

The Impact of Social Innovation: Benefits and Opportunities from Brazilian Social Business

O Impacto da Inovação Social: Benefícios e Oportunidades do Negócio Social Brasileiro

Bruno Anicet BITTENCOURT [1](#); Paola Schmitt FIGUEIRÓ [2](#); Soraia SCHUTEL [3](#)

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ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to analyze which benefits and opportunities may be generated by a social business that approximates different social realities. Participatory action research was conducted in a social-purpose organization that focuses on children education on high vulnerability areas in the south of Brazil. The main benefits and opportunities are innovative practices in the territory of Brazilian favela; contributions to the increase in the life quality of children and adults involved in the projects; and adults' access to new forms of work, mainly income access and women's empowerment in the community.

Key words: Social Innovation, Social Business, Brazil, Business Schools.

RESUMO:

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar quais benefícios e oportunidades podem ser gerados por negócios sociais que aproximam diferentes realidades. Foi realizada uma pesquisa ação participante em um negócio social com foco na educação de crianças e jovens que vivem em áreas de alta vulnerabilidade social no sul do Brasil. Os principais benefícios e oportunidades envolvem contribuições que aumentam a qualidade de vida das crianças e dos adultos envolvidos nos projetos analisados; e o acesso dos adultos a novas formas de trabalho, principalmente oportunidades de geração de renda para mulheres a partir do seu empoderamento junto à comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Inovação Social, Negócios Sociais, Brasil, Escolas de Negócios.

1. Introduction

The increasing social inequality that has affected the lives of billions of human beings all over the world requires constant search for alternatives that may generate changes in this reality. In this context, Social Innovation (SI) has come up as a theme that questions structures and policies which have not been able to eliminate recurrent problems, such as world epidemics, social inequality, hunger and weather changes (Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Bignetti, 2011).

Therefore, Social Innovation has been seen as a way of solving social problems (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw & González, 2005) based on a new form of Economics which uses elements of current logics connected with other elements that aim at contributing to social welfare (Bignetti, 2011). It deals with changes in the social context in which new institutions and social systems are created in a logic that moves from the individual to the collective.

In this paper, Social Innovation gets the definition issued by CRISES (*Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales*), located at the business school HEC in Montréal, Canada: "new organizational and institutional forms, new ways of doing things, new social practices, new mechanisms, new approaches and new concepts that give rise to concrete achievements and improvements" (CRISES, 2004, p.00). As a result of this definition, different types of SI may emerge, such as social businesses. Unlike profit organizations, this kind of business is related to the agreement that a social enterprise should combine profitability and socio-environmental objectives (Doherty, Haugh & Lyon., 2014).

This kind of business is even more relevant in countries where social problems reflect large socio-economic disparities, such as Brazil. Regarding extreme poverty, even though its rate had decreased from 7.58% to 3.63% between 2004 and 2012, it increased to 4.03% in 2013 (IPEA, 2015). Out of 16.3 million extremely poor people, 4.8 million have no income at all and 11.4 million get from R\$ 1 to R\$ 70 monthly *per capita*. In this case, children and the youth are much more vulnerable, since they undergo social exclusion directly represented by abandonment, domestic violence, child labor, school dropout rates, violence on the streets, and other problems (for further details, see Raufflet and Amaral, 2006; Fundação Abrinq, 2016).

Besides, the current economic crisis in Brazil had led to an increase in its unemployment rate, which was about 10% in 2015. In the south of Brazil, the rate was about 6% that year, the highest one in that region since 2012 (IBGE, 2015). In this context, social initiatives have been flourishing, mainly as business opportunities. Artemisia, a non-profit national organization that deals with the acceleration of impact businesses, has raised R\$ 40.6 million for 69 businesses in the last 4 years. However, the exact number of businesses with this profile in Brazil is unknown; the estimate is that there is R\$ 250 million available in funds for impact investments in the country (Artemisia, 2015).

The focus of this study is a Brazilian social-purpose organization named *Escola Convexo*. This social business, which aimed at stimulating leadership by intertwining different realities, was developed in 2013 in a public school in a *favela* (slum) in Porto Alegre, a city located in the south of Brazil. Weekly meetings held in that school aimed at solving problems by empowering 7-17-year-old students and their community through the development of entrepreneurship, communication and logical thinking skills. In order to reach this target, different kinds of projects were carried out with different stakeholders and realities, such as a public high school whose students lived in high social vulnerability conditions. Their families, volunteers, private companies, universities and the whole community were also involved.

Therefore, the question that guided this study was "which benefits and opportunities may be generated by a social business that approximates different social realities?" To find its answer, a participatory action research was conducted in *Escola Convexo*, which involved three projects carried out with a community, universities and volunteers.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first deals with theoretical discussions on Social Innovation and Social Business. The second describes methodological procedures. The third

comprises the discussion and the analysis of the results, which are followed by some final remarks.

