Contextual understanding of care ethics in social entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to add a contextual understanding of care ethics to the nascent literature on ethics in social entrepreneurship. To this end, an interpretive study of social bricoleur entrepreneurs in rural India is presented and the constitutive effects of the enactment of care ethics are articulated. First, this enactment is examined as a relational practice between social entrepreneurs and local communities. Then, the notion of formative context is used to analyse how this enactment has expressions of human agency that constitute the societal context. Further, it is shown that context is not something that exists on its own but is instead enacted in the caring practices of social entrepreneurs. The micro-level practices of relating and the macro-level societal structures become malleable in the enactment of care ethics. This study has two major contributions. First, by departing from the notion of ethics as a characteristic of an individual, it shows how social entrepreneurs give and receive care through mutuality and human interaction. Second, by adding the analysis of sensemaking and formative context to care ethics, it deepens the understanding of context as conditions that facilitate the enactment of care ethics and is constituted by that enactment.

Introduction
Despite the broad and rich research literature that exists on social entrepreneurship, the theoretical development of the ethics of social entrepreneurship is still emerging (André and Pasche 2016; Bull and Ridley-Duff 2019; Chell et al. 2016; Dey and Steryaert 2016; Harris, Sapienza, and Bowie 2009; Hota, Subramanian, and Narayanamurthy 2019). The entrepreneurial moral space is undermined amidst the emphasis on the scientification of the economic logic in entrepreneurship (Anderson and Smith 2007). In the day-to-day actions and interactions between entrepreneurs and society, a moral space spans the boundary between individual (private) gains and societal (public) experiences (Anderson and Smith 2007). As a phenomenon aligned with this thinking, ‘social entrepreneurship’ brings social change (Mair and Martí 2006) to address social problems causing suffering (Martin and Osberg 2007), by using practical and innovative solutions (Bornstein and Davis 2010). Social entrepreneurs are identified as visionaries who are passionately dedicated (Roberts and Woods 2005) and prioritize creating social value over private economic value (Mair and Martí 2006). They transform societal and institutional structures (Lehtimäki et al. 2021; Ratten and Welpe 2011; Roberts and Woods 2005) and give voice to poor and marginalized groups (Perrini and Vurro 2006).
However, despite the increase in research efforts to institutionalize ‘social entrepreneurship’ as an independent field of study, recent review articles on social entrepreneurship (Gupta et al. 2020; Lortie and Cox 2018; Macke et al. 2018; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019) do not report ‘ethics’ as a distinct theme in past research. Literature reviews on the definition of social entrepreneurship (Banerjee and Sahay 2019; Dato-on and Kalakay 2016) do not find any definition on the practice of ethics among social entrepreneurs. Some researchers ascribe this omission to social and moral aspects being taken for granted because of the community orientation and contextual embeddedness of social entrepreneurship. Chell et al. (2016) argue that ethics in social entrepreneurship is oversimplified, as it is often taken for granted that ‘social’ equals ‘ethical’. The oversimplified ‘social’ in social entrepreneurship results in a weak theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Kimmit and Muñoz 2018). Adding to complexity is the contestation in the meaning of ‘social entrepreneurship’ due to various usage of the term in different settings (Choi and Majumdar 2014; Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019). The challenge of theorizing social entrepreneurship is partly because most research typically engages with only one level of analysis, focusing on either the micro level (entrepreneur, actor, stakeholder), the meso level (venture, community, network), or the macro level (societal, institutional, and spatial contexts) (Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019). This has led to increasing challenges in understanding the interconnectedness between entrepreneur, community, and context.

This article examines the ethics of social entrepreneurship as a relational practice between social entrepreneurs and the communities with which they engage, and discusses ethics in social entrepreneurship with a context-sensitive perspective. While it is a given that the societal context is encountered by social entrepreneurs, context must also be viewed as shaped by their agency (Anderson and Gaddefor 2017). In theorizing the ethics of social entrepreneurship, this study undertakes a constitutive approach that contextualizes entrepreneurship as an interactive and emergent co-creation of context and agency (Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani 2014). This approach focuses on the everyday interactions and practices through which the ethics of social entrepreneurship and its context are simultaneously created through multi-faceted and emergent agency. This moves beyond the universalistic account of ethics of social entrepreneurship to elaborating on these ethics in terms of the sense it makes to the entrepreneurs themselves and what they consider important and endogenous in their day-to-day relational practice with the local communities.

More specifically, this study uses the lenses of care ethics and sensemaking to examine situational interaction between social entrepreneurs and the local communities, and provide insights into the ways in which the local as well as the broader societal and institutional contexts are constituted in the micro-level ethical practices of relating. The ethics of care literature (Liedtka 1999; Tronto 1993, 2013, 2015) focuses on the interdependence and interconnectedness of human relations, responsibilities, and practices on moral grounds (Hamington 2006). It entails layers of connected relationality conveying a sense of care by which resources can be creatively mobilized and positive change can be achieved for societal good (Laaser and Bolton 2017). The caring practice of social entrepreneurs includes caring about, taking care of, care giving, and care receiving (André and Pache 2016). Doing and experiencing ethics in entrepreneurship is a socially constructed and meaning-making perspective rather than a normative judgment (Anderson and Smith 2007). Hence, the sensemaking lens has been used in this study (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012; Maitlis and Christianson 2014) as it concerns the construction of new meanings in dealing with complex problems (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). This helps in identifying how the social entrepreneurs interpret and engage with events and routines that constitute the context in their enactment of care ethics.

Thus, the research question is as follows: How do social entrepreneurs enact an ethics of care in their interactions with local people, and how does this enactment address the transformation of the local community and societal context? This is answered through an interpretive qualitative study of two unique cases of social bricoleurs in rural India that examine their ethical practices of relating. ‘Social bricoleurs’ innovate indigenous solutions by using and reusing resources that have little value for
others, defy structural and institutional assumptions, strive to solve problems locally, and often operate at unusual places (Baker and Nelson 2005; Servantie and Rispal 2018; Wierenga 2020; Zahra et al. 2009).

Grassroot initiatives using social entrepreneurship in India are intense and impactful (Sengupta, Sahay, and Hisrich 2020; Wierenga 2020). The first case enterprise, HIMSEN (Himalayan Sustainable Energy Solutions), develops low-carbon and renewable solutions from biomass residue, such as pine needles, that is available widely as forest waste in the Himalayan foothills. These entrepreneurs worked with a rural community to produce an eco-friendly fuel from the previously ignored waste that is plentiful in the forests, generated earned income for locals and contributed to mitigating forest fires in the region. The second case enterprise, TFGN (Teach for Green), reached out to school children in rural and semi-urban areas to increase their awareness about renewables, circular economy, and climate change, and to farmers to impart technical skills for becoming solar micro-entrepreneurs. These children and farmers came from neighbourhoods or villages with limited access to essential services such as basic healthcare, water, education and electricity. The entrepreneurs sought to enable confidence in those dismissed as rural, uneducated, and non-trainable.

The core finding of this study is that examining social interactions between social entrepreneurs and local people as a site of socially shared assumptions, social practices, and institutional arrangements reveals how the ethics of care in social entrepreneurship can be understood in context. The results deepen the understanding of how the micro-level practices of relating with local people and the macro-level societal structures become malleable in the ethics of care. Moreover, analysing the relational aspect in the practice of care ethics helps determine which formative contexts are privileged above others (Unger 1987). The analysis of the caring practices shows the imaginative assumptions of social entrepreneurs based on their interactions with local people, the agency that is shaped at the actor and discursive levels, and how the structural arrangements are preserved or transformed in these relational caring interactions (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012; Unger 1987).

Thus, this study makes two contributions. First, it contributes to social entrepreneurship research by addressing the call for more research on ethics in social entrepreneurship. It departs from the taken-for-granted notion of ethics as a virtuous characteristic of an individual and instead focuses on an understanding of ethics as a practice where social entrepreneurs are ethical through everyday interactions and rationality. Second, it contributes to the increasing scholarly attention on the context as central to understanding social entrepreneurship (Stervinou et al. 2021). Context is found to be creating conditions that facilitate the enactment of an ethics of care and is constituted by that enactment. This analysis expands the understanding of social entrepreneurship as a contextual phenomenon and demonstrates the inseparability of context and agency in the ethic of care.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, the literature on ethics in social entrepreneurship is reviewed, followed by the ethics of care in particular. Second, the sensemaking perspective on the enactment of context is explicated. Then, the methodology is explained and the results of our analysis is presented. Finally, theoretical contributions are discussed and implications are offered for future research.

**Literature review**

**Ethics in social entrepreneurship**

Studies on the ethics of social entrepreneurs have examined ethics as the motivation of the entrepreneur and altruism as the antecedent (Cater, Collins, and Beal 2017; Santos 2012). These studies examine ethics as the entrepreneur’s ethical and moral perceptions (Smith, Kistruck, and Cannatelli 2016) or draw moral portraits based on their intentions in gaining society’s moral approval and their commitment to the social mission (Bacq, Hartog, and Hoogendoorn 2016). The individualistic approach includes studies on compassion and other-orientation (Miller et al. 2012), the pro-social perspective in motives and intentions (Bacq and Alt 2018), the entrepreneur as an emancipator
(Chandra 2017), and the use of rhetoric in engaging with community actors (Chandra 2016). Theorizing the practice of ethics in social entrepreneurship with a contextual understanding marks a shift from emphasizing the identity and virtue-based morality of the individual entrepreneur to discovering the actions and interactions of the entrepreneur as a practice of meaningfully relating to others in ethical ways (Anderson and Smith 2007; Chell et al. 2016).

Ethical concerns can be implicitly understood from past studies, such as wilful engagement and disengagement in accessing institutional support (Plutshack et al. 2019), transformative social business models (Marti 2018), or the compromises made in scaling or branching decisions (Smith, Kistruck, and Cannatelli 2016). Further, social entrepreneurship research has also drawn attention to the enactment and enforcement of moral choices between systems of economic exchange and actions for social value orientation (Bull and Ridley-Duff 2019). Ethical concerns have been raised in the morally binding issues underlying the entangling of ‘purpose’ with the distribution of gains (Harris, Sapienza, and Bowie 2009), particularly in social enterprises that are very local (Dacin, Dacin, and Tracey 2011). It has been argued that the concentration of power and control in the micro-level actions of more localized enterprises (social bricoleurs) run the risk of dysfunctional agency on their part (Zahra et al. 2009). This makes it interesting and challenging to examine what makes them ethical. Their role and relevance are determined discursively as they relate to excluded groups (such as the remote and subaltern in low-and lower-middle-income countries) through immersive participation and everyday interaction. Their moral choices are generated in the mundane needs and practical opportunities in everyday life. However, with social bricoleurs challenging assumptions of institutional and cultural settings as an integral part of what they do, the extant social entrepreneurship literature does not sufficiently examine how their actions and interactions close to the ground can be characterized as ethical practices.

