooted in the essence of social entrepreneurship.

The results of interviews have also revealed that this differentiation between social and traditional entrepreneurship becomes more prominent when the metrics for measuring success are taken into account. This correlates to the findings of Nodeson (2024) who has stated that traditional businesses rely on financial indicators for measuring success such as return on investment and market share while the social enterprises like the AsIAM foundation prefers to measure success through level of community engagement and their inclusion outcomes. Supporting this argument, Roy (2022) has claimed that the differences in strategies also exist where traditional entrepreneurs rely on gaining competitive advantage in the market whereas social entrepreneurs are centred on advocacy and collaboration. The Irish social entrepreneurship landscape thus appears to thrive on multi-sector cooperation, embedding social change objectives into organisational strategy.

The literature by Saebi (2019) has been proven right by the findings of this study that funding models also diverge the two forms of entrepreneurship where traditional entrepreneurs relay on equity model and debt financing while social enterprises have to consider the blended funding options which could include combining grants, donations, and earned income from mission-aligned services. This hybrid model ensures that social

enterprises can maintain both social mission integrity and operational viability (Nodeson, 2024).

The results of thematic analysis have also differentiated the two types of entrepreneurs based on their shared challenges. However, this contradicts with the literature by Peredo, (2016) who has mentioned that gaps in public understanding regarding the organisational mission can create new hurdles and challenges for both types of entrepreneurs in Ireland. In Ireland, where awareness of autism and other social issues is growing but still uneven, social enterprises must invest significant resources into public education before they can achieve systemic change (Wuebker, 2021).

Thus, to conclude, it can be said that while traditional and social entrepreneurs share many characteristics their fundamental goals, impact measures, and stakeholder engagement strategies diverge sharply. Social entrepreneurship's emphasis on inclusion, advocacy, and systemic transformation positions it as a complementary but distinctly purpose-driven model within Ireland's broader entrepreneurial ecosystem.

- **To study the working patterns of social entrepreneurs in Ireland to bring societal change (theme 2, 4 and 6)**

The results of interviews conducted with stakeholders from the AsIAM Foundation have revealed that distinct working patterns have been observed which clearly articulate how social entrepreneurs in the Ireland are working to achieve the social transformation. Integration of advocacy, education, and policy influence into daily organisational practices are some of the common observations drawn from the working patterns of social entrepreneurs in Ireland which relates to the themes identified by the interviewed participants. The same perspective has been pointed out in the literature by Mair (2016) who has pursued that while traditional entrepreneurs are more focused on singular operational goals, social entrepreneurs such as those at AsIAM pursue multi-pronged strategies which are aimed at dismantling systemic barriers who can affect autistic individuals in the country.

Sullivan Mort (2023) has highlighted in his study that community embedded engagement is an important working pattern which can shape the organisational strategies of social

entrepreneurs in the country. Participants have agreed to this stating that social entrepreneurs are engaged in delivering workshops at the schools where autistic individuals are taught, providing workplace training, and directly collaborating with the public institutions (Braun, 2022). This alignment between the findings of literature and the results of thematic analysis clarify that social change is systematic as well as grass rooted in the organisational culture. This also resonates with the social entrepreneurship culture proposed by Salamzadeh (2023) who conclude that cross cultural partnerships form the basis of sustainable impact created by social entrepreneurs in the country.

Another working pattern adapted by Irish social entrepreneurs as indicated from the results of thematic analysis include adaptive leadership and capacity building in the country. Irish social entrepreneurs tend to invest in training programmes, mentorship initiatives, and youth engagement to cultivate the next generation of leaders. These findings are supported in the literature by Ilahi & Mohammed (2022) mentioning in his study that the long-term sustainability approach embedding inclusivity into Ireland's social and educational systems forms the part of working operations of social entrepreneurs in the country. However, this has been opposed by Lanuza (2022) who has claimed that the working patterns of these entrepreneurs in Ireland are also shaped by contextual challenges like public misconceptions about autism. These factors necessitate persistent advocacy and flexibility in operations which can hinder the working patterns of these entrepreneurs in the country (Defourny, 2020).

