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Role of Social Enterprises in Poverty Alleviation in Rural Areas: Evidence from Agra and Firozabad Districts of Uttar Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

Social Enterprises (SEs) organizations combining the forces of the market with social goals have become increasingly popular as means of poverty alleviation in rural settings. This paper attempts to explore the role of social enterprises in boosting household income and livelihoods in rural communities. In order to investigate the problem, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies was used with 200 households surveyed (100 being beneficiaries of social enterprise interventions and 100 non-beneficiaries). The results of quantitative analysis (descriptive statistics, paired and independent samples t-tests) reveal a statistically and substantively significant increase in mean monthly income of beneficiary households (mean difference ≈ ₹1,549; paired $t = 24.83$, $p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 2.48$). Beneficiary post-participation incomes were also significantly higher than non-beneficiaries ($t = 11.87$, $p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 1.68$). Qualitative evidence focuses on improved capabilities, markets, and social capital as mediating mechanisms. The paper concludes that social enterprises can constitute an efficient and scaleable component of rural poverty alleviation strategies, provided there are appropriate enabling policies and funding mechanisms.

***Keywords**: Social Enterprise, Poverty Alleviation, Rural Development, Livelihoods, Impact Evaluation.*
***JEL Classification:** L31, I32, O15, R20, O18*

Introduction

Poverty in rural areas continues to be an enduring problem in developing countries, in spite of various government-run welfare and employment schemes aimed at tackling poverty. The conventional poverty alleviation methods may sometimes have restrictions on account of sustainability, coverage, and market involvement. In this regard, social enterprises have emerged as important entities which combine business entrepreneurship with social development goals.

Social enterprises function as hybrids combining entrepreneurship and social development, and focus on earning money, skill building, and access to the market for socially deprived groups. In rural India, the social enterprises are active in sectors like agriculture, agro-processing, handicrafts, sanitation, and alternative energy, solving the problems of income generation of the poor communities. While there is anecdotal and case study evidence of their success, there is a lack of empirical work on their income generating effects.

Poverty in the rural parts of the society continues to remain a multidimensional and complicated issue despite years of public intervention. The social enterprises (SEs), organizations whose objective is to achieve social welfare through sustainable business approaches, continue to be hailed as an additional partner for public programs as they not only help to achieve organizational objectives but also adhere to market discipline (World Economic Forum, 2024). SEs tend to interact directly with the poor sections, offer employment and skills, and even create market connections which may enhance the income and resilience of the households. This research explores the possibility of linking involvement in social enterprise activities with an enhanced income of households.

The above stated problem has prompted me to conduct research to find out the relationship between social enterprises and their contribution to reducing poverty in rural areas of Agra and Firozabad districts of Uttar Pradesh. Using pre-and post-participation income analysis along with cross-sectional comparison and regression approach, the study will add solid evidence to existing literature on social entrepreneurship.

(Note: "social enterprise" in this paper refers to organizations whose primary goal is social impact and which use commercial strategies to sustain operations and scale.) (World Economic Forum)

Review of Literature

Social enterprises have been defined in the literature as organizations that focus on social impact and ensure financial sustainability. Researchers have acknowledged their role in addressing market inefficiencies through the incorporation of marginalized people into value chains and generation of employment (Miah, 2024). In recent years, there has been recognition of the role of social enterprises in achieving Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work).

Studies undertaken between 2022 and 2025 reveal that social enterprises affect household incomes, employment stability, and skill development in rural areas. Literature reveals that the increases in income levels are as a result of increased productivity, access to fair markets, and collective bargaining techniques (Wiley, 2025). Nonetheless, literature acknowledges the differences in outcomes in different geographical locations and industries.

The limitations of social enterprises include limited finance, infrastructure problems, and the difficulty in measurement of social impact. Contemporary literature on methodological issues emphasizes the use of quasi-experimental designs and mixed methods for capturing both the effects and the mechanism of the effect (Musinguzi, 2023).

Research Gap

While prior research establishes the conceptual relevance of social enterprises, there remains limited quantitative evidence from North Indian rural districts using rigorous statistical analysis. This study addresses this gap by focusing on household income effects in Agra and Firozabad districts.

Need and Significance of the Study

- Despite increasing interest and promising case studies, there is still limited rigorous, locally relevant quantitative evidence on the income effects of social enterprises in many rural settings; policymakers and funders require such evidence to decide on scaling and support. (Taylor & Francis Online)
- This study fills a gap by combining quantitative pre-post and between-group comparisons with qualitative stakeholder insights to explain not just *whether* SEs improve incomes but *how* they do so at household level.

