

Social Entrepreneurship in Tunisia: What Drives Them to Act and How they Transform Society

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ABSTRACT : The objective of this study was to explore the motivations of social entrepreneurs and to better understand the diversity of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon, thereby contributing to filling the gap in research on the subject and enriching empirical data. The article highlights the diversity of social entrepreneurship. In addition to grouping the entrepreneurs studied, the authors identified four groups of motivational factors that, together, can encourage the creation and management of a social enterprise. The elements of the resulting motivational structure are as follows: external financial motivations, entrepreneurial motivations, social motivations, and personal motivations. The latter can be subdivided into two categories depending on whether the motivation aims at the well-being of the individual or that of the community. The authors' findings also show that the social entrepreneurs studied are characterized by strong relational motivation and a higher level of maturity in terms of power motivation, due to their prosocial motivations and collectivist values, in addition to the high level of success-driven motivation that characterizes traditional entrepreneurs.

KEYWORDS : motivation, social entrepreneur, needs theory, Tunisia.

INTRODUCTION

Social enterprise is currently one of the most promising levers for addressing contemporary social challenges, offering sustainable solutions while ensuring their economic viability (Qi et al., 2025 ; Quaye et al., 2024 ; Halsall et al., 2022 ; Kim & Lim, 2017). Although the literature on social enterprises is constantly growing, available empirical studies remain scarce (Littlewood & Khan, 2018 ; Young, 2012). According to Kiladze et al. (2024), many aspects of sustainable entrepreneurship remain unexplored (particularly social and environmental entrepreneurship and certain elements of CSR). According to these authors, studying entrepreneurs pursuing social and environmental objectives can help us understand how, why, and under what conditions entrepreneurial activity can generate benefits for society.

According to Murnieks et al. (2020), although research on entrepreneurial motivation initially generated considerable interest, it was discontinued, leaving this research area unexplored. Currently, the study of entrepreneurial motivation is receiving increasing attention (Murnieks et al., 2020). Furthermore, when it comes to entrepreneurial motivation, researchers primarily focus on commercial entrepreneurs (Galati et al., 2020). In the case of social entrepreneurs, research has focused more on their distinction from other organizational and entrepreneurial forms (Litrico & Besharov, 2019), and exploring the motivations of social entrepreneurs remains an area requiring further research (Müller et al., 2025).

This study aims to address the lack of research data on social entrepreneurs in Tunisia and seeks to understand their motivations for creating and managing a social enterprise. Due to the nature of the question, this is an exploratory and qualitative study, based on in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews. Our main objective was to understand the motivations of the social entrepreneurs studied. We also sought to group these entrepreneurs and examine our motivational findings in light of McClelland's (1965) acquired needs theory (Awang et al., 2025). Thus, in the literature review, we will address the definition of social enterprise and entrepreneurial motivations. We will then describe the methodology used and present the research sample, followed by our main findings, divided into three parts: the classification of social entrepreneurs, the description of the groups of motivational factors, and the examination of these groups of factors through the lens of acquired needs theory. We will conclude our study with our findings.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Social enterprise

The literature offers numerous definitions of social enterprises. Regardless of the approach adopted, Sinthupundaja et al. (2020) argue that the primary objective of social entrepreneurship is not profit maximization, but rather the creation of social value and the service of the interests of a community or group. This objective is explicitly stated in the enterprise's mission (Eng et al., 2020).

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According to Sparviero (2019), social enterprises therefore aim to provide solutions to (critical) social problems within a market context. For the purposes of this research, we consider social enterprises to be those that were created to solve social problems in a financially viable manner, or that have been transformed for this purpose (Kickul & Lyons, 2020). In our view, this definition is applicable to many fields and sufficiently broad not to restrict the scope of our exploratory research, but rather to provide it with an appropriate framework. Therefore, we consider any individual who creates or manages a social enterprise as defined above to be a social entrepreneur.

The concept of social enterprise, like most concepts and phenomena used in the social sciences, is a construct (Astley, 2019) and thus lacks an objective definition. Numerous divergences also exist between the relevant approaches identified in the literature. For example, while some believe that social entrepreneurship can only be defined if the social dimension (social interests and objectives) takes precedence over the economic dimension (Mahfuz Ashraf et al., 2019), others are more permissive (Aponte et al., 2019). Some approaches strictly restrict the issue of profit distribution in the definition of social enterprises (Hudon et al., 2020), while others are more flexible on this point (Gertner, 2023).

According to some definitions, social enterprises are inherently innovative (Martens et al., 2021), while other approaches qualify this assertion (Seelos & Mair, 2020). Some definitions stipulate that an organization can be considered a social enterprise if it takes on a significant level of economic risk (Krocil et al., 2020), while other approaches consider that it can also operate with a low degree of market participation (Kraff & Jernsand, 2020). Some approaches stipulate that democratic decision-making is an essential characteristic of social enterprises (Vickers et al., 2025), while others believe this is not necessarily the case (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019). Still others argue that motivation and intention are the two most important elements in determining whether an organization is a social enterprise (Makard & Siriwichai, 2022).