2. Social Innovation

There are different conceptual approaches related to social innovation; some of them even follow distinct ways (Bignetti, 2011). Taylor's pioneering study (1970) defined social innovation as new ways of doing social intervention. According to Cloutier (2003), social innovation, a new answer to an unsatisfactory social situation, has focused on people's and communities' welfare; it defines itself as an action and long lasting change that aims at developing individuals, territories or businesses. Innovation for inclusive growth is also defined as "the development and implementation of new ideas which aspire to create opportunities that enhance social and economic well-being for disenfranchised members of society" (George, MacGahan & Prabhu, 2012, p.663).

In other words, social innovation is a socially acknowledged answer which aims at triggering social change by meeting human needs which have not been met by the market in its classic way, at promoting social inclusion and at providing professional education actors who are subject to social exclusion (André and Abreu, 2006). Therefore, social businesses, the theme of the next section, may result from social innovations. According to Cajaiba-Santana (2014), social innovation deals with new collective practices: "social innovations are new social practices created from collective, intentional and goal-oriented actions aiming at promoting social change through the reconfiguration of how social goals are accomplished" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p.44).

Moulaert *et. al* (2005) conceptualize social innovation as a tool that helps urban development so as to meet human needs through innovations in community relations. Westley (2008) sees social innovation as an initiative that deeply changes routines, resource flows and authorities or beliefs in a social system.

CRISES - *Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales*, at HEC, Montréal, Canada, sees the theme as a process in which social actors act in order to meet human needs through solutions that aim at changing social relations (CRISES, 2014). The approach of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* is that social innovation is a process of creating new solutions for social problems in an efficient and sustainable way so that value can be aggregated to the society (Bignetti, 2011; Maurer, Marquesan & Nunes, 2010). RQIS - *Le Réseau Québécois en Innovation Sociale* has defined social innovation as an intervention approach in which innovative problem-solving products and services are actually applied (Maurer *et al.*, 2010).

Three main pillars are related to social innovation: territory, life conditions and work/job. The territory is related to the social actors and their innovative practices in the places where they happen whereas life conditions relate to the life quality of people who get the benefits of the innovation. Work/job refers to the organizational scope and other issues related to regulations, jobs and work organization (CRISES, 2014).

Regarding the theoretical construction of social innovation, there are two main perspectives which focus on the individual, the innovation agent, and on the structure. In this case, social innovation would happen in an external structural context (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Since the author believes that social innovation is based on practices, he defends the importance of analysing the structures that enable agents to act. Thus, it means both issues go together, rather than composing a dichotomy. Besides, understanding the agents' roles, their practices and the impacts on the environment where they are acting is relevant to develop social innovation. Social innovation comprises processes of collective problem solving; as a result, learning happens collectively (Bignetti, 2011). Results depend on the trajectory of every individual and his/her potential to carry out social changes (Cloutier, 2003). In addition, it should be highlighted that the characteristics of social innovation favor its diffusion and replication in other communities (Bignetti, 2011). Although the fields of social and open

innovation have thus far remained somewhat distinct, it is suggested that adoption of openness with regards to solving societal problems is a promising avenue for future research and practice (Chalmers, 2012).

According to Moulaert *et al.* (2005), the dynamics of innovation in the local level comprises agents and institutions, besides their articulation in different levels. Mozzato and Bitencourt (2014) highlight cooperation as a key process for integrating different organizations based on a set of elements that are both structural (structured and unstructured social spaces) and relational (learning spaces based on interaction). Westley (2008) states that, to cause impact, social innovation needs several actors – working together or separately – to actually get concrete actions and impact. Taking into account that social innovation is a concept related to the resolution of social problems, certain issues, such as opportunity, market and political demands, besides the cultural context, must be considered.

Some barriers are found regarding the scaling-up of social innovation, such as lack of a clear and shared view of innovation amongst stakeholders, inadequate funding models, staff instability and discontinuity regarding its work, lack of leadership and commitment, professional resistance and risk-adverse governments and organizations (Brown, 2003; Kohli and Mulgan, 2010; Baginsky *et al.*, 2011 *apud* Brown, 2015). Therefore, it is understood that communication with stakeholders, funding, staff, leadership and the environment are important to trigger and develop social innovation.

One of the ways to exert social innovation and generate solutions which can create social value is a social business, the theme that is discussed below. It stood out as Muhammad Yunus got the Nobel Prize, due to the foundation of the Grameen Bank, a microcredit institution which aims at mitigating extreme poverty in emergent countries.