As a summary, the Irish model of social entrepreneurship, as exemplified by As I Am, is characterised by multi-level engagement, impact-centred metrics, diversified funding, and leadership development. These patterns reflect a commitment not only to immediate service delivery but also to fostering lasting societal change through systemic transformation.

- **To understand the difficulties experienced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland to bring any change in the society.**

The results of thematic analysis have revealed multiple interconnected challenges which can hinder the operations of social entrepreneurs in Ireland like AsIAm foundation in the country. These findings are closely aligned with the challenges highlighted in literature by

Kwabena (2021). The literature has revealed that one of the main challenges encountered by social entrepreneurs in Ireland is related to the social stigma and misconceptions that society has developed regarding these entrepreneurs in the country. Relating it to the findings of this study, Irish people have developed outdated beliefs about autism making it a barrier for autistic children in the country to enter into special schools, workplaces and impacting their interactions with the public life. This echoes with the research by Nodeson, (2024) who has mentioned that cultural attitudes of people in a country can impact the acceptance of new social initiatives which demand social entrepreneurs in the country to devote considerable resources to public education before implementing any systematic change. Thus, this discourages the mission of social enterprises in the country (Lanuza, 2018).

Funding instability and differences in policy and institutional gap are the other challenges highlighted by the results of the thematic analysis. As revealed through the results of interviews that many social entrepreneurs in Ireland operate on the blended funding models combining grants, donations, and earned income (Mair, 2016). The literature by Fransiscus (2021) has criticised this stating that while this hybrid approach offers resilience, it is vulnerable to fluctuations in donor priorities, economic downturns, and competition for limited grant opportunities. The literature by Sabri & Mohamad (2024) further supports this, highlighting that small-scale social enterprises in Ireland often lack the financial reserves to weather funding gaps, forcing them to prioritise short-term survival over long-term strategic initiatives (Agarwal & Mulunga, 2022).

Interviewees described how inconsistencies in service provision and slow legislative reform impede the implementation of inclusive practices. This finding is consistent with Irish policy studies that point to fragmented governmental support for social enterprises, particularly in niche areas like autism advocacy. Without coherent national frameworks, social entrepreneurs often find themselves working in isolation, relying heavily on personal networks and informal collaborations. Therefore, before adopting social entrepreneurship, one must reconsider its potential benefits as well as challenging to increase the chances of success through counter measures and checks.

## 6.2 Relevance to research questions

Relating the findings of this study to the findings of literature review, following answers to the research questions have been developed.

- **How social entrepreneurs like Adam Harris can drive social change in Ireland?”**

Collectively, the insights from the review of existing literature and the results of this study illuminate the pathways through which social entrepreneurs such as Adam Harris, founder of As I Am, can effect lasting societal change in Ireland. Both sources highlight that impactful social entrepreneurship rests on three pillars: mission-driven leadership, strategic collaboration, and systemic advocacy.

From the literature, it is evident that social entrepreneurs are the catalyst for change who work to identify the societal inequalities, mobilise the resources and implement innovative solutions to extend beyond immediate service provision (Agarwal & Mulunga, 2022). With the mission to foster inclusivity in Ireland for autistic individuals, Adam Harris has embedded this model in his foundation. As the results of interviews with the volunteers of AsIAm foundation has repeatedly focussed on Adam Harris role in articulating a clear social mission, this clarity of his purpose is aligned with the social innovation theory discussed in literature review chapter. This theory highlights the value of sustained, mission-focused initiatives to achieve systemic transformation (Alvord, 2024).

Furthermore, multilevel engagement strategy has been highlighted multiple times by the interviewees. This elaborates that social entrepreneurs must not limit to organisational level only. Instead, they must work in schools, workplaces and policy arenas simultaneously. This has been supported by literature on systems change which suggest that the root cause across sectors produce more sustainable societal shifts (Gupta & Chauhan, 2020). Harris’s work in influencing public policy and providing practical inclusion training mirrors this systems-oriented method, ensuring that change is embedded at structural and cultural levels.