The lack of a uniform definition of social enterprises poses a major problem during the operationalization phase of research. Indeed, even when a definition is adopted, measuring its attributes, even nominally, can prove complex. For example, how can one objectively determine whether the economic or social aspect takes precedence in the functioning of a business? Is innovation a defining characteristic of a social enterprise? Is decision-making within the organization democratic?

Beyond these definitional differences, the operationalization of social enterprises can also create a dilemma, as many other concepts, such as corporate social responsibility (Hertel et al., 2022), sustainable business development (Bonfanti et al., 2023), political entrepreneurs (Jarrodi et al., 2020), or the truly responsible enterprise (Bruder, 2021), cannot be clearly separated from social enterprises. This raises a question : where do we draw the line between businesses in the traditional sense and social enterprises ? Or, where does the line lie between responsible entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs ? At what point does a business become a social enterprise and no longer simply a socially responsible one ?

Closely related to the above, the diversity of social enterprises is also illustrated by the concept proposed by the authors Defourny and Nyssens (2022), which groups together the different types of social enterprises. This model positions social enterprises and their characteristic resources within a triangle structured around three fundamental interests (general, mutual, and capitalist) (Figure 1).

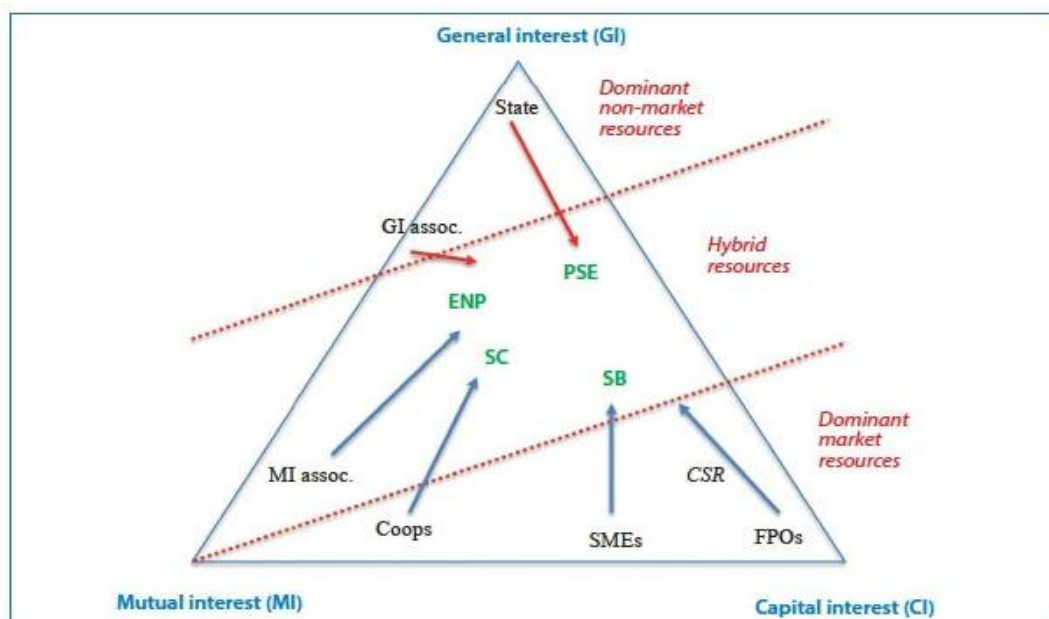


Figure 1 : Institutional trajectories and social enterprise models
Source : Defourny et Nyssens (2022)

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Among the interests forming the vertices of the triangle, general interests concern a wide range of communities and are generally supported by the state (e.g., public education or the operation of primary healthcare). The defense of mutualist interests consists of defending the interests of members, which is typical of the functioning of cooperatives (e.g., production cooperatives or service cooperatives). Civil society organizations (associations, non-profit organizations, etc.) lie between general and mutualist interests. These organizations, which aim for the general interest, are closer to defending the general interest, but do not occupy the apex, because their general interest (the community they serve) is generally less extensive than that which represents the apex of general interests. The interests of capital are primarily represented by for-profit companies; by interest, we mean, among other things, profit maximization or consideration of investor interests (Defourny and Nyssens, 2022).

According to the authors, four types of social enterprises can be distinguished based on their objectives :

- Entrepreneurial non-profit organizations: organizations that engage in entrepreneurial activities to achieve their social goals and supplement their income (public funds, subsidies, etc.);
- Social cooperatives: organizations that support a social objective based on shared interests, are owned by their members, and are democratically managed by them;
- For-profit social enterprises: organizations primarily motivated by a social objective, which operate in a profit-making, generally commercial, form;
- Public social enterprises: outsourced enterprises designed to reduce costs, with a social purpose, which serve to fulfill government missions ("spin-off enterprises").

1.2. Entrepreneurial motivations and the acquired needs theory

Researchers define motivation as the set of psychological processes that drive, guide, and sustain action (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2025 ; Joshi, 2025 ; Reeve, 2024 ; Ahmad, 2021).

Many have examined the reasons why individuals become entrepreneurs (Norstedt & Germundsson, 2023 ; Laukkanen, 2022 ; Machani et al., 2021), but many researchers believe that this area still holds many mysteries (Jayanthi, 2019 ; Brännback & Carsrud, 2015). In our country, research on entrepreneurial intentions and the transition to entrepreneurship is increasingly common (Chaker & Dellagi, 2023 ; Festa et al., 2023 ; Maayoufi et al., 2023 ; Moussa & Kerkeni, 2021).

