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Social Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Sustainable Social Development: A Conceptual Synthesis and Social Work Perspective on Community-Led Interventions

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative model for addressing persistent social problems such as poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity, and social exclusion. However, its integration into professional social work practice remains underrepresented in both the academic literature and field education. This paper explores the intersection of social entrepreneurship and social development through a social work lens, arguing that entrepreneurial principles, when grounded in ethical, participatory, and empowerment-based frameworks, can enhance sustainable community-led change. Drawing on a systematic review of 54 interdisciplinary sources, the paper proposes a conceptual model: the Social Work–Social Entrepreneurship (SWSE) Integration Framework. Key findings indicate that social work's core values of social justice, self-determination, and respect for human relationships complement entrepreneurial strategies such as innovation, resource leveraging, and financial sustainability. Nevertheless, significant challenges persist, including role conflict, mission drift, inadequate preservice training, and tensions between market logic and care ethics. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for social work education, policy, and practice, ultimately positioning social entrepreneurship as a legitimate and valuable method within macro social work. Future research directions and limitations are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global landscape of social problems is marked by widening economic inequality, environmental degradation, affordable housing crises, inadequate mental health services, and persistent racial and gender-based marginalization. Traditional welfare-state models, while essential, have shown diminishing capacity to address these challenges alone, particularly in contexts of austerity and shrinking public budgets (Bornstein, 2007; Dees, 2018). Social work, as a profession historically rooted in both charitable assistance and structural social reform, is uniquely positioned to engage with innovative, entrepreneurial approaches to development (Ferguson, 2017). Yet, despite this historic alignment, social work education and practice have disproportionately emphasized clinical or casework methods, leaving macro-level interventions such as community economic development, social enterprise startup, and impact investing underutilized (Austin *et al.*, 2016; Reisch, 2019). This micro-oriented bias has been documented for decades, with fewer than ten percent of Master of Social Work graduates entering macro practice roles (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014), a trend that limits the profession's ability to influence structural determinants of well-being. Meanwhile, social entrepreneurship has gained substantial traction globally as a mechanism for achieving sustainable social development, defined by the United Nations as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 2015, p. 3). Social entrepreneurs identify market or systemic failures, such as lack of access to clean water, dignified work for people with disabilities, or affordable childcare, and design self-sustaining ventures that prioritize social impact over financial return (Martin & Osberg, 2015; Santos, 2012). Examples range from Grameen Bank's microfinance model in Bangladesh to community-owned renewable energy cooperatives in Europe. However, critics warn that an uncritical adoption of business logic can undermine core social work ethics, leading to mission drift, exploitation of vulnerable populations, or a narrow focus on cost recovery at the expense of client dignity (Dey & Steyaert, 2016; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2014).

This paper addresses a critical gap in the literature: How can social work practitioners and scholars integrate social entrepreneurship into their professional repertoire without compromising foundational values? The absence of a clear, ethics-grounded framework has left many social workers ambivalent or resistant to entrepreneurial methods, even when those methods could generate sustainable resources for client communities. Through a comprehensive review of 54 interdisciplinary references spanning social work, business ethics, development studies, and nonprofit management, The paper aims to achieve four objectives. First, it traces the conceptual evolution of social entrepreneurship in relation to social development theory, highlighting historical precedents within social work. Second, it identifies areas of synergy and tension between social entrepreneurship and core social work values. Third, it proposes an integrative, actionable framework, the Social Work–Social Entrepreneurship (SWSE) Integration Framework, that

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operationalizes ethical entrepreneurial practice. Fourth, it offers concrete recommendations for social work education, policy, and research to support the responsible adoption of social entrepreneurship as a macro practice method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Development Theory and Social Work

Social development theory, as articulated by Midgley (2014) and others, emphasizes structural change, participatory governance, and the integration of economic improvement with social well-being. Unlike residual welfare models that focus on remedial assistance, social development views social and economic goals as mutually reinforcing and often inseparable (Pawar, 2019). For example, a community that creates a worker-owned cooperative addresses both income poverty (economic goal) and social isolation (social goal) simultaneously. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have further mainstreamed this perspective, explicitly linking poverty reduction (SDG 1), decent work (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) with environmental sustainability (UN, 2015). Social work's global definition, as articulated by the International Federation of Social Workers, explicitly includes "social change and development" as core purposes of the profession (IFSW, 2014). Yet empirical studies consistently show that social work education and licensing favor clinical and therapeutic competencies over community economic practice (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). This gap represents both a weakness and an opportunity: by reclaiming its developmental roots, social work can re-engage with entrepreneurial strategies that produce tangible, lasting improvements in material conditions.

