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Gaps and opportunities in Mexico's social entrepreneurship ecosystem

Brechas y oportunidades del ecosistema de emprendimiento social en México

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ABSTRACT

Traditional entrepreneurship aims to generate profits and accumulate capital. In contrast, social entrepreneurship prioritizes solving social or environmental problems, considering economic benefits as a means to generate positive and sustainable impact in the community. In Mexico, the social entrepreneurship ecosystem is unevenly developed compared to the traditional model, which is more consolidated and supported, with significant backing from the private and government sectors through public policies, training, and support, among other measures. Although there is a General Law on Social and Solidarity Economy and various public programs, the support infrastructure remains fragmented and lacks a modern legal framework that would facilitate its scaling up. This study has three objectives: (1) to identify the structural gaps in the national ecosystem; (2) to compare it with international models that have implemented solid policies and legal frameworks; and (3) to propose a comprehensive agenda that promotes social innovation and sustainable community development. The methodology combines documentary and regulatory analysis, a review of specialized literature, and case studies, mainly in the Latin American region. Preliminary findings indicate that social entrepreneurship faces significant constraints in financing, tax incentives, and specialized incubation programs, unlike the traditional ecosystem. International evidence shows that the adoption of specific legal frameworks, the incorporation of impact criteria in public procurement, and the creation of mixed investment funds are effective strategies for reducing these gaps and strengthening the sector in the national and regional context.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship; Social Innovation; Public Policy; Social Economy; Mexico.

RESUMEN

El emprendimiento tradicional tiene entre sus objetivos generar ganancias y acumular capital, en contraste, el emprendimiento social prioriza la solución de problemas sociales o ambientales, considerando los beneficios económicos como un medio para generar impacto positivo y sostenible en la comunidad. En México, el ecosistema de emprendimiento social presenta un desarrollo desigual frente al modelo tradicional, que cuenta con mayor consolidación y respaldo, con un apoyo importante de los sectores privado y gubernamental a través de políticas públicas, capacitación y apoyos, entre otros. Si bien existe la Ley General de Economía Social y Solidaria y diversos programas públicos, la infraestructura de apoyo sigue fragmentada y carece de un marco jurídico moderno que favorezca su escalamiento. Este estudio persigue tres objetivos: (1) identificar las brechas estructurales del ecosistema nacional; (2) comparar con modelos internacionales que han implementado políticas y marcos legales sólidos; y (3) proponer una agenda integral que impulse la innovación social y el desarrollo comunitario sostenible. La metodología combina análisis documental y normativo, revisión de literatura especializada y

estudios de caso sobre todo en la región latinoamericana. Los hallazgos preliminares indican que el emprendimiento social enfrenta restricciones significativas en financiamiento, incentivos fiscales y programas de incubación especializada, a diferencia del ecosistema tradicional. La evidencia internacional muestra que la adopción de figuras jurídicas específicas, la incorporación de criterios de impacto en las compras públicas y la creación de fondos de inversión mixtos constituyen estrategias eficaces para reducir estas brechas y fortalecer el sector en el contexto nacional y regional.

Palabras clave: Emprendimiento Social; Innovación Social; Política Pública; Economía Social; México.

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship is a business model focused on solving social and environmental problems through innovative and sustainable solutions, combining business practices with a social mission. These initiatives improve the quality of life of vulnerable communities, promote equity, and foster social change while maintaining economic viability (García & Ribadeneira, 2024).

In Latin America, this phenomenon is developing in the context of strong structural inequalities: in 2018, 30,1 % of the population lived below the poverty line, with rural areas, women, indigenous communities, and Afro-descendant communities being particularly affected. This context of exclusion explains why social enterprises have taken on a central role as mechanisms for inclusion and opportunity generation in the region (Prado, 2021).

In recent years, academic and professional interest in their economic and social impact has increased significantly, expanding this area. This boom is because it prioritizes the creation of social value over the capture of economic value, addressing problems that are not covered by the capitalist market or the public sector (Minga López et al., 2022).