Furthermore, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor regularly conducts surveys in various countries to study entrepreneurial activity, entrepreneurial attitudes, and the context, as well as their interactions (Ndofirepi & Steyn, 2023).

Entrepreneurial motivation can be understood in various ways. Some researchers distinguish between opportunity-driven and constraint-driven entrepreneurs (Kah et al., 2022 ; Brännback and Carsrud, 2015), while others approach the issue from the perspective of the personal definition of success, determined by external or internal factors (Hartati et al., 2024 ; Kumalasari et al., 2021). The importance and impact of goals are receiving increasing attention in motivation research (Brännback and Carsrud, 2015), as well-chosen goals have a positive effect on performance and the chances of business sustainability (Sekáč, 2023 ; Lassala, 2021). In research on entrepreneurial motivation, McClelland's (1961) motivation theory is widely used (Awang et al., 2025), and we partially used it as a basis for analyzing our empirical results. According to this theory, individuals have three fundamental needs: the need for achievement, power, and belonging (Alkhalwaldeh & Alla, 2025):

- The concept of achievement orientation was introduced into entrepreneurship research by McClelland (1961), who argued that young people may be motivated by a higher need for achievement to start a business, as they can find greater fulfillment in it than in any other job. Achievement-motivated behavior can be described as an individual's concern for excellence. Highly achievement-motivated individuals: appreciate situations where they can take responsibility for solving problems; like to set moderately ambitious goals, i.e., take calculated risks; They appreciate precise feedback and plan ahead. Regarding motivation for success, researchers distinguish two tendencies: success orientation and failure avoidance (Brunstein & Heckhausen, 2025; Kuhl, 2021).
- Relational motivation is the desire to develop close, friendly interpersonal relationships with others. Relationship-motivated individuals prioritize cooperation over competition. Those characterized by strong relational motivation prefer social activities, spend more time cultivating their social relationships, and enjoy being liked.
- Power motivation is the need for an individual to accomplish, influence, teach, or encourage others to behave as they wish. A person driven by this motivation enjoys competition, recognition, and status (Anderson et al., 2015). In his 1975 work, McClelland subdivided the motivation for power into four stages, according to an individual's maturity: two dimensions, the source of power (self, others, principles) and the object of power (influencing oneself or others, encouraging them) (Busch, 2025). At the first stage of maturity, we seek encouragement or direction from others. At the second stage, we draw our strength from within ourselves, which allows us to strengthen and orient ourselves.

1.3. The motivations of social entrepreneurs

Early research on entrepreneurship generally assumed that entrepreneurs were motivated to take personal risks by financial return and profit maximization (Debrulle et al., 2021 ; Manish & Sutter, 2016 ; Brännback & Carsrud, 2015).

Brännback and Carsrud (2015) add that, while profit-oriented entrepreneurs may indeed start a business for financial, prestige, and/or social status reasons, these factors do not explain the motivation of all entrepreneurs.

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In the case of social enterprises, since social interest can be one of their main motivators (Wanyoike & Maseno, 2021 ; Humphris, 2017 ; Brännback & Carsrud, 2015), previous research on egocentric motivation is not always relevant for characterizing their motivations (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019). Kibler et al. (2019) also share the view that research examining entrepreneurial motivations (self-fulfillment, financial success, personal growth, status, and autonomy) focuses primarily on the well-being and wealth of the individual or their family, while prosocial motivations receive very little attention.

According to other researchers, however, another step is more interesting: it consists of attempting to influence and serve others by leveraging a higher source of power (e.g., religion, laws, one's group) (Frieze & Boneva, 2015). These leaders often prioritize collective interests over their individual interests (Weitzner & Deutsch, 2015).

According to a large international study on social enterprises, the three elements most frequently associated with their mission are improving the labor market, providing employment support, and creating professional opportunities (Lysaght et al., 2018); objectives related to the local community (Kim & Lim, 2017); and improving the situation of people with disabilities or reduced work capacity (Redko, 2024). The most common founding motivations are achieving a social or community goal, cooperation and stakeholder involvement (Kim & Lim, 2017), solving social problems (Kimura et al., 2019), contributing to the common good (Marek et al., 2023), and promoting sustainable development (Quaye et al., 2024). This research clearly shows that social enterprises are imbued with prosocial motivations.

Several authors emphasize that an entrepreneur's motivations and goals can evolve over time (Murnieks et al., 2020 ; Carsrud et al., 2017 ; Brännback & Carsrud, 2015).

On the one hand, we can observe a shift from the initial need to meet basic needs to a need for growth, or from the enjoyment of the activity to profit, with the emphasis increasingly placed on the latter (Carsrud et al., 2017). Another type of evolution can involve a shift from egocentric to altruistic motivations (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2019). Given that the altruistic motivations of leaders generally remain strong over time (Lysaght et al., 2018), we can assume that a social enterprise is unlikely to transform into a traditional commercial enterprise. Furthermore, a company's commitment to an activity stems from the personal convictions and commitment of its leader (Busch, 2025).

Satar (2025) suggests that compassion can greatly contribute to becoming a social entrepreneur. According to him, compassion is a prosocial emotion that connects an individual to a suffering community and makes them more sensitive to the needs and pain of others; it thus represents a broader form of empathy. The importance of this prosocial motivation is also highlighted by Yitshaki et al. (2022), as it allows for a better understanding of the needs of others and the development of more appropriate solutions. According to Satar (2025), this integrative thinking can also contribute to the synthesis of different interests, which constitutes the foundation of social enterprises (socio-economic interests).

Another process facilitating access to social entrepreneurship is cost-benefit analysis incorporating a prosocial dimension (Davies & Kiberd, 2020). In this framework, in addition to considering individual costs and benefits, particular importance is given to the impact of our decisions on others; in other words, we internalize the costs and benefits for others (Satar, 2025). Inaction can then be perceived as a kind of "emotional cost." The third process mentioned by Gilbert (2015) is that empathetic individuals strengthen their commitment to alleviating the suffering of others because they perceive themselves as caring and compassionate, thus reducing the gap between their ideal and their reality. Au et al. (2024) highlight the link between prosocial motivations and individual well-being, and that social entrepreneurs can pursue both prosocial and personal goals.

Crucke and Decramer (2016) studied social entrepreneurs and identified five main motivating factors: personal fulfillment, helping society, a non-financial approach, performance orientation, and proximity to the social problem. For entrepreneurs with professional experience exclusively in the social sector, financial issues proved extremely sensitive, which can be a major obstacle to the smooth operation of a social enterprise, whereas those without social work training naturally addressed the issue of profit. The findings of Crucke and Decramer (2016) partially align with the ideas of Satar (2025), as the concept of compassion describes a phenomenon similar to points 2 and 5 in Crucke and Decramer's work, even though the latter established a more diverse motivational framework. Ardiansyah and Alnoor (2024) studied environmentally committed companies that, simply put, integrate a strong focus on environmental rather than social aspects into their business objectives. They found that, even though managers were aware of the possibility of achieving higher profits with less environmentally friendly practices, they acted in an eco-responsible manner thanks to their personal commitment, values, and intrinsic motivation. The success of these companies is defined as much by the well-being of others as by their own.

Beyond these more common motivations, there are specific cases that can lead a person to become a social entrepreneur. This is the case, for example, of a person with a disability or serious health problems who seeks an opportunity offering flexibility and autonomy, and who then chooses an entrepreneurial career that meets these criteria (Redko, 2024). In the United States, people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to become entrepreneurs as their peers (Balcazar et al., 2023). This personal commitment can also be the starting point for a social enterprise, as those affected experience firsthand the resulting difficulties and social problems. Similarly, people whose physical or mental health is threatened by an environmental or social issue are often inclined to do everything in their power to find a solution (Balcazar et al., 2023).

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2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our study aims to answer the following question : What motivates Tunisian social entrepreneurs to create and manage a social enterprise?

While entrepreneurship can be influenced by many other environmental factors besides motivation, such as competition, the regulatory framework, or the availability of venture capital (Murnieks et al., 2020), we focused exclusively on motivations here. Due to the exploratory nature of the topic, the research is inductive and qualitative, aiming to understand and highlight deeper connections. During the first quarter of 2025, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews along two lines of inquiry. The first line of inquiry involved interviewing social entrepreneurs, while the second consisted of an interview with an expert. This interview with the expert had a dual purpose. On the one hand, it allowed us to better understand the environment, the challenges, and the motivations of social entrepreneurs. On the other hand, it contributed to integrating more relevant questions into the interview series targeting these entrepreneurs (i.e., the operationalization phase of the social enterprise research process). The interviews were structured around predefined themes, while constantly keeping the research objective and questions in mind. However, the questions were open-ended and thematically permissive, meaning that interviewees had considerable freedom regarding the points they wished to address within a given theme (King et al., 2018). Because of these characteristics, this data collection method is perfectly suited to exploring and understanding the knowledge, perspectives, opinions, and feelings of social entrepreneurs relevant to our research objectives. It also allows for the emergence of new and unexpected observations, which is all the more important given the novelty and under-explored nature of the topic.

The search for interviewees was primarily based on their accessibility, using several methods. In some cases, we were able to contact a person through different means.

When selecting our interviewees, we sought to narrow our search area and, thanks to our network of contacts, chose the Greater Tunis region. The expert we interviewed had not only been recommended by several people, but he had also organized an event for social entrepreneurs, which we attended. Furthermore, the organization he represents has a large regional network of consultants specializing in social entrepreneurship. The first group of interviewees consisted of social entrepreneurs recommended by the expert and participants from this event. To increase the sample size, we selected, in a second group, the winners of the calls for applications for social entrepreneurs.

To select interviewees, we relied, at both stages, on expert recommendations, presentations given at the event, and brief descriptions of the applications. Our main selection criterion was to include companies whose descriptions seemed to correspond to the definition of a social enterprise adopted for this research. We contacted in person those we could meet (at an event, at a local craft market), and the others by email.