Defining Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship lacks a single, universally accepted definition, which has led to conceptual confusion but also creative plurality (Bacq & Janssen, 2011). Dees (2018) offers one of the most cited formulations: social entrepreneurship involves "adopting a mission to create and sustain social value, not just private value" and requires the discipline of the market alongside the passion of a social mission. Key characteristics identified across the literature include innovation (developing new solutions to old problems), opportunity recognition (seeing resources where others see obstacles), resource bricolage (combining available assets creatively), and accountability to multiple stakeholders, including beneficiaries, funders, and employees (Austin *et al.*, 2016; Mair & Martí, 2019). Some scholars distinguish between non-profit social enterprises (which reinvest all surplus into mission) and for-profit social businesses (which may distribute limited dividends to impact investors) (Yunus, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, social entrepreneurship encompasses any venture, whether legally structured as a nonprofit, cooperative, low-profit limited liability company (L3C), or B Corporation, where social impact is primary and financial sustainability is a means to an end, not an end in itself (Santos, 2012). This broad definition allows social workers to engage with multiple legal forms depending on local context and funding availability.

Historical Overlaps: Settlement Houses and Cooperatives

Contemporary social entrepreneurship is often portrayed as a novel phenomenon, but early social work history reveals robust entrepreneurial precedents. Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, founded in 1889, combined direct service provision (nursery, kindergarten, legal aid), social advocacy (labor rights, women's suffrage), and income-generating activities such as a public bathhouse and a cooperative boarding house (Knight, 2015). Addams did not separate "business" from "social mission"; rather, she understood that financial sustainability enabled long-term advocacy. Similarly, cooperative movements in the Global South, including credit unions, agricultural co-ops, and housing co-ops, were often supported by social workers who recognized that collective ownership empowered marginalized groups more effectively than charitable handouts (Birchall, 2013). These historical precedents suggest that social entrepreneurship is less a departure from social work tradition than a reinvention of settlement house and cooperative methods adapted to twenty-first-century market conditions (Ferguson, 2017). Recognizing this lineage can reduce resistance among social workers who fear that entrepreneurship represents an abandonment of core values.

Synergies with Social Work Values

Several authors have argued that social entrepreneurship aligns positively with core social work values when implemented ethically. Self-determination, the principle that individuals and communities should be agents of their own change, is operationalized in social enterprises that give beneficiaries voting power or ownership stakes (Mendes, 2019). Social justice, the commitment to addressing structural inequalities, is advanced when social enterprises hire people facing systemic barriers, such as formerly incarcerated individuals, refugees, or persons with disabilities (Mulroy, 2018). For example, a community-based social enterprise that employs returning citizens at a living wage reduces recidivism rates while challenging discriminatory hiring practices (Graebner, 2020). Furthermore, empowerment evaluation tools, such as participatory social return on investment (SROI) analysis, allow social entrepreneurs to track psychosocial outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, social support) alongside financial metrics, ensuring that the enterprise serves human development goals (Patton, 2018). The concept of "blended value" (Emerson, 2019) explicitly rejects the false dichotomy between economic and social returns, a position entirely consistent with social development theory (Midgley, 2014).

Tensions and Criticisms

Conversely, a robust critical literature warns that market mechanisms can deepen inequality if unregulated or applied without reflexivity. Eikenberry and Kluver (2014) argue that the marketization of the nonprofit sector encourages organizations to prioritize wealthy donors or fee-for-service clients over the most marginalized, thereby undermining the redistributive aims of social work. Social workers may face acute role conflict when asked to prioritize cost-recovery over client care; for instance, a social enterprise that provides mental health services might be pressured to discharge clients who cannot pay, violating the profession's commitment to universal access (Dey & Steyaert, 2016). "Mission drift", the gradual, often unnoticed shift toward profit-generating activities that stray from original social goals, has been documented across multiple fields, including microfinance institutions that moved from serving the poorest to lending to better-off clients, and fair trade enterprises that adopted conventional supply chain practices to remain competitive (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2018; Jones, 2019). Additionally, social entrepreneurship training in social work programs remains rare; a survey of accredited MSW programs found that fewer than 15% offered any course on social enterprise or community economic development, leaving practitioners ill-equipped to write business plans, analyze markets, or conduct cost-benefit analyses (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2019). This training gap increases the risk of well-intentioned but unsustainable or even harmful ventures.

Empirical Evidence on Effectiveness

Despite the theoretical debates, a growing body of empirical research has examined whether social entrepreneurship actually produces superior social development outcomes compared to traditional service delivery. Findings are mixed but generally promising. A randomized control trial conducted in rural Uganda randomly assigned youth to either a social entrepreneurship training program (including seed funding for small enterprises) or a standard vocational skills program. After 24 months, the social entrepreneurship group showed a 34% higher increase in household savings and a 41% higher increase in community participation (measured as attendance at village meetings and mutual aid activities) (Kasirye, 2020). Longitudinal research in the United Kingdom followed community land trusts (CLTs) over five years and found that CLT members experienced a 28% reduction in housing insecurity, defined as risk of eviction or unaffordable rent increases, compared to a matched control group in traditional rental housing (Lloyd, 2021). However, a meta-analysis of 47 social enterprise evaluations concluded that many studies suffer from weak research designs (lack of control groups, short follow-up periods, and reliance on self-reported outcomes) and called for more rigorous, long-term, mixed-methods research (Short *et al.*, 2017). In particular, there is a scarcity of studies that isolate the effect of the "entrepreneurial" component versus the effect of simply having a job or income support.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper employs a conceptual synthesis approach (Jaakkola, 2020), which is appropriate for integrating disparate streams of literature to develop new theoretical frameworks and practical guidelines. Unlike a systematic review focused solely on effect sizes, conceptual synthesis prioritizes the identification of themes, tensions, and integrative propositions. The review draws on 54 peer-reviewed and authoritative sources published between 2000 and 2025. Databases searched included Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest Social Work Abstracts, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined Boolean operators: ("social entrepreneurship" OR "social enterprise" OR "social business") AND ("social work" OR "social development" OR "community practice" OR "macro social work" OR "community organizing"). Additional hand searching of reference lists from key articles (e.g., Austin *et al.*, 2016; Mair & Martí, 2019) was conducted to identify relevant book chapters and grey literature from international organizations such as the ILO and UN.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) English-language publication; (2) peer-reviewed journal article, book, or book chapter from an academic press; (3) explicit focus on social work, social development, or community practice; (4) publication date between 2000 and 2025 to ensure contemporary relevance while allowing foundational older works (e.g., Midgley, 2014). Exclusion criteria were: (1) purely business or economics studies without any reference to social outcomes, social mission, or vulnerable populations; (2) opinion pieces without scholarly grounding; (3) studies focused exclusively on individual psychological entrepreneurship (e.g., "personal initiative") without a social mission component.

After removing duplicates, 215 abstracts were screened, yielding 89 full-text articles assessed for eligibility, from which 54 were included in the final synthesis. A thematic analysis, following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2019), was conducted by the author. Phase 1 involved familiarization with all 54 sources. Phase 2 generated initial codes (e.g., "values conflict," "governance models," "funding challenges"). Phase 3 grouped codes into candidate themes. Phase 4 reviewed themes against the coded data and the full texts. Phase 5 defined and named four major themes: (1) values alignment (how social entrepreneurship expresses social work ethics), (2) ethical tensions (mission drift, role conflict, market logics), (3) training gaps (lack of business competencies in social work curricula), and (4) contextual factors for success (governance structures, legal forms, community ownership). Phase 6 produced the final written analysis represented in Sections 4 and 5.

Findings and Discussion

The SWSE Integration Framework

Based on the thematic synthesis of 54 sources, the paper proposes the Social Work–Social Entrepreneurship

(SWSE) Integration Framework, a six-component model designed to guide ethical, effective practice. The framework addresses the central question: How can a social worker start or manage a social enterprise without betraying professional values?

Component 1: Social Mission Primacy. The enterprise must articulate a specific, measurable social or environmental goal that takes precedence over profit generation. Mission metrics should be defined in consultation with beneficiaries and tracked regularly. Cornwall and Gaventa (2018) refer to this as "constitutional mission protection," where governing documents legally require that social impact be prioritized in any decision, including dissolution of the enterprise.

Component 2: Participatory Governance. Beneficiaries (e.g., clients, residents, workers) must have meaningful decision-making power, typically through voting seats on the board of directors and representation on any advisory committees. Pawar (2019) argues that participatory governance is the single most effective safeguard against mission drift because beneficiaries have direct self-interest in maintaining social goals.

Component 3: Dual Accountability. Practitioners and managers report regularly on two parallel sets of outcomes: social/wellbeing outcomes (e.g., improvements in mental health, housing stability, employment quality) and financial sustainability indicators (e.g., profit margin, liquidity ratio, cost recovery). Patton's (2018) utilization-focused evaluation framework provides tools such as participatory dashboards where community members help interpret both types of data.

Component 4: Ethical Bricolage. Social enterprises often operate with scarce resources, leading to "bricolage", creatively combining available assets. However, ethical bricolage requires that resource re-use does not exploit labor, natural resources, or community goodwill. For instance, using discounted or donated goods is ethical, but pressuring volunteers to perform skilled labor for free in place of paid staff is not (Mair & Martí, 2019). Fair wages, environmental sustainability, and transparency in sourcing are non-negotiable.

Component 5: Trauma-Informed Scaling. Growth is often a goal of social entrepreneurship, but rapid scaling can retraumatize vulnerable participants if it leads to loss of personal relationships, increased bureaucracy, or pressure to produce. Knight (2015) draws on settlement house history to argue for "slow scaling": expanding only when infrastructure, staffing, and community oversight are adequate to maintain quality and dignity. The framework includes a scaling-readiness assessment tool.

Component 6: Reflective Adaptation. Regular ethics audits and mission check-ins should be conducted, at least annually, by an external advisory board that includes community members, social work ethicists, and financial advisors. Jones (2019) found that enterprises conducting such audits were 73% less likely to experience severe mission drift than those relying solely on internal review.

Case Illustration: The Women's Weaving Co-op

To illustrate the SWSE framework in action, the paper presents a hypothetical but empirically grounded case based on composite experiences reported in Mendoza (2020) and similar studies. A licensed social worker in rural Guatemala, let us call her Elena, noticed that women survivors of domestic violence in her community had weaving skills but no safe, consistent income. Charitable donations provided temporary relief but did not address long-term economic dependence. Drawing on training in macro social work and a short course in social entrepreneurship, Elena facilitated the formation of the Women's Weaving Co-op.

Implementing Social Mission Primacy, the co-op's bylaws state that "the primary purpose is emotional and economic healing of survivors; profit is secondary." Participatory Governance is achieved through a board of seven members, five of whom are weavers themselves, who vote on all major decisions, including product pricing, work schedules, and acceptance of new members. Dual Accountability is operationalized through monthly wellbeing surveys (using a validated Spanish-language scale for depression and anxiety) alongside standard profit-and-loss statements. Ethical Bricolage is exemplified by using donated looms and recycled threads where possible, but paying all weavers at least 150% of the local minimum wage. Trauma-Informed Scaling means that when a large international retailer offered a bulk order requiring 60-hour work weeks, the board declined, instead negotiating a smaller order with extended deadlines and on-site childcare. Reflective Adaptation occurs via a quarterly ethics circle facilitated by a local university social work department.

After three years, the co-op reported a 60% reduction in depression scores among active members and a 90% rate of economic independence (no longer requiring any government or charitable assistance). This case is not meant to claim that social entrepreneurship is easy or always successful, but rather to demonstrate how the SWSE framework translates abstract principles into concrete decisions.

Ethical Dilemmas Resolved via the Framework

The SWSE framework is designed to help social workers navigate common ethical dilemmas. Consider a recurring dilemma in social enterprise literature (Dey & Steyaert, 2016; Weerawardena & Mort, 2021): A social enterprise that employs adults with intellectual disabilities receives a large contract from a corporate client. The contract would double revenue, ensuring long-term financial sustainability. However, it requires a 25% increase in weekly working hours and a faster production pace. Some workers report feeling stressed and rushed. Traditional business logic might prioritize the contract as a growth opportunity. However, applying the SWSE framework, the enterprise would: (1) consult participatory governance (worker-owners vote); (2) conduct a trauma-informed assessment of stress impacts; (3) if the contract is accepted, require that overtime pay be triple the base rate, that no worker be required to work more than 35 hours per week, and that an additional support staff be hired to provide breaks and accommodations. If the corporate client refuses these conditions, the enterprise declines the contract, consistent with Social Mission Primacy. This approach prevents the exploitation that critics of social entrepreneurship rightly fear (Spear, 2016).

Implications for Social Work Practice, Education, and Policy

Implications for Social Work Practice

At the practice level, social workers should be trained to perform feasibility studies for social enterprises, including market analysis, stakeholder mapping, and break-even analysis. Traditional clinical assessment skills can be adapted to assess community assets and social needs through methods such as participatory asset mapping and community visioning (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2019). Social workers in agencies should advocate for the creation of "social intrapreneurship" roles, positions within existing human service organizations that are explicitly tasked with developing new revenue-generating services that also advance mission. For example, a homeless shelter could launch a social enterprise providing janitorial services using residents as paid staff, with surplus reinvested into housing vouchers (Austin *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, social workers in private practice may consider forming professional cooperatives that share administrative costs and provide sliding-scale services, thereby expanding access to care.

Implications for Social Work Education

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) currently emphasize micro and mezzo competencies, with macro practice often relegated to an elective track (CSWE, 2022). The paper recommends that CSWE revise EPAS competency 8 ("Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities") to explicitly include social entrepreneurship as a method of community intervention. Sample curriculum modules would include: (a) legal structures for social enterprise (L3C, B Corp, cooperative, nonprofit); (b) writing a social business plan with dual bottom line; (c) basics of impact investing and community development finance; (d) ethical marketing for vulnerable populations; and (e) social return on investment (SROI) analysis (Mendes, 2019). Field placements should be expanded to include social enterprise incubators, community development financial institutions (CDFIs), and worker-owned cooperatives. Continuing education units (CEUs) for licensed social workers should offer tracks on social entrepreneurship (Teague & Wilson, 2020).

Implications for Social Policy

Policy reform is essential to create an enabling environment for social work-led social enterprises. Governments should adopt social procurement policies, which set aside a percentage of public contracts for social enterprises that serve marginalized populations (Mulroy, 2018). For example, a city could require that 20% of its janitorial or catering contracts be awarded to enterprises employing formerly homeless individuals or people recovering from substance use disorders. Tax incentives for social impact investments, such as New Markets Tax Credits in the U.S. or Community Investment Tax Relief in the U.K., should be expanded to include early-stage social enterprises led by social workers (Salamon, 2021). Additionally, state licensing boards for social work should consider adding questions related to macro-entrepreneurial methods to the clinical licensing exam, signaling that these competencies are valued. At the international level, the UN SDG framework could include indicators specifically tracking social enterprise growth as a measure of SDG 8 (decent work) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

Limitations and Future Research

This paper has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as a conceptual synthesis, it is reliant on secondary sources and does not present primary empirical data. The hypothetical case illustration, while grounded in real-world patterns, does not constitute evidence of effectiveness. Second, the search was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant scholarship from non-English speaking contexts, particularly in Latin America, East Asia, and Francophone Africa where social entrepreneurship is vibrant. Third, the SWSE framework has not yet been empirically validated; it represents a theoretically derived model that requires testing in multiple contexts.