The literature by Melnikovas (2018) also notes that sustainable social change requires robust resource mobilisation, a theme echoed in the interviews through discussions of As

I Am's blended funding model. Harris's ability to combine grants, donations, and earned income from training reflects a hybrid approach that balances mission fulfilment with financial resilience, enabling long-term impact without compromising core values (Lanuza, 2018).

In summary, the integration of literature and thematic findings suggests that Adam Harris has driven the social change in Ireland through a combination of clear mission leadership, systemic multi-sector engagement, authentic advocacy, and adaptive resource strategies. This model not only addresses immediate inclusion needs but also builds the cultural and institutional foundations necessary for enduring societal transformation (AsIAm, 2023).

- **How the activities of traditional entrepreneurs differ from those of social entrepreneurs in Irish context?**

The literature on entrepreneurship by Yee (2023) highlights a fundamental divergence in the goals and operational activities of traditional versus social entrepreneurs. Traditional entrepreneurship is primarily centred on profit maximisation and market competitiveness (Dees & Battle-Anderson, 2020), with success measured through financial metrics such as return on investment and market share. In contrast, social entrepreneurship prioritises social value creation, addressing unmet societal needs while balancing financial sustainability (Zeyen & Beckman, 2025).

The thematic analysis of interviews with As I Am stakeholders reinforces this distinction in the Irish context. Participants consistently described As I Am's activities as mission-led actions intended to shift societal attitudes towards autism. These activities directly reflect the systems change perspective identified in literature, focusing on transforming societal structures rather than exploiting market gaps for financial gain (Wuebker, 2021).

A key activity-based difference is in stakeholder engagement. Literature suggests that traditional entrepreneurs often maintain transactional relationships with a narrower set of stakeholders driven by commercial objectives (Light, 2022). In contrast, social entrepreneurs like Adam Harris operate within multi-sector networks, collaborating with

beneficiaries, government bodies, educators, businesses, and advocacy groups. The thematic findings show that AsIAm's community-embedded approach fosters co-production, with lived experience shaping programme design (Sullivan Mort, 2023)

The findings of this study also suggests that funding activities also differ significantly. Traditional entrepreneurs generally depend on equity investment, debt financing, and reinvested profits to scale operations. Social entrepreneurs in Ireland, however, often employ blended funding models—a mix of grants, donations, earned income, and sometimes impact investment (Austin, 2016). As revealed in the interviews, As I Am combines public funding with revenue from training programmes, ensuring alignment between income generation and mission delivery. This approach reflects the Irish literature's emphasis on hybrid resource mobilisation as a survival strategy in a competitive funding landscape.

Another distinguishing feature differentiation traditional and social entrepreneurship lies in impact measurement. While traditional entrepreneurs track financial performance indicators, social entrepreneurs measure success through social impact metrics such as engagement levels, changes in public attitudes, and policy influence (Dacin, 2021). The interviews revealed that As I Am assesses its impact through feedback from autistic individuals, the number of schools and workplaces reached, and qualitative stories of increased inclusion.

To sum up this discussion, literature and thematic findings jointly indicate that, in Ireland, traditional entrepreneurs focus on market-driven growth, whereas social entrepreneurs operate through advocacy, inclusive stakeholder engagement, blended funding, and impact-focused evaluation. These differing activities are rooted in contrasting missions shaping the way each type of entrepreneur interacts with communities, resources, and systems.

- **How social entrepreneurs work to transform social and economic conditions for different groups of people in the society?**

The literature by Ilahi & Mohammed (2022) consistently frames social entrepreneurs as agents of change who deploy innovative strategies to address societal inequalities while fostering economic empowerment. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs, whose primary goal is profit generation, social entrepreneurs seek to create inclusive socio-economic systems that benefit marginalised or underserved groups. The Irish context reinforces this perspective, as social enterprises often address gaps in public policy and service provision, particularly for vulnerable communities (Salamzadeh, 2023).