In total, we compiled a list of nearly 40 social entrepreneurs, 26 of whom met our definition. However, only 22 responded to our invitation for multiple interviews.

After obtaining the interviewees' consent, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full. During the analysis, we favored a textual analysis method that was as open as possible in order to highlight all the essential elements related to motivations. We thus used the inductive and open analysis methodology of grounded theory (Osman et al., 2018). By its very nature, our methodology is particularly well-suited to exploring and understanding the stakeholders' perspective. Initially, we coded the interviews in detail, ensuring that this coding was done independently of any pre-existing theories. The aim was to highlight the results derived from the data during analysis, without imposing pre-existing theories. During this initial coding phase, we used, as much as possible, *in vivo* codes to preserve the interviewees' perspectives (Maher et al., 2018).

Subsequently, we organized the existing codes into broader logical units: categories. More abstract than codes, categories constitute the building blocks for subsequent theoretical development (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). The categories used were derived from the interviews, which were not mutually exclusive (to avoid the loss of information and the reductionist nature of general coding). Thus, a single text passage could appear in several categories, thereby preserving meanings, information, and connections, and facilitating their identification.

For quality assurance purposes, we analyzed each interview individually and independently. Following this second coding stage, we validated the results. In cases of disagreement, we systematically sought consensus ; if no consensus could be reached, the result was excluded from the analysis. The final set of categories and their resulting factor groups was then established.

In a third step, we compared the structure and theory synthesized from the categories with two existing studies describing the motivation of social entrepreneurs, and we also examined them in light of McClelland's theory of needs.

Given that the results of qualitative research are generally less generalizable, our results are therefore more transferable than generalizable (Drisko, 2025), and there is a trade-off between validity and reliability, and that, in the case of qualitative research, the degree of validity can be greater than that of reliability (Noble & Smith, 2025), we sought to ensure the validity, reliability, and generalizability (transferability) of our research in the following way.

To reduce researcher subjectivity, which is inevitable in any research process, we analyzed the interviews independently. Following the principles of grounded theory, we prioritized the use of "*in vivo*" codes and incorporated all the motivational factors that emerged during the development of the theory in order to best represent the opinions of the interviewees. Our research was meticulously

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documented (audio recordings, tabulated categories, and codes used to reference interview excerpts). To promote transferability, i.e. the extension of the research beyond the sample, we critically compared our results with those of similar previous research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We analyzed nine interviews conducted with eight social entrepreneurs in the Greater Tunis region, and our results are based on their findings. We also conducted an interview with a social entrepreneurship expert who is the director of a regional consulting firm specializing in this field. The information gathered from him allowed us to critically evaluate our results and was not included in the analysis.

In light of the above, it is clear that the most frequent social objective is the employment of people with disabilities and disadvantaged individuals (Redko, 2024), an objective present almost everywhere. The importance of this issue in Tunisia is evident: the employment rate for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses was only 2% in 2024¹. Yet, many people would like to and would be able to enter the workforce, but are unable to do so (Ardeleanu et al., 2025). Among the companies studied, the following social objectives were also found: improving the quality of life for people suffering from a specific illness, supporting families with young children, and developing local food systems.

These companies also carry out a wide range of economic activities, such as renovating and selling second-hand furniture, producing fruit juice and juice cartons, and managing a daycare center or playground. Preserving traditions and selling handcrafted products were also present in several organizations.

3.1. Grouping of social entrepreneurs

The research has already revealed the diversity of social enterprises within the sample of eight entities. To demonstrate this, we use the Defourny and Nyssens (2022) model, presented previously, to classify the interviewees within the social enterprise system (Figure 1). The criteria for grouping social enterprises are identical to the model's categorization criteria (interests and funding methods). The characteristics of the organizations, according to these criteria, were defined based on information gathered during the interviews.

To avoid any bias, the classification was not based on the organizations' legal structure. Specifically, we distinguish:

❖ Non-profit entrepreneurial organizations

We classified eight in this category. Their main characteristic is a focus on social objectives, and their operation is guided by aspects defined as general interests in the model (for example: support for disadvantaged youth, assistance for people with disabilities). They conduct economic activities to finance social objectives or create therapeutic jobs. These businesses can survive thanks to significant central support (state, municipal, or European subsidies) and generally originate from civil society organizations.

❖ Social cooperatives

We classified only four organizations in this category, although, formally (in terms of legal structure), the organizations of several interviewees are also social cooperatives. In the case of businesses in this category, the aspects defined as mutual interests in the model are decisive (i.e., the interests of members predominate, such as employing disadvantaged members or providing meaningful work), while objectives formulated according to general interests (extending beyond the interests of members and affecting a wider public) appear, but are significantly less prominent (for example, the importance of recycling). Market resources are more common for financing, as in the case of non-profit entrepreneurial organizations, but various subsidies also play an important role.

❖ For-profit social enterprises

Among the organizations examined, we have categorized 10 enterprises here. Although their legal structure is that of associations (where, according to the model, the general interest predominates) or social cooperatives (characterized by mutual interests), financial interests proved decisive in their operation. For example, interviewee 2 also questions the relevance of the association structure for their own organization.

