

# Public Entrepreneurship: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

*In many writings the concept of entrepreneurship is frequently associated with the private sector, and with small and medium sized enterprises, and start-ups. However, the public sector also frequently participates in entrepreneurial action, sometimes providing some of the most important services for the economy. Nowadays, the issue of Public Entrepreneurship need to get more attention by researchers, academicians and practitioners, especially in developing countries like Ethiopia. Because it helps to create value for the citizens of a state by bringing together unique combinations of public and/or private resources to exploit social opportunities, and provides many more advantages. At a minimum, public entrepreneurship involves the production, distribution, or innovation of goods/ services for the public. This makes it crucial to the lives of billions of people around the world. For example, entrepreneurial initiatives by public entities include the provision of health care services, water services, emergency services, transportation, and recycling/climate initiatives, among others. The purpose of this review work was to develop a literature review on the mission, key characteristics, types of public entrepreneurship, difference between public and private sector entrepreneurship, and public entrepreneurship strategy to overcome public sector barriers to entrepreneurship and come up with pertinent points. So, to carry on this review work, only 69 articles were chosen based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the reviewer.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Public Entrepreneurship, Public sector, Private sector, Criteria*

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** *M10, M20, M31*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “entrepreneurship” is frequently associated with the private sector, and with small and medium-sized enterprises, and start-ups (Kearney et al., 2009). However, the public sector also frequently participates in entrepreneurial action, sometimes providing some of the most important services for the economy. As it is mentioned in the work of Olumekor (2022), research into public entrepreneurship has become pivotal to the contemporary analysis of public administration, and is also frequently examined in the fields of political science, management, economics, sociology, and social psychology, among others (Hayter et al., 2018; Shockley et al., 2006). At a minimum, public entrepreneurship involves the production, distribution, or innovation of goods/ services for the public. This makes it crucial to the lives of billions of people around the world. For example, entrepreneurial initiatives by public entities include the provision of health care services, water services, emergency services, transportation, and recycling/climate initiatives, among others (Carnes et al., 2019; Rastoka et al., 2022).

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As it is also stated in the work of Olumekor (2022), academic enquiry into public sector entrepreneurship can be traced back to the work of Schumpeter (1942), but it was Ostrom (1965) who pioneered empirical investigation on the topic by examining water producers in the West Coastal Basin of southern California. Another very important study for the development of public sector entrepreneurship was provided by Wagner (1966). He introduced the idea that individuals in government provide public services to achieve political gain. Since then, academic scholarship on the topic has grown exponentially. Public sector entrepreneurship has become one of the most frequently studied areas of entrepreneurship as globalisation and the need for sustainable economic growth have grown.

## **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The issue of Public Entrepreneurship needs to get more attention by researchers, academicians, and practitioners today, especially in developing countries like Ethiopia. Because it helps to create value for the citizens of a state by bringing together unique combinations of public and/or private resources to exploit social opportunities, and provides many more advantages. It is also one of the fastest growing research areas worldwide and which is one of the sectors highly contributing to the economic and social development of a country as well.

Therefore, this study intended to develop literature review on the mission, key characteristics, type of public entrepreneurship, difference between public and private sector entrepreneurship, and public entrepreneurship strategy to overcome public sector barriers to entrepreneurship and come with pertinent points.

## **3. METHODOLOGY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1 Search procedure/method**

In this review work, 69 refereed articles related to the issue of Public Entrepreneurship were reviewed and analysed. This is to mean that, the researcher used only secondary information which were collected by those articles chosen to be reviewed and analysed based on the objectives of this review. By reviewing and analysing the chosen articles, the researcher outlined all addressed issues in detail and suggested some very important issues for future research work.

### **3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

For this article review work, the researcher downloaded many published articles which are related to the concept of Public Entrepreneurship. However, to select the articles that directly related from multiple publications, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were implied.

The inclusion and the exclusion criteria were: First, all selected articles must directly relate to Public Entrepreneurship and the topic must be clearly mentioned in the methodology and objectives of the study. As a result, articles focused on private entrepreneurship were excluded. Second, the source of all the articles to be only those from journals, this criterion led to the elimination of sources like trade journals, book series, and the like. Third, since it is difficult to conduct a thorough manual analysis of articles written in other languages, except English, the reviewer further selected only articles published in English language and excluded articles written and published in other languages. And lastly, included articles needed to be published in between 1942 to 2022, that means those articles published before 1942 and after 2022 were excluded from this review work. So, based upon the above inclusion and exclusion criteria, only sixty-nine and were considered for this study.