Literature review/State of the art

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a critical alternative to the dominant economic model, which is based on profit maximization and self-interested *homoeconomicus*. This perspective has led to a disconnect between ethics and economics, generating inequality, poverty, and recurring crises. In response, social entrepreneurship seeks to reintroduce the altruistic and cooperative dimension into economic activity, prioritizing attention to social and environmental needs over the accumulation of capital (Santos, Barroso & Guzmán, 2013).

Globally, such initiatives are gaining ground as drivers of innovation and sustainable development. There has been a growing adoption of policies that integrate social responsibility into national innovation systems, promoting socially responsible products and services (García & Ribadeneira, 2024).

A review of the literature reveals that there is no consensus on the concept of social entrepreneurship, as its scope has been conceptualized in diverse contexts. However, the most frequently repeated characteristic refers to social entrepreneurship “as the innovative and ingenious, market-based process through which attempts are made to solve specific social problems and bring about transformative processes in society” (Minga López et al., 2022, p. 4).

In Mexico, the field has moved from a classical approach—focused on the Schumpeterian entrepreneur, market innovation, and profit maximization—toward emerging lines that incorporate social value creation and innovation for public purposes. This evolution can be explained by the growing role of higher education institutions and public research centers as agents that not only produce knowledge but also enhance its social value through *spin-offs* (companies derived from socially oriented research projects), technology transfer, and outreach projects aimed at solving collective problems. In this context, social entrepreneurship and academic entrepreneurship have become bridging categories for analyzing how innovation can translate into community impact, beyond the exclusive logic of capturing economic value (Sampedro & Díaz, 2023).

Likewise, regional assessments show its potential: 40 % of social enterprises generate more than five jobs; 42 % are led by women, a proportion higher than the global average; and 67 % have expectations for expansion. However, most depend on their own resources or donations, and impact investment remains limited and concentrated in a few countries. Mexico shares this gap and, in addition, lags behind in B Corporation certifications¹ and lacks a legal framework to support them. Experiences in Nicaragua and Argentina show that factors such as contextual innovation, local networks, and income diversification explain their sustainability over more than a decade, which inspires the need to strengthen local capacities and hybrid models in rural Mexican communities (Prado, 2021).

Social entrepreneurship is thus emerging as a response to the limitations of contemporary capitalism, characterized by structural inequality and the disconnect between ethics and economics. Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, whose central purpose is profit maximization, it introduces a logic of sustainability that combines altruistic and productive motivations, addressing needs that the conventional market tends to ignore, such as poverty, exclusion, or environmental degradation. Comparative studies show that Latin America, owing to its high level of inequality, has a greater incidence of social entrepreneurship than other regions do, as well as significant participation by women, which underscores its inclusive and transformative nature (Santos, Barroso & Guzmán, 2013).

Regulatory and public policy framework in Mexico

In Mexico, the National Institute for Social Economy (INAES), a decentralized body of the Ministry of Welfare, implements policies aimed at strengthening the social sector of the economy through technical and financial support, training and dissemination of social and solidarity economy principles, and territorial coordination through the National Network of Nodes. Although these actions have benefited vulnerable communities and allow for the monitoring of federal resources, their scope does not amount to a comprehensive social entrepreneurship policy such as those seen in other countries.

METHOD

This study was developed via a qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach aimed at identifying structural gaps and opportunities for strengthening the social entrepreneurship ecosystem in Mexico. To this end, a documentary and regulatory analysis was carried out on laws, initiatives, and policies related to the social economy, social innovation, and entrepreneurship, such as the *Social and Solidarity Economy Law* (2012) and the *General Social Entrepreneurship Law Initiative* (2023) in Mexico, as well as international regulatory frameworks in countries such

¹ Private certification for companies that demonstrate a “triple impact” (economic, social, and environmental), with independent evaluation and public reporting of their performance. It is not a legal entity; it differs from BICs, which are a legal status created by law.

as Colombia, Peru, and Spain. Academic literature and institutional reports published between 2010 and 2024 in databases such as Scopus, Redalyc, and Dialnet were also reviewed, as were documents from international organizations such as the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which were selected for their thematic relevance and regulatory contributions. Finally, international experiences were compared, in particular, Law 2234 of 2022 of Colombia and Law No. 31072 of 2020 of Peru, which are considered the most consolidated models in the region in terms of *Sociedades de Beneficio e Interés Colectivo* (BIC) (Collective Benefit and Interest Companies), as well as Colombia's Law 2234 of 2022, which sets the social entrepreneurship policy in South America. The triangulation of these sources made it possible to identify the main limitations of the Mexican case—the absence of a framework law, the lack of a specific corporate entity, and restrictions on financial instruments—and, on this basis, to outline an action agenda tailored to national needs.

RESULTS

The Latin American diagnosis is similar to that of Mexico: most social enterprises depend on their own resources, family resources, or donations and seek only external investment at later stages. Despite this, 67 % reported growth expectations, and 42 % were led by women, a proportion higher than the global average. These data reflect both the dynamism of the ecosystem and the structural limitations of access to capital, which condition their capacity for scaling up (Prado, 2021).

In Mexico, evidence suggests that the institutional framework has a significant effect on entrepreneurial dynamism: the quality of public services and government openness are positively associated with business creation. This finding emphasizes that effective public policies—regulatory simplification, support services, and reliable services—create enabling conditions for scaling up impactful initiatives (Sampedro & Díaz, 2023).

Ibero-American cooperation has also recognized the importance of linking innovation and sustainability to the Sustainable Development Goals. The Andorra Summit (2021) promoted programs on gender equality, indigenous languages, and global citizenship, whereas SEGIB highlighted more than 1,600 South–South cooperation initiatives and a platform with 10 000 active actions. Although these are not legal frameworks, they represent a favorable context for the advancement of regulations such as the BIC laws in South America (SEGIB, 2021).

Two experiences stand out in the region. In Colombia, Law 2234 of 2022 promoted the Public Policy on Social Entrepreneurship, with instruments such as special lines of credit, visibility platforms, cofinancing, and annual monitoring (Parejo Rodríguez et al., 2024). Moreover, Law 1901 of 2018 introduced the concept of BIC, which allows companies to incorporate social and environmental objectives into their corporate purpose, facilitating purposeful investment. An international comparison shows that the pioneering feature of Colombian law is that it has organized, for the first time in the region, a national public policy on social entrepreneurship with defined governance, multilevel coordination, operational instruments (visibility platforms, credit lines with public guarantees, access to public procurement), and a monitoring system with indicators. This has clear implications for Mexico in two ways: (i) a public policy framework law that recognizes the field, assigns institutional leadership, and establishes mandatory goals, instruments, and metrics; and (ii) a specific-purpose corporate entity that allows companies to adopt social and environmental objectives in their bylaws with transparency and accountability requirements. This combined design provides institutional and legal certainty, facilitates impact

financing, and creates conditions for the verifiable scaling up of the sector.

In Peru, Law No. 31072 of 2020 created the BIC Company as a voluntary statutory condition, requiring the inclusion of the purpose of collective benefit in statutes and compliance with transparency requirements. This regulation provides legal certainty, market identity, and accountability standards, contributing to the expansion of impact companies in the region.

In Europe, Spain approved Law 28/2022 on Startups, which, without defining itself as social entrepreneurship, offers useful tax and regulatory incentives as a reference. Other countries, such as Chile and Uruguay, are holding legislative debates, and in Argentina, Brazil, Panama, and Mexico, there are draft BIC bills that have yet to be approved. These regional advances have strengthened the legal recognition of purpose-driven companies, the attraction of sustainable investment, and their possible incorporation into public procurement, in addition to highlighting the importance of female leadership in the triple impact (SEGIB, UNDP & IDRC, 2021).

Overall, the literature confirms that social entrepreneurship does not replace traditional entrepreneurship but rather complements it through cooperation and social justice (Santos, Barroso & Guzmán, 2013). Comparative experience shows that both public policy framework laws (Colombia) and specific corporate entities (Peru) offer certainty and strengthen the ecosystem.