In the case of these 10 organizations, economic logic prevails, that is, financial interests, which is also reflected in their decisions: they attempt to integrate their social activities into their commercial operations (for example: inclusive schooling for children with disabilities – No. 2 ; free services for a limited number of disadvantaged children – No. 6 ; promotion of a healthy lifestyle at events, which also constitutes a marketing activity – No. 19).

In addition to financial interests, general interests proved decisive (for example: support for children with special needs and their parents – No. 10, employment of disadvantaged people – No. 13, local products, local sales – No. 20), with mutual interests playing a lesser role. These organizations seek to finance their activities primarily through the market, via self-financing, even though they receive public subsidies (mainly in the form of calls for tenders). The use of other types of public subsidies (for example: public sector employment) is atypical for this category, unlike for non-profit organizations with an entrepreneurial focus.

¹ <https://www.leconomistemaghreb.com/>

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Table 1: The different classes of businesses in the sample

Type	Number of cases
Entrepreneurial non-profit organizations	8
Social cooperatives	4
For-profit social enterprises	10
Total	22

3.2. Motivational structure of social entrepreneurs

Personal values are generally studied using quantitative methods (Leavy, 2022). However, as Lim (2025) points out, qualitative research can help us understand how values motivate an individual to engage in social activity, since the ethical dimension of our decisions is strongly influenced by our personal values. In the case of small businesses, such as those we studied, organizational values, principles, and personal values are consistent with the value system of the leaders we interviewed for this research (Kraemer, 2025 ; Gao, 2017).

The social enterprises examined also consider continuous development and quality as essential values. The dominant principles of their operation are now democratic decision-making, as stated by interviewee 3 :

"I consider employees as colleagues; I ask for their opinions, what they think. Then I decide."

Cases 5 and 7 address employee satisfaction :

"It's a non-profit organization; everything here is done to ensure everyone is happy." (Case 5)

"It's extremely important that those who work for us feel really good." (Case 7)

Recycling, as a value, also emerged in several interviews :

"I'm glad people have finally understood that things shouldn't be thrown away, but rather appreciated." (Case 6)

And mutual support :

"We have to help each other, six of us, so that one person can build themselves up." (Case 11)

"We're a socially sensitive group, so if someone has a problem, we help them." (Case 15)

Other more typical values and principles include ethics, creativity, and cooperation with other organizations:

"Collaboration is necessary, especially in non-profit organizations." (Case 18)

The analysis of the observed organizational values and operating principles reveals that the majority of them are collectivist, meaning they prioritize the interests of the community and the group over the individual (Sinthupundaja et al., 2020). This finding illustrates, in our view, the importance that social entrepreneurs place on the well-being of others, in addition to their own (Ardiansyah & Alnoor, 2024).

During the interviews, we explored the motivations and driving forces of the social entrepreneurs interviewed through various questions and approaches: the creation and history of the business, the reasons for its creation, key milestones, objectives, and success criteria. It seemed essential to address motivations from different angles because, despite some repetition, this approach proved indispensable for uncovering numerous motivating factors.

Our results show the existence of four main groups of motivating factors:

❖ External financial motivations

These motivations essentially encompass various sources of funding and support. The use of funding sources is present in the financing of all the businesses studied, or at least the future possibility of such use exists. In three cases (10, 13, and 20), funding sources, as external financial motivations, proved decisive in the creation of a social enterprise, a non-traditional business.

It is noted that these resources are necessary for the organizations to function, as one interviewee demonstrated:

"There is no capital ; we raise it from funding sources." (Case 15).

The expert interviewed previously also summarized that:

"It is important for a social entrepreneur that civil society recognizes that we do not live solely on grants, because that is not productive. It is excellent that funding sources exist, and they should exist, because, as a civil society organization, it is much more difficult to obtain funds, but we must strive to generate our own income in one way or another."

The funding source affected the interviewed social entrepreneurs in several ways, influencing their decisions. Some effects of the call for proposals were evident, such as job creation, equipment acquisition, motivation to start a business, and the hiring of workers from the target group. We also observed more interesting individual positive effects. Some wanted to illustrate the success of a call for tenders (cases 4 and 14), others developed it more boldly (case 20), and still others were more inclined to welcome new members thanks to the call for tenders (cases 1 and 7). However, during the research, several negative effects of the call for tenders emerged, such as administrative difficulties (cases 2, 9, and 16), risks of staff shortages (cases 5 and 19), a risk of complacency (cases 11 and 18), and debt related to self-financing:

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"We won, we celebrated, we drank champagne, we spent the 10% self-financing, including invoices, and then we didn't receive the money. So I had to take out a loan to recover this amount and put it back into the family coffers, which I repaid over more than 3 years." (Case 2)

Another negative effect relates to a difficult transition from free services offered under the tender process to the sale of paid services (Case 4). Qi et al. (2025) also mention that social enterprises often need external support or cooperation with public bodies, whose bureaucracy and inefficiency can pose obstacles for social entrepreneurs.