3. Social Business as a type of Social Innovation

Social businesses have got more attention from both academic and executive areas. It is a new form of business that can be placed somewhere between a profit-maximizing organization and a non-profit one, but differs from profit-maximizing enterprises in its objectives (Yunus and Weber 2007; Yunus, Moingeon & Lehmann-Ortega 2010). Unlike a profit organization, a social business is related to the agreement that a social enterprise should combine profitability and socio-environmental objectives (Doherty *et al.*, 2014). Thus, the core business is related to initiatives, such as the sale of goods or services; simultaneously; it seeks for social impact through its activities.

Profit seeking is not the main focus of these organizations; it is merely necessary for survival (Iizuka, Varela & Larroudé, 2015). “The managerial mindset must be the same as a business: when you are running a social business, you think and work differently than if you were running a charity, even though your objective is different from a profit-maximizing company” (Yunus *et al.*, 2010, p.310).

Literature points out different definitions of social business. On one hand, Muhammad Yunus understands that social businesses should generate wealth to be reinvested in business and that gains should be collective. Besides, social businesses have to cover full operational costs and their owners are entitled to recover their investments, but it is more cause- than profit-driven (Yunus *et al.*, 2010). Thus, “a social business is designed and operated just like a ‘regular’ business enterprise, (...) but its primary purpose is to serve the society and improve the lot of the poor” (Yunus *et al.*, 2010, p.311).

On the other hand, the North-American perspective tends to understand social businesses as a traditional private corporation, whose consumers are the population at the bottom of the pyramid (Iizuka, Varela & Larroudé, 2015). The main point they have in common is that social businesses often build partnerships with different types of organizations and stakeholders, and collaboration between them is essential to make business happen.

This study adopts Yunus’ approach, which highlights that, to create a social business, a new

logic must be created. "It is not simply doing another business. You belong to a completely new logical structure" (Kickul, Terjesen, Bacq & Grissiths, 2012, p.457). Therefore, in order to create a social business, social managers should learn the new logic. Muhammad Yunus recommends that education of the next generation of social innovators should teach that business can be created without interest in making money and profit, which is the dominant business logic.

Civic commitments, community learning experiences, holistic learning, integration of knowledge and experiences from different areas, problem-solving process in society should be considered in the education for social business (Kickul *et al*, 2012). Exposing students to the field can help them to develop awareness and insights to better understand how to address social issues, to operate a social business, to use resources and to have a clear view of the mission of the enterprise (Elmes, Jiusto, Whiteman, Hersh & Guthey, 2012).

Educating future social managers is a contribution to spread the new model of social business management and its values. As Simanis and Hart (2009) stated, the inspiration that led to the Grameen Bank came from the personal bond of Yunus with the Bangladeshi farmers who live in the village adjacent to Yunus' home and the local university. To contribute with social development, social entrepreneurs use new business models or organizational structures and can have strategic alliances with corporations, NGOs and governments in order to achieve their goals (Raufflet, Berranger & Aguilar-Platas, 2009). In sum, the social entrepreneur's role is fundamental in social business.

Yunus knew the communities' reality and understood their needs. "That shared vision came into focus as Yunus and the villagers spent time together as a community: in the rice fields in farming projects, in afternoon conversations at roadside tea stalls, and in late-evening dinners and debates" (Simanis and Hart, 2009, p.77). According to Simanis and Hart (2009, p.83), "innovation is not enabled by new relationships; it is the relationship itself".

In addition, Choi and Majumdar (2014) observed a close correlation among these concepts: social innovation, creation of social value, social entrepreneur, social entrepreneurship organization and market orientation. They are some of the basic characteristics of social entrepreneurship. Therefore, there is an intrinsic relation among social entrepreneur, social business and social innovation.

The importance of social managers and of the need to improve this kind of education in Business schools is clear, especially in emergent countries with serious social problems. In the case of Brazil, there will be no continuous sustainable and safe development if socioeconomic exclusion is not eliminated (Santana, Volpi & Fonseca, 2015). Social business can be very helpful in this society in transition. Artemisia (2015) – the pioneering non-profit organization which funds business of social impact in Brazil – believes that social businesses are the ones that are able to change Brazil with profit business and with the potential to assist thousands of people on a low income.

Therefore, more and more social business and social entrepreneurs who are able to solve social issues are needed in emergent countries. In the next sections, a Brazilian social business oriented to children education and its impact on the community where they live will be described, as well the interactions with Business Management students and the founding of a cooperative.

4. Method

In order to answer the research question, participatory action research was used as a method, since it assumes the implementation of a transforming action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007). In this method, there is no separation between subject and object, because respondents are both subjects of the research and collaborative participants in its construction. In addition, it intertwines theory and practice, because it takes the theory to the field and then performs an action together with the respondents (Brandão, 1984; Freire, 1982; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007; Thiollent, 2005).