#### 4. DEFINING PUBLIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There is no universally consistent definition of the nature, roles, or motivations of the public entrepreneur. For example, Ostrom (1965) defined the public entrepreneur as an agent that creates public benefits by innovating through public organisations, while others have broadly argued that a public entrepreneur is more concerned with public policy and decision making (Hughes, 1991). Additionally, a public entrepreneur uses public resources to improve productivity and create social value (Osborne et al., 1992; Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2010), they create or improve public organisations (Carnes et al., 2019; Ramamurti, 1986), are involved in generating innovative ideas for public gain (Becker et al., 2019; Roberts, 1992) and are motivated by political gain (Zerbinati & Souitaris, 2005). According to Hayter et al. (2018), public sector entrepreneurship is often characterised by three factors, “actions that are innovative, that transform a status quo social and economic environment, and that are characterised by uncertainty”, while Shockley et al. (2006) offered that public entrepreneurship occurs when a “political actor is alert to and acts on potential profit opportunities, thus moving the system in which the actor is embedded toward equilibrium.”

Morris and Jones (1999) defined PSE as the process of creating value for citizens by bringing together unique combinations of public and/or private resources to exploit social opportunities. The value created, be it economic or non-economic, tangible or non-tangible, is derived from ‘unique resource combinations’. Value creation comes from not only the identification but also the exploitation of those opportunities. The ‘social opportunities’ are viewed here as any unsatisfied needs (gaps) that the citizenry may have, whether of an economic, social or political nature. When these gaps have been satisfactorily acted upon (value creation), through innovative solutions, public entrepreneurship would have taken place.

Let us have a look at the different definitions provided by different authors:

**Table 1. Definitions of Public Entrepreneurship and public Entrepreneur**

Authors	Definitions
<b>Public Entrepreneurship</b>	
Shockley et al., (2006, p. 205)	Public sector entrepreneurship occurs whenever a political actor is alert to and acts on potential profit opportunities, thus moving the system in which the actor is embedded toward equilibrium
Kearney et al. (2007, p. 277)	Public sector entrepreneurship, which for the purpose of this research refers to state enterprise/civil service, is defined as an individual or group of individuals, who undertakes desired activity to initiate change within the organisation, adapt, innovate, and facilitate risk. Personal goals and objectives are less important than the generation of a good result for the state enterprise/civil service.
Holcombe (2002, p. 143)	Political entrepreneurship occurs when an individual observes and acts on a political profit opportunity.
Roberts (1992, p. 56)	Public entrepreneurship is defined as the generation of a novel or innovative idea and the design and implementation of the idea into public sector practice.
Currie et al. (2008, p. 989)	Entrepreneurship is seen as the process of identifying and pursuing opportunities by individuals and/or organisations. Further, this process is often characterised by innovativeness, risk-taking and pro-activity
Morris and Jones (1999, pp. 74–86)	Public sector entrepreneurship is the process of creating value for citizens by bringing together unique combinations of public and / or private resources to exploit social opportunities.
Osborne and Gaebler (1992, p. xix)	Entrepreneurial institutions/public entrepreneurs use resources in new ways to maximise productivity and effectiveness.

Authors	Definitions
<b>Public Entrepreneurship</b>	
Roberts and King (1991, pp. 149-150)	Public entrepreneurship' is a process of introducing innovation to public sector practice
Leyden and Link (2015)	The promulgation of innovative public policy initiatives that generate greater economic prosperity by transforming a status-quo economic environment into one that is more conducive to economic units engaging in creative activities in the face of uncertainty
<b>Public Entrepreneur</b>	
Bellone and Goerl (1992, p. 131)	Four important characteristics of public entrepreneurs – autonomy, a personal vision of the future, secrecy, and risk-taking – need to be reconciled with the fundamental democratic values of accountability, citizen participation, open policymaking processes, and concern for the long-term public good (stewardship).
Ramamurti (1986, p. 143)	Public entrepreneur is an individual who undertakes purposeful activity to initiate, maintain or aggrandise one or more public sector organisations.
Schneider et al. (1995, pp. 8-147)	In addition to the central feature of alertness to opportunity, we also define entrepreneurs by two other factors: their willingness to take risky action in the pursuit of opportunities they see, and their ability to coordinate the actions of other people to fulfil their goals. Political entrepreneurs – individuals who seek elective office to pursue their vision of change.
Roberts (1992, p. 56)	Individuals who generate, design, and implement innovative ideas in the public domain are called public entrepreneurs. (based on Schumpeter; deliberately without risk, which the capitalist bears)
Currie et al. (2008, p. 989)	Entrepreneurial [public] leaders expand the goals, mandates, functions, and power of their organisations in ways not foreseen by their political masters. They build coalitions that knit together public and private interests to take advantage of opportunities for entrepreneurship.
Lewis (1980, p. 9)	...a person who creates or profoundly elaborates a public organisation so as to alter greatly the existing pattern of allocation of scarce public resources.
Bernier and Hafsi (2007, pp. 489-492)	...a public entrepreneur [is an] entrepreneur who contributes to building a public organisation or increasing its ability to deliver services and create value." "Proactive, innovative behaviour and bold risk taking seem to be the hallmarks of entrepreneurial individuals who have emerged in the public sector."