Hence, this study shifts to a new line of research that examines ethics in social entrepreneurship as a practice of identifying and addressing social problems. For example, Kimmit and Muñoz (2018) examined the ethical practice of social entrepreneurs in producing social justice outcomes. Applying a sensemaking perspective shows how entrepreneurs interpret the ‘social’ in ‘social entrepreneurship’ for legitimizing social justice. Other research efforts consider social entrepreneurship as embedded in societal discourse. Dey and Steyaert (2016) examined ethics as a discursive practice, through which social entrepreneurs become ethical subjects while critically and creatively challenging the expectations imposed by authority. A social enterprise can also be developed and scaled with care ethics (André and Pache 2016). By becoming a ‘caring entrepreneur’, a social entrepreneur can sustain the moral vision, whereby care ethics gives the enterprise the identity of a ‘caring enterprise’.

**Care ethics in social entrepreneurship**

The care ethics literature views ethics as a caring practice for mitigating human suffering (Hankivsky 2005, 2014; Taylor, Ladkin, and Statler 2015) or as an ongoing act of relating, anchored in loving relationships, rather than only in suffering (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012; Liedtka 1999). More specifically, ‘care’ is the continuous practice of making decisions and taking actions by considering the concerns and needs of others (Bozalek et al. 2016; Evans 2016; Tronto 1993, 2013, 2015). The relevance of care goes beyond immediate relationships to social life at large, the role of various institutions, and the state itself (Donati and Archer 2015; Fineman 2004; Held 2006; Laaser and Bolton 2017). Further, at the individual level, the ethics of care is also connected to sympathy, compassion, and friendship as primary moral virtues (French and Weis 2000). Achieving the position of a caregiver in the community entails the practice of care where resources are mobilized considering caring qualities in the activities and value is mutually created by caregivers and care receivers (Laaser and Bolton 2017). The qualities of becoming a caring entrepreneur (André and Pache 2016), coupled with life experiences, determines the success of the social entrepreneur and the enterprise organization (Satar and John 2016).
The practice of care ethics in social entrepreneurship implies that caring for the collective is induced by the entrepreneurial process and its day-to-day functions. The moral elements necessary for caring practice are attentiveness towards ‘caring about’, responsibility for ‘caring for’, competence for ‘caregiving’, and responsiveness to ‘care receiving’ (Bozalek et al. 2016; Tronto 1993, 2013, 2015). The caring practice of the social entrepreneurs has an iterative process: a) caring about, which is an empathetic connection with communities to engage with them, identify their key social issues, and start thinking of solutions; b) taking care of, which involves decision-making and planning out of a sense of responsibility and commitment to social action; c) caregiving, which means translating plans into action by developing and deploying solutions, and then giving communities access to them to create more value; and d) care receiving, which means listening to different stakeholders for opinions and feedback, and making modifications to create more value (André and Pache 2016). This underscores the layers of connected relationality in the practice of care and how positive change is achieved through the creative, compassionate and collaborative mobilization of resources for social good (Laaser and Bolton 2017).

The ethics of care manifests itself contextually and context-specific research enables theory development by exploring how this ethics interacts with social entrepreneurs’ situations (Hamington 2006). However, they may determine their own ethics by deciding whether to resist or affirm the worldviews of different stakeholders, which further determines the course of the enterprise (Dey and Steyaert 2016). Sensitivity to human relations is important in the ethics of care because it construes the ways in which human interactions shape social practices and institutional arrangements. This, in turn, constitutes the emergence and embeddedness of social entrepreneurship in a given context. This treatment of the context and care ethics as mutually and recursively constituted (Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani 2014) helps to situate the practices of relating in the day-to-day actions and voices of social entrepreneurs and local people. It is an ongoing construction of collective strength and a reshaped environment with fewer struggles (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012). To strengthen this theoretical understanding of social entrepreneurship as a praxis of relationality with the ethics of care in shaping a context, this study adopts the notion of ‘formative context’ from Roberto Unger’s constructive social theory (Unger 1987).

**Sensemaking and formative context in social entrepreneurship**

Sensemaking is relevant to understand how the interaction between social entrepreneurs and local people construct the context and develop practices. Moreover, the role of institutional context and the dynamics of sensemaking in institutional change are relevant in understanding how institutions are experienced and interpreted through sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Weber and Glynn 2006) and how individual-level sensemaking has consequences for organizations and societies (Brown, Colville, and Pye 2015). Sensemaking analysis highlights micro processes that underlie macro processes and emphasizes the intertwined and recursive nature of micro-macro sensemaking (Brown, Colville, and Pye 2015; Zilber 2007). The key points here are that a context is produced through meaning making, and in studying a societal phenomenon, it is important to understand which formative contexts are privileged above others in that society (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). Some applications include how dominant social values become meaningful in individual action (Hilde 2017), how individual problems are rooted in broader social and political contexts (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012), and what possibilities for the future are embedded in imaginative assumptions.

While the ethics of care construe the moral elements of the relations between entrepreneurs and locals, the notion of formative context delineates how the ethical practices of relating with a sense of care entail social and societal practices. The concept of formative context was defined in Unger’s (1987) constructive social theory as ‘imaginative assumptions about the possible and desirable forms of human association as well as institutional arrangements and non-institutionalised social practices’.
This focus on context develops an understanding of society, social structures, and roles, with the ability to challenge and change the preconceptions that shape social roles and institutional structures (Unger 1987).

In social entrepreneurship, the use of constructive social theory as a theoretical lens highlights the interaction between the entrepreneurs and the locals as a site of practices that are social (actor-level human agency) and societal (discursive institutional arrangements). Here, the formative context can be detected in the ways in which practices of relating involve broader societal issues. However, Unger’s (1987) constructive social theory viewed society as an expression of human agency and praxis rather than of a natural order. Thus, society is an artefact, something made and imagined, not composed of structures to be taken for granted (Crawford and Mills 2011). The formative context is embedded in practice and is observable in the routines, conceptions, and roles present in a given society. It sets the conditions for human agency and is informed by the routines and activities in human interaction. It is reflected in institutional structures, shared beliefs, taken-for-granted arrangements, and is also reproduced in context-preserving routines and context-transforming conflicts. Here, activity, agency, conversation, and language are among the potential sites for creating disentanglement (Crawford and Mills 2011; Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). The degree to which routines are entrenched determines the extent to which praxis can be imagined and adopted. In studying care ethics in social entrepreneurship, this means that the context, on the one hand, sets the conditions for ethical interaction with local people and, on the other, is created and re-created in that interaction.

**Methods**

**Research setting**

The first author is the field researcher in this study. He travelled to rural locations in five provinces in northern, western, and central parts of India, where HIMSEN and TFGN operated. As part of a larger project, he interacted with multiple social enterprises. Among them, the co-founders of these two enterprises stood out as social bricoleurs (Servantie and Rispal 2018), who were at an early stage with their ventures, successfully operating in rural and remote locations, and making do with locally available resources (such as waste materials) to address environmental and social problems. They were one of a kind and used unconventional and innovative solutions that were developed and designed painstakingly through experimentation and community feedback. The entrepreneurs of both the enterprises invested in living with local people in their natural settings to gain an everyday understanding of what was happening in their lives and to engage with them to deepen human relationships and interactions. India is an excellent low-income context for studying social bricoleurs because of grassroots innovation in highly resource-scarce and informal settings (Wierenga 2020). With little regulatory oversight and working with communities with limited exposure, these entrepreneurs become interesting subjects for understanding ethics in social entrepreneurship (Zahra et al. 2009). Hence, these entrepreneurs and their enterprises were theoretically relevant (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015) for the purpose of this study. Further, this study went beyond the legal identities of the enterprises and focused on the meaning of social enterprises as grassroots organizations bringing change through practical and innovative solutions that address the problems of vulnerable or marginalized and remote or rural communities (Bornstein and Davis 2010; Mair and Marti 2006).

The field researcher interviewed the entrepreneurs in Delhi, where they had their main offices, and during the field trips. The field researcher joined the entrepreneurs on their travels and stays, where he learnt about the places and societal context through his own experience, spontaneous interactions, and organized interviews. In one to two days of knowing each other and staying together, the entrepreneurs and local people mostly appeared to forget the presence of the researcher. This provided him a rich setting for observing and taking field notes to understand
their everyday interactions and activities. Table 1 gives information about the case enterprises, which is very relevant for understanding the empirical analysis and discussion in this study. The villagers had limited exposure to and interaction with the outside world, apart from a few NGOs in the past with social and health awareness campaigns and livelihood activities. When the field researcher visited the villages, he found that the local people and entrepreneurs were friendly and cooperative. Some locals did not let the entrepreneurs and researcher leave without offering a meal at their homes. The entrepreneurs had developed this trust through multiple visits, collaborative work plans,

| Table 1. Case description. |
|---------------------------|
| **HIMSEN (Himalayan Sustainable Energy Solutions)** |
| **Problems and local life:** The villages in the Himalayan foothills are remotely located with low population, challenging climate, and little work opportunities. Most men migrate to cities for work, leaving behind the women and old folk for farming and occasional low-paying construction work. Most of the men staying back do little to no work, become abusive drinkers, which forces women to look for work and take their children to work. Moreover, several million tonnes of pine needles falling densely on the forest floor, across the range, are of no value. Collecting them for cattle fodder was considered the job of the women. The dry pine needles would also cause forest fires that would disrupt local life and farming. |
| **Solutions and impact:** HIMSEN, a for-profit social enterprise, made renewables from biomass residues, such as briquettes from pine needles in this case. These briquettes are low-carbon and low-cost because they are locally made from dry pine needles available widely. They can be used for commercial and household cooking. Local women working with HIMSEN found a new meaning in their lives, new sense of fulfillment, a feeling of being part of something futuristic, yet close to their own place. They also learnt that involving their children in work amounts to child labour and they were empowered to challenge gender stereotypes. The entrepreneurs sought to use forest waste as resource, in a way that was productive and profitable, for local people to earn a living, while also developing the local economy and society. It also helped in addressing the forest fires that damage crops, pollute the natural environment, and disrupt local life. |
| **The entrepreneurs:** The two co-founders had an internationalized university education, but they had forsaken industry-level opportunities to dedicate themselves to designing entrepreneurial and technological solutions for grassroot community welfare and climate change mitigation. They devoted substantial time experimenting how biomass can be converted into eco-friendly low carbon products (pine needle-based briquettes in this case) by designing and deploying locally feasible small-scale kilns that can be operated at these remote places. The entrepreneurs invited the villagers to participate in experimenting and producing, to ensure that they feel like co-creators and stakeholders in creating a sustainable society. Interestingly, one co-founder was not of Indian origin but became close to the rural communities. He was able to overcome their initial hesitation by demonstrating his commitment through active participation in everyday activities and occasionally playing cricket with children or sharing meals with locals. The entrepreneurs also received unconditional local guidance from a local NGO that worked with some villages on weaving and natural dying of handmade textiles. |
| **TFGN (Teach for Green)** |
| **Problems and local life:** The state-run rural schools in a diverse and hugely populated lower-middle income country like India are very different from those in high-income economies with more resources for smaller population. Government run schools in rural India have the poorest children and some of the lowest learning levels (Alcott and Rose 2015). Further, there are deeply embedded class divisions based on income and living standards; families associate lower social class with publicly run schools. These schools neither attract the best teachers and students nor parents who can invest in their children’s education. Adults in rural India, mostly small scale farmers, struggle with finding alternative work and more income. Hence, migration from rural to urban is very high, leaving villages desolate with ageing population. |
| **Solutions and impact:** TFGN, a non-profit social enterprise (not a charity but an entity with non-profit objectives) had three educational programmes in rural India: ‘rural entrepreneurship skill development’, ‘green school green community’, and ‘kit to kid’. They received grants from foundations and larger NGOs who share common social and environmental agendas and do not interfere in their activities. TFGN gave micro-entrepreneurship training to farmers on decentralized and small-scale solar energy-based electrification solutions, which also made them self-sufficient in household energy needs. TFGN also collaborated with teachers in rural schools to integrate education on climate change mitigation into the mainstream teaching and learning activities. This sensitized the children to relate themselves to their natural and social environment. With hands-on and team-based activities, the students learnt about the circular economy and made small solar cell-powered toys or study lamps from waste accumulated by the entrepreneurs to be used as resources, such as using discarded plastic bottles as lamp shades for small solar powered study lamps. |
| **The entrepreneurs:** The four co-founders had worked in national and international NGOs on pressing problems in rural India such as access to electricity, education, water, sanitation, and healthcare. Two of them were themselves victims of the social class structure that affected their schooling and had experienced poor living conditions as children. Despite challenges, they developed skills on electrical engineering, mass communication, and social work. The other two were educated in social work and conducting research. The entrepreneurs found their purpose in connecting what mattered most to them: society and environment. In the training programmes, the larger vision was to transform the lives of rural farmers and school children with practices that would bring them closer to connecting society and the natural environment. |
workshops, and shared activities. It is noteworthy that an ancient tradition of treating guests is still embedded in some rural Indian societies. *Aitihidevo Bhava* – a Sanskrit phrase in the *Upanishads* between 700 and 500 BCE – is a philosophy of respecting guests in the same way that one would respect God. However, the field researcher observed that the villagers would keenly listen to the entrepreneurs and observe every activity to decide for themselves how all of this makes sense to them and how they would like to participate in this change.

**Collection of empirical materials**

An interpretive study was conducted, drawing on the field-research tradition of qualitative and ethnographic research (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015; Van Maanen 2011). However, the data collection was not ethnographic in the classic sense of prolonged fieldwork in a single site. It was instead in multiple locations with shorter periods of stay and fieldwork in economically deprived places representing the ‘Global South’ where unanticipated events and interactions unfold every day (De Lima 2020). Further, brief time spent (weeks instead of a year) at multiple places and with diverse actors is also accepted in contemporary organization and management research (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015). The intent was to become immersed in the everyday lives of those observed by spending time in their real-life circumstances, observing their work in a natural setting, and obtaining a nuanced perspective on how entrepreneurs and local people interacted with each other (Berg 2008). Data collection took place over a span of six months in 2017–2018 in the form of four immersive field visits by the first author (Table 2). The four separate instances of spending time in these real-life situations allowed for seven rounds of interviews and observations on site.

The following data were collected by the field researcher: (a) one-on-one interactions in the form of semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs, interns, employees, people offering local support, customers, and community people; (b) informal interactions with groups, such as seeing and experiencing entrepreneurs working and interacting with local people and spending time with them in the evenings to reflect on the day’s activities; (c) conversations in mundane meetings and other interactions between the co-founders and local collaborators offering support; and (d) reflexive note making at the end of the day based on observations and experiences in the field. The semi-structured interviews started with generic questions and became more detailed as the informants (entrepreneurs and locals) shared more about their experiences in terms of what they did, how they felt, how they dealt with what came their way, what sense they made of their experiences with one another, and whether they regarded these efforts as making a difference. Examples of the initial questions are as follows: (1) Tell me something about your enterprise, what do you, and what you want to achieve – what is it all about? (2) How did the idea and enterprise shape up? (3) What do you do when you go to the villages? (4) How do you establish acceptability? How do you gain trust? (5) What are the daily challenges? (6) How do you find this work? How does it help you? (7) How are you involved? What brings you here? (8) What are you going to do next? (9) Tell me more about this village – what matters most and what is needed?

The researcher’s formal (organized) and informal (spontaneous) interactions, and conversations in mundane meetings, were recorded whenever possible, with the consent of the study informants. When recording was not possible due to operational challenges, copious notes were taken. The entrepreneurs were fluent in English. Since most of the local people had some basic education, they spoke simple and conversational Hindi. The field researcher did not need a translator as he is fluent in both English and Hindi. Clear for fieldwork and access to the field was facilitated by the entrepreneurs. Everyone had consented to the recording of formal and informal interactions and to the taking of photographs. Anonymity has been maintained for all respondents, with no identifiable information attributed to interview quotations in the article. Due to the effort of the researcher in merging with the context (place, time, collective) to increase familiarity, people gradually became more frank, easier to talk to,
Table 2. Data collection.

| Social enterprise 1 | Hours of one-on-one interactions with entrepreneurs | Hours of observing entrepreneurs in real life | Locations for observing real-life situations | Hours of observing other actors | Days in real-life situations | Number of other actors | Actor type          |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| HIMSEN              | 10                                               | 160                                         | Village A                                   | 36                             | 10                        | 7                    | Local support       |
|                     |                                                   |                                             | Village B                                   | 28                             | 10                        | 16                   | Local people        |
|                     |                                                   |                                             | Village C                                   | 2                              | 2                         | 1                    | Customer            |
|                     |                                                   |                                             | Village D                                   | 5                              | 2                         | 2                    | Customer            |

Informants in one-on-one interactions

| Informant(s) | Role                                                                 |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Informants 1 & 2 | Co-founders (social entrepreneurs)                                    |
| Informant 3   | Spouse of one co-founder who provided managerial support               |
| Informants 4 & 5 | Local NGO voluntarily giving local (mostly operational and logistical) support |
| Informant 6   | Local consultant voluntarily advising the co-founders                 |
| Informants 7 to 9 | Villagers voluntarily supporting the enterprise in its operational needs |
| Informant 10  | Community facilitator: Women’s self-help group, volunteer support     |
| Informant 11  | Local farmer working on a contract with the enterprise in operational activities |
| Informant 12  | Customer (restaurant owner) buying fuel who also supported with experimenting |
| Informant 13  | Customer (resort owner) buying fuel who also supported with experimenting |
| Informants 14 to 17 | Local pine needle collectors                                      |
Table 2. (Continued).

| Social enterprise 2 | Hours of one-on-one interactions with entrepreneurs | Hours of observing entrepreneurs in real life | Locations for observing real-life situations | Hours of observing other actors | Days in real-life situations | Number of other actors | Actor type |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| TFGN                | 9.5                                               | 110                                         | Village X                                   | 4                               | 3                          | 14                     | Local people |
|                     |                                                   |                                             | Village Y                                   | 12                              | 4                          | 13                     | Local people |
|                     |                                                   |                                             |                                             |                                 |                            |                        | Intern, Employee |
|                     |                                                   |                                             |                                             |                                 |                            |                        | Funder |
|                     |                                                   |                                             |                                             |                                 |                            |                        | Local support |
|                     |                                                   |                                             | Village Z                                   | 28                              | 6                          | 18                     | Local people |
|                     |                                                   |                                             |                                             |                                 |                            |                        | Local support |

Informants in one-on-one interactions

| Informant          | Role                                                                 |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Informant 1 to 3   | Co-founders (social entrepreneurs)                                   |
| Informant 4        | Project coordinator                                                  |
| Informant 5        | Local community actor; teacher in one of the beneficiary schools     |
| Informant 6        | Local community actor; headmaster of one of the beneficiary schools  |
| Informants 7 to 9  | Interns, volunteers                                                   |
| Informants 10 to 13| Local community people; farmers and students trained by the enterprise|

Apart from one-on-one interactions with employees and volunteers working with the entrepreneurs, the field researcher also had informal interactions with other local residents and became familiar with what the entrepreneurs and community people were doing. Except for interactions with the entrepreneurs in their main office locations, all other interactions happened in the field. Omitting the time spent on logistical matters, the researcher kept track of the number of days spent in real-life situations during the field work to ensure transparency in research communication. Hours of interactions in semi-structured interviews were calculated based on the recordings.
and freer in their opinions. They opened up to speak their minds, did their usual chores in the presence of the researcher, and became oblivious of him when they found him to be genuine, sensitive, and trustworthy. The data collection was not driven by any predefined model or literature-driven insights. The objective was to stay true to the informants and give them voice in their natural settings. This allowed the informants to interpret their experiences and actions and construct their reality as they spoke.

**Analysis of empirical materials**

The paradigmatic approach in the analysis of data was interpretive sensemaking using an abductive process (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015; Ketokivi and Choi 2014; Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Van Maanen, Sørensen, and Mitchell 2007). An insider-outsider approach (Maitlis and Christianson 2014) proceeded in stages to deepen the nuanced understanding of the empirical context and involved travelling back and forth between the empirical materials, the interpreted themes, and theoretical readings. Figure 1 presents the abductive process of analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Gehman et al. 2018; Sætre and Van de Ven 2021), where the authors travelled between the descriptions and meanings given by the entrepreneurs and the local people, hunches in empirical induction through the thematic analysis and conversational sense-making, and theoretical lenses from ethics of care and formative context. As a result, new explanations were generated and articulated about agency and context as co-created in the practices of social entrepreneurship.