The thematic analysis of interviews with As I Am stakeholders revealed a multifaceted approach to transforming social and economic conditions. Central to these activities is inclusion-focused advocacy. Participants described how the organisation works with schools, workplaces, and policymakers to create environments where autistic individuals can participate fully (Ellenwood, 2022). This aligns with the social innovation theory, which emphasises long-term systemic benefits over short-term fixes. By changing societal attitudes and dismantling barriers, As I Am not only enhances social belonging but also improves access to education and employment (Nodeson, 2024).

Economic transformation is also facilitated through skills development and capacity building. The interviews highlighted initiatives such as workplace training, leadership development for autistic individuals, and mentorship programmes (Melnikovas, 2018). Literature on resource mobilisation by Peredo (2016) supports the view that equipping disadvantaged groups with relevant skills increases employability, income potential, and overall socio-economic mobility. For example, As I Am's corporate training creates dual benefits: preparing organisations for inclusive hiring while expanding job opportunities for autistic people.

Another significant mechanism is policy influence, a theme strongly presented in both literature and findings. Systems change theory (Meadows, 1999) suggests that altering institutional policies can produce long-term social and economic improvements. As I Am's engagement with government bodies to advocate for inclusive education and workplace policies exemplifies this approach, ensuring structural change that benefits not only individuals but also entire communities (Santos, 2022).

In summary, the integration of literature and thematic findings suggests that social entrepreneurs transform social and economic conditions through advocacy, skills development, systemic policy change, and sustainable resource strategies. By simultaneously addressing social inclusion and economic opportunity, they create pathways for marginalised groups to participate fully in society, thereby driving long-term societal resilience and equality.

- **What challenges are encountered by social entrepreneurs in Ireland in introducing any change to the society?**

The thematic analysis of interviews with stakeholders from AslAm foundation has confirmed that Irish social entrepreneurs have to encounter multiple barriers in bringing change to society. A consistent theme from thematic analysis reflecting these challenges was funding insecurity. Participants noted that many Irish social enterprises operate with annual incomes below sustainable thresholds and rely heavily on grants, donations, and sporadic earned income (Roy, 2022). Literature by Saebi (2019) echoes this as one of the most persistent obstacles to scaling social impact (Defourny & Nyssens, 2020). The reliance on short-term funding cycles limits the capacity to plan long-term initiatives, particularly those aimed at systemic change, such as nationwide awareness campaigns or structural policy reforms (Pittaway, 2023).

Another key challenge identified in both literature and thematic findings is public misunderstanding and stigma. AslAm interviewees emphasised that outdated stereotypes about autism remain a major barrier to inclusion. This aligns with the social norms' theory perspective, which highlights that deep-seated cultural attitudes often resist change, even in the presence of evidence-based interventions (Santos, 2022). Changing mindsets requires sustained public engagement, yet the lack of widespread understanding of social enterprise missions can reduce support from communities and policymakers (Sakyi & Musona, 2020).

The complexity of policy navigation emerged as another significant barrier. Literature by Sakyi & Musona (2020) suggests that social entrepreneurs often face fragmented policy

environments where responsibilities are split across multiple government departments. The interviews reflected this, as participants described the difficulty of influencing policy and ensuring that autistic voices are represented in decision-making processes. Limited institutional support and slow legislative reform can delay or dilute social change initiatives (Sabri & Mohamad, 2024).

Finally, the thematic findings revealed that the hybrid nature of social enterprises like AslAm operating between charity and business can confuse investors and donors about their purpose, impacting credibility and funding opportunities. This is consistent with the literature by Sullivan Mort (2023), which stresses that hybrid organisations must carefully balance financial and social priorities to maintain legitimacy (Battilana & Lee, 2024).

In summary, integrating literature and thematic analysis reveals that the main challenges for Irish social entrepreneurs include funding instability, societal stigma, complex policy landscapes, and identity ambiguity. These interconnected barriers constrain the ability to implement and sustain social change, suggesting the need for targeted policy support, clearer organisational narratives, and long-term funding models (Wang, 2023).

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The exploration of challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in Ireland, with a specific focus on AslAm foundation, reveals a complex landscape where passion for societal betterment meets structural, cultural, and operational barriers. Both the thematic analysis and literature converge on the understanding that while social entrepreneurship plays a

vital role in driving inclusive societal transformation, the path is fraught with persistent obstacles that require strategic and systemic solutions.