Aspects of social transformation are also involved, because all participants of the research learn together. Moreover, there is the emancipatory characteristic: once respondents are aware of their situation, they may start to act more critically toward the environment where they are situated (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007). In addition, participatory action research has strong social commitment with the researcher, who is deeply involved in the research topic and acts in accordance with the values that s/he shares with respondents (Brandão, 1984).

In this study, three researchers are the co-founders of the projects developed by the social business called *Escola Convexo* and two of them are professors at universities which participated, directly or indirectly, in projects that are discussed in this paper. This involvement facilitates the process of planning, implementing and monitoring the activities. Thus, the method of data collection was based on the active participation of researchers throughout the process. Besides, testimonies given by nine different stakeholders (professors, graduate and undergraduate students, volunteers, a company director, a teacher and students from *Escola Convexo* and a student's mother), as well as secondary data, were used. The research was carried out between April and December, 2015. The *Escola Convexo* is described in the next item.

5. Social Business: *Escola Convexo*

Escola Convexo is a social business that aims at stimulating leadership by intertwining different realities. The business was developed in the last two years; meetings were held once a week, after/before the regular school period, in a public school located in a slum in Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. It aims at solving local problems by empowering 7-17-year-old students through the development of entrepreneurship, communication and logical thinking skills. In this process, fifty students that participated in *Escola Convexo* ended up involving other students, teachers, directors, parents and the whole community, besides the mentors and other people who provided funds and supported the project financially and affectively.

Students from *Escola Convexo* chose a real problem in their school or community and learned how to investigate and take decisions by defining ways and building new concepts to solve it. The methodology is supported by three pillars: communication, logics and entrepreneurship. Students improve their educational levels since they learn contents in Portuguese and Mathematics based on their everyday activities and life. Besides, the methodology is carried out according to four movements: the identification of a problem, its transformation into an opportunity, the construction of a project and the development of businesses. Inside the classroom, students are divided into five thematic groups according to their competences: creativity, welfare, sustainability, technology and network.

In this context, the more *Escola Convexo* activities are developed, the more social demands show up. To meet those demands, new projects come up. This paper describes the analysis of three projects that were carried out with the collaboration of stakeholders, student-members of the *Escola Convexo*, students' mothers, graduate and undergraduate students, teachers, managers and volunteers. Table 1 shows the summary of each project and its participants. Details and discussions about the projects are in the section results.

Table 1 – Three projects from *Escola Convexo*

Projects	Central idea	Stakeholders
1) Women's Cooperative	Cooperative of <i>Convexo</i> students' mothers, aiming at generating income for their families.	<i>Convexo</i> students Students' mothers Private company

2) Higher Education	Interaction among Business Management students, <i>Convexo</i> students and students' mothers to help create the cooperative.	<i>Convexo</i> students Students' mothers Universities Professors Graduate and undergraduate students
3) Fashion and Lives	Professional education and empowerment of women in embroidery workshops and discussion groups.	<i>Convexo</i> students Students' mothers Volunteers

Data analysis was based on group discussion sessions among researchers, associated with the crossing of the data from the testimonies and secondary data. The steps of the research followed Kemmis and McTaggart's proposal (2007): Plan; Act and Observe; Reflect. **Plan** refers to the collection of all the necessary data and the subsequent planning of the action that will be performed. **Act and Observe** refers to the moment of the action itself, which must be carefully performed in order to produce a great deal of data that will serve as food for thought. **Reflect** refers to the help given to respondents to think about the performed action and understand what has emerged from the action; if necessary, input should be provided to plan the new action. The next section provides the description and the analysis of the results, which were obtained while the steps mentioned above were followed.

6. Results

This section describes and analyzes the results of each project, based on the steps mentioned in the section Method (Plan; Act and Observe; Reflect).

Plan

The planning step comprises the organization that precedes the implementation of the actions. Since *Escola Convexo* is a social business that aims at developing leadership by intertwining different realities, it offers different activities to students before or after their regular school hours. The three projects carried out by this study intend to generate benefits to all people involved. This item aims at explaining how each project came up.

Project 1: at the beginning of 2015, *Escola Convexo* students identified through a research that, in the community where they live, women's unemployment and their lack of income was a relevant problem. This problem was identified after students interviewed 91 women who live in the community. An opportunity arose with one of the mentors who owns a vegan restaurant and is a member of a vegan and vegetarian restaurant chain in Porto Alegre: the possibility of creating a cooperative which could aromatize olive oil to be sold to restaurants.



Figure 1 – Project 1: Students from Escola Convexo interview residents in the community

Therefore, this project became the focus of the work carried out by *Escola Convexo*, since students began to build the framework of this cooperative and to involve mothers and other community dwellers. The main goal was to make the cooperative generