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**THE MEANING OF  
SOCIAL INNOVATION:  
A REVIEW OF THE  
LITERATURE**

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**Abstract:** Social innovation has emerged as a key concept in the contemporary world, especially in the field of business and technology. This practice focuses on creating creative and sustainable solutions to social and environmental problems, and has proven to be a powerful tool for generating positive change in society. The literature on social innovation is vast and varied, including studies that explore its origins, definitions, models, success stories, and challenges. In this context, a review of the literature related to Social Innovation represents the contribution of this article to understand the different perspectives and trends in the social innovation ecosystem in Mexico.

## **BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL INNOVATION**

Social innovation is a term used to refer to those innovative solutions that seek to address problems of a social or environmental nature through methodologies, techniques or actions originating in the area where the social and economic spheres converge. Despite the recent popularity of this term, the concept of social innovation actually has an illustrious theoretical background that goes back to Max Weber, who identified the role that behaviors initially considered abnormal play in social change, or Émile Durkheim who analyzed the social impact of technological change. Subsequently, Joseph Schumpeter laid the foundations for contemporary understanding of the role played by innovation and structural change in the organization of society, and the role of the entrepreneur as an agent of development. As for the complementary concepts of “social economy” and “third sector”, its origins also date back to the 19th century to define initiatives based on solidarity and reciprocity that sought to respond to the social problems generated by industrialization and rapid urbanization, mainly by the labor

movement and religious groups.

After a long period throughout the 20th century in which the State established itself as a leading actor in satisfying social needs, the concept of social innovation and the actions linked to it revive at the end of the last century in a historical context once again. marked by deep transformations: economic restructuring, development of ICTs and massive underemployment and informality. In this context of growing social needs, social innovation emerges as a promising alternative in the context of the tension between stagnant public services with dwindling budgets and more dynamic market solutions that generate inequality. Precisely the attraction of social innovation consists in its versatility that allows it to be adapted to all types of political, economic and cultural contexts as long as there are conditions for the development of civil society. In fact, Nussbaumer and Moulaert (2007) highlight that social innovations can have a macro or micro, structural or local dimension, they can correspond to a business entrepreneurship initiative or a solidarity action and, as far as their implementation is concerned, they encompass both improvements in the functioning of existing organizations through the introduction of participatory government systems, as well as the creation of social companies, companies with social objectives and other types of organizations with a social purpose.

The flexibility of the concept is also manifested in the great diversity of approaches and disciplines from which it is studied, although the current use of the term and its practice basically respond to four major theoretical schools. In the first place, the literature on innovation from the methodological approach of Administration and Management studies (*Management*), which focuses on the broader social processes in which the innovation process is inserted

(Spithoven, Bart and Knockaert, 2011). Secondly, we have the studies on investment and social capital that analyze the relationship between social innovation and economic development, among which we can highlight the analyzes on inequality, social mobility, discrimination and training by James Heckman, Nobel Prize in Economics in 2000. A third influence on social innovation studies is the literature on the determinants of social change (Mulgan *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the most recent influence is the practical contribution of collaborative networked communities that take advantage of the possibilities of ICTs and open source models to forge new business and organization models.

From this eclectic set of theoretical and practical influences, two major perspectives can be identified regarding the contemporary analysis of social innovation. A current of authors postulates maintaining this diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches given the limitations of any theory to fully explain social change in all its manifestations (transformation of gender roles, new models and functions of the home, evolution of local communities urban, rural and peri-urban, changes in the world of work, revitalization of collective identities, etc.). From this perspective, these great social transformations experienced by post-industrial societies have some similar characteristics, but they cannot be interpreted from a single theoretical model with predictive and explanatory value, along the lines of Giddens' (1984) critique of the claims of a general theory of society.