Source: Compiled from the reviewed articles, (2023)

Definitions of entrepreneurship in the public sector have a number of elements in common. First, the dimensions of innovativeness, pro-activeness, and risk-taking emerge repeatedly – for example, referred to in terms of “innovate”, “initiate change”, and “facilitate risk” (Kearney et al., 2007). Second, some definitions incorporate value creation – for example mentioned as “value for citizens” (Morris & Jones, 1999) or “ability to deliver services and create value” (Bernier & Hafsi, 2007). Another common element is the creation of new organisations.

## 5. THE MISSION OF PUBLIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The mission of public entrepreneurs is to ensure the successful integration of innovation into the work of public agencies and organisations and to create innovative products and processes while managing scarce public resources with or without possible private resources, whereas the implementation of innovation is the culmination of entrepreneurial activity grounded in idea development and followed by the design and development phase (Schumpeter, 1942).

## 6. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF A PUBLIC ENTREPRENEUR

From the different literature that I have read, the following are suggested as some of the broad characteristics of Public Entrepreneurs:

- Collaborating and networking. Collaboration is fundamental to the public entrepreneur, who seeks to build coalitions for change across government, business, and civil society, often knowing when to 'let go' in order for others to lead.
- Working across systems. Public entrepreneurs see themselves as part of a system rather than just an organisation or department.
- Building narratives for change. Entrepreneurs persuade, influence, and sell. They influence behaviour, showcase social innovation, and persuade colleagues (administrators, politicians, and citizens) that even in our increasingly blame-driven culture, where civil servants are understandably risk averse, there remains an upside of doing something differently.
- Leveraging new resources. A critical function of the public entrepreneur is to find new ways of financing public service and development interventions. This could mean pooling budgets, looking to public-private partnerships, using digital technology, or experimenting with new models of social finance and impact investment.
- Focusing on outcomes. Public entrepreneurship is about doing what it takes to get the right outcome, even if that means abandoning traditional career paths and confounding performance expectations.
- Adapting and learning. Public entrepreneurs must take this attitude into environments with a human as well as a financial cost, so learning and adapting quickly is vital.

## 7. TYPES OF PUBLIC ENTREPRENEURS

Roberts (1992) and Kropp and Zolin (2008) distinguish four types of entrepreneurs, namely, policy, bureaucratic, executive, and political entrepreneurs.

Four mutually exclusive categories or types of public entrepreneurs

- ✚ Policy Entrepreneur: a public entrepreneur who works outside the formal governmental system to introduce and implement innovative ideas into the public sector. Policy innovations can be thought of as a subset of political innovations: the direct implementation of novel policies.
- ✚ Political Entrepreneurs: one who holds an elected leadership position in government. Political entrepreneurs are those elected to their positions and, on the main, have administrative responsibilities. According to Holcombe (2002), political entrepreneurship occurs when an individual observes and acts on a political (profit) opportunity. Schnellenbach (2007) notes that political entrepreneurs introduce political innovations in the process of competing for office, while policy entrepreneurs are those whose effort is directed at implementing novel policies.
- ✚ Bureaucratic Entrepreneur: If the public entrepreneur holds a formal position in government, although not in a leadership position, he/she is described as a Bureaucratic Entrepreneur.
- ✚ Executive Entrepreneur: Executive Entrepreneurs are from their leadership positions in governmental agencies and departments, generate and implement new ideas.

