



Socio-Cultural Factors and Livelihood Sustainability: Evidence from the Lotuko Community in Juba, South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of socio-cultural factors on livelihood sustainability among the Lotuko community in Juba, South Sudan. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative data from 139 respondents with qualitative insights from four focused group discussions (FGDs). Regression analysis revealed that socio-cultural factors exerted a statistically significant influence ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < 0.001$) on livelihood sustainability, underscoring their central role in shaping indigenous entrepreneurship outcomes. Qualitative findings further highlighted how cultural norms, gender roles, communal solidarity practices, and symbolic traditions function both as enablers and constraints. Mechanisms such as Ahitai (group farming), Rabitta (women's contributions), and Adua (collective weeding) strengthened resilience, while rigid gendered expectations restricted participation in lucrative enterprises. These results point to the dual role of culture: as a source of resilience and as a limitation on innovation. The findings carry important implications for policy, suggesting that interventions must engage with socio-cultural realities to support indigenous entrepreneurship. The study adds to global discourse by situating indigenous livelihood practices within fragile, post-conflict urban contexts, offering grounded insights into the interplay between culture and sustainability.

Keywords: Indigenous social entrepreneurship; socio-cultural factors; livelihood sustainability; Lotuko community; South Sudan; gender norms; communal solidarity.

1.Introduction

Livelihood sustainability has emerged as a critical concern in development discourse, particularly in contexts of fragility, conflict, and socio-economic transition. The concept emphasizes that a livelihood should not only secure immediate survival but also ensure long-term resilience, intergenerational continuity, and ecological balance (Kollmair & Gamper, 2002). For many indigenous communities, livelihoods are deeply intertwined with socio-cultural systems that govern norms, values, and practices. These socio-cultural dimensions are not merely background factors but central determinants of how communities organize their economies, distribute resources, and preserve collective identity (Apsalone & Sumilo, 2015).

Indigenous social entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a pathway for fostering sustainable livelihoods by integrating traditional knowledge, collective values, and local innovations into economic practice (Anderson et al., 2006; Mika et al., 2018). Unlike mainstream entrepreneurship, which often prioritizes individual profit, indigenous social entrepreneurship is grounded in communal obligations, reciprocity, and cultural identity. For example, studies from New Zealand, Canada, and Australia demonstrate that indigenous entrepreneurs frequently operate within frameworks that emphasize community empowerment and cultural continuity (De Bruin & Mataira, 2018; Harrington & Clarkson, 2022). These approaches highlight the dual role of socio-cultural systems: they provide resilience and solidarity but may also restrict individual agency and innovation if norms are too rigid (Absalyamov et al., 2017).

Across Africa, socio-cultural factors have been shown to significantly shape indigenous entrepreneurship and livelihood strategies. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the Igba-Boi apprenticeship system demonstrates how kinship-based training and settlement rituals foster intergenerational economic resilience (Nkamnebe & Ezemba, 2020). Similarly, Maasai communities in Kenya anchor entrepreneurial opportunities within pastoral traditions and communal structures, showing how cultural identity influences opportunity recognition (Ndemo, 2007). In Zimbabwe, the Shona employ cultural rituals such as nhimbe (work parties) to strengthen community solidarity and brand identity in local enterprises (Mbigi, 2000). These examples illustrate that socio-cultural factors, including kinship systems, gender norms, communal rituals, and symbolic practices, are central to shaping livelihood sustainability across indigenous contexts.

However, socio-cultural factors also present challenges. Gender norms, caste systems, and rigid traditions can exclude marginalized groups—particularly women and youth—from participating fully in economic activities. Research from Pakistan and Bangladesh has shown that socio-cultural restrictions on women's participation in business limit the sustainability of indigenous enterprises (Islam, 2020). Similarly, studies in fragile contexts highlight how

displacement, urbanization, and cultural disruption alter traditional roles, sometimes weakening the communal bonds that underpin indigenous livelihoods (Quirke et al., 2022). In such contexts, socio-cultural structures may fail to adapt quickly enough to new realities, constraining livelihood diversification and innovation.