On the contrary, other authors affirm that social change has a systemic character and, therefore, it is possible to elaborate a general theory of social innovation that allows the design of effective and evidence-based policies to respond to the profound structural changes in societies. contemporary (Hämäläinen and Heiskala, 2007). But this approach goes even

1 In 2014 the BEPA (*Bureau of European Policy Advisers*) was restructured as *the European Political Strategy Center* (EPSC).

further, because according to this perspective, social innovation is not only a complementary mechanism to solve new social problems that are outside the scope of traditional public policies, but is actually the best adapted type of policy. to the conditions of post-industrial societies to boost economic growth and face the great current challenges, such as climate change.

As might be expected, this diversity of theoretical influences, methodological approaches, and prescriptive views has also generated a nuanced debate around the definition of social innovation (Cloutier, 2003). In any case, among the different options we can highlight the definition proposed by BEPA (2011:35), the group of experts that advises the European Commission on public policy, due to its universal nature: "Social innovations are innovations <sup>1</sup>that they are social in both their ends and their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society's capacity to act."

Likewise, in the definition of the concept it is important to point out how the conception of social innovation has evolved since its popularization in the nineties of the last century. At first it was limited to local systems based on solidarity and reciprocity in the so-called third sector (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005), but later the adoption of new methodologies typical of technological innovation, organizational innovation and capital theories Social innovation has made it possible to extend the reach of social innovation initiatives by expanding their scale (as in global fair trade networks), the type of actors (from traditional charities to social

enterprises, for example) and procedures (with greater emphasis on participatory processes).

In relation to this last point, more and more importance is attached to social interactions between individuals as a key aspect to achieve the desired results in any social innovation initiative. This is consistent with a similar trend in business innovation, where open, collaborative, participatory, and non-linear methodologies are also on the rise, with business open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003; 2011), a concept that emphasizes the need to involve the end user as an effective innovation mechanism (Monteiro Martins and de Souza Bermejo, 2015).

## **SOCIAL INNOVATION IN MEXICO**

Regarding research on social innovation in Mexico, the FCCyT has launched the Social Innovation Collection with three volumes that summarize the state of the art at a national and international level (FCCyT, 2018a, b, c). They include several case studies that analyze actions in areas such as education, the environment or the fight against poverty, which respond to conceptions and methodologies of social innovation. Thus, Bucio-Mendoza *et al.* (2018) describe the case of an irregular settlement in the urban area of Morelia where its inhabitants have designed sustainable and creative solutions to improve the well-being of the ecological community.

On the other hand, Rivera *et al.* (2018) analyze the strategy for creating cooperatives as a method of combating poverty implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Employment Promotion of Mexico City (STyFE) between 2015 and 2017. In the educational field González Fernández (2018) compiles recent experiences of educational innovation through the use of ICTs, while Valencia Aguirre (2018) describes the limitations of tutoring as an innovative strategy in the plans and study programs of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary

Education, and Ruvalcaba Romero *et al.* (2018) analyze an experience of rebuilding the social fabric in a marginalized community in the Guadalajara Metropolitan Area through the development of socio-emotional skills and the promotion of reading among the children of the community.

Apart from this selection of experiences by the FCCyT, education is one of the areas that has most aroused the interest of researchers in Mexico. For example, Martínez Arrona (2015) investigates the possibilities of social innovation as a privileged mechanism to ensure that HEIs contribute to a greater extent to the social development of the country. Another area that has received special attention from specialists in social innovation is that of the solidarity economy and the third sector.

In this sense, Otero (2006) identifies the factors that allowed the consolidation of fair-trade coffee in Chiapas to analyze the possibilities of this type of social innovation as a mechanism to improve the living conditions of small agricultural producers in Mexico. Morales (2014) elaborates on this topic based on the case of the Tlaxcala group of producers Ecoagricultores del Sur, under the collective action approach. For their part, Cano Salgado *et al.* (2012) defend the effectiveness of the cooperative model for the introduction of small-scale social innovations based on the experience of fishing cooperatives in Tabasco.

Another very promising line of research is to analyze to what extent the different support programs for innovation, entrepreneurship and social development foster social innovation. A pioneering study in Mexico in this sense is the work of Pastor (2013), who reviews the funds of the National Microentrepreneur Financing Program (PRONAFIM) to assess whether the supported productive projects stimulate social innovation. The author confirms that neither the foundation nor the operating

rules of the program take social innovation into account, although she concludes that the empowerment and accumulation of social capital achieved by the beneficiaries make them potential agents of social change in their environment.

## **THE SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM IN MEXICO**

Like the rest of the Latin American countries, Mexico is a fertile territory for the implementation of social innovation initiatives given the magnitude of the problems that our societies face (environmental degradation, uncontrolled urbanization, structural poverty, educational backwardness...), which contrasts with limited public resources to deal with them. Faced with this, an alternative resource is to take advantage of the creativity of the Mexican population, long accustomed to generating mechanisms of subsistence and development outside of some institutions weighed down by bureaucratization, inefficiency and corruption. In addition, the emergence in recent years of a promising civil society reinforces the possibilities of social innovation as a lever for the development of the country. In fact, the space in which the different manifestations of civil society intersect in addressing social problems from an open perspective and based on cooperation is what is called the “social innovation ecosystem” (Fernández, 2016). In such ecosystems, the different agents come together to result in social entrepreneurship projects and guide the activity of companies towards social values (Silva and Pedroza, 2015).

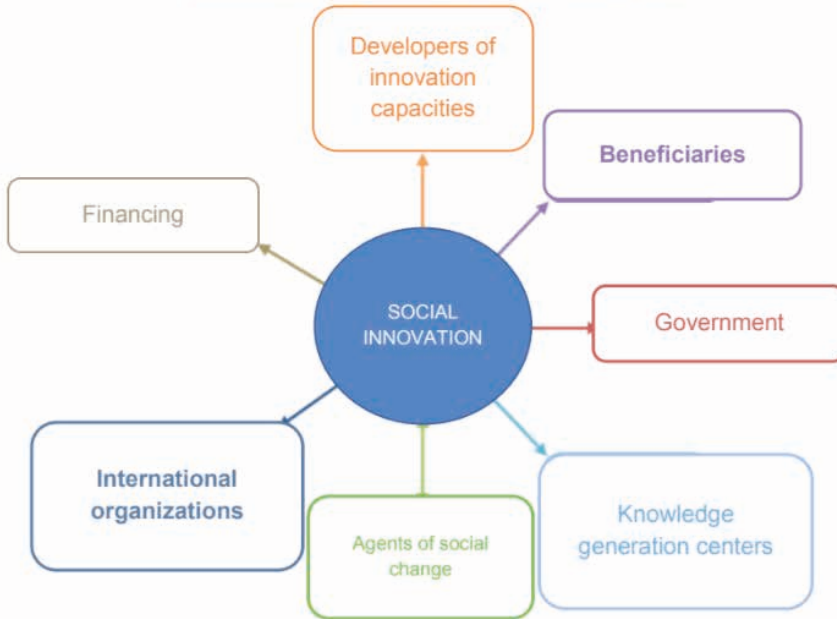
Based on this conception, the classification of agents of a social innovation ecosystem proposed by Silva and Pedroza (2015) is taken up by the FCCyT (2016:43-66), who describe the structure of the Mexican social innovation ecosystem based on the different types of agents that make it up: (1) beneficiaries of

innovation and social entrepreneurship, which includes society in general but particularly some specific segments such as low-income people, marginalized groups, non-profit civil organizations or community centers ; (2) agents of social change such as entrepreneurs and social promoters, the different social projects, companies of a social nature or the so-called Type B companies (hybrid between social and private companies); (3) capacity developers such as incubators and accelerators of social entrepreneurship projects, laboratories, *coworking spaces*, *hubs* and social innovation communities or any development and training initiative on the matter; (4) knowledge generation centers such as universities and research and development centers, but especially innovation centers created by different universities; (5) social innovation financing entities such as venture capital funds and angel investors, institutional funds, crowdfunding initiatives, philanthropic organizations and international financing sources; (6) the different government bodies such as secretariats, decentralized organizations and multilateral organizations. One last element of the ecosystem with a prominent role that the FCCyT identifies are the different contests for the promotion of social innovation initiatives, although we can consider it as a special type of agent of social change.

