

The contributions of Enactus to South Africa's Social and Solidarity Economy: A case study of a University

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Background: Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable rise in worldwide acknowledgement of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and its substantial socioeconomic and environmental benefits. In response, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed a resolution on 18 April 2023 advocating for government and institutional support to the SSE towards accelerating the achievement of sustainable development Goals (SDGs). However, there is a lack of understanding of how higher education institutions contribute to this agenda.

Aim: The study examines the contributions of Entrepreneurial Action Us (Enactus) to South Africa's SSE.

Setting: The case study was conducted at the Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State in South Africa, to examine how higher education and the SSE interact through Enactus initiatives.

Methods: The study utilised a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with 11 students and alumni and an analysis of Enactus' annual impact reports. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding Enactus' impact on the SSE.

Results: Enactus enhances student entrepreneurship and innovation, promoting economic growth, job creation and community sustainability. Initiatives like the student-led Vermi Village Enterprise have empowered youth and women and created employment opportunities. Collaboration with local corporations and educational institutions has fostered sustainable changes, improving regenerative agriculture and urban food production, thus addressing multiple poverty facets.

Conclusion: This study highlights the crucial role of initiatives like Enactus in promoting a more inclusive and sustainable economy, advancing the broader objectives of the SDGs, and supporting a brighter future for South Africa.

Contribution: Despite resource limitations and the need for greater stakeholder engagement, Enactus projects and enterprises hold significant potential for driving sustainable development and socioeconomic equality, ultimately strengthening South Africa's SSE.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; Social and Solidarity Economy; Enactus; sustainable development goals; students.

Introduction and background

Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable rise in worldwide acknowledgement of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) and its substantial socioeconomic and environmental benefits (Morais & Bacic 2020; UN 2023). In response, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed a resolution on 18 April 2023 advocating for government and institutional support to the SSE towards accelerating the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs) (UN 2023). The SSE is a new economic model focusing on social well-being, fairness and environmental sustainability instead of maximising profits (Rahmanti & Subandi 2024). It provides a comprehensive approach to tackling current socioeconomic issues. The SSE strengthens local resilience and promotes social entrepreneurship and innovation by fostering inclusive growth, supporting sustainable development, and advocating for economic democracy through cooperative models and mutual aid (Ojiagu & Usman 2023). Promoting community cooperation and unity enhances social capital and offers a compelling alternative to conventional economic models. The SSE's focus on value-based financial activities helps create fairer and more robust societies and supports global endeavours to accomplish the SDGs. As a result, it plays a crucial role in future economic and social planning (UN 2023). Social and Solidarity

Economy offers a feasible and long-lasting solution in South Africa, where socioeconomic inequalities originated from the historical apartheid system, bad governance and the effects of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

As UNGA celebrates one year for the SSE resolution and has set a reflective webinar on 18 April,¹ it is essential to analyse and evaluate how organisations such as Entrepreneurial Action Us (Enactus) contribute to SSE in South Africa. Therefore, this study contributes to the global sharing of experiences and review discourse, as the United Nations exemplifies. Using Enactus, a student-led organisation, this study evaluates how student-led initiatives contribute to SSE in South Africa in accelerating the achievement of SDGs. Enactus, a global non-profit organisation that fosters the growth of social entrepreneurship among university students, emerges as one organisation aiming to address social and environmental challenges using the SSE philosophy (Enactus 2024). Enactus enables the cooperation of students, business leaders and academics to collectively create solutions for community challenges aligning with the objectives of SSE. Blending with solidarity-oriented societies in South Africa, SSE provides sustainable and inclusive strategies to address pressing issues through the collaborative nature of social development organisations (Ojong 2023).

Objectives of the research

This article seeks to understand the impacts of Enactus on South Africa's SSE by responding to the following objectives:

1. Understand the purpose of Enactus and its contribution to SSE.
2. Assess the scope and efficacy of Enactus' involvement and cooperation with other parties in facilitating SSE.
3. Identifying the challenges and opportunities encountered by student entrepreneurs in their contributions to the SSE.

Literature review

The SSE concept is a socioeconomic model emphasising solidarity, cooperation and social justice principles (Morais & Bacic 2020). Organisations and institutions subscribing to this philosophy are driven to positively impact and enhance society's standard of living and quality of life. Furthermore, Lee (2020) emphasises that SSE involves creating a society with greater fairness, long-term viability and inclusivity. This society is guided by solidarity, cooperation, fairness and democracy. Furthermore, its objective is to generate a substantial integrative influence for individuals facing circumstances of exclusion and vulnerability. This demonstrates that enterprises have a distinct role in promoting the common interest of influencing society and fostering inclusivity in the SSE economy.