**Table 2. Differences between public and private (independent) sector entrepreneurship**

	<b>Public sector entrepreneurship</b>	<b>Private (independent) entrepreneurship</b>
Objectives	Greater diversity and multiplicity of objectives; greater conflict among objectives (Banfield, 1975; Rainey et al., 1976; Cornwall and Perlman, 1990)	More clearly defined goals and objectives; greater consistency among objectives (Sadler, 2000)
Authority	More authoritarian; more centralised or centrally controlled (Downs, 1967; Pugh et al., 1969)	More democratic; more decentralised (Miller, 1983; Cornwall and Perlman, 1990; Slevin and Covin, 1990; Miles and Arnold, 1991; Jennings, 1994; Russell, 1999)
Decision making	Less decision-making autonomy and flexibility; more constrained on procedures and operations; subject to public scrutiny; major decisions have to be transparent (Rainey et al., 1976; Rainey, 1997)	Greater degree of flexibility and autonomy in the decision-making process; more participative and independent in their decision making (Pearce and David, 1983; Jennings and Lumpkin, 1989)
Rewards/ Motivation	Lower financial incentives; does not share enterprise's profits (Ramamurti, 1986; Morris and Jones, 1999). Lower commitment and job satisfaction (Rhinehart et al., 1969; Buchanon, 1974a, b; Rainey, 1983; Boyne, 2002)	Calculated risk taker; invest personal capital in the business; higher financial incentives; profitability is fundamental to generate income (Ramamurti, 1986; Hornsby et al., 2002). Greater level of commitment and job satisfaction (Rhinehart et al., 1969; Buchanon, 1974b; Rainey, 1983; Hornsby et al., 2002)
Innovation	Public managers are entrepreneurial in the way they take risks with an opportunistic bias toward action and consciously overcome bureaucratic and political obstacles their innovations face (Sanger and Levin, 1992)	Create value through innovation and seizing that opportunity without regard to either resources (human and capital); produces resources or endows existing resources with enhanced potential for creating wealth (Churchill, 1992)
Risk taking	Calculated risk taker; takes relatively big organisational risks without taking big personal risks (Morris and Jones, 1999)	Risk taking is a prime factor in the entrepreneurial character and function; assumes significant personal and financial risk but attempts to minimise them (McClelland, 1961; Palmer, 1971; Timmons, 1978; Welsh and White, 1981)
Proactivity	Uses every opportunity to distinguish their public enterprise and leadership style from what is the norm in the public sector; understand the business as well as supporting the opportunity for business growth and development (Ramamurti, 1986)	Pursues an opportunity, regardless of the resources they control; relatively unconstrained by situational forces (Timmons, 1994; Bateman and Crant, 1993)
Funding and profit	Not constrained by narrow profit; easier to obtain funding for risky projects; easier to raise capital; do not have a profit motive, instead they are guided by political and social objectives (Ramamurti, 1986; Morris and Jones, 1999)	Can be constrained by narrow profit; more difficult to access and obtain funding for risky projects; difficult to raise capital; profit-oriented (Ramamurti, 1986)

Source: Adapted from Kearny C, Hisrich R and Roche F. (2009), p. 29

## 8. HOW PUBLIC ENTREPRENEURS OPERATE

The table below presents six well-known barriers/roadblocks to entrepreneurship in the public sector and then lists strategies that public entrepreneurs employ to overcome those barriers. The six barriers are: goal ambiguity; limited managerial autonomy and political interference; high visibility; disincentives for risk-taking; short-term orientation; and rigid personnel practices that demotivate employees. Public entrepreneurs do not get overwhelmed by these constraints or waste time complaining about them. Instead, they find ways to get around them,

or better still; transform them from constraints into positive advantages. Several of the strategies identified in the following table can be adopted by the average public sector manager to become more effective in his or her job (Ramamurti, 1986).

**Table 3. Public Entrepreneur's strategies for overcoming public sector barriers to Entrepreneurship**

Type of Public Sector Barrier to Entrepreneurship	Traditional Argument	Public Entrepreneur's Attitude and Approach to Overcoming Barriers
Multiplicity and ambiguity of goals	Paralyses managerial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perfectly clear goals will never be made available</li> <li>• Goal ambiguity is a source of Discretion</li> <li>• Generate profits to crosssubsidise social goals</li> </ul>
Limited managerial autonomy & high potential interference	Discourages innovation and entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy has to be earned</li> <li>• Reduce external dependence, especially financial dependence</li> <li>• Build political support</li> <li>• "Capture" regulators</li> <li>• Be willing to use threat of resignation</li> <li>• Exploit your ability to get things done for government</li> <li>• Shape the context of control</li> <li>• Do the work of other agencies, if necessary, to achieve your goals</li> </ul>
High visibility	Causes overly-cautious behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media can be a source of power</li> <li>• Supply media positive information on company</li> <li>• Invest in advertising and public relations</li> <li>• Maintain a scrupulously clean personal image</li> </ul>
Skewed reward systems	Penalizes failures/ mistakes but rarely rewards success and, therefore, discourages risk taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploit ambiguities in rules, Procedures, etc.</li> <li>• Ends can justify means (e.g., rule-breaking)</li> <li>• While taking big organisational risks, reduce personal risks by managing decision process carefully</li> <li>• Success permits more rule-breaking</li> </ul>
Short-term orientation	Discourages large, innovative strategic changes with longterm payoffs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin with impressive, short-term successes</li> <li>• Then implement long-term plans as a series of short-term programs, each with quick payoffs</li> </ul>
Restrictions on personnel policies (hiring, firing, rewarding, etc.)	Reduces leader's ability to motivate subordinates and Implement programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploit the power of personal example</li> <li>• Systematically break the traditional bureaucratic culture</li> <li>• Search for best employees and motivate through growth opportunities and non-economic incentives</li> <li>• Hire talent from outside</li> <li>• If profitable, provide additional incentives and on-the-job perquisites</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Ramamurti, R., (1986), p. 17