First, the authors independently engaged in close readings of the transcribed text and field notes and then jointly discussed the interpretations and experiences of the first author in the field. At this stage, close attention was paid to making meaning of the ethical considerations arising from the words and actions of the entrepreneurs, local people, and other stakeholders like advisors, collaborators, and customers. The second author, who had not been in the field and had only some prior experience in visiting a rural Indian village, asked ‘what’ questions that supported going beyond cultural pre-assumptions and allowed for the combining of the insight and sensemaking of the observer – the first author as the insider – with the fresh perspective of the outside researcher (Maitlis and Christianson 2014).

Second, photographs taken by the first author were used to elaborate on the first-hand account of his sensemaking, understand and accurately depict the rural context in India, and interpret how social entrepreneurship was unfolding in that societal and institutional context (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Viewing photographs enables combining rationality and emotionality (Bell and Davison 2013) and thus, encourages reflexivity with regard to context and giving voice to the community. Here, the authors focused on the people whose lives the social entrepreneurs were impacting and the lives and actions of the entrepreneurs themselves. The photos allowed for not only documenting the action on the ground but also visualizing the aesthetic and ethical perspectives reflected in the interview data and field notes. These deepened the interpretation of the contextual and spatial character of ethics in social entrepreneurship, thus enriching reflexivity with attention to gender, identity, and working and living in the community. However, while the photographs preserve rich detail about the context, it is important to understand that they are not shortcuts to reality, as meaning making in the photographs is engaged in by the photographer who decides what to shoot and how to frame those shots (Steyaert, Marti, and Michels 2012).

Third, the transcribed verbal data were subjected to a coding process, in which the first step was to assign initial codes to quotations from the data. These codes were then grouped thematically using the informants’ own words and ideas. ATLAS.ti software was used in this process (Friese 2012). Then, the themes were analysed to combine into abstractions that expressed the ethical considerations enacted in the context. Fourth, the abstractions were sorted into broader categories according to the existing dimensions of care ethics (later in Table 3). The original quotations were revisited to ensure that the analysis stayed true to the data. Finally, the enactment of care ethics was analysed
Research design (field researcher)
- Reviewing the state-of-the-art in social entrepreneurship, gap-spotting and problematizing, exploring potential case studies

Ethnographic case study (field researcher)
- Two unique cases, traveling to and living in multiple locations of case enterprises, short stays with actors in the context (place)
- Immersion in real-life experiences, semi-structured interviews, group interactions, field observations and notes, photographs
- Research ethics, manual transcriptions

Theoretical reasoning and problematising (field researcher and outside researcher)
- Reviewing ethics in social entrepreneurship
- Problematising
- Look out for existing theoretical explanations in business ethics, social entrepreneurship, and organisation management
- Theoretical lenses providing relevant but partial explanations:
  a) Care Ethics
  b) Formative Context (Constructive Social Theory)
- Raising potentially interesting research question

Empirical analysis (field researcher and outside researcher)
- Independent readings of transcriptions and field notes
- Jointly discussing field interpretations and experiences
- Field researcher insights and outside researcher interpretation
- Photographs for outside researcher to visualise the activities and places
- Inductive coding for abstractions, appreciating nuance and complexity, comparing and triangulating evidences

Theorising and findings (field researcher and outside researcher)
- Categorising abstractions with dimensions of care ethics
- Interpreting formative context for further analysis
- Rethinking theoretical lenses for abductive understandings and converging researchers' reflexivity and empirical induction
- Presenting findings in theoretical framework and articulating theoretical elaboration

Collective and conversational sensemaking analysis

Figure 1. The Research Process.
Table 3. Evidence from data on ethics as a practice of relating in social entrepreneurship.

| Representative quotations                                                                 | Abstractions expressing ethical considerations                                           | Care ethics category                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| *Entrepreneur (HIMSEN)*: The communities we are working with, if you go to the really   | Building an understanding of the visible and practical local challenges                | Caring about                              |
| interior parts of the state, you start seeing either completely empty villages where     |                                                                                        |                                            |
| people have just left for the plains in search of income-generating livelihoods, or you  |                                                                                        |                                            |
| will see villages that are almost 50% empty, or you will see villages where there are     |                                                                                        |                                            |
| just elderly and young children, while the men are working in the plains. Most of the    |                                                                                        |                                            |
| time, they are working in tough conditions.                                              |                                                                                        |                                            |
| *Entrepreneur (HIMSEN)*: I think they have not been treated this way before. Our        | Connecting deeply with the community for collective growth                              |                                            |
| relationship with them has been very non-transactional, and I think they know that we    |                                                                                        |                                            |
| are genuinely there . . . that they are important stakeholders in this . . . and that    |                                                                                        |                                            |
| our interests are not just about making profit from the business; our interest is to     |                                                                                        |                                            |
| grow together with them.                                                                   |                                                                                        |                                            |
| *Entrepreneur (HIMSEN)*: We lived there in the village for three months to understand    | Empathetically engaging with the community to learn about their pains                   |                                            |
| everything possible about the business, what resources are available locally to build a |                                                                                        |                                            |
| technology, to understand people’s lifestyles in detail, the work culture of people over |                                                                                        |                                            |
| there, the kind of markets available, the kind of customers we could sell the product to,|                                                                                        |                                            |
| speaking with people who would actually be collecting the raw material and producing the |                                                                                        |                                            |
| fuel, how the collection and production could be more suited to their lifestyles and not |                                                                                        |                                            |
| be disruptive of their current lifestyles.                                                 |                                                                                        |                                            |
| *Entrepreneur (TFGN)*: The objective is to become a process-oriented organization, not a  | Improving community life as a priority purpose                                        |                                            |
| selling or implementation organization, so as to build capacity in households for the     |                                                                                        |                                            |
| use of new and renewable energy. It is not that the communities are not happy without   |                                                                                        |                                            |
| your intervention; the fact is they are not even aware. Your capacity development is     |                                                                                        |                                            |
| not to make them happier but to improve their lives.                                     |                                                                                        |                                            |
| *Entrepreneur (TFGN)*: Our focus is on meeting a specific social need in the renewable   | Making sense of the root societal causes of local problems                               |                                            |
| energy sector. We have observed that the acceptance of green energy is very low in this  |                                                                                        |                                            |
| country, irrespective of what community is involved. Some reasons for the lack of       |                                                                                        |                                            |
| acceptance and interest are a lack of hands-on experience, low service at the local      |                                                                                        |                                            |
| level, and seeing technology as complex.                                                  |                                                                                        |                                            |
| *Entrepreneur (TFGN)*: It feels good when these children say that they had cleaned their | Making the community a change-maker to enhance its own dignity and development         |                                            |
| house . . . when a child says that he or she has repaired the light at home. I have      |                                                                                        |                                            |
| been associated with this community for a long time. The school for us is a model that   |                                                                                        |                                            |
| influences the community, and the ones influencing this community are the children      |                                                                                        |                                            |
| studying in that school.                                                                  |                                                                                        |                                            |

(Continued)
Table 3. (Continued).

| Representative quotations | Abstractions expressing ethical considerations | Care ethics category |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| **Customer (Homestay/Resort) of HIMSEN:** This can have a tremendous effect – the potential is huge. Especially in areas like these, 90% of the forests are covered with pine needles. All the forests are burnt. The endemic forests that would naturally be there are all gone. It’s just pines. [...] The objective is not to create energy; that is just a process. The objective is to let the forest regrow. That is the objective, to create employment in the process, to create some income in the process, to create women’s empowerment in the process. So, the idea is not to make energy. | Finding potential for societal and environmental changes | Taking care of |
| **Entrepreneur (HIMSEN):** You are also inviting them to be innovators, creators; inviting them to be a part of this, to have pride and ownership in developing a technology. [...] They are pioneers in this. | Giving locals the feel of becoming innovators and creators | |
| **Entrepreneur (HIMSEN):** We did a few context-mapping sessions. Apart from interviews, we conducted some activities across three different segments. We wanted to know how to make pine needle collection easier for them. One activity was designing and understanding the daily lifestyle across seasons for the villagers. The other activity was about understanding what kind of work culture people are used to or prefer in that area. We kind of did a past, present, future exercise with them. All these activities kept in mind that people would not be really comfortable in expressing themselves or carrying out fully open dialogues. So, we had activities that picked out emotions, expressions, and comments in a very indirect manner from what they are doing and saying while doing the activity. We thought this would paint a more accurate picture than just asking direct questions. | Finding gaps in awareness of the community regarding practical applications | |
| **Entrepreneur (TFGN):** A common problem I saw was that the communities knew nothing about solar energy and green energy because they did not even know how solar energy can charge a mobile. So, my project is sustainable only if they find usability. | | |
| **Entrepreneur (TFGN):** If we keep on naming rural people as beneficiaries and ourselves as benefactors, we are just recreating the same divide and the same hierarchy we want to do away with. It’s a very subtle thing. | Not treating the community as victims or beneficiaries | |
| **Entrepreneur (TFGN):** It is a relationship of friendship. We ourselves have to see how we look at the community. If it is a market, there will never be friendship. [...] People get to know you … you get to know people. Then you start developing a dialogue, and from your dialogue, something emerges that will be a perceived need. For example, income, lighting, education, and water are all perceived needs. Now, we have to make the call as to where we can help them and where we can’t help them. We are not the government. We can only work on certain things. | Making sense of community needs through friendly relationships and dialogue | |
| **Entrepreneur (TFGN):** In a school programme in Rajasthan, he [the other co-founder] had worked there for three years, which gave us a community connection, and since there was a need for science-based intervention, our environmental programme was a match. | Finding clues that match intended interventions | |

(Continued)
Table 3. (Continued).