This way, an ecosystem of social innovation is configured in the following way:



### Structure of the social innovation ecosystem



Source: FCCyT(2016:67)

Among these figures, it is convenient to highlight the agents of social change as a driving factor of the ecosystem, since the rest of the actors act as elements that facilitate or enhance their work (Bloom and Dees, 2008). Among such agents, the FCCyT (*op. cit.*) highlights the case of the Ashoka Foundation, an international organization for the promotion of social entrepreneurship with a presence in Mexico, although it also reports on the activities of the Carlos Slim Foundation in this same sense. Likewise, it is worth noting the work of Enactus México, an international platform that promotes social initiatives among university students, and the Social Enterprise Knowledge Network (SEKN), a network of Ibero-American business schools that generates and disseminates knowledge on business initiatives of a social nature, inclusive and sustainable. All of them directly support entrepreneurs, including social enterprises such as IluMéxico, which provides access to solar energy to rural communities, or Cirklo, a consulting firm specializing in social innovation management.

Regarding the agents that facilitate the development of innovation capacity, the FCCyT study distinguishes between incubators, accelerators, laboratories, coworking spaces and training centers. In the first category, the social incubation work carried out by the Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM) in its different campuses stands out, where training and advice are provided to entrepreneurs, as well as resources for the creation and strengthening of micro-enterprises. This infrastructure is complemented by the Institute for Sustainable Social Development (IDeSS) on the Guadalajara campus (recognized by the Ashoka Foundation as Changemaker Campus), the Entrepreneurship Center for Migrants on the Puebla campus, and the Social Innovation Research Project. Another important actor in terms of incubation and acceleration is the National Institute of the Entrepreneur, through its offer of incubators, accelerators, linking spaces, events and the Entrepreneurial Culture Platform. On the other hand, Mexico annually hosts the Latin American Impact Investment Forum (FLII)

in Mérida, the most important meeting of its kind in the region, thanks to the sponsorship of various public and private agents of the social innovation ecosystem.

Regarding open innovation laboratories, these are spaces that allow different actors to interact in horizontal innovation schemes to test and develop solutions to real problems through co-creation methodologies. An example in our country is the Mexico City Laboratory, an experimental area of the Government of Mexico City where pilot projects supported by a multidisciplinary methodology based on civic innovation and urban creativity are incubated. Another model is the Laboratory for Applied Social Research and Innovation (LIISA), an initiative of the Tijuana artistic collective Torolab that integrates applied science, art, and strategic planning to promote community participation, capacity building, and citizen empowerment. Finally, we must highlight the Economic and Social Innovation Laboratory (LAINES) of the Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, which supports social economy ventures by young people.

Regarding training initiatives in social innovation, it is worth highlighting the Mexican Observatory of University Social Responsibility (OMERSU) in charge of the Latin American Seminar on Social Innovation and University Management, an institution that promotes exchange and debate on sustainable development among HEIs. Latin American. Other training initiatives with a more specific objective are the “Disruption and Social Innovation” workshop offered by the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP) within the framework of its affiliation with the Ashoka Foundation, while the Universidad Anáhuac Sur teaches the Master’s Degree in Social Innovation and Citizen Participation. Likewise, the Innovation and Development Coordination

of the UNAM organizes a Diploma in Social Innovation, while the National Association of Faculties and Schools of Accounting and Administration (ANFECA) inaugurated in 2013 a School of Social Entrepreneurs that houses the Faculty of Accounting and UNAM Administration.

Another key agent in the social innovation ecosystem are the entities that offer financing to the different initiatives. One of the most common formulas for financing social innovation actions is *crowdfunding*, through which resources are collected from the online community. In this sense, the Multilateral Investment Fund (2014) carried out a pioneering analysis of the *crowdfunding* market in Mexico that identifies the necessary factors to accelerate this mechanism in our country. Another formula typical of social innovation is the so-called “impact investment”, defined as an active investment in businesses that generate a high social and/or environmental impact but, at the same time, offer an attractive financial return.