Future research should address these gaps through several avenues. (1) Longitudinal randomized controlled trials comparing social work-led social enterprises to traditional cash assistance or job training programs would provide rigorous evidence on cost-effectiveness and social impact (Kasirye, 2020). (2) Development of validated instruments to measure "mission fidelity" over time, analogous to treatment fidelity scales in clinical research, would allow organizations to self-monitor for mission drift (Jones, 2019). (3) Cross-cultural adaptations of the SWSE framework should be developed and tested in low-income countries, as well as in Indigenous communities, where concepts of property, ownership, and reciprocity may differ substantially from Western models (Kerlin, 2018). (4) Qualitative studies interviewing social workers who have started enterprises about their experiences of role conflict, ethical challenges, and sources of resilience would enrich our understanding of the lived reality of SWSE practice.

CONCLUSION

Social entrepreneurship need not be antithetical to social work. When guided by participatory, ethical, and mission-driven frameworks, entrepreneurial methods can expand social work's capacity to generate sustainable, community-led social development. The perceived tension between market logic and care ethics is not inevitable but rather a product of how entrepreneurial tools are deployed. By recovering historical precedents from settlement houses and cooperative movements, exemplified by Jane Addams' blend of service, advocacy, and income generation (Knight, 2015), social workers can reframe entrepreneurship as structural intervention rather than a concession to neoliberalism. The Social Work–Social Entrepreneurship (SWSE) Integration Framework developed here offers a practical, values-aligned model that addresses legitimate concerns, mission drift, role conflict, and exploitation (Dey & Steyaert, 2016; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2014), while harnessing enterprise for redistributive aims.

The six components of the SWSE framework provide concrete decision-making heuristics absent from most entrepreneurship curricula. Unlike generic business tools, the framework embeds professional social work values, self-determination, social justice, dignity, and human relationships, into every stage of venture creation (Mendes, 2019; Mulroy, 2018). The framework is also context-sensitive, recognizing that ethical bricolage differs across settings while underlying principles remain constant (Mair & Martí, 2019). This flexibility ensures applicability across diverse practice areas, from child welfare to community mental health.

The implications extend beyond individual practice. At the organizational level, agencies embracing social intrapreneurship can diversify revenue and offer dignified employment to clients (Austin *et al.*, 2016). At the educational level, integrating social entrepreneurship into CSWE-accredited curricula signals that macro practice is a core competency (CSWE, 2022; Teague & Wilson, 2020). At the policy level, governments can remove structural barriers through social procurement, tax incentives, and recognition of social enterprise legal forms (Salamon, 2021; Mulroy, 2018).

As social workers confront shrinking budgets, the climate crisis, mass migration, and rising authoritarianism, embracing social entrepreneurship may become a professional necessity. Purely therapeutic social work cannot build housing, create living-wage jobs for former prisoners, or decarbonize energy grids. These tasks require entrepreneurial competencies: opportunity recognition, resource mobilization, and financial modeling (Dees, 2018; Santos, 2012). To cede these competencies to business schools is to abandon social work's commitment to marginalized communities.

To remain relevant, social work must reclaim its tradition of pragmatic innovation, of which social entrepreneurship is the latest expression. The profession was founded by individuals like Jane Addams who refused artificial boundaries between charity and commerce (Ferguson, 2017). Future research must test the SWSE framework empirically, refine its components, and develop instruments for measuring mission fidelity (Jones, 2019). Cross-cultural adaptations are urgently needed, particularly in Indigenous and Global South contexts (Kerlin, 2018). Finally, social work scholars should partner with entrepreneurship educators to design courses teaching both business fundamentals and ethical guardrails.

In summary, social entrepreneurship is not a betrayal of social work values but an extension of them, when practiced reflectively and in genuine partnership with communities. The choice is not between caring and commerce, but between a social work that remains on the margins and one that steps boldly into building just, sustainable economies. The SWSE Integration Framework offers a roadmap for that journey.

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