Virtual Ecosystems in Social Business Incubation

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ABSTRACT

The complexity of today global context hinders the emergence of innovative endeavors; this inner enhancement of capabilities springs out from worldwide entrepreneurs that reveal procuring the best environmental conditions and technologies to nourish new ingenious ventures whether of social or any capitalist profile. Social entrepreneurs noticeably understand that making an intensive use of new technologies engenders innovation and scales impact effects in society; that is why ICTs, and especially the web 2.0, have constituted catalysts to accelerate collaborations for social change: social innovation labs, social e-enterprise incubators, social innovation centers, social innovation park, etc. This article reviews the main experiences of social entrepreneurial empowerments, pinpointing those pioneering projects that exploit new technologies to provide services and get access, with no boundaries, to a significant number of communities. It is structured as follows: it starts analyzing the emergence and development of social enterprise, its encouragement and empowerment. Later, there are examined some key initiatives for social entrepreneurs, more in particular those offered virtually (e-empowerment). It is concluded with a brief summary of final thoughts.

Keywords: Business Incubation, E-Enterprise, Global, Social Entrepreneurs, Social Innovation Centers, Virtual Ecosystems

1. THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

The field of social entrepreneurship has grown exponentially in recent years and has become a social, economic and cultural phenomenon (Pless, 2012). Often evidenced by success stories across the world in diverse fields: health, education, finance, culture, etc. (Huybrechts & Nicholls, 2012). The development and establishment of capitalism as a globally predominant system has left millions of poor people spread out all over the world, especially in the southern hemisphere. Despite international efforts to temper this problem, there is a significant gap so far, between stated expectations and achieved challenges, in different areas such as funding for development, ensuring access to markets, new technologies and essential medicines, as well as sustainability of the debt. The concern is further accentuated because of the global economic crisis in which are embedded many of the most developed economies in the world,

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just those that, so far, earmarked funds and resources of all kinds to reduce inequalities in the world. In this world conjuncture the social enterprise becomes increasingly relevance, if that is possible, in view of the fact that it is now considered a vital part of societal and economic systems, as well as the protagonist of a possible solution to the crisis. As noted by Porter and Kramer (2011):

*Business enterprise must reconnect prosperity with social progress. Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success. It is not on the margin of what companies do but at the center. We believe that it can give rise to the next major transformation of business thinking* (p. 4).

Some consensus exists on the nature of social enterprise, but only at a high level of abstraction (Young & Lecy, 2012). Most scholars and practitioners would ascribe to the notion that social enterprises are organizations that combine a social purpose with pursuit of financial success in the private marketplace. However, this is where the consensus ends. Although social entrepreneurship research is still in an embryonic state and a unified definition is missing (Short et al., 2009), the social entrepreneur would be a person or a collective that develops and implements innovative solutions to create a positive social impact, combining business discipline with innovation perspective; all of this with social purposes (Anderson & Dees, 2007; Dees, 2001; Elkington & Hartigan, 2008). They lead the change in compliance with the principle of the triple bottom line (social, economic, and environmental responsibility) and have the ability not only to make efficient use of available resources, but also to multiply the effectiveness of limited funds (Fundación Bankinter, 2010). Social entrepreneurs are agents that respond to market failures with transformational and financially sustainable innovations, being uniquely positioned to assist any government to deal with the hardest social problems (Wolk, 2008).

The interest in social enterprise is not something new. By 1993, Harvard University launched the *Social Enterprise Initiative*. Since that time, numerous programs emerged from the patronage of universities and private foundations to support training and strategic consulting for social entrepreneurial managers, and that included many non-profit organizations. In Europe, it is also gestated an emerging process for developing social businesses, particularly in countries like Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain; a process characterized by the deficiency in the provision of certain public services and the existence, in these countries, of a significant development of “social economy”. Since then, growth of social sector is undeniable. In the past two decades, the global citizen sector, led by social entrepreneurs, has grown exponentially. Just as the business sector experienced a tremendous spurt in productivity over the last century, the citizen sector is experiencing a similar revolution, with the number and sophistication of citizen organizations increasing dramatically. In this context, social entrepreneurs play a vital role in fostering societal change. In the next years, social entrepreneurs and the social economy, at large, have a key role to play to generate new growth and strengthen the confidence of both citizens and businesses in the Single Market.

In the present article, thus, it is intended as main purpose to take a closer look at some of the most remarkable experiences of today worldwide social entrepreneurial empowerments, denoting those projects that intensify the use of ICTs on reaching and interrelating individuals and communities. It is structured as follows: it starts analyzing the emergence and development of social enterprise, its encouragement and empowerment. Later, there are examined some key initiatives for social entrepreneurs, more in particular those offered virtually (e-empowerment). It is concluded with a concise allusion of possible future research and a brief summary of final thoughts.

Based on the collected information, it has been identified, among the cases studied, certain common patterns of behavior that might constitute a useful starting point to distinguish
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