

“ECOSYSTEMS AND UNIVERSITIES IN SUPPORT OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: INSIGHTS FROM LATIN AMERICA”

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurs (SEs) contribute with innovative solutions to the most pressing issues in our societies. Despite their significant contributions, however, SEs are known for facing various challenges during their journey. Those challenges include a lack of financial and human resources, managerial skills and specialised knowledge. This dissertation contributes to our knowledge on how ecosystems support SEs and thus help them to overcome the challenges they face. We investigated the different support functions in ecosystems and the role of universities as one prominent supportive actor for SEs.

The ideas in this dissertation are based on a systematic literature review of 258 articles and on qualitative research (95 interviews and 16 focus groups) in Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia. Countries in Latin America were selected for this study due to the high levels of poverty and inequality, and due to the variation in the level of development of supportive ecosystems for SEs. SEs in these countries operate in a context, where informality, lack of social security support and deep social disparities are predominant. These challenges made this setting ideal for exploring SEs in a context where a supportive ecosystem can result in increasing their social impact and thus, positively impacting their local communities.

Based on a systematic literature review, we contribute with a typology of support categories (Fuel, Hardware and DNA) in ecosystems. Based on our qualitative research, we propose three support archetypes (Altruistic, Communitarian and Commercial) of actors in SE ecosystems. In addition, this dissertation offers an overview of different resources and activities that universities can offer in support of SEs.

The different chapters of this dissertation show that support is a fundamental aspect of ecosystems for SEs. The support mobilized by the different actors in ecosystems is instrumental for the different activities and businesses led by SEs, as it provides the possibility to gain resources and knowledge, expand their networks, increase their visibility, and strengthen the businesses. Therefore, we suggest that the support function in ecosystems is a fertile ground for future research. Hence, we advocate for more in-depth studies to continually developing our understanding of the support, which will benefit not only our scholarly community but also the different initiatives of SEs around us.