South Sudan provides a particularly urgent setting for examining these dynamics. Decades of conflict, displacement, and political instability have eroded formal livelihood systems and weakened state institutions (Bacq et al., 2022). In the absence of strong institutional support, communities have relied heavily on indigenous social entrepreneurship embedded in socio-cultural frameworks for survival. These frameworks include kinship-based solidarity, ritual practices, and gendered labor divisions that both sustain resilience and limit opportunities for diversification. Urban migration to Juba has further complicated this picture, as indigenous communities such as the Lotuko face pressures to adapt traditional socio-cultural practices to new urban realities.

Against this backdrop, socio-cultural factors remain critical in shaping how indigenous entrepreneurship contributes to livelihood sustainability. They influence who participates in economic activities, what types of enterprises are deemed legitimate, how resources are shared, and how resilience is maintained in times of crisis. This article therefore examines the effect of socio-cultural factors on livelihood sustainability among the Lotuko community in Juba, South Sudan, situating the analysis within the wider literature on indigenous entrepreneurship, culture, and sustainable development. By doing so, it contributes to the broader scholarly debate on how socio-cultural systems function as both enablers and constraints of livelihood sustainability in fragile and post-conflict settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Context

Socio-cultural factors are widely recognized in development and entrepreneurship literature as fundamental determinants of livelihood sustainability. Within the framework of the Sustainable Livelihoods Theory, cultural and social assets are considered vital forms of “capital” alongside financial, natural, and human resources (Kollmair & Gamper, 2002). Similarly, Social Entrepreneurship Theory emphasizes that opportunity recognition and venture sustainability are influenced not only by financial capital but also by shared values, traditions, and community obligations (Shane, 2015). These frameworks highlight that socio-cultural systems play a central role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior and community well-being, particularly in contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent.

2.2 Global Perspectives on Socio-Cultural Factors

Globally, indigenous communities demonstrate how socio-cultural values can both foster and constrain livelihood strategies. Anderson et al. (2006) note that indigenous entrepreneurship is often grounded in cultural identity, reciprocity, and social cohesion. In Native American contexts, cultural practices and symbolic rituals not only sustain identity but also guide economic decision-making (Harrington & Clarkson, 2022). Similarly, Maori enterprises in New Zealand integrate traditional values such as guardianship (*kaitiakitanga*) into entrepreneurial ventures, linking economic activities with cultural preservation (Te Au, 2015).

However, socio-cultural structures may also impose constraints. Absalyamov et al. (2017) argue that rigid traditions can become barriers when they prevent adaptation to modern business environments. For example, restrictions on gender participation or hierarchical decision-making systems may limit innovation and inclusivity. This dual role of socio-cultural factors—as enablers of resilience and as potential constraints—emerges consistently in global scholarship (AlMehrizi et al., 2023).

2.3 African Perspectives on Socio-Cultural Factors

In African indigenous contexts, socio-cultural practices strongly shape entrepreneurship and livelihood outcomes. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the Igba-Boi apprenticeship model provides intergenerational economic resilience through kinship-based training and settlement practices, demonstrating the power of cultural frameworks in sustaining livelihoods (Nkamnebe & Ezemba, 2020). In Zimbabwe, Shona traditions such as *nhimbe* (work parties) integrate cultural rituals with economic cooperation, reinforcing community solidarity and identity while enhancing productivity (Mbigi, 2000).

Similarly, Maasai entrepreneurship in Kenya is influenced by pastoral traditions and collective decision-making, where cultural identity shapes opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial initiative (Ndemo, 2007). These cases illustrate that indigenous socio-cultural systems provide mechanisms of resilience, such as kinship networks, cooperative labor, and cultural rituals, which function as social safety nets in contexts of poverty or limited state support (Onwuegbuzie & Mafimisebi, 2021). Yet, as in global cases, restrictive gender norms and rigid cultural hierarchies can limit inclusivity, especially for women and youth (Islam, 2020).