¹<https://unsse.org/sse-and-the-sdgs/>

The significance of Social and Solidarity Economy in South Africa

Social and Solidarity Economy presents an inclusive and sustainable approach to the country's enduring history of social and economic disparities, which were intensified by the apartheid regime (Lemon 2021). This tradition has endured for an extended period, exacerbated by poor governance and the effects of COVID-19. The SSE approach is based on a broader global phenomenon that acknowledges the inclusive entrepreneurial strategies of social economies, especially in disadvantaged and underserved communities. For example, European social economy enterprises considerably impact the business environment, indicating that South Africa may face similar effects as those observed in Europe. Since 2017, the Economic Development Department in South Africa has collaborated closely with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to make substantial progress in promoting SSE (Mbanda & Fourie 2020). The SSE recognises that cooperatives, social enterprises and non-profit organisations play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive economy. These organisations substantially promote job opportunities for young individuals and enhance services and opportunities (Maphiri, Matasane & Mudimu 2021).

To promote the growth of SSE in South Africa, it is necessary to thoroughly understand its conceptualisation and establish a policy framework that aligns with its principles. It is essential to clearly define the social economy to provide a solid foundation for national discussions on its importance and value (Bergeron et al. 2015). Ensuring clarity is of utmost importance to align the social economy with the overarching objectives of social change, transformation and upliftment in South Africa (Nguyen & Nielsen 2023). Integrating the SSE into existing policy frameworks offers various possibilities for enhancement, with a critical focus on averting conflicts or burdening small businesses with excessive obligations. As a result of this, there is a demand for a policy framework that is more unified and acknowledges the simultaneous social and economic importance of the SSE (Lee 2020). Moreover, there has been a transition from solely prioritising acquiring more financial resources to embracing a holistic approach that includes improving capabilities and forming collaborative networks and partnerships. When developing a social economy ecosystem that prioritises collaboration over competition, it is crucial to include these components.

Moreover, there is a transition from conventional funding models to ones that prioritise investments' social and environmental impacts. This transition is accompanied by a growing focus on impact investing and enhancing market accessibility (Zhan & Santos-Paulino 2021). In South Africa, there is a process of gradually redefining the criteria for a successful business. This involves implementing a new approach that aligns with the country's current goals and strategies. Green and social impact bonds are new financial instruments developed as innovative solutions in this context. Innovative financial instruments address social issues through public-private partnerships (Sartzetakis 2021).

The commissioning bodies repay the investors only if the project achieves predetermined, measurable social outcomes. This outcomes-based financing model shifts new social programme financial risk from the government to investors, encouraging preventive and early intervention services (Bhutta et al. 2022). Conversely, this article introduces Enactus Central University of Technology (CUT) and explains its role in supporting SSE's broader goals.

Universities as drivers of social transformation

The global university education system is fundamental to social, economic and political progress. The primary purpose of a university is to provide valuable and applicable knowledge, conduct research and engage in community development (Asaju 2023). Nguyen and Nielsen (2023) agree that universities significantly impact academic pursuits and their capacity to interact with local communities, politicians and other stakeholders to effect change. Universities are crucial in promoting social change by sharing knowledge and actively participating in local communities. Universities in South Africa have become increasingly important in driving positive social change and are recognised as crucial contributors to social development (Jones et al. 2021). While various university activities are on board regarding tracking impact, various student engagements have not been considered, especially if they are not part of the curriculum or the university strategy. Therefore, this study seeks to capture these efforts lying in documents, yet they have a considerable impact, especially their contribution to SSE.

According to Tomasi, Paviotti and Cavigchi (2020), universities significantly impact societal progress by producing well-educated and skilled individuals who contribute to the labour market and economic well-being. However, Asaju (2023) expresses dissatisfaction with Nigeria's current state of universities. Furthermore, O'Neill (2023) states that out of the 10 million unemployed and underemployed youths in South Africa, 3.5 million have completed their education and obtained a degree. This underscores a disparity in students' proficiency, notwithstanding their educational qualifications. However, universities play a significant role in driving social change by actively participating in local communities and disseminating knowledge. Despite the growth in the number of universities, courses, student enrolment and graduates, the impact of these institutions on social change appears to be falling short of promoting local economic development, which would result in grassroots employment. There is a lack of collaboration between the university and other sectors. Nevertheless, the perspective on the cooperation between universities and other sectors is essential for driving social transformation, which could address the problems of unemployment and underemployment.

Enactus overview

Entrepreneurial Action Us (Enactus) is a globally recognised non-profit organisation that operates in over 33 countries (Enactus 2023a). This network consists of business leaders committed to using business enterprises to achieve beneficial

societal and environmental transformations through supporting student-led enterprises. Enactus' numerous impactful initiatives directly impact the lives of over 13.1 million people globally. The initiatives encompass 1626 collaborative projects and businesses operating in 33 countries (Enactus 2023a). The projects aforementioned are explicitly tailored to tackle urgent issues, including but not limited to the promotion of gender equality, the creation of job prospects for youth, the accessibility of water and the state of food resources. Significant initiatives include the '1 Race 4 Oceans' initiative, among other vital projects, which garnered active involvement from 18 countries. This intentional campaign promoted SDG 14, Life Below Water (Enactus 2023b). Participating teams are working hard to solve ocean problems and improve marine ecosystems.