In the case of Mexico, an entity specializing in this type of investment is Spectrum Desarrollo, a civil society founded in 2007 that offers private capital investment management services in SMEs, as well as consulting services in public social development policies.

## RESEARCH ON SOCIAL INNOVATION IN MEXICO

There are Mexican universities that intervene in the field of research on social innovation as generators of knowledge and experience. In terms of academic research, the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM) has a research group specifically oriented to this topic through the Social Innovation Program of the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (ECSH) of the campuses of the Mexico City. The result of this research work has resulted in various projects

that have earned international recognition, such as PROtrash, a social recycling company that in 2016 was a finalist for the prestigious Hult Prize.

Another institutional program is the Economic and Social Innovation Laboratory (LAINES) of the Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, the first university innovation ecosystem in Mexico, while the Ibero of Mexico City promotes an Innovation Laboratory for Citizen Security.

Likewise, the Western Institute of Technology and Higher Studies (ITESO) has the High Impact Social Innovation Center through which projects are promoted from a systemic perspective of social innovation. In addition to the fact that this same institution has a Master's Degree in Strategic Design and Social Innovation, from which social innovation research is encouraged from a systemic approach.

Knowledge is also generated through affiliation to international collaboration networks, such as the Ashoka Foundation, which recognizes two Changemaker Campuses in Mexico, the Guadalajara campus of ITESM, and the University of Monterrey (UdeM). And, they collaborate with six other institutions: the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Banking and Commercial School (EBC), the Technological Institute of Lázaro Cárdenas, the La Salle Morelia University and the Popular Autonomous University of the State of Puebla. For its part, the Emprendia Network, which integrates Ibero-American universities, includes four Mexican universities: IPN, UNAM, ITESM and the University of Guadalajara.

In addition, one of the most effective mechanisms to generate knowledge are digital tools that allow mobilizing and organizing the work of volunteers to produce public goods, which are perfectly adapted to the characteristics and needs of social innovators.

2 [codeforamerica.org](http://codeforamerica.org)

A good example is provided by the activities of *Code for America*, a US non-profit association in which more than 5,000 volunteer software technicians design open source applications to promote transparency, participation and efficiency in local governments.<sup>2</sup>In this case and other similar ones, digital technologies facilitate an open and ubiquitous space for the self-organization of civil society that amplifies the scope of its traditional mobilization mechanisms.

## CONCLUSIONS

The meaning of social innovation is a topic of interest in academic and professional literature, and has been addressed by various authors and disciplines. A review of some of the most outstanding works in this area is presented.

In general, there is no precise definition of "social innovation" due to the variety of meanings that have been given to it, including concepts such as institutional change, social goals, and public good. However, most existing definitions focus on new ideas that have the potential to improve human well-being. Various authors and institutes propose their own working definition. Many of the examples of innovations described here fit with a systemic approach to improving education, the environment, and life expectancy.

The social innovation ecosystem in Mexico is constantly evolving and growing, but some relevant trends can be identified:

1. **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** There is increasing collaboration between the public, private and social sectors to jointly address social and environmental problems and achieve greater impact.
2. **Technology for social good:** The use of technology and innovation to solve social and environmental problems



is a growing trend in Mexico. There are more and more startups and organizations using technology to develop creative and effective solutions.

3. Focus on vulnerable communities: Social innovation solutions are increasingly focused on addressing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities, such as indigenous peoples, women, and migrants.

4. Social and solidarity economy: Greater participation in the social and solidarity economy is being promoted, which seeks to generate jobs and opportunities for people in vulnerable situations and promote social justice.

5. Sustainability and the environment: There is a growing concern for sustainability and the environment in the social innovation ecosystem in Mexico. More and more projects seek to address environmental challenges and promote sustainable practices.

In general, the social innovation ecosystem in Mexico is maturing and diversifying, and there are more and more actors and projects seeking to address the country's social and environmental challenges in innovative and effective ways.

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