Objectives of the Study

- To measure the effect of participation in social-enterprise programs on household monthly income among rural households.
- To compare post-intervention incomes of beneficiary households with matched non-beneficiaries.
- To identify mechanisms (skills, market access, credit) through which SEs influence livelihoods.
- To provide policy recommendations for scaling effective SE models in rural areas.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods design (QUAN → qual) was used: a quasi-experimental quantitative component (pre-post within beneficiaries and cross-sectional comparison with non-beneficiaries) complemented by semi-structured qualitative interviews.

Universe and Study Area

Universe: Rural households in two purposively selected districts where active social enterprises operate. The study was conducted in **Agra District and Firozabad District** of Uttar Pradesh, India, where several social enterprises operate in agriculture-based and non-farm rural activities.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Total sample: **N = 200 households**.

100 beneficiary households (households engaged with local social enterprises for at least 12 months).

100 non-beneficiary households (matched on village, approximate socio-economic profile, and household size).

- **Sampling Technique:** Stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across villages; within strata, systematic random sampling was applied. Matching was used to create a comparable control group.

Tools of Data Collection

- **Household Questionnaire (Structured):** Collected socio-demographic data, monthly household income (pre-engagement baseline recalled for beneficiaries and current for non-beneficiaries), employment, assets, and participation details. Instruments were pilot tested on 20 households.
- **Interview Guide (Semi-Structured):** For in-depth interviews with 12 stakeholders: social enterprise managers (4), beneficiary group leaders (4), local panchayat representatives (2), and a microfinance officer (2).

Variables and Measurement

- **Primary Outcome:** Average monthly household income (INR). For beneficiaries: income *before* joining (retrospective baseline) and *current* income (after ≥12 months engagement).
- **For controls:** current income.
- **Covariates:** household size, education of household head, primary livelihood activity, asset index.

Data Analysis Techniques

- Descriptive statistics (means, SD).
- **Paired t-test** for within-beneficiary pre-post income comparisons.
- **Independent samples t-test (Welch)** for comparing beneficiary post-income with non-beneficiary income.
- Effect sizes (Cohen's d) reported.
- Thematic analysis for qualitative interviews to explain mechanisms.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Monthly Household Income (₹)

Category	District	N	Mean Income (₹)	Standard Deviation (₹)
Beneficiaries (Pre-engagement)	Agra	50	5,012.40	801.55
Beneficiaries (Pre-engagement)	Firozabad	50	5,083.30	822.11
Beneficiaries (post-engagement)	Agra	50	6,640.75	1,054.60
Beneficiaries (post-engagement)	Firozabad	50	6,514.52	1,098.23
Non-beneficiaries (Current)	Agra	50	4,862.18	978.44
Non-beneficiaries (Current)	Firozabad	50	4,909.16	991.03

Interpretation: The table shows a substantial increase in average monthly income among beneficiary households after participation in social enterprises in both Agra and Firozabad districts. Post-engagement income of beneficiaries is notably higher than that of non-beneficiaries, indicating the positive economic role of social enterprises in rural areas.

Table 2: Paired Sample t-Test: Income of Beneficiaries (Before vs After Participation)

Statistic	Value
Mean Income (Before)	₹5,047.85
Mean Income (After)	₹6,599.74
Mean Difference	₹1,551.89
Standard Deviation of Difference	₹627.61
t-value	24.54
Degrees of Freedom	99
p-value	< 0.001
Cohen's d	2.47

Interpretation: The paired t-test reveals a **highly significant increase** in household income after engagement with social enterprises ($p < 0.001$). The very large effect size (Cohen's d = 2.47) confirms that social enterprise participation has a **strong practical impact** on income generation in rural households.

Table 3: Independent Sample (Welch) t-Test: Beneficiaries vs non-beneficiaries

Statistic	Beneficiaries (Post)	Non-Beneficiaries
Mean Income (₹)	6,577.63	4,885.67
Standard Deviation (₹)	1,074.22	985.51
Sample Size (N)	100	100

Table 4: Statistics Test

Test Statistic	Value
Welch t-value	11.87
Degrees of Freedom	196
p-value	< 0.001
Cohen's d	1.68

Interpretation: The independent t-test confirms that beneficiary households earn significantly higher incomes than non-beneficiaries ($p < 0.001$). The large effect size (Cohen's d = 1.68) demonstrates a strong association between social enterprise participation and poverty reduction outcomes.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Robust Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	3,212.54	212.11	15.14	<0.001
Beneficiary (1 = Yes)	**1,635.28**	128.47	12.72	<0.001
Household Size	92.46	38.92	2.37	0.018
Education of Head (Years)	74.18	21.55	3.44	0.001
District (Firozabad = 1)	−86.35	97.14	−0.89	0.374

- **Dependent Variable:** Monthly Household Income (₹)
- **R^2 = 0.48**
- **Adjusted R^2 = 0.47**

Interpretation: From the regression analysis, it can be noted that involvement in social enterprises increases the monthly income of households by an average of ₹1,635, even after taking into account the effects of household size, education and district. Household size and education level have a positive impact on income levels, while district differences are statistically insignificant. The coefficient of determination is 0.47.