Enactus' philosophy is centred around the principle of student empowerment. This principle involves offering students a platform encompassing various fields of study to develop their professional and leadership skills. The students gain expertise in project management, problem-solving and entrepreneurship by actively engaging in projects and businesses that align with the SDGs (Vezi-Magigaba 2018). The Clean Water Project in Kenya (WEIKE 2023) and climate change intervention by female students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (James, 2014) exemplify Enactus' approach to promoting enduring community solutions through cooperative endeavours. Both projects are situated in Kenya and South Africa, respectively. In addition, the Service-Learning Global Literacy Initiative demonstrates Enactus' dedication to promoting cultural exchange and positively impacting education (Adarlo 2020). Enactus fosters a worldwide community of ambitious leaders and innovators, aiming to facilitate their collaborative endeavours to make substantial transformations.

Enactus is crucial in promoting social entrepreneurship among college students, contributing to South Africa's SSE. Enactus' main objective is to create a platform for students to collaborate with business leaders and academics to devise creative solutions for community challenges (Enactus 2023a). This aligns with the overarching goals of SSE, which prioritise creating social value, inclusivity and sustainable economic practices. However, in order to fully comprehend the present circumstances, it is essential to include a thorough analysis or assessment of the impacts of these Enactus initiatives within the framework of the South African SSE. To ascertain the degree to which these projects can alleviate socioeconomic inequalities in South Africa, it is crucial to possess a strong comprehension of their real-world efficacy, capacity for expansion and long-term sustainability. This discrepancy emphasises the significance of conducting comprehensive case studies or empirical investigations to assess the results and difficulties that Enactus' initiatives encounter in promoting the SSE in South Africa.

This study will thoroughly examine Enactus' South Africa activities to fill the knowledge gap and contribute to the

UNGA call. This will be achieved by examining the CUT as a case point. By employing a case study methodology, we can understand how effective, challenging and sustainable Enactus' efforts are in promoting social entrepreneurship and reducing socioeconomic inequalities in South Africa. This study will offer substantial empirical data and insights into the role and influence of Enactus within the broader framework of South Africa's SSE. The role of universities in promoting SSE through Enactus is of great importance.

According to Omotosho et al. (2023), previous studies on Enactus teams' implementation of the SDGs indicate that their practices are constrained within the boundaries of a specific institution. According to Mawonde and Togo (2019), South African universities have not yet fully implemented the SDGs. However, these research findings recognise that Enactus teams are involved in addressing SDGs. In South Africa, student teams need to undertake significant work to address SDGs effectively through project implementation. Using a specific example to illustrate progress, Mbanda and Fourie (2020) highlight the importance of focusing on attaining the goals of the SDGs according to a country's priorities. Consequently, there is a demand for understanding the role played by Enactus teams in South Africa as they seem to significantly contribute to addressing the SDGs.

The South Africa National Development Plan (NDP2030) is a strategic plan outlining the country's development and progress goals and objectives over the next decade (NDP2030, 2015). According to Naidoo and Maré's (2015) research, the South African government has identified critical objectives in reducing poverty, employment creation and inequality. Bapoo et al. (2022) acknowledge that reducing poverty, employment creation and inequity is the key to accelerating the achievement of SDGs. Therefore, the country's NDP2030 is in sync with the SDGs. Thus, to complement the synchrony, the study provides the contributions made by students to key pillars of sustainable development.

Social value

The importance of the SSE, particularly in developing countries like South Africa, cannot be overstated. The SSE emerges as a beacon of hope amid socioeconomic disparities exacerbated by apartheid legacy, governance challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic (Morais & Bacic 2020; UN 2023). The resolution adopted by the UNGA in 2023, advocating for strengthening the SSE to achieve the SDGs, serves as a global call to action. This study draws on these global narratives and positions Enactus. This student-led organisation promotes social entrepreneurship as a critical component in this discourse, in line with the SSE's ethos of promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development (Enactus 2024; Ojiagu & Usman 2023).

Scientific value

This article aims to enhance understanding of the role of SSE in South African higher education institutions. It analyses the impact of Enactus at the CUT. The study

showcases how social entrepreneurship (SE) initiatives empower students, encourage innovation and contribute to community development (Mbanda & Fourie 2020). Incorporating the SSE framework with the capability approach provides a thorough theoretical perspective, highlighting the significance of enhancing individuals' capabilities and opportunities (Sen 1999). Moreover, the article emphasises the crucial significance of universities in connecting scholarly knowledge with tangible, community-focused solutions (Nguyen & Nielsen 2023). This viewpoint offers practical and valuable information for policymakers, educators and practitioners. This suggests that integrating social entrepreneurship as credit-bearing activities and providing strong institutional support can significantly improve the university's impact on societal issues and SDGs (Lee 2020).