A primary finding relates to financial instability; a challenge deeply embedded in the operational realities of Irish social enterprises. The reliance on short-term, project-based funding through grants, donations, and sporadic earned income limits the ability to plan, innovate, and scale impact (Agarwal & Mulunga, 2022). As confirmed in both interviews and scholarly work by Defourny & Nyssens (2022), financial unpredictability forces social entrepreneurs into reactive rather than proactive modes of operation. This lack of sustainable funding not only constrains immediate service delivery but also undermines the long-term viability of systemic change efforts. The evidence suggests a clear need for diversified, multi-year funding structures that allow organisations like AsIAM to maintain momentum and strategic focus (Alvord, 2024).

As reflected in the thematic analysis, even when policy frameworks exist, societal attitudes can act as invisible barriers, preventing the full integration of autistic individuals into schools, workplaces, and communities. The literature on social norms theory supports the notion that changing public perception is a slow and resource-intensive process. This calls for sustained awareness campaigns, embedded within educational systems and workplace culture, to normalise diversity and inclusion (Mair, 2016).

The findings also reveal the complexity of navigating fragmented policy environments. Social entrepreneurs often find themselves engaging with multiple government bodies, each with its own mandates, priorities, and bureaucratic constraints. This fragmentation not only slows policy reform but also dilutes accountability (Agarwal & Mulunga, 2022). The thematic analysis demonstrated that AsIAM works tirelessly to influence public policy, yet such efforts require significant resources, persistence, and strategic alliances. Literature such as Salamzadeh (2023) underscores that systemic change is often contingent on long-term engagement with policymakers and the building of cross-sector coalitions.

Lastly, organisational identity ambiguity emerged as impactful challenge. The hybrid nature of social enterprises can confuse stakeholders about their purpose. As Battilana & Lee (2024) note, maintaining legitimacy requires clear communication of mission and

value proposition. For AslAm, ensuring that funders, partners, and the broader public understand the balance between financial sustainability and social impact is essential for securing trust and support.

In conclusion, the synthesis of thematic analysis and literature paints a picture that social entrepreneurs in Ireland operate in an environment that demands adaptability, strategic communication, and collaborative problem-solving (Bacq, 2021). While challenges such as financial instability, societal stigma, policy complexity, and identity ambiguity are significant, they are not easy to solve. The evidence suggests that with sustained investment, supportive policy frameworks, and public education, organisations like AslAm can continue to drive meaningful and lasting social change. Addressing these challenges holistically will not only strengthen individual organisations but also enhance the overall capacity of the Irish social entrepreneurship sector to transform society (Wang, 2023).

## **7.1 Practical Implications**

For practitioners, the study suggests prioritising clear mission communication to maintain stakeholder alignment and motivation. Social enterprises should adopt diversified funding models balanced with mission safeguards to enhance sustainability.

Developing accessible, mixed-method impact evaluation tools can improve accountability and learning without overburdening resources. Capacity-building initiatives focused on leadership and youth engagement are vital for sustainability.

Finally, embracing technology, coproduction, and cross-sector collaboration can amplify social enterprises' reach and effectiveness.

## **7.2 Limitations and Future Research**

While this study offers rich qualitative insights, it is limited by its focus on a single organisation, which may affect generalisability. Future research could compare multiple social enterprises across different disability contexts to broaden understanding.

Longitudinal studies tracking impact measurement evolution and funding model outcomes would also be valuable. Further investigation into coproduction dynamics and technology adoption in social entrepreneurship could enrich emerging trends

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## 9.0 Appendices

### 9.1 Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding about AS I AM foundation? What has motivated you to join this organization?
2. What do you think how this organization is bringing positive change in the society?
3. In your opinion, what are the key differences between social entrepreneurship and traditional business entrepreneurship?
4. What matrices do you consider in measuring the impact of this organization on society?
5. Have you ever used a specific framework (e.g., SROI, GIIRS) to assess the social impact of this organization?
6. What funding method do you prefer to use to provide funds to this organization? Why?
7. What do you think social enterprises like AS I AM should prioritize financial sustainability or social impact? How can they balance both?
8. What challenges are faced by this organization in introducing any change in the society?
9. How the organization can improve social training to students to foster the culture of social entrepreneurship?
10. What future trends do you expect in field of social entrepreneurship?