❖ Entrepreneurial motivations

The motivations in this group of factors are exclusively economic in origin; that is, the motivations to engage in economic and entrepreneurial activities are the determining factor here (Qi et al., 2025; Quaye et al., 2024; Halsall et al., 2022; Kim & Lim, 2017). This group of motivational factors constitutes the economic and profit-driven foundation of the social enterprise. Therefore, the motivations within this group are not sufficient on their own to create a social enterprise, but only in combination with other groups of factors. This includes more common categories such as innovation or the growth and expansion of the business:

"The goal is to have the widest possible range of products and to be able to offer them in the largest possible market, and this has been achieved." (Case 8)

"The decision is to move forward and gain many more customers." (Case 15)

Others are interested in the company's financial independence:

"We managed to get support, but that doesn't mean it's a success. We need to generate revenue ; we need to make the store operational." (Case 1)

"A real milestone will be reached when we achieve our goal : for the company to generate enough profit to also be able to pay salaries." (Case 20)

But it was also mentioned in several interviews that exploiting the identified market niche also played a role in the company's creation:

"It's natural for us. There was a demand for it." (Case 7)

Indeed, for some of them, entering foreign markets also emerged as a goal :

"I think we need to think internationally." » (Case 18)

A greater variety of these entrepreneurial motivations was observed among entrepreneurs operating for-profit social enterprises according to the categorization of Defourny and Nyssens (2022).

❖ Social motivations

The motivations of this factor group are primarily social in origin; in other words, socially oriented motivations (social interests) are the determining factors, sometimes accompanied by motivations aimed at conducting economic activity (economic interests). This factor group includes motivations where entrepreneurial activity is stimulated by the need to finance the social objectives formulated by organizations (e.g., implementation of rehabilitation programs, summer camps for children), or where the economic activity itself constitutes a means of achieving the social objective (e.g., offering employment opportunities with a "therapeutic" aim (6), selling handcrafted products made by people with disabilities). This dual orientation largely aligns with the ideas of Nalyvaiko et al. (2021) on how these two interests can converge, either by reinvesting profits in the social objective or by considering the target group as consumers rather than beneficiaries.

In the case of the "social motivations" factor group, the most frequent category is job creation. In many places, companies specifically want to provide livelihoods for the disadvantaged groups they target and contribute, through employment, to making members of these groups feel useful again (3). This commitment to the target group is well illustrated by the following three interview excerpts: "a bit like a sanatorium, that's why we're moving more slowly" (5), "it's more therapeutic work than a factory or a business in the classical sense" (6), "spiritually good, but technically inept, he should be able to find a job" (8). Furthermore, a good work environment is important to our respondents, so that people enjoy working for them ("It is extremely important that those who work for us feel extremely good." Case 2). Several respondents also indicated that there is an optimal size beyond which they do not wish to expand. This can be a product-oriented approach, meaning a refusal to be "just another product" (9), or a more human-centered approach: "I don't want a factory, but I want to know who I'm working with" (6). According to Györi (2012), small size also has a smaller environmental impact, a problem that can be addressed through networking or by leading by example, in order to have a greater impact. Furthermore, more specific objectives motivate entrepreneurs, such as community development ("Bringing disadvantaged youth together in a community," case 5; "Coming together and helping each other," case 8) or raising awareness and promoting the inclusion of a disadvantaged target group, for example, through "empathy therapy" (4), where adults with disabilities lead creative activities with children. It is among entrepreneurs managing non-profit organizations, according to the classification of Defourny and Nyssens (2017), that we observe the greatest diversity of social motivations.

❖ Personal motivations

The last major group of motivating factors, namely creating and managing a business out of personal motivation, can be usefully divided into two parts for our purposes, depending on whether the motivation aims at the well-being of the individual or that of the community.

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Among the most typical motivations focused on the well-being of the individual is the need to secure one's own livelihood:

"The goal is to support many families." (Case 12)

"But also to have a source of income for myself." (Case 13)

Added to this is the enjoyment derived from the activity:

"It's important for me to do what I love." (Case 10)

Some were motivated by previous negative experiences in the private sector to create a social enterprise:

"If I wasn't smiling, my boss would call me and ask what was wrong." I was explaining it to him, and he told me to go back and smile and stop refusing." (Case 1).

While others were motivated by a personal commitment to addressing the social problem, as could be inferred from the reflections of Crucke and Decramer (2016):

"...And there are many patients among us who are in vain, look at my degree, my qualifications, etc. Many of us are in this situation ; we can't find work." (Case 22).

Several interviewees also stated that it is rewarding to do good, and that this is why they became social entrepreneurs :

"It would be demagoguery to say that it fills people with a sense of well-being, but it's possible." (Case 17).

For three people interviewed, accumulating personal wealth is not a goal :

"I'm lucky because I don't drive as big a car or live in as big a house as some people, but I'm still happy to love what I do." (Case 20)

"When we hired people back then, it was essential that it be a company like ours ; it wasn't about getting rich, but about their success, their motivation, and the long-term viability of the place." (Case 7)

Among personal motivations, the most frequent for the well-being of the community was commitment to a social cause :

"For example, I do as much volunteer work as if I were paid, but you can't expect that of everyone, or even anyone." (Case 3)

In addition, the desire to help others also emerged:

"I'm not an angel either, I just want to be one. I want to help everyone." (Case 15)

Furthermore, although it was only mentioned by interviewee #12, this individual spoke with great passion about their desire to lead by example by successfully completing an app project, creating something concrete and not just filling out forms. From the perspective of the social entrepreneur categories defined by Defourny and Nyssens (2022), we observed no particular trends in the dimensions of personal motivation.