The conceptual framework

This article's conceptual framework is based on the SSE paradigm, which prioritises social well-being, fairness and environmental sustainability over maximising profits (Rahmanti & Subandi 2024). Social and Solidarity Economy supports inclusive economic growth and sustainable development, aligning with the SDGs (UN 2023). Enactus adopts social entrepreneurship, a component of SSE, and uses sustainable business approaches to address social issues, enhancing economic and social value (Lee 2020). This aligns with the capability approach, focusing on enhancing individuals' capacities to live meaningful lives (Robeyns 2017). Universities play a crucial role in linking academic knowledge with community engagement and policy advocacy (Nguyen & Nielsen 2023). The Enactus case at the CUT shows how student-led initiatives address regional socioeconomic challenges and promote sustainable development (Mbanda & Fourie 2020). This article combines SSE, SE and higher education's role in promoting inclusive economic growth and sustainability.

Aims and objectives

This study seeks to understand the multifaceted effects of Enactus on South Africa's SSE. The goals are to, (1) define Enactus' purpose and contributions to the SSE; (2) assess the extent and effectiveness of Enactus' engagements and collaborations in promoting the SSE and (3) identify the challenges and opportunities that student entrepreneurs face within this framework. The study aims to provide actionable insights and frameworks that can be used by academic institutions, policymakers and social entrepreneurs to strengthen the SSE, thereby contributing to the achievement of sustainable development and a more equitable society in South Africa and beyond.

Research methods and design

Study design

We sought to examine the influence of Enactus on South Africa's SSE. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we opted for a qualitative approach to gather comprehensive

insights into the experiences and perspectives of Enactus students. The qualitative approach provides deep, nuanced insights into human behaviour and experiences, enabling a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena such as how Enactus contributes to SSE (Butler 2023).

Setting

The CUT, which has campuses in Bloemfontein and Welkom in the Free State province of South Africa, was selected as the case study for Enactus participating students. Case studies use diverse sources of evidence to provide rich, detailed insights and demonstrate the practical applications of theories in natural settings (Liu et al. 2019). The CUT was chosen for its exemplary social entrepreneurship practices within the South Africa Enactus network. The university has won the national championship for two consecutive years. This demonstrates its steadfastness in formulating and executing social entrepreneurial endeavours. Hence, it was crucial to understand the nature of the businesses in which the students are involved and their influence on the South Africa SSE.

Study population and sampling strategy

We employed purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences with Enactus, resulting in the selection of 11 participants. The study included eight current students and three alumni; two were employed as university staff, while the others were used in the corporate sector. The students were chosen from various departments, such as construction and architecture, human resources, business studies and engineering. This diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds was essential in understanding Enactus' multidisciplinarity. It further provided diverse perspectives. Out of the 11 participants, five were female, thus guaranteeing gender diversity in the sample. The diversity was essential to collect multiple perspectives and experiences regarding understanding the impact of Enactus on the SSE in South Africa.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Only individuals directly involved in Enactus activities were included, while those not involved were excluded.

Sample size

The study included 11 participants, justified by the desire to capture diverse disciplines and experiences. These participants were drawn from various academic disciplines, enterprises and study levels. Male and female participants were represented.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide in-depth information about Enactus' impact. This strategy ensured a wide range of perspectives from different academic backgrounds.

Implementation

Participants were recruited using university Enactus membership lists, which were accessible through the team Faculty Advisor. Students voluntarily participated in the outreach via email and other university communication channels.

Data collection

Data collection process

Participants' personal experiences, perceptions and thoughts on Enactus' contributions to South Africa's SSE were investigated through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed by conducting a thorough review of relevant literature and subsequently refined through a pilot interview with two students to ensure the questions were clear and appropriate. The interviews were conducted in English, each recorded with the participant's permission. The participants' consent was obtained before recording the interviews. The tapes were transcribed word by word for analysis.

Semi-structured interviews and report review

One-on-one interviews were conducted with eight students and three alumni. Students were interviewed to understand their perception of how participating in Enactus initiatives contributes to the objectives of SSE. Enactus alumni were interviewed to understand how participation in Enactus shaped their personal and professional development towards their current economic and social roles outside the university. Project beneficiaries were interviewed to understand their views on the role of Enactus in their projects. Additionally, the teams' 2022–2024 annual impact reports were reviewed to ascertain their impact on the challenges being addressed.

Data analysis

Transcribed interviews were methodologically analysed through a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase framework to improve scientific rigour and academic novelty. This rigorous process comprised immersive data engagement, initial codes, salient theme extraction and refinement, and final reporting. According to Pearse (2019), an inductive approach is essential to uncovering themes organically from the data and ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the participants' lived experiences and perspectives. The manual analysis allowed us to discuss and resolve coding discrepancies and theme interpretations, improving the reliability of the results. A critical examination of Enactus' annual impact reports revealed student projects, impacts, collaborations and other key achievements demonstrating Enactus' commitment to SSE. This methodological approach strengthens the research's credibility and contributes to academic discourse by presenting empirically sound findings. The analysis led to developing an Enactus model showing the linkages between SSE, NDP2030 and the SDGs, identifying specific Enactus activities that contribute to those above.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Central University of Technology, Free State Ethics Committee.