| Representative quotations | Abstractions expressing ethical considerations | Care ethics category |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Entrepreneur (TFGN): I have worked on the modelling of school interventions with the involvement of parents; with women who conceal their faces with veils. I have worked on sanitary pads. This is something that I never did, even with my mother or sister ever. Working with them on awareness of sanitary pads, and they were associating themselves with me on this issue; this was previously unimaginable for me. And then seeing girls discussing health matters and issues like domestic violence in school and gradually finding purpose in the learnings on society and the environment; that showed the change. [...] We felt there was a gap between policy, advocacy, and research at the government level and started working on removing that gap at our own level. | Critiquing dogma and initiating societal transformation | Care giving |
| Entrepreneur (HIMSEN): We all need to be together. [...] We want to invite people into this who are also willing to help the community grow. Thus, we want people who want to see this community grow ... this company ... this project ... and so that we get people to work hard, work honestly, to give feedback. We will give our best to organize this well. | Seeking deliberate and honest collective organizing | |
| Entrepreneur (HIMSEN): We found it quite shocking to see what people who were not able to migrate do. For the families that are really poor in disconnected villages, migration is quite a risky proposition. They only have seasonal work for which they are even not paid on time. We just felt that if we could combine the bio-energy aspect of it to create a livelihood for people who are already used to living from the forest, we could create an enterprise out of it. | Creating locally feasible opportunities to prevent migration | |
| Entrepreneur (HIMSEN): Here, people really value something that is produced close to them, and people are sensitive to the environment. Having the forest protected is a valuable asset to them. If they get a better product, they will shift to it. We are still figuring out the size and shape of the briquettes to meet their needs, but simply the concept of shifting from coal to these briquettes is a good proposition. Coal has far more impurities and sulphur content and also produces a lot of smoke that is harmful for people. | Producing solutions that relate to what is valued locally | |
| Entrepreneur (TFGN): The children are taught to design small solar-powered appliances on their own. This activity is undertaken with a long-term vision that creating an awareness of renewable energy at this age will be an investment for life. These children will grow up as people accepting and acknowledging the need for, value of, and usefulness of using green energy. | Bottom-up approach in creating awareness from an early age | |
| Entrepreneur (TFGN): We want to inculcate environment sensitivity in the students. We also involve the school’s science and environment teacher in the process. We want to strengthen the school system. [...] We want the students to go through a transformation process so that their minds are deeply engrained with the awareness. [...] We want to bring the teacher into our system and help him or her incorporate interactive learning to raise environmental sensitivity. | Desiring societal transformation at a systemic level | |
| School teacher in a school where TFGN runs one of its programmes (quotation translated from Hindi): Both have worked with almost 700 students in the past two years, sensitizing them on the health issues caused by air pollution. They also encouraged the students to sensitize the people living in their community. They also took selected students from each class to meet the health minister. Training these 700 children meant an outreach to almost 10,000 people in the region. The class teachers themselves received feedback a few times, and they were personally impressed as well. They even gave away some of their class hours to the entrepreneurs as what they teach is closely related to the lives of these children. These people have developed the basic idea of dry versus wet waste and why it is essential to segregate them. People have started understanding that putting waste in the dustbin is better than throwing it on the street from the rooftop. | Initiating change at a societal level through engagement with immediate stakeholders | |
| Representative quotations                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Abstractions expressing ethical considerations                                                                                 | Care ethics category |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| **Entrepreneur (HIMSEN):** I felt really good connecting with all the pine needle collectors. That time when we were sitting together and talking – that was a very special moment. And they were speaking about the impact it has on their lives, education, health, and finances. And that’s what we are working for. If this were not here, it would have been difficult. That means it is meaningful to them. | Knowing that meaningful impact has been created                                                                                                                                               | Care receiving      |
| **Entrepreneur (HIMSEN):** We want to have feedback on how this is in terms of safety, how is the actual work they are doing, can they do it more safely, efficiently? Any ideas or suggestions? Also, is it worth their time? Is it something that they would like to join in again? We want to hear their voices, their comments and perspectives. | Seeking subjective feedback from community members                                                                                                                                          |                    |
| **Pine needle collector working with HIMSEN (quotation translated from Hindi):** It definitely helps us meet our family expenses, our day-to-day family expenses. [...] This enables us to get the goods we need. It also helps us pay our children's school fees. [...] If we have more money, it will help us visit better doctors for better healthcare. | Enhancing the ability of rural families to meet subsistence needs                                                                     |                    |
| **Entrepreneur (HIMSEN):** One of the women today offered her land to us to set up a factory. [...] Today, after we paid them, they asked us to dance. They asked my wife to dance. They asked me to dance. And yeah, [...] I mean, we have generally been able to establish good relationships with the people of the village. | Community giving back through faith and friendship                                                                                                                                          |                    |
| **Farmer trained by TFGN (quotation translated from Hindi):** Whatever I learn in this training, I want to spread it around me. The promotion of solar electricity in our country will enable a healthy environment for our future generations. | Transforming community actors into agents of change                                                                                                                                         |                    |
| **Entrepreneur (TFGN):** These are communities that do not have food to eat, but they welcome you and give you food and water – that is the kind of connection that you develop with the community. That is valuable and has to grow. We realized that this model would succeed because of the connections and impacts that we could establish. | Nurturing the emotional connections with local community members                                                                      |                    |
| **Entrepreneur (TFGN):** The school believes in us [...] this is the best part of my life. My vision is that I want to impact society. **Farmer trained by TFGN (quotation translated from Hindi):** Solar panels and solar energy will lead to the development of the village. I am an electrician, and I also do repair work. I am interested in bringing solar pumps to the village so that the villagers can benefit from them. They will be of much use to everyone here for their agriculture. I would like to start my own supply, installation, and maintenance company for solar pumps and even solar panels in the village. | Sensing the trust of community                                                                                                       |                    |
|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                     | Community actors yearning to become entrepreneurial and expand their capacity to act                                             |                    |
with interpretive meaning making to show the links between context and enactment (later in Table 4). The last phase of the abductive analysis entailed going back and forth between the empirical material and literature on sensemaking, formative context, care ethics, and social entrepreneurship.

In the analysis, triangulation was constantly pursued by comparing evidence from various sources (field notes, photographs, long face-to-face interactions, spontaneous interactions, group interactions, and the first author’s experiences and emotions) to ensure the reliability and validity of the interpretations. Further, collective sensemaking was undertaken in an ongoing iterative manner (Maitlis and Christianson 2014) so that during the analytical process, the authors travelled back to the original transcripts and field notes to ensure that the higher order of abstractions generated through the interpretative sensemaking process remained appropriately rooted in the context. Additionally, the researchers’ different nationalities and cultural and societal frames, along with the fact that the second author had not visited the empirical study sites, helped them capture nuance and complexity in the empirical setting and be reflexive about otherness, differences, and similarities in cultural and social pre-assumptions, researcher identities, and positioning of the research participants in the context (Cunliffe and Karunayake 2013). This abductive methodological approach has been shown to be effective in theory elaboration (Ketokivi and Choi 2014).

**Findings: enacting care ethics and transforming the context**

First, the interaction between the entrepreneurs and local people was analysed and the four dimensions of care ethics (Tronto 1993) in the practices of relating were identified (Table 3). Interpretation of the data through discussions led to the discovery of an interesting story of caring through relating. Subsequently, the authors’ understanding of formative context (Unger 1987) was used to explore the enactment of care ethics by the social entrepreneurs as having the potential to transform the local community context and the broader societal and institutional context.

**Care ethics as a practice of relating**

**Caring about**

The social entrepreneurs chose to connect directly with communities that were socio-economically disadvantaged in their access to energy, education and work opportunities, geographically remote, or culturally marginalized through casteism, religious divides, and male supremacy. In this context, this excerpt shows how the entrepreneurs invested time and effort to understand the everyday lives of the local people and what solutions might work:

‘We lived there in the village for three months to understand everything possible about the business: what resources are available locally to build a technology, to understand people’s lifestyles in detail, the work culture of people over there, the kind of markets available, the kind of customers we could sell the product to, speaking with people who would actually be collecting the raw material and producing the fuel, and how the collection and production could be more suited to their lifestyles and not disrupt their current lifestyle.’ (Entrepreneur, HIMSEN)

The excerpt shows that the entrepreneurs engaged with the local people to investigate how to develop a business idea around an indigenous method of making renewable fuel from abundantly and freely available biomass residues. The entrepreneurs wanted to understand how this can be done without disrupting local activities, by building upon something that the local people already had in their surroundings, and thereby creating something that could involve the locals as co-creators and key actors in the solutions to their social and environmental problems. This displays care
Table 4. Enactment of ethics of care and the context as constituted by that enactment.

| Formative context in the enactment of care ethics | Embodied engagement and situational orientation | Giving meaning to action and fostering the capacity to act | Imaginative assumptions |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Caring about                                     | • Connecting deeply with the community for collective growth  
• Building an understanding of the visible and practical local challenges  
• Empathetically engaging with the community to learn about their pains | • Making sense of the root societal causes of local problems  
• Making the community the change-maker to enhance its own dignity and development | • Improving community life as a priority purpose |
| Taking care of                                   | • Community engagement activities to identify day-to-day problems  
• Finding gaps in awareness of the community regarding practical applications  
• Finding clues that match intended interventions | • Giving locals the feel of becoming innovators and creators  
• Making sense of community needs through friendly relationships and dialogue | • Finding potential for societal and environmental changes  
• Not treating community as victims or beneficiaries |
| Care giving                                      | • Bottom-up approach in creating awareness from an early age  
• Producing solutions that relate to what is valued locally  
• Initiating change at a societal level through engagement with immediate stakeholders | • Critiquing dogma and initiating societal transformation  
• Seeking deliberate and honest collective organizing | • Creating locally feasible opportunities to prevent migration  
• Desiring societal transformation at a systemic level |
| Care receiving                                   | • Community giving back through faith and friendship  
• Seeking subjective feedback from community members  
• Nurturing the emotional connection with local community members | • Knowing that meaningful impact has been created  
• Community actors yearning to become entrepreneurial and expand their capacity to act | • Enhancing the ability of rural families to meet subsistence needs  
• Transforming community actors into agents of change |
ethics as the entrepreneurs engaged with the local people with this purpose and with empathy to identify inadequately addressed social issues and collaborate on possible solutions (André and Paché 2016). They sought to understand how the locals interpreted their own lives in relation to their social, economic, and natural environments, and to ensure that their efforts were viewed as relevant and useful by the local people. It took the entrepreneurs more than a year to understand the exact challenges in the region, do their initial research, and help villagers become aware of eco-friendly briquettes and their impact on the local economy if developed from the pine needles lying as forest waste. With reference to ethics literature, this engagement of social entrepreneurs in the local context was relational and appreciative (Anderson and Smith 2007; Hamington 2006; Lawrence and Maitlis 2012; Liedtka 1999). During this time, they faced cultural and social dilemmas and had to question their pre-suppositions about the local context.

Further, the field researcher was surprised to see how well the entrepreneurs and villagers knew one another, and this included details of each other’s personal lives. There were recurring situations, where they sat together to discuss and make decisions collectively and to voice differences of opinion. Mutual trust and collaboration led to problem identification and activities (workshops, experiments, pilots, logistics) for designing solutions. The entrepreneurs also gathered knowledge about the region by building connections with people who worked with the villagers, such as shopkeepers, carpenters, restaurant owners, and taxi drivers. All the local support, regular interaction with locals, and ongoing exploration of the surroundings enabled the entrepreneurs to see the potential for building a business that was meaningful, yet non-disruptive, for the local people.

‘We did a few context-mapping sessions. We wanted to know how to make pine needle collection easier for them. One activity was designing and understanding the daily lifestyle across seasons for the villagers there. The other activity was about understanding what kind of work culture people are used to or prefer in that area. […] We wanted the biofuel to be an aspiration product. If it is not aspirational, people will not be ready to be a part of it.’ (Entrepreneur, HIMSEN)

The excerpt shows that in addressing pressing social and environmental issues, the HIMSEN co-founders also understood that they had to create a marketable product. It was challenging for them to find a balance between economic, ecological, and social value creation. They did different activities with the people at the villages to identify ways in which biochar-based briquettes could be produced, who are the potential buyers, and what impact this might have on the collective and the context. Manifesting empathy and a strong contextual orientation, the entrepreneurs considered it important to find a solution that does not disrupt local life, while at the same time develop a marketable product along with these people. Further, they found that the local people valued things that were produced close to their home. For them, the forest was an asset that needed protection and restoration. The local restaurants and resorts were interested in easily accessible, affordable, and eco-friendly fuel that could replace firewood. Additionally, the villagers participated in collecting pine needles and operating the biomass conversion processes. The processes for making the product were experimented by the entrepreneurs and locals together, to determine the best methods.

Meanwhile, TFGN operated in rural and semi-urban places where most government-run schools lacked good educational standards and had poor infrastructure. Most of the children came from low-income families working in unincorporated units in the agrarian or informal economy and outside national legislation; casual labour was also a frequent source of income. The entrepreneurs found that these people lacked an understanding of the ways by which everyone could create wellbeing and become environmentally conscious in their everyday surroundings. Consequently, they explored what means (plantation drives, kitchen gardens, cleaning lanes and alleys, home cleaning, hands-on tools and techniques, etc.) could motivate community stakeholders – including children, farmers, teachers, and local officials – to become ambassadors for change and multiply the impact in their own communities and society at large. The excerpt below explications how social entrepreneurs
go beyond a business model of producing and selling affordable products to the poor to an act of care where they aim to build capacity in impoverished households in doing environment friendly practices that improve the quality of their living.

'It feels good when these children say that they had cleaned their house... when a child says that he or she has repaired the light at home. I have been associated with this community for a long time. The school for us is a model that influences the community, and the ones influencing this community are the children studying in that school.' (Entrepreneur, TFGN)

The entrepreneurs gave hands-on training to farmers in transferable skills – such as maintaining and repairing solar panels – that were necessary for becoming micro-entrepreneurs and economically self-sufficient. To understand how they could better provide training, the entrepreneurs spent time in each village where they worked to understand the different skill levels and environmental (infrastructural, societal, and economic) details. The entrepreneurs travelled and lived in the villages, interacted with farmers of different age groups through informal conversations while sharing meals, taking trips with them to farms, and meeting with priests at temples or crematoria. In this process, they learnt how the lives of the farmers and their families had changed over time, what mattered to them, and what it meant for the entrepreneurs to bring new thinking (climate change and renewables) and skills (repairing solar panels and rural electrification) to the villages.

**Taking care of**

Through their actions and interactions, the social entrepreneurs showed care ethics in their commitment and dedication to the local people, thus expressing their sense of responsibility and shared concern for responding to social needs through what they were able to bring to the locals (André and Pache 2016). Being fair and truthful to the local people was found to be very important in identifying how to ethically address the key problems in the local context. This excerpt demonstrates care ethics in the willingness of the entrepreneur to go beyond the traditional beneficiary-benefactor approach and work with the community in ways that made them feel like equals: ‘If we keep on naming rural people as beneficiaries and ourselves as benefactors, we are just re-creating the same divide and the same hierarchy that we want to do away with. It’s a very subtle thing’. (Entrepreneur, TFGN) This relationship showed a commitment that worked both ways for the entrepreneurs and community people by creating viable grounds for the solutions and ideas that the former had in mind. With the experiential approach, entrepreneurs enact the ways in which local people construct their experiences, struggles, and futures (André and Pache 2016; Lawrence and Maitlis 2012; Tronto 1993, 2013, 2015), engage in experiencing the context with them (Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani 2014) and use resources to construct it in interaction with them (Anderson and Gadde, 2017; Laaser and Bolton 2017; Welter, Baker, and Wirsching 2019).

Meanwhile, the co-founders of TFGN also inspired the children and teachers in rural government schools through educational discourse to find meaning in the part they could play through eco-friendly activities to make their own lives better. Further, they obtained first-hand experiences of the day-to-day struggles of the children and families suffering from poor living conditions, a lack of access to quality education and hygiene, and societal taboos that hindered progress. This motivated them to work towards education-driven activities such as solar micro-entrepreneurship training programmes for adults (mostly farmers) in the villages and teaching school children to assemble light fixtures from scrap materials, which led to meaningful participation by the rural communities. The entrepreneurs constantly worked on educating the children and adults on climate change to generate a broader vision of the role of renewable energy and green practices in shaping a sustainable future.
However, the co-founders had some tensions among themselves because one of them was interested in addressing certain inequalities in the local community such as limiting gender bias towards girls, another wanted also to focus on providing job opportunities for young adults in rural areas, and the third wanted a focus on scientific aspects. These tensions lead to extensive discussions on prioritizing goals and activities.

At HIMSEN, the researcher saw regular concern about the ease of working for women, whose task for generations had been collecting pine needles for cattle fodder or firewood. For them, caring was a chain of participative activities. Moreover, the entrepreneurs conducted interviews and engaged in activities with the community to learn about its everyday tools, working environment, and culture. They operated in a cycle of activities that involved collecting pine needles, interacting with needle collectors, understanding how pine needle collection had provided a livelihood for local women in the past, and constantly experimenting with the making and marketing of the briquettes made from the pine needles. However, the entrepreneurs faced an ethical dilemma in terms of the willingness of women to take their children to work for making more money. Eventually, the entrepreneurs and local women came to an agreement that children would not join in the collecting and carrying of heavy pine needle stacks, and that it meant child labour.

Additionally, the entrepreneurs emphasized the importance of personally experiencing the local context and being sensitive to ‘emotions, expressions and comments’ that came out ‘in a very indirect manner from what they are doing and saying while doing the activity’. One of the HIMSEN co-founders, who was not of Indian origin, made four visits, lasting from three weeks to three months, to cultivate familiarity with the villagers and learn more about the people and places. Further, the entrepreneurs adjusted to local conditions such as long power cuts, long walks over hilly terrain, heavy rains, and unexpected delays. They worked alongside the women as equals in collecting pine needles from forest floors and weighing the piles of needles. They found a strong sense of responsibility in making decisions that showed their commitment to solving local problems and never looking for comfort. The community saw their dedication and commitment, which inspired them to work with the entrepreneurs. Moreover, when the researcher travelled with the entrepreneurs, they shared how they had learnt about local problems of gender and unemployment and how the way of life was related to the resources in the hills and the forests from the songs passed down through the generations in the mountains. This excerpt below expresses the trust and understanding of the local people towards the commitment and dedication of the social entrepreneurs in responding to the local needs: ‘We will grow only when the company grows; we understand that’. (Pine Needle Collector, HIMSEN)

Interaction and engagement between the entrepreneurs and community people were ongoing, and being fair and true to each other was emphasized as essential in identifying how to address the major problems permeating the context. In the following excerpt, care ethics can be understood as commitment and dedication to taking care of the social needs of the local people in the business and development activities (André and Pache 2016): ‘You are also inviting them to be innovators, creators; inviting them to be a part of this, to have pride and ownership in developing a technology. […] They are pioneers in this’. (Entrepreneur, HIMSEN) Thus, the social entrepreneurs engaged in taking care of practices that manifested responsibility in building the confidence of the community, giving people an opportunity to work, and sharing with them a vision of innovation (André and Pache 2016).

**Care giving**
The solutions and actions of the social entrepreneurs led to the creation of work opportunities and alternative livelihoods, such as solar-based micro-entrepreneurship or bio-mass residue collection, measures for imparting education to children and youth in rural and remote locations, and an emphasis on collective activity and honesty in interaction. They also considered it important to support local small businesses and advancing the local economy. This excerpt shows caregiving as
being designed by entrepreneurs and deploying entrepreneurial solutions to cater to the social needs of the local people and giving them a chance to create more value and livelihood for themselves (André and Pache 2016):

‘For the families that are really poor in disconnected villages, migration is quite a risky proposition. They only have seasonal work for which they are even not paid on time. We just felt that if we could combine the bio-energy aspect of it to create a livelihood for people who are already used to living from the forest, we could create an enterprise out of it.’ (Entrepreneur, HIMSEN)

Moreover, the ethics of care practice of social entrepreneurs actively challenges and shapes the context through human interaction and localized solutions with a close consideration of the current and future concerns and needs of the local people (Bozalek et al. 2016; Chell et al. 2016; Evans 2016; Welter, Baker, and Wirsching 2019). In this context, the HIMSEN entrepreneurs involved community members in planning and setting up a small plant in the village to make eco-friendly briquettes from the bio-char, and it could be run and managed locally. Further, they themselves put in heavy labour for hours and even days along with the locals in collecting and weighing pine needles and running the carbonizing kilns. They paid the pine needle collectors a wage above local rates and obeyed the minimum wage norms prescribed by the International Labour Organization. Nevertheless, the field researcher observed negotiations between the women and entrepreneurs on wages. While the entrepreneurs wanted to pay wages that were higher than the local rates for seasonal work, they faced the dilemma of limited finances. They explained to the women how important it was for a business to grow and sustain itself and the important role that they would play in that and in preventing migration to the plains for low-wage jobs. Below is an excerpt (translated from Hindi) of an interaction between one of the HIMSEN co-founders and an elder pine needle collector when they were negotiating the prices for pine needle collection in that season. The local labour working rates were one rupee a kilogram (kg) for lifting any kind of weight, such as sand, bricks, or even pine needles. HIMSEN wanted to do better than that as much as they could but within the constraints of their financial condition.