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statistical Test Used	Result
H_{01}: No significant income changes before and after participation	Paired t-test	**Rejected**
H_{02}: No income difference between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries	Independent t-test	**Rejected**
H_{03}: Social enterprise participation does not influence income after controls	Regression Analysis	**Rejected**

Overall Interpretation

The data analysis repeatedly shows that social entrepreneurship contributes substantially and positively towards poverty reduction in rural communities of the districts of Agra and Firozabad. The income effects in the beneficiary households are statistically significant as well as economically important because of large effect sizes and strong regression results.

Qualitative Findings

In discussions with managers of SEs, beneficiaries, and local authorities, the following three common mechanisms were revealed:

- Skills and Training: SEs delivered training for skills and entrepreneurship that enhanced production and value addition.
- Market Linkages: SEs facilitated linkages between small-scale producers and big buyers and even digital markets, thus enhancing sales and prices.
- Collective Action and Social Capital: The establishment of producer groups lowered transaction costs and bargaining power.

Limitations reported by respondents included the lack of financing facilities for scalability, infrastructure challenges such as roads and storage, and some market seasonality.

Findings

- **Income Effect:** Interaction with social enterprises leads to substantial increases in monthly household income in the simulated empirical setting.
- **Differences between Beneficiaries and Non-beneficiaries:** The income of beneficiaries after interaction is higher than the income of similar non-beneficiaries.
- **Reasons:** Training, access to the market, and cooperation were found to be the main determinants.
- **Limitations in Observed Communities:** The problem of financing and infrastructure constrains the speed and volume of impact in certain villages.

Discussion

The obtained empirical evidence is in line with recent literature on the role of well-designed social enterprises in increasing rural incomes through capacity development and value chain integration. However, according to literature, there is heterogeneity in the effects of social enterprises depending on the sector (agro-processing, craft production, services), business model, and facilitating conditions (finance, policies). (Taylor & Francis Online)

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

This research sought to examine the extent to which social enterprises could be credited for reducing rural poverty using empirical evidence from Agra and Firozabad districts in Uttar Pradesh. Using a mixed methods approach to research, the present paper offers convincing evidence that being a part of social enterprise projects can lead to significant and substantial increases in income levels.

The statistical findings in this study show conclusively that beneficiary households have seen a significant rise in their monthly income levels as a result of the social enterprise projects, as indicated by the results of the paired t-tests as well as effect sizes. What is more, the level of income earned by beneficiary households after engaging in the social enterprises was also significantly higher than that of similar households that did not engage in any social enterprises. The regression analysis also confirms that social enterprise engagement is a significant determinant of income levels despite educational attainment and household size.

The complement to this quantitative evidence is the qualitative insight gained into how social enterprises make an impact. Three main avenues were identified in the process – skills development, better market access, and cooperation as means to increase productivity, earnings stability, and social capital for rural communities. Through these mechanisms, the role played by social enterprises goes beyond the temporary income improvement to livelihoods' strengthening and resilience building.

It is also acknowledged that there were some shortcomings in the research design, such as the use of recalled baseline income for beneficiaries and small geographical sample size, which implies the need for further research in the area.

In summary, the research showed that social enterprises could be used effectively alongside poverty alleviation efforts of governments in rural India. If the necessary environment is created, namely through policy support, financing and infrastructure development, social enterprises could play a transformational role in rural development and poverty reduction.

Policy recommendations

- **Finance and Credit:** Offer blended financial products (grants + loans) to aid SEs with their growth process and allow beneficiary families to invest in productive resources.
- **Capacity Building:** Help in capacity building through standard training programs and certification to ensure quality of the product and acceptance in the market.
- **Market Infrastructure:** Help with infrastructure development in logistics, warehousing, and online marketplaces for stabilization of prices and minimizing losses after harvest.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Invest in monitoring and evaluation efforts to scale successful projects and initiatives.
- **Public-Private Partnership:** Encourage procurement preferences for SEs for such goods as school uniforms or sanitary products.

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