Results

The following themes emerged using the aforementioned thematic analysis, which addressed the study objective.

Understand Enactus' mandate and its contribution to Social and Solidarity Economy

Empowerment through entrepreneurship and innovation

Enactus enables student-led ventures to address community issues by leveraging entrepreneurship and focusing on sustainability and community development. Several students identified this as a key objective of Enactus and how it relates to SSE, South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 and the SDGs. A participant mentioned Enactus: 'Empower us [students] with the knowledge and exposure needed to engage in entrepreneurship focusing on sustainability and community development' (Participant 4, male, student). The statement was linked to the records acquired from one student-led enterprise, Vermi Village. Vermi village is derived from vermiculture, a process that involves breeding and raising earthworms to decompose organic waste into nutrient-rich vermicompost (Soni & Sharma 2016). Earthworm digestion turns organic matter into high-quality compost, improving soil health and fertility. One participant reiterated, 'Vermiculture is a method that uses red wriggler earthworms to transform organic waste into nutrient-rich vermicompost' (Participant 9, female, alumni). He further articulated that South Africa has the potential to tap into this innovative regenerative agriculture because, in South Africa, 30% of agricultural fresh produce is lost to waste along the agricultural supply chain. The process reduces landfill waste and promotes sustainable agriculture (regenerative agriculture) and gardening by producing natural fertiliser. Vermicompost is valued for improving soil structure, water retention, and plant nutrition and microorganisms (Sinha et al. 2010).

This student-led initiative has reduced town waste and generated over R57 000.00 in sales by training local farmers and selling worms and organic compost. It was mentioned that, 'To date, we have generated a revenue of over R57 000.00 and a laptop was purchased at R4000.00 to aid our operations' (Participant 7, male, student). Empowered youth have turned 'trash to cash'. Motivated participants have started over 27 worm farming businesses. Over 135 local school and church employees have received comprehensive training through the initiative's partnerships. This effort has made backyard vegetable gardening an essential part of sustainable local agriculture. This programme shows how student-led initiatives can empower communities and promote environmental sustainability through entrepreneurship.

Employment and economic contribution

This initiative has created job opportunities and contributed significantly to the economy through entrepreneurial activities, demonstrating the possibility of self-employment in sustainable agriculture. Establishing over 27 worm farming enterprises exemplifies this student-led initiative's ability to create jobs. Despite the directors' deep involvement in their business and their academic responsibilities, they were able to hire one full-time employee and five food waste collectors in Bloemfontein. According to an interviewed enterprise director, while there is only one employee, all directors are actively involved. An interviewed enterprise director, Participant 6, shared:

'...we have one employee... but all directors are hands-on. We subcontract waste collectors for our food waste collection in the [Central Business District] CBD, although we undertake most of the work ourselves.' (Participant 6, female, student)

This demonstrates the students' ability to multitask effectively, benefiting both the economy and environmental sustainability. Looking ahead, after graduation, these students hope to continue promoting regenerative agriculture throughout the country, emphasising its importance through additional training. This initiative supports Mishenin, Yarova and Koblianska's (2021) emphasis on the need for local and environmentally friendly methods to improve local food systems. This is especially relevant given South Africa's reliance on agricultural fertilisers imported from Ukraine, whose supply chain has been disrupted by conflict. Thus, local initiatives to bridge this gap are critical, highlighting the importance of homegrown solutions in maintaining agricultural productivity in the face of global challenges.

Sustainable solutions/regenerative agriculture

Nobel Prize winner Gunnar Myrdal (1898–1987) famously stated, 'It is in the agricultural sector that the battle for long-term [sustainable] economic development will be won or lost'. This statement emphasises the importance of innovating within agricultural systems to ensure household-to-global food security. In line with this, Enactus projects have been at the forefront of developing long-term solutions to pressing social and environmental challenges, fostering economic growth. The Vermi Village project is a prime example of such innovation, as it exemplifies regenerative agriculture principles by ensuring that nothing goes to waste. The project demonstrated that using organic manure produced by breeding wriggler earthworms can increase crop yields by 30% while preserving soil fertility and structure (Edmeades 2003; Ye et al. 2020). This initiative contributes to the NDP2030 and supports SSE and SDGs, demonstrating a collaborative effort towards a more sustainable and prosperous future.

Education and skill development

Enactus stands out as a beacon of practical learning and skill development far beyond traditional academic curricula.

It focuses on developing entrepreneurial, leadership and professional skills, promoting personal and professional growth among its participants. Students who participate in Enactus learn critical skills such as professional communication, business model comprehension, enterprise development, and cultivating a leadership mindset and entrepreneurial spirit.