In contrast, Mexico only has the General Law on Social and Solidarity Economy (2012) and bodies such as INAES but lacks (a) a specific framework law with indicators and national coordination and (b) a corporate entity such as the BIC. The 2023 federal initiative for a General Law on Social Entrepreneurship did not succeed, leaving regulatory gaps open.

DISCUSSION

Social entrepreneurship maximizes the impact on communities by generating social and environmental value through innovation, employment, and wealth beyond economic benefits (Minga López et al., 2022). The results show that innovation, social capital, and community support are decisive factors, but barriers such as limited financing, regulatory complexity, and sociocultural inequalities persist. Overcoming them requires hybrid models, strong support networks, and greater digitization (García & Ribadeneira, 2024).

INAES emphasizes that strengthening the sector depends not only on financial support but also on collaborative ecosystems between the government, civil society, and private sector (INAES, 2018). However, the General Law on Social Entrepreneurship initiative presented in 2023—which proposed a National Social Entrepreneurship Plan and System, state-backed financing schemes, and inclusive public procurement—was not successful, leaving the sector without legal certainty (Chamber of Deputies, 2023).

The Latin American experience shows that the sustainability of social enterprises does not rely solely on innovative products but also on management models based on community trust, income diversification, and local capacities. Cases documented in Nicaragua and Argentina confirm that these factors allow operations to be sustained for more than a decade in vulnerable contexts (Prado, 2021).

In Mexico, higher education institutions are reconfiguring their social function by promoting entrepreneurial skills, cocreating solutions with communities, and transferring knowledge in purposeful projects. To this end, it is essential to align internal incentives (intellectual property,

academic evaluation) and external science, technology, and innovation (STI) policies that translate university innovation into social impact (Sampedro & Díaz, 2023).

Findings such as those of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) confirm that although social entrepreneurship represents a minority proportion worldwide, its incidence is higher in regions with high inequality, such as Latin America, where high female participation and sector diversity also stand out (Santos, Barroso & Guzmán, 2013).

This article contributes two central elements that transcend the comparative diagnosis. First, it highlights the legal vacuum in Mexico compared with regional advances such as Law 2234 of 2022 in Colombia or the BIC Law in Peru, which already provide legal certainty and strengthening instruments. Second, it proposes explicitly linking science, technology, and innovation (STI) policy and the entrepreneurial university model with social entrepreneurship through impact-oriented technology transfer, *spin-offs* with a social purpose, and academic evaluation systems that recognize the dissemination of knowledge to communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The Social and Solidarity Economy Law (2012) is insufficient in the face of current demands for social entrepreneurship: it focuses on traditional forms, excludes hybrid models, and lacks mechanisms for measuring impact and transparency. In contrast, experiences in Colombia (Law 2234 of 2022 and Law 1901 of 2018) and Peru (Law No. 31072 of 2020) offer complementary models: comprehensive public policy and a specific corporate entity, respectively.

On the basis of these experiences, the following is proposed for Mexico:

- Legal framework: creation of a General Law on Social Entrepreneurship that recognizes objectives, target population, and impact indicators (Colombia, 2022).
- Governance: a National Social Entrepreneurship System, coordinated by INAES and with the participation of local governments, academia, and the private sector (Colombia, 2022).
- Corporate entity: incorporation of a Mexican BIC Company, inspired by Peru, with clear statutory requirements and transparency mechanisms (Peru, 2020).
- Financing: differentiated instruments with mixed funds, soft loans, tax incentives, and state guarantees (Colombia, 2022).
- Public procurement: Resources a percentage of tenders for certified social enterprises, as recommended by SEGIB (2021).
- Impact measurement: official and mandatory indicators to prevent *impact washing* (simulation or overestimation of social impact) (Peru, 2020).

Together, these proposals seek to provide Mexican social entrepreneurship with a robust and operational legal framework that provides certainty to stakeholders, stimulates impact investment, and ensures that social innovation translates into tangible and sustainable benefits for communities.

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