**Entrepreneur:** We want to make better quality coal from pine needles this time. The usual rate for pine needle collection is one rupee per kg. But we would like to give two rupees per kg if the total collection is above 500 kg. Till 500 kg, it will be one rupee and fifty paisa per kg. Will that be okay?

**Elder Pine Needle Collector:** Two rupees per kg is good.

**Entrepreneur:** Currently, we are short on funds. But everything that we do must benefit the village. Money earned in the market from this is for the betterment of the village. If we increase costs now, the product will become more expensive, and the market may no longer buy. So, it will not help the village. Until 500 kg, we will give one rupee fifty paisa per kg, after which we will pay two rupees per kg. Is this okay?

**Elder Pine Needle Collector:** No, we want two rupees per kg. Otherwise, it does not help us. The village is very poor!

**Entrepreneur (after a pause):** Would you not be able to do it below rupees two per kg at all? Feel free to speak your mind.

**Elder Pine Needle Collector:** No! It will be difficult for us.

**Entrepreneur:** Ok. Let us make it two rupees per kg. No issues! Certainly not one rupee a kg; we do not want that either.

Following this, there were some discussions between the entrepreneurs and ten more pine needle collectors on the best spots for fetching good quality pine needles. In their interactions with the field researcher, the women mentioned that this not only helps them in meeting day-to-day family expenses, but also in getting things for themselves, and more importantly, for sending the children
to school and visiting a better health clinic. In working with HIMSEN, they also understood and explicitly mentioned to him that new and ambitious work for improving local life and environment needed significant efforts.

For TFGN, the mission was to ensure that a child in a low-income family living in a suburban slum or remote rural location would be able to improve his or her life and household with environmental awareness gained through hands-on DIY learning. The entrepreneurs worked actively with their volunteers and interns to collect different waste materials and basic electrical tools that children could use to make solar toys and lamps. While working in the villages, the entrepreneurs sometimes had to tackle deeply embedded societal notions on gender, hygiene, or the education of girls to come across as people who genuinely cared and hence had earned the right to conduct a school-level intervention. The excerpt below demonstrates care giving in the commitment of the entrepreneur in catering to the social needs of the local women and schoolgirls, even though the needs were not directly connected to the content and mission statement of the social enterprise:

‘I have worked on the modelling of school interventions with the involvement of parents. With women who conceal their faces with veils, I have worked on sanitary pads. This is something that I never did, even with my mother or sister—ever. Working with them on awareness of sanitary pads, they were associating themselves with me on this issue—this was previously unimaginable for me. And then seeing girls discussing health matters and issues like domestic violence in school and gradually finding purpose in the learnings on society and the environment—that showed the change.’ (Entrepreneur, TFGN)

The entrepreneurs developed friendly relations with the farmers and children and often came together informally to understand how their work impacted local systems and institutions. This excerpt exhibits care ethics in showing the entrepreneurs’ commitment to building sensitivity among community stakeholders and strengthening existing institutions:

‘We want to inculcate environmental sensitivity in the students. We also involve the school’s science and environment teacher in the process. We want to strengthen the school system. [...] We want to bring the teacher into our system and help him or her incorporate interactive learning to raise environmental sensitivity.’ (Entrepreneur, TFGN)

Moreover, the entrepreneurs were rarely concerned for their own comfort and pushed themselves into giving care as shown by the following example. Once, when one of the entrepreneurs and the researcher reached a remote village after an exhausting fourteen-hour journey, they found that the village had no electricity that day and that the training had to begin in the sweltering mid-summer tropical heat. But the entrepreneur remained highly committed by training the farmers for a full day on the basics of electrification and circuits in solar panels, unconcerned about how profusely he was himself sweating and dehydrating. The farmers then decided to arrange food and water for everyone in the training.

**Care receiving**

The local people were able to relate themselves, their lives, and their futures through their interactions and actions with the social entrepreneurs. They saw value in what the entrepreneurs were trying to achieve and understood the challenges that they faced. This increased the commitment of the local people, which in turn reinforced the entrepreneurs’ motivation. Thus, by listening to them, the social entrepreneurs engaged in a dialogical process and became aware of a wide range of opinions and feedback (Bozalek et al. 2016; Noddings 2002; Tronto 1993, 2013, 2015). This allowed for making modifications in the entrepreneurial solutions to achieve higher levels of value creation (André and Pache 2016).

The entrepreneurs demonstrated care ethics in engaging in informal interactions and listening to those who were directly or indirectly connected with the enterprise (André and Pache 2016). This excerpt below is an example of receiving back from the community, which gave the entrepreneurs deep satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment.
'Whatever I learn in this training, I want to spread it around me. The promotion of solar electricity in our country will enable a healthy environment for our future generations.' (Farmer, TFGN)

The field researcher observed that the community people were very vocal about the contributions of the entrepreneurs. In different ways, the community would give back to the entrepreneurs by bestowing their trust. For example, the villagers would express their gratitude by inviting the TFGN co-founders to their homes for a meal or by taking them to places of worship to offer prayers for their wellbeing. During one of the evening interactions with the researcher, one of the TFGN co-founders said with an emotional touch

'These are communities that do not have food to eat, but they welcome you and give you food and water; that is the kind of connection that you develop with the community. That is valuable and has to grow. [...] The Teach for Green model connects the community with the environment, making the community aware and conscious of the environment, giving them the skills to do things by themselves to save the environment and solve their own problems.' (Entrepreneur, TFGN)

Additionally, TFGN's co-founders repeatedly received appreciation in the schools. The entrepreneurs tried to involve the class teachers in daily activities, so that they were also inspired. The teachers participated in building awareness among the children on problems such as climate change and pollution, and thus facilitated the entrepreneurs rather than creating barriers. Further, when the children spoke confidently to others about what they had learned, the entrepreneurs felt a sense of fulfilment. At one school, the researcher saw a child giving a picture he drew depicting climate change, the environment, and society to one of the TFGN co-founders. The entrepreneurs found it rewarding that the children from low-income families in suburban slums or remote villages were able to bring dignity into their lives with the newly gained knowledge and skills.

Meanwhile, the HIMSEN entrepreneurs collected feedback on how the pine needle collectors found their work in terms of safety, ease, and efficiency. Emotional bonds were built as the entrepreneurs engaged in playing games and sometimes celebrating with the local people. Some families, even though very poor, would cook meals for the entrepreneurs to make them feel at home. An old woman who lived in a mud hut with a grown-up daughter, young son, and a husband with a debilitating alcohol problem invited the entrepreneurs to her home. After inviting the entrepreneurs to sit on straw mats in front of the house, she offered them water, which was the best that she could provide. The entrepreneurs were deeply touched by this gesture, which encouraged them further in their social mission. Here is a translated excerpt from an interaction that the field researcher had with the daughter and another woman, both of whom were involved in pine needle collection:

**Researcher:** So, who collects pirool (pine needles) in your family?

**Daughter:** Mother and me. My mother does everything. She even does labour work, like breaking stones just like men do.

**Researcher:** Why?

**Daughter:** Because my father does nothing.

**Other woman:** Her father only drinks and stays at home. He does nothing.

**Researcher:** Mother takes care of everything?

**Daughter:** Yes, mother works whenever she gets a chance. The money earned goes into running the household. We save nothing after that.

**Researcher:** How about working here?

**Daughter:** Feels good! If this becomes a big plant, I will work more, and I am sure more people will come.
However, the empowerment of these women was not only in terms of income, but it also created opportunities for them to cope with an intensely gendered society where there were clear definitions of gender roles:

‘My brothers ask me why do I go to work? It does not look good. He asks me why do I go out for earning? What is going to happen with my money? I say that I feel good working with these people, whether there is money or no money. I come of my own will.’ (Pine Needle Collector, HIMSEN)

These types of perspectives of the local people demonstrate the different ways in which the entrepreneurs received care from them. This giving and receiving of care through human interactions and actions creates new meanings at the individual and societal levels.

**Formative context in the enactment of care ethics**

The notion that a formative context informs and is reproduced in daily activities and routines (Unger 1987) allows for specifying how social entrepreneurs address entrenched local and national conditions through the practices of care ethics. Context is not something ‘out there’ (existing on its own) but is instead enacted in ethical practices of relating. The local community and societal institutional contexts shape and are shaped by these interactions between social entrepreneurs and local people. Further analysis identified three dynamics that constitute the formative context in the enactment of care ethics (Table 4).

The first dynamic is the *embodied engagement and situational orientation* of the social entrepreneurs in connecting with local people. This study’s analysis of care ethics as a practice of relating shows that the entrepreneurs were deeply involved in obtaining a profound understanding of local conditions and viewing challenges and expectations from the community’s perspective. They also engaged with the local people intellectually and emotionally and worked side by side with them. The practice of care comprised learning with and about others, an orientation to the other, trust building, honesty in venturing, future orientation, and fostering hope. Culturally, the worldview at the community level involved an appreciation for closeness to nature and seeing oneself as part of the larger purpose. Further, the social entrepreneurs also conducted their activities with local people with commitment, openness, and an embrace of uncertainty. The connectedness to the other is characteristic of the ethics of care and is intertwined with a respect for the other’s autonomy, both of which enhance the ability of the other to make good choices (Liedtka 1999). Connectedness constitutes the context by generating interest among and enhancing the ability of local people to start taking actions for their own wellbeing in their community. Through the practice of care ethics, the social entrepreneurs mobilized local people to become agents with the capacity to care and the courage to re-interpret local conditions; thus, they ignited the re-shaping of the local context. According to Lawrence and Maitlis (2012), this enactment of care ethics provides nurturing ways for people to construct their futures. It supports the potential for growth and development of collective capacity to its fullest (Liedtka 1999).

The second dynamic involves the ways of *giving meaning to action and fostering the capacity to act* to transform the context. The social entrepreneurs’ interaction with the local people facilitated a critique of the local collective and broader societal contexts. Instead of personalizing people’s struggles, their enactment of care ethics situated them in terms of social and cultural underpinnings (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012). In the local community context, the enactment of care ethics addressed problems like the lack of education and economic opportunities, as well as the challenges of illiteracy, social injustice, poverty, and other social problems like alcoholism and gender bias. Meanwhile, in the societal context, the enactment addressed economic distress, despair, a lack of education and opportunity, extreme poverty, and migration to big cities. In this context, the social entrepreneurs sought to adopt the local perspective and focus on the constraints that create these dire conditions. Through their practices of care ethics, they steered away from suffering as an individual problem and directed attention to challenges in the local and societal contexts to address
the difficulties that local people faced. Thus, problems could be approached with an analytical stance, and an action plan could be created to take steps in solving problems. This builds the locals’ capacity to act and give meaning to action, develops collective caring and a sense of collective agency, and nurtures hope as a fuel to take action for a better future.