Two notable participants shared their transformative experiences with Enactus. Participant 4 described Enactus as an essential catalyst for improving professional communication skills, understanding business models and promoting enterprise development. Participant 8 credited Enactus with empowering their leadership development. Notably, Participant 4, who identifies as a 'hustle-preneur' who maximises available resources for entrepreneurial endeavours, provided insights into the gap between engineering education and the entrepreneurial skills required in the real world. They pointed out that the curriculum focuses on preparing students for employment rather than entrepreneurship. This participant's entrepreneurial journey has led to establishing their own business, which focuses on facilitating student housing and accommodation placement for universities and colleges in the Bloemfontein area. This initiative assists students, particularly those funded by the National Student Financial Assistance Scheme (NSFAS), in finding suitable housing and helps landlords get their university-accredited properties. This endeavour exemplifies a shift from the traditional path of seeking employment after graduation to creating job opportunities for peers and contributing to local economies.

This enterprise's success and challenges reflect the practical application of skills and knowledge gained through Enactus. Working on community projects, conducting stakeholder analyses and assessing project feasibility have enhanced participants' experiences, boosting their resilience and determination to reach significant milestones. Despite facing various challenges, the spirit of 'hustle-preneurship' motivates them to continue growing and pursuing ambitious goals. This story demonstrates how Enactus provides a powerful platform for students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical challenges, fostering a generation of leaders and entrepreneurs ready to make a meaningful impact in their communities and beyond.

Educational and community engagement

Enactus' educational and community engagement programmes on food security and environmental sustainability have greatly expanded its reach. Skill development and community welfare are vital to this impact. Students' proactive community service, such as offering entrepreneurial training to improve school gardening projects, shows this. Participant 7 noted, 'Our workshop program reached 135 learners and over 130 women from various churches, teaching them how vermiculture can enhance their school gardens' (Participant 7, male, student). Such collaborative training sessions emphasise knowledge

sharing and community giving, exemplifying solidarity. Expert partnerships enrich these initiatives, as seen in the successful workshop with Lesotho specialists. Their feedback improved the workshop's content and success. Students learned skills and experienced networking and professional growth through this collaboration. Participant 3 said, 'This network [Enactus] significantly contributed to my personal and professional development, fostering skills like creativity, problem-solving, and effective communication' (Participant 3, female, student). Enactus transforms communities and develops future leaders with critical skills. These projects teach Enactus students about giving back, networking and professional development while addressing community needs.

Global citizenship and entrepreneurship

Enactus programmes host national and regional challenges to promote regional and international collaboration, networking, competition and cross-border learning. Successful student projects receive seed capital and professional training from Harmony Gold Mining, MTN South Africa and the Ford Foundation. These collaborations allow teams to showcase their projects globally, allowing students to become global citizens beyond South Africa and Africa. Exposure to different cultures, practices and entrepreneurial approaches is invaluable. It broadens students' perspectives and gives them global market skills. From local innovators to globally competitive entrepreneurs, profound learning and a deeper appreciation for global cultures and business practices are hallmarks.

Enactus' CUT team, which won South Africa's national championship for two consecutive years, proves its method works:

We've had the amazing opportunity to present our projects, especially Vermi Village, to an international audience. Travelling abroad with Enactus was exciting. The idea of travelling abroad with Enactus was captivating ... I've always wanted to be a global citizen. (Participant 7, male, student)

This quote encapsulates Enactus' mission to create a generation of successful entrepreneurs with a global perspective.

Engagement and collaboration to enhance Social and Solidarity Economy

Engagement and collaboration have been critical in improving the SSE through Vermi Village, an initiative that exemplifies self-empowerment, authentic experiences and transformative effects on communities. Vermi Village has successfully improved entrepreneurial initiatives and project outcomes by capitalising on a solid stakeholder network. Extensive collaboration with local communities, businesses and educational institutions, such as Motheo Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College and Interstate Bus lines, has promoted enterprise growth and met project objectives. A participant noted, 'We've learned to work

with and maintain relationships with our partners, ensuring continued support and funding from organisations and companies' (Participant 6, female, student). Participant 11 mentioned, 'Our collaboration with Interstate bus lines, Motheo TVET College, has been instrumental in the growth of our enterprises and market base' (Participant 11, female, alumni). This collaborative effort has secured ongoing support and funding from various organisations and businesses, demonstrating the importance of maintaining strong partnerships.

Strategic resource sharing and support have significantly aided enterprise development and expansion, enabling the transition from operating in a garage to significant growth facilitated by land provided through a partnership with Meals on Wheels. 'Collaboration has been crucial ... Initially, the enterprise operated from a garage, but through a partnership with Meals on Wheels, we received land allowing for significant expansion' (Participant 10, male, alumni). Furthermore, collaborations with local businesses and banks, including Absa, have provided a broader perspective on enterprise development, attracting funding and instilling an entrepreneurial spirit. Participant 10 noted, 'Partnering with banks like Absa offered a broader perspective on enterprise development, attracting funding and instilling an entrepreneurial spirit' (Participant 10, male, alumni). Through these collaborative efforts, Vermi Village and its partners have demonstrated the significant impact of stakeholder engagement and strategic partnerships on the success and expansion of entrepreneurial projects, which is crucial for a thriving SSE environment.