Indeed, the identified groups of factors appear predominantly together among the entrepreneurs studied, suggesting that their simultaneous presence is likely necessary for the creation and management of a social enterprise. Of the four groups of factors, "external financial motivation" is the most easily influenced by policymakers, who can thus encourage the creation of social enterprises.

Furthermore, "external financial motivation" appears to be a Tunisian specificity. However, compassion, highlighted by Satar (2025) as an important prosocial emotion for social entrepreneurs, also emerged among several of them in Tunisia. For some, it manifested as aid provided to a disadvantaged group to which they did not belong (1, 9, 18, and 2), while for others, it translated into greater sensitivity to environmental issues that only affect society in the long term (3, 8, 14, and 19).

3.3. Motivational factor groups identified in light of needs theory

Each element belonging to the four main groups of motivational factors described above was examined according to McClelland's acquired needs theory to determine whether motivation, driven by one need rather than another, was more characteristic of a given group of factors. The analysis revealed motivational categories aimed at simultaneously satisfying multiple needs.

We also opted for McClelland's theory because entrepreneurs are generally characterized by a strong drive for success (Kibler et al., 2019). Furthermore, we hypothesized that, given the prosocial motivations characteristic of social entrepreneurs (Quaye et al., 2024 ; Redko, 2024 ; Marek et al., 2023 ; Kimura et al., 2019 ; Lysaght et al., 2018; Kim & Lim, 2017; Brännback & Carsrud, 2015), relational motivation might also be more predominant, and that power motivation would typically emerge at the fourth stage of maturity.

Our suspicions were confirmed when we examined the categories within each factor group in light of needs theory. Regarding the factors related to "social motivations," relational motivation was predominant (e.g., a positive work environment, community development, service to the target group). We also observed, to a lesser extent, performance motivation (e.g., achieving optimal size, expanding social objectives) and power motivation (e.g., raising awareness, community development). Examples of relational motivation also appeared in the "community well-being" segment of "personal motivations" (e.g., helping others, making others happy). In the mixed categories, power motivation (e.g., leading by example, helping others) and performance motivation (e.g., leading by example) were also present. It is clear that motivations addressing the need for connection were present in both cases where the objective was to create a social benefit based on collectivist values that transcend the individual.

In contrast, all categories falling under "external financial motivation" and "entrepreneurial motivation" aim to satisfy the need for performance (e.g., innovation, financial autonomy of the company, growth, and expansion). The "individual well-being" component

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of "personal motivations" also predominantly reinforces performance motivation (e.g., meeting a challenge, providing for oneself, or creating something), but factors aimed at satisfying the need for power (e.g., recognition from experts) and the need for connection (e.g., the satisfaction of acting for the common good) are also observed.

It follows from the above that, in addition to the strong performance motivation that generally characterizes entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs also exhibit a significant connection motivation, likely due to their more pronounced prosocial motivations and collectivist values. Furthermore, it can be observed that the factors and categories of motivation that address the emerging need for power include both motivations that reinforce an individual's power over others, belonging to the third stage of maturity (e.g., recognition from experts), and power motivations that serve others according to principles and values that transcend the individual, according to the fourth stage of power (e.g., raising awareness, helping others).

CONCLUSION

The main objective of our research was to explore and better understand the motivations that drive individuals to create and manage a social enterprise. Our study fills a gap in our country, as few results have been published to date on the motivations of social entrepreneurs. On the one hand, our research highlights the diversity of the (national) social entrepreneurship sector. On the other hand, we have identified a model describing the motivations of social entrepreneurs, structured around four groups of factors: external financial motivation, entrepreneurial motivations, social motivations, and the two components of personal motivations.

Our results suggest that the combined presence of these different groups of motivational factors is necessary for the creation and management of a social enterprise. Finally, by comparing the motivational structure obtained with previous research on the motivations of social entrepreneurs and McClelland's theory of motivation, we concluded that social entrepreneurs, due to their prosocial motivations and collectivist values, exhibit higher levels of maturity in relational and power motivation, in addition to the high level of achievement motivation characteristic of traditional entrepreneurs.

Our model can serve as the basis for a broader empirical theory describing the motivations of national social enterprises, or even for quantitative operationalization (e.g., a questionnaire). Furthermore, this theory can help policymakers better understand the motivations of social entrepreneurs and, consequently, to more effectively encourage social entrepreneurship (e.g., by proposing incentives within future support programs).

The main limitation of our research lies in its qualitative nature : the small sample size does not allow us to generalize our results to all social enterprises. Further research is therefore needed to better understand the diversity and motivations of Tunisian social enterprises.

Furthermore, research on this topic could explore several interesting avenues. Firstly, do the motivations of social entrepreneurs differ according to their stage of development?

Secondly, is there a difference depending on whether a set of motivational factors can be considered externally or internally regulated? Moreover, based on interviews conducted with experts and social entrepreneurs, examining the conflicts (tensions) between dual motivations and objectives (economic and social) could constitute a promising area of research.

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