The third dynamic involves the imaginative assumptions that the practice of care ethics reproduces. The enactment of care ethics constitutes farmers as economic agents who continually improve their skills to find an alternative livelihood and an environmentally friendly way of life. The focus on the ways by which people living in rural areas can create local economic activity enables seeing them as micro-entrepreneurs who can develop skills for locally sourced power and electricity, and environmentally friendly energy solutions. This, in turn, improves the rural economy and reduces migration to cities. Further, nurturing the commitment and dedication of these people in learning new skills turns them into active agents who have human dignity and can find their own paths away from extreme poverty. The enactment of care also constitutes women as economic agents and makes gender equality natural and desirable in rural communities and in the broader society. In this study, the entrepreneurs interpreted their actions as catalysts for a system-level transformation that, with time, the community itself makes sense of. They viewed themselves as actors who bring change by treating the locals as they would treat themselves as equals. Rather than identifying the local people as beneficiaries, they imagined themselves as beneficiaries who have been given the space and opportunity to become part of a local community.

Discussion

In this paper, the care ethics and formative context theories have been integrated to deepen the understanding of ethics in social entrepreneurship as a practice of relating. Departing from the notion of ethics as characteristic of an individual, this study has argued that ethics needs to be studied by examining the relational practices of social entrepreneurs. An appreciation of ethics in entrepreneurship requires researchers to adopt a socialized notion of how the engagement between the agential entrepreneur and broader context is relationally driven (Anderson and Smith 2007). The ethics of care builds on the idea of the connectedness of actors and is fundamentally concerned with relationships (Liedtka 1999). The analysis of the enactment of care ethics and formative context in social entrepreneurship through relationality in a rural setting shows how the context is a central constitutive element of the ethics of social entrepreneurship, and how viewing ethics as a practice of relating allows researchers to address the society as a context that is both institutional and imaginative.

While recognizing context as a resource that shapes entrepreneurial actions to fit them into certain structural conventions (Pret and Carter 2017) and participative forming of entrepreneurial initiatives (Stervinou et al. 2021), this study also shows the context as a site of social practices and institutional arrangements that are malleable through the actions and interactions between social entrepreneurs and local people. In this interpretation, social entrepreneurs are viewed as agential in constructing their contexts rather than passively experiencing those contexts or taking them for granted (Anderson and Gaddefors 2017; Welter, Baker, and Wirsching 2019). Rather than treating social entrepreneurs as atomistic agents and context as deterministic and independent of agency, using the constitutive approach depicts social entrepreneurs as caring entrepreneurs who contextualize ethics through practice. Thus, examining the ethics of social entrepreneurship as constitutive of context enables the treatment of both individual and group problems as rooted in broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

The practice of the care ethics is situational but goes well beyond addressing the specific needs of individuals and groups (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012). Viewing agency and context as co-created facilitates a powerful critique of institutionalized societal structures that cause the adversity that people face. Furthermore, in their enactment of care ethics, social entrepreneurs produce new structures and opportunities (Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Weick 1988). Because the starting
point is that the world is socially constructed and reconstructed, the practice-based understanding of ethics provides a foundation for re-imagining local and institutional contexts and making societal progress. Social entrepreneurs create shared realities with local people by questioning existing norms and habits and helping them create new ways of conducting life as a community. These shared realities build on the empowerment of the poor and marginalized and have potential to improve local economic and cultural wellbeing. Hence, in studying the ethics of care in social entrepreneurship, a practice-based understanding directs attention to social entrepreneurs’ quality and level of commitment to the relational practices with local people and other stakeholders. The results of this study show that care is a practice in which social entrepreneurs engage in embodied relations with emotion, cognition, analytical thinking, lived experience, and acting on others’ behalf. The ethics of care are detected in the ways in which the entrepreneurs listen to, communicate with, and work with the locals. Here, care entails understanding the local conditions, grasping that ‘truth’ is locally situated and produced, and identifying the positive potential of people and their lives (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012).

Hence, with the theoretical elaboration in this study, a major contribution is made to the social entrepreneurship literature by answering the call for more research that involves rich detail about the contexts in which social entrepreneurship occurs. Presenting an in-depth qualitative analysis of social bricoleur entrepreneurs finding solutions to poverty and inequality in a lower-middle income country provides insights into the socio-cultural assumptions and institutional arrangements that such entrepreneurs are likely to encounter in these countries. To that end, this study fills the gap of empirical research on care ethics in non-Western cultural settings (Andre and Pache 2016). Moreover, this study offers new knowledge on contextually understanding the practice of ethics by social bricoleurs in an emerging non-Western economy in the Global South where the entrepreneurs operated locally with marginalized communities that subsist at lower levels than can be imagined in most Western countries (Sutter, Bruton, and Chen 2018). Meanwhile, in Western societies, social entrepreneurs operate in contexts with strong governmental regulations and are often expected to complement government services to the underprivileged (Bull and Ridley-Duff 2019). However, the entrepreneurial narrative presented in this study allows for transferring insights from the setting of this study through identification of analogical links (Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani 2014) to social bricoleurs operating in other nuanced, low-income settings, thereby giving theoretical generality to the findings (Ketokivi and Choi 2014).

Another major contribution lies in answering the call for more focused research on the ethics of social entrepreneurship. A review by Hota, Subramanian, and Narayananmurthy (2019) showed that over the past twenty years, ethics has mostly appeared as implicit in theorizing on social entrepreneurship and that more explicit studies are needed. This study can now be added to the nascent literature on ethics in social entrepreneurship, highlighting care ethics and adding a practical approach to complement the value-laden notion of altruism and communitarianism as the common explanation for the ethics of social entrepreneurs (Hota, Subramanian, and Narayananmurthy 2019; Bull and Ridley-Duff 2019). Further, the results of this study contribute to understanding ethics as practice in entrepreneurship and theorizing on care ethics by explicating the ways in which a contextual understanding extends the care ethics framework. By departing from the notion of ethics as a laudable individual characteristic (Anderson and Smith 2007; Chell et al. 2016), how social entrepreneurs are ethical in actively challenging and shaping the context is shown through human interaction and localized solutions (Chell et al. 2016; Welter, Baker, and Wirsching 2019). Additionally, in this study, the sensemaking perspective further deepens this understanding as a construction of agency and context through the enactment of ethics.
Limitations of the study and directions for future research

This study is not without limitations. First, the analysis involved only social bricoleur entrepreneurs. This opens up opportunities for examining the practice of ethics by social entrepreneurs who run larger, more established enterprises. Future research can contribute to the contextual understanding of ethics in social entrepreneurship by examining social entrepreneurs who manage complex relationships with multiple stakeholders for raising funds and scaling social solutions (Zahra et al. 2009). In addition, a longitudinal study would provide insight into the changes in relational practices and their social implications.

Second, this analysis is limited to the interaction between social entrepreneurs and local people. Further research is needed on interactions between them and a broad range of stakeholders. Nevertheless, it is contended that this interpretive study is a valuable first step in theorizing the intersection of care ethics and the formative context.

Third, in the analysis, limited attention was paid to the discrepancies in the relations between the social entrepreneurs and the local people, limits and failures of care, and solving ethical dilemmas by the social entrepreneurs. Thus, future research is needed on tensions and ambivalence in the social entrepreneurs’ experiences of undertaking caring practices. In this context, previous research has shown that care giving and receiving may be ambivalent due to ethical dilemmas present in situations, unequal distribution of power in the relationships, and varying frames of interpretation among the parties involved (Parker 1997). Detailed attention to ambivalence between the communities and the social entrepreneurs, as well as ambivalence in the relations among the social entrepreneurs, could enrich understanding about the culturally and socially located dialogical practices in social entrepreneurship.

Fourth, this study produced unique and rich empirical data from a non-Western context in the Global South and thus runs the risk of being somewhat limited in geographical scope. Conducting a comparative study of social enterprises in different cultural and societal settings could support or refine the conclusions drawn in this study. Additionally, in this rich empirical study that has indigenous characteristics of a rural non-Western setting, no non-Western theoretical lenses were adopted. While reviewing extant literature to identify appropriate theoretical lenses, several attempts were made to create connections between non-Western philosophy on ethics and current scholarship on social entrepreneurship. However, in the readings of both Western and non-Western theory and literature, the ethics of care and the notion of formative context came closest to this study’s analysis of the empirical data. This contributes to the generality of these theoretical understandings. Nevertheless, there is untapped potential for future studies to integrate Western and non-Western epistemological loci to produce context-specific knowledge on the ethics of social entrepreneurship as a practice.

Conclusion

In this article, the constitutive approach was adopted and additions were made to the nascent literature on ethics in social entrepreneurship by extending the contextual understanding of care ethics. With an interpretive study, social bricoleur entrepreneurs, who demonstrated deep concern and devotion to advancing the welfare of local people in rural India, were examined. This study provides insights into the ethics of social entrepreneurship as a relational practice and sheds light on the transformational power of care ethics in the local community and society at large. With the four ethical elements of care, this paper elaborated on how relationships between social entrepreneurs and local people are ethical. Further, with the formative context lens, an analysis was conducted of how these relationships manifest through human interactions, translate into the local community and institutional contexts, and make themselves available for revision in the caring relations. Hence,
the integration of care ethics and the formative context into social entrepreneurship lead to novel research outcomes. This framework can be used in future researcher to analyse the ethics of social entrepreneurship with sensitivity to different contexts.

As a practical implication, the findings can be useful to policymakers and practitioners who seek understanding beyond social and market logic for what identifies as social entrepreneurship. This study shows how macro-level change is embedded and visible in micro-level interactions between social entrepreneurs and local people. Moreover, in running mundane routines dealing with grass-root problems, the imagining practice involves recreating the ideas of institutional structure, such as valuing human dignity that links to the value of people as people or treating rural people with respect rather than power. This study can help them understand what issues social entrepreneurs address, what is different about them, how they address them with a caring practice, and what it means to do so contextually.

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