Challenges faced by students in participating with Enactus

There are various challenges students face as they execute their enterprises. While others can be managed locally, some are beyond their comprehension. Therefore, they only keep on hanging because of the entrepreneurial spirit and resilience within them. Participant 7 articulated that 'combating the challenges ... is obviously a trial and error, keeping the resilience there' (Participant 7, male, student). This assertion attests that the terrain is not even for the faint-hearted. With resilience and commitment, they strive.

Climatic and resource challenges

Climate change emerged as a significant challenge, as four participants noted a discernible shift towards cooler weather over time. This change has significantly impacted open farming practices, particularly for vegetables, implying a shift towards more capital-intensive solutions, such as greenhouse farming, to ensure uninterrupted harvests. These environmental and resource challenges necessitate innovative and resilient project execution approaches, particularly in the Free State's agricultural issues such as soil quality and climate.

Accessing capital to scale up their businesses is a significant barrier for young entrepreneurs. Financial institutions

frequently require tangible collateral for loans, which presents a challenge for entrepreneurs whose primary assets are innovative ideas and unwavering determination. As a result of this financial bottleneck, many promising projects falter or fail to succeed, emphasising the critical need for alternative funding mechanisms that can assist young entrepreneurs in bringing their ideas to fruition and overcoming the pressing challenges of climate change.

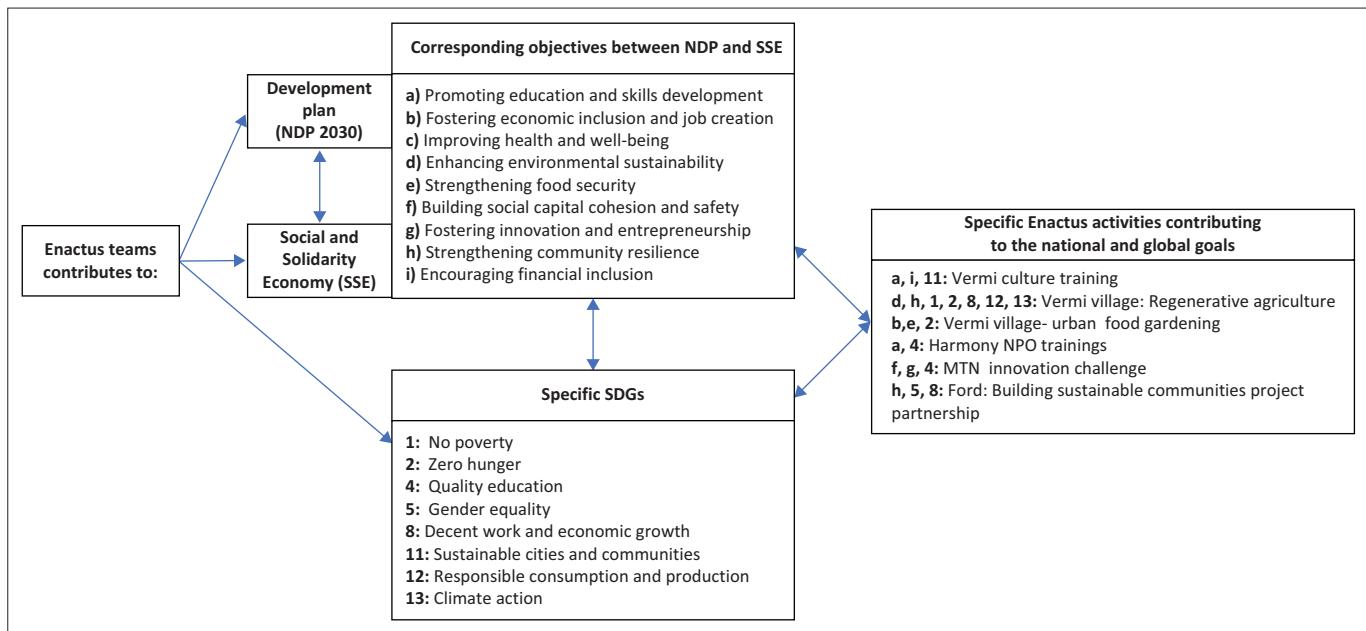
Engagement and motivating teams

Participant 5 and Participant 8 emphasised the complexities of balancing academic responsibilities with business management, noting that this equilibrium frequently comes at a high cost. The demands of enterprise management have forced some team members to step back as their involvement began to have a negative impact on academic performance. Participant 10 highlighted an additional challenge: keeping team members engaged and motivated. 'One ongoing challenge is engaging and motivating people to participate in our projects' (Participant 10, male, alumni). This difficulty lowers morale among current members and puts additional strain on leadership. Participant 10 elaborated on a leader's multifaceted role, which goes beyond simply managing the enterprise to motivating members and assuring them of their potential for success. This emphasises the dual challenge of guiding the enterprise towards its goals while creating supportive and encouraging environments for all members.