### 9.2 Appendix 2: Initial coding

#### Thematic Analysis of Interviews on As I Am Foundation and Social Entrepreneurship

##### Theme 1: Understanding of Mission and Motivation to Engage

- **Key Insights:**

Across all interviews, participants consistently described As I Am's mission as promoting inclusion, fairness, and understanding for autistic individuals. The organisation is perceived as an advocate for equal opportunities in education, work, and community life.

- **Motivations:**

Many interviewees joined due to personal values around equality and a desire to make a tangible difference. Some cited empathy for marginalised groups; others highlighted wanting to challenge societal stigma.

##### Representative Quotes:

- “They want pupils with disabilities to live with people... with good education and equal values—not different, like all humans.”
  - “I care about people. I want to help those who are sometimes left out.”
- 

## **Theme 2: Contribution to Social Change**

- **Key Insights:**  
Participants recognised As I Am’s work in raising autism awareness, advocating for policy change, delivering school and workplace training, and creating autism-friendly communities.
- **Social Change Mechanisms:**
  - Public education campaigns
  - Influencing government policy
  - Promoting inclusive employment and schooling

### **Representative Quotes:**

- “They are changing people’s lives and giving good opportunities to live like other people.”
  - “After working with us, the staff changed their approach... autistic learners felt more comfortable and valued.”
- 

## **Theme 3: Social vs. Traditional Entrepreneurship**

- **Key Insights:**  
Interviewees distinguished social entrepreneurship by its mission-first orientation, reinvestment of profits into social goals, and emphasis on community benefit rather than solely financial gain. Traditional entrepreneurship was described as profit-driven, market-oriented, and less focused on systemic change.

### **Representative Quotes:**

- “Social enterprises measure success by the positive change they create in society.”
  - “Normal business is about growing yourself; social entrepreneurship is about helping other people.”
-

## **Theme 4: Measuring Social Impact**

- **Key Insights:**

Metrics cited included event participation, online engagement, policy changes influenced, feedback from beneficiaries, and increased awareness levels. A few mentioned using formal frameworks like Social Return on Investment (SROI), but most relied on qualitative feedback and activity counts.

- **Challenges:**

Resource constraints limit consistent application of formal evaluation tools.

### **Representative Quotes:**

- “We look at event attendance, online reach, and improvements in access and inclusion.”
  - “SROI is useful... but requires time and resources to implement effectively.”
- 

## **Theme 5: Funding Models and Sustainability**

- **Key Insights:**

Most respondents supported blended funding models—combining grants, donations, and earned income from training or consultancy. Grants and donations were valued for program expansion; earned income was seen as important for stability.

- **Balance Strategies:**

Diversification of income streams, partnerships, and aligning paid services with the mission were recommended.

### **Representative Quotes:**

- “A combination of funding sources works best.”
  - “Helping people should always come first... but we also need money to keep working.”
- 

## **Theme 6: Challenges**

- **Key Insights:**

Recurring challenges included societal stigma, misinformation about autism, limited funding, and difficulties reaching diverse communities.

- Cultural change was seen as slow and requiring sustained effort.

- Policy and service provision gaps were mentioned multiple times.

### **Representative Quotes:**

- “Changing public attitudes takes time and consistent effort.”
  - “Some people still don’t understand autism... they may believe old ideas.”
- 

## **Theme 7: Education and Capacity Building**

- **Key Insights:**

Participants recommended leadership training for autistic individuals, school and college partnerships, youth engagement, and storytelling as tools for cultural change.

Mentorship programs and integration of social entrepreneurship into curricula were also suggested.

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## **Theme 8: Future Trends**

- **Key Insights:**

Anticipated trends include:

- Technology-driven inclusion (apps, assistive tools)
- Co-production with people with lived experience
- Stronger cross-sector collaboration
- Greater emphasis on inclusive design in products and services