## 9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public entrepreneurs try to foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in public organisations to bring about beneficial reforms serving public interests (Bernier and Hafsi, 2007). Kearny et al. (2009) summarise in their definition that public sector entrepreneurship is “the process that exists within the public sector organisation that results in innovative activities such as the development of new and existing services, technologies, administrative

techniques, new improved strategies, risk taking, and proactivity.” King and Roberts (1991) also emphasised that public entrepreneurs act inside administrations and government institutions with the effect that they need to collaborate with public bureaucrats and internal stakeholders, on the one hand, and with politicians, on the other hand, to translate their innovative ideas. Polsby (1984) underlines that these forms of collaboration may result in a “symbiotic relationship” with political leaders and politicians, which is a prerequisite for public entrepreneurs to move their new policies in the policy process. Roberts and King (1991) even speak about “coupler(s) in a very complex policy process.”

Indeed, public entrepreneurs and leaders act in various, complex environments and arenas like political, policy, bureaucratic, civic, and face varied tasks, duties, and performance challenges. Bernier and Hafsi (2007) argue that public entrepreneurs may also act in teams and pursue systematic actions, slowly reinventing their public agency or organisation. They define a public entrepreneur as a person contributing to building a public organisation or to fostering its ability to deliver services and create value, e.g., through new laws, regulations, and policies (Bernier and Hafsi, 2007). Public entrepreneurs encounter possibilities for innovation, but also institutional barriers, since they are restricted by their political system and context (Klein et al., 2010). t’Hart (2001) adds for consideration that the success of good public leadership is difficult to measure, referring to the diverse, contextual, and institutional governance environment, but also the motivation of leaders to consolidate their positions either by (re)appointment or (re)election; the extent to which followers and allies contribute entrepreneurial leadership sustainably (follower perspective); or the degree of “legitimacy, performance and continuity of public organisation.

High-performing and successful public enterprises can bolster economic systems worldwide (Bruton et al., 2015) and increase the standard of living in every society due to supplying powerful services of general interest (Mühlemeier, 2019). This influence underscores the relevance of understanding government as an essential entrepreneurial actor (Mazzucato, 2018) and embeds the idea of entrepreneurship extending beyond the classic private-sector corporates to energise a high-performing public sector.

In recent decades, the public sector has been subject to multiple reforms aiming to improve performance by targeting areas like efficiency and public value (Swann, 2017). However, public enterprises are still described as the organisational type most resistant to change (Millward, 2011) and as being the most subject to political interference, factors that are blamed for the low performance levels of public enterprises compared to those of private firms (Cuervo & Villalonga, 2000; Shleifer & Vishny, 1994). Following this line of argumentation, the public sector in general is described as being “incompatible with manifestations of entrepreneurialism” (Bernier, 2014) and empirical results suggest that the strategic posture of entrepreneurial orientation (EO) might still be at a lower level in publicly owned organisations than in their private and non-profit counterparts (Hinz & Ingerfurth, 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that most of the general public associate the term entrepreneurship with heroic individuals or innovative private-sector corporates disrupting whole branches of commerce. Similarly, in research, entrepreneurship is predominantly a private-sector phenomenon (Liddle & McElwee, 2019). Unfortunately, the increasing importance of EO in the public sphere remains mainly unremarked (Kraus et al., 2019; Meynhardt & Diefenbach, 2012), although the public sector is critically relevant as an entrepreneurial actor (Mazzucato, 2018): its enterprises generate approximately 10% of world gross domestic product and more than one tenth of the world’s largest corporates are state owned (Bruton et al., 2015). Alongside their economic impact, those public-sector enterprises



contribute significantly to modern society in terms of guaranteeing and improving public value (Swann, 2017). So, the idea of public entrepreneurship needs to get high emphasis and intention in both the academic and practitioners, especially in developing countries such as Ethiopia. Generally, entrepreneurship in the public sector is an essential area for research and practice.

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