Discussion

This study has shed light on the critical role of Enactus in addressing SSE, specifically through the lens of student-led initiatives at the CUT. Figure 1 summarises how Enactus specifically contributes to SSE, SDGs and NDP2030 by highlighting critical objectives that are addressed and linking them with the SDGs. The investigation revealed that Enactus is a catalyst for encouraging student entrepreneurship and innovation through qualitative research that included participant interviews and an analysis of annual impact reports. These efforts promote economic growth and job creation and provide long-term solutions to community challenges, which are closely aligned with the goals of sustainable development and socioeconomic equality (Adarlo 2020).

However, the path to achieving these lofty goals has its challenges. Resource constraints and the complexities of stakeholder engagement have emerged as significant challenges. These challenges, however, vary from institution to institution, as highlighted by Morais and Bacic (2020). Despite these challenges, the evidence points to a promising future for sustainable development through projects like Vermi Village. This initiative demonstrates the transformative power of regenerative agriculture, which converts organic waste into nutrient-rich compost, increasing crop yields, improving soil health and contributing to environmental sustainability. Executing these student ventures requires overcoming significant barriers, most notably the availability of capital. Young entrepreneurs frequently face challenges in



SSE, Social and Solidarity Economy; SDG, sustainable developmental goal; NDP, National Development Plan 2030; NPO, Non-profit organisation.

FIGURE 1: Enactus model: The relationship between Enactus activities and the national and global goals.

expanding their businesses because of stringent financial requirements, such as the need for collateral from lending institutions. This financial bottleneck stifles the growth of potentially transformative projects (Alemu 2016), highlighting the critical need for alternative funding mechanisms that encourage innovative thinking and the entrepreneurial spirit.

The study also delves into the difficulties of balancing academic obligations with enterprise management, emphasising team members' dropouts because of the impact on their academic performance. Furthermore, engagement and motivation within teams have been identified as ongoing challenges, emphasising leaders' multifaceted role in managing enterprises and inspiring and reassuring team members of their ability to succeed. This investigation into Enactus' contributions to the SSE in South Africa highlights the critical importance of creating an environment that promotes student entrepreneurship and innovation. Mele et al. (2022) highlighted that the prevailing socioeconomic environments require resilient and astute students who think beyond the book taping into opportunities to create social and economic value. This environment is essential for promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Student-led initiatives such as Enactus can be crucial in advancing South Africa's SSE by addressing the identified challenges and capitalising on opportunities for sustainable development, thereby contributing to the larger goals of socioeconomic equality and environmental sustainability, as shown in Figure 1.

Strengths and limitations

This study's in-depth qualitative approach provides rich insights into participants' experiences. However, the study's

case study focus may limit the findings' generalisability but give a detailed understanding of how Enactus contributes to SSE using the initiatives implemented by the CUT.

Implications or recommendations

This study emphasises the importance of increased support and funding for Enactus projects, recommending that policymakers and educational institutions prioritise such initiatives. Additional research could investigate the long-term effects of Enactus on students' careers and community development.

Conclusion

This study investigates Enactus' significant contributions to enhancing SSE, mainly through student-led initiatives at the CUT. It demonstrates that Enactus projects, such as Vermi Village, encourage students' entrepreneurial skills and innovation and address critical social and environmental issues in line with sustainable development and socioeconomic equity objectives. Despite challenges such as limited resources and complexities in stakeholder engagement, these initiatives show the potential for long-term impact through regenerative agriculture practices. However, financial constraints and balancing academic commitments with enterprise management present significant obstacles. The findings emphasise the importance of increased support and funding for student-led social entrepreneurship, recommending additional research into its long-term effects on career development and community upliftment. This study underscores the importance of initiatives such as Enactus in driving a more inclusive and sustainable economy, contributing to the larger goals of the SDGs and fostering a better future for South Africa.

Recommendations

To increase Enactus' efficacy and recognition in academic and societal spheres, it is recommended that Enactus projects be integrated into university curricula as multidisciplinary, credit-bearing modules, thus legitimising the initiative and recognising students' efforts and competencies. Furthermore, there should be a concerted effort to prioritise sustainability-focused projects in areas such as regenerative agriculture, waste management and youth empowerment. There is a need for precise tools to measure the impact of Enactus initiatives and aid in refining and expanding effective models. Furthermore, engaging in policy advocacy to gain government support for SSE is critical. Enactus can set the social entrepreneurship and sustainable development agenda by highlighting its accomplishments and addressing challenges.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, C.N. The data are not publicly available because of privacy and ethical concerns. However, they can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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