2.4 Socio-Cultural Dynamics in South Sudan

South Sudan presents a unique setting where socio-cultural factors intersect with displacement, conflict, and urbanization. Decades of war have disrupted traditional livelihoods, but indigenous communities continue to rely on cultural frameworks for survival. Kinship solidarity, symbolic rituals, and collective practices remain central to indigenous entrepreneurship, particularly where formal systems are weak (Bacq et al., 2022). However, displacement

and migration to urban centers like Juba have introduced new challenges. Traditional practices such as communal farming, ritual-based labor organization, and gendered divisions of work have been strained by changing socio-economic realities (Quirke et al., 2022).

The Lotuko community exemplifies this tension. Communal practices such as Ahitai (group farming), Rabitta (women's collective contributions), and Adua (collective weeding) function as resilience mechanisms, sustaining food security and reinforcing solidarity. At the same time, restrictive gender norms hinder inclusivity: women are often excluded from profitable ventures, while men risk ridicule for engaging in traditionally "feminine" roles. These contradictions align with findings from other fragile contexts, where socio-cultural traditions provide resilience yet simultaneously act as barriers to livelihood diversification and innovation (Najia et al., 2024).

2.5 Research Gap

While global and African scholarship has established the dual role of socio-cultural factors, there remains limited empirical evidence on how these dynamics operate in fragile, post-conflict states such as South Sudan. Much of the existing research focuses on stable or semi-stable contexts where indigenous cultural systems interact with relatively supportive institutions (Anderson et al., 2006; De Bruin & Mataira, 2018). Less is known about how socio-cultural structures adapt—or fail to adapt—under conditions of displacement, urbanization, and prolonged insecurity. This gap underscores the need for empirical inquiry into how communities like the Lotuko navigate livelihood sustainability through socio-cultural systems in an unstable national context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of socio-cultural factors on livelihood sustainability among the Lotuko community in Juba, South Sudan. This design was chosen because it allows for triangulation of findings, ensuring that statistical patterns observed through quantitative analysis are complemented and contextualized by qualitative narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Juba, South Sudan, with a specific focus on the Lotuko community, one of the indigenous groups that has experienced significant displacement and adaptation pressures due to conflict and urban migration. The target population consisted of Lotuko community members residing in peri-urban and urban settlements of Juba. These individuals were selected because they represent diverse socio-cultural and livelihood experiences, ranging from traditional subsistence activities to emergent urban entrepreneurship.

3.3 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The quantitative phase employed probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling to ensure that all sub-groups within the Lotuko community had a fair chance of inclusion. A total of 139 respondents were surveyed using structured questionnaires. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select participants for four focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of 8–10 participants. This approach ensured the inclusion of men, women, youth, and elders, allowing diverse voices on socio-cultural practices and livelihood dynamics to be captured.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data

A structured questionnaire was administered to collect data on socio-cultural variables, including gender norms, kinship structures, communal labor practices, and social obligations, as well as measures of livelihood sustainability such as income stability, food security, and resilience strategies. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended items measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Qualitative Data

FGDs and key informant interviews (KIIs) were used to capture deeper insights into the lived experiences of community members. Discussion guides were designed around themes such as cultural rituals, gender roles, communal practices, and adaptation strategies in urban contexts. All FGDs were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v27). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were first computed to profile socio-cultural variables. Inferential analysis, particularly regression modeling, was then applied to examine the effect of socio-cultural factors on livelihood sustainability.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. A coding framework was developed based on both the research objectives and emergent themes from the FGDs. Themes such as gender-based constraints, communal solidarity mechanisms, and adaptation of traditional practices in urban settings were identified and compared with quantitative findings to establish areas of convergence and divergence.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

For the quantitative instrument, validity was ensured through expert review and pre-testing of the questionnaire. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with coefficients above 0.7 considered acceptable. For the qualitative phase, credibility was established through member checking, where participants validated interpretations of their responses. Triangulation of data sources (questionnaires, FGDs, and KIIs) further enhanced the robustness of the findings.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant academic institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent before participating, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing data. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and participants were assured that withdrawal from the study would not attract any penalty.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

More strikingly, socio-cultural factors demonstrated the strongest positive correlation with community sustainable livelihood, registering a coefficient of $r = .858$ with $p < .001$. This very high correlation reflects a robust linear relationship, suggesting that changes in the socio-cultural environment—such as traditional beliefs, kinship solidarity, gender norms, household roles, and participation restrictions—have a profound influence on livelihood outcomes. The strength of this association underscores the degree to which social cohesion, cultural adaptability, and household dynamics shape indigenous entrepreneurial behaviors and capacities. When communities experience positive social reinforcement, cultural acceptance of innovation, and reduced socio-gender barriers, they tend to engage more effectively in entrepreneurial activities that foster sustainability.

4.2 Qualitative Results

The qualitative findings reinforced this quantitative evidence. Practices such as Ahitai (group farming), Rabitta (women's cooperative contributions), and Adua (collective weeding) were identified as critical in sustaining food security, reducing vulnerability, and fostering solidarity. These practices were described as indispensable safety nets, especially for households facing economic shocks. However, participants also emphasized restrictive gender roles that discouraged women from engaging in more profitable ventures such as market vending or bar trade, while men risked ridicule if they took up roles deemed culturally feminine. Notably, urban youth demonstrated more flexibility, breaking traditional prescriptions to pursue diverse entrepreneurial opportunities, highlighting a generational shift toward cultural adaptation in Juba's urban setting.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that socio-cultural factors are the most significant determinant of livelihood sustainability for the Lotuko community, surpassing both economic and environmental influences. The correlation value ($r = .858$, $p < .001$) highlights an exceptionally strong relationship between socio-cultural dynamics and livelihood outcomes. This finding aligns with global evidence showing that cultural systems and social capital often act as the backbone of indigenous entrepreneurship (Anderson et al., 2006; Harrington & Clarkson, 2022). In contexts where formal institutions are weak, socio-cultural structures provide the legitimacy, trust, and resilience that enable entrepreneurship to flourish.

The qualitative findings provide crucial depth to this statistical relationship. Mechanisms such as Ahitai, Rabitta, and Adua represent more than just collective labor—they embody social solidarity and culturally embedded economic strategies that mitigate risk and ensure household survival. These practices mirror similar systems across Africa, such as the Igba-Boi apprenticeship model among the Igbo in Nigeria (Nkamnebe & Ezemba, 2020) and nhimbe work parties among the Shona in Zimbabwe (Mbigi, 2000). They demonstrate that socio-cultural institutions are not marginal; they are central to how indigenous communities manage uncertainty and sustain livelihoods.

At the same time, the restrictive role of gender norms demonstrates the duality of socio-cultural systems. While solidarity mechanisms enhance resilience, rigid cultural prescriptions exclude women and stigmatize men who step outside traditional roles. This echoes findings from Pakistan and Bangladesh,

where cultural barriers to women's participation in business significantly constrained livelihood outcomes (Islam, 2020). Such restrictions not only weaken household economic diversity but also inhibit innovation and adaptation, essential elements for sustainability.

A particularly significant insight is the generational shift observed among Lotuko youth in Juba. Their willingness to defy rigid traditions in pursuit of urban entrepreneurial opportunities reflects cultural adaptability under pressure. This supports Harrington and Clarkson's (2022) argument that indigenous entrepreneurship often evolves as younger generations negotiate cultural identity while responding to new economic realities. For South Sudan, this signals a potential pathway toward cultural evolution that balances tradition with adaptation.

The implications are profound. Policies and development programs targeting indigenous livelihoods cannot adopt one-size-fits-all economic models; they must be culturally responsive and community-driven. Strengthening positive socio-cultural mechanisms such as Rabitta and Ahitai, while simultaneously addressing restrictive gender norms, offers the most promising avenue for sustainable development. This requires culturally sensitive gender empowerment, support for youth-led entrepreneurship, and recognition of indigenous practices as legitimate forms of social enterprise.

In sum, the discussion reaffirms that socio-cultural factors are not auxiliary to livelihood sustainability; they are determinant forces. For the Lotuko and similar communities in fragile states, social cohesion, cultural adaptability, and household dynamics shape the possibilities of indigenous entrepreneurship. Development interventions that fail to engage with these realities risk irrelevance or failure, whereas those that embrace cultural systems stand to foster resilience, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study examined the influence of socio-cultural factors on livelihood sustainability among the Lotuko community in Juba, South Sudan. The findings revealed that socio-cultural dynamics—particularly traditional beliefs, kinship solidarity, household roles, and gender norms—play a decisive role in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities and livelihood outcomes. Quantitative analysis confirmed that socio-cultural factors had the strongest positive correlation with community sustainable livelihood ($r = .858$, $p < .001$), underscoring their centrality as determinants of resilience.

Qualitative findings reinforced this statistical evidence, demonstrating that communal practices such as Ahitai (group farming), Rabitta (women's contributions), and Adua (collective weeding) provide essential social safety nets and strengthen community cohesion. At the same time, restrictive gender norms and rigid cultural roles act as barriers, excluding women from profitable enterprises and limiting men's participation in alternative roles. A generational shift, however, is emerging in urban Juba, where youth are increasingly challenging these norms to engage in diverse entrepreneurial activities, highlighting the adaptive potential of culture.

Taken together, the findings affirm that socio-cultural systems in fragile and post-conflict settings serve as both enablers and constraints. They sustain communities through solidarity and cultural continuity, but they also impose boundaries that restrict inclusivity and innovation. Understanding and working within this duality is essential for designing interventions that genuinely promote sustainable livelihoods.

6.2 Recommendations

1. Policy Alignment with Cultural Systems

Development interventions in South Sudan should recognize and strengthen indigenous cultural mechanisms such as communal farming, women's contribution systems, and collective labor practices. These practices provide culturally legitimate entry points for development and should be integrated into formal livelihood programs.

2. Culturally Sensitive Gender Empowerment

Interventions must address restrictive gender norms without alienating cultural values. Culturally sensitive gender dialogues, women-focused entrepreneurship programs, and inclusive community platforms could expand participation while respecting traditions.

3. Youth-Centered Interventions

Given the generational shift observed in Juba, policies should empower youth who are already defying restrictive norms to pursue diverse entrepreneurial opportunities. Training, mentorship, and start-up support should target young people as drivers of cultural adaptation and innovation.

4. Community-Driven Development Models

Programs aimed at improving livelihoods should adopt participatory approaches that allow community members to define priorities and strategies. This ensures legitimacy, enhances ownership, and reduces the risk of cultural resistance.

5. Integration of Informal and Formal Systems

Strengthening partnerships between informal socio-cultural mechanisms and formal state or NGO initiatives can improve sustainability. For example, microfinance programs could be linked to existing women's contribution groups (Rabitta), while agricultural extension services could partner with communal farming systems (Ahitai).

6.3 Contribution to Scholarship

By situating the Lotuko case within broader debates on indigenous social entrepreneurship, this study contributes to global scholarship by demonstrating that socio-cultural factors are determinant forces in fragile and post-conflict contexts. It highlights the importance of culturally responsive policies and provides evidence that development interventions must engage with, rather than bypass, indigenous socio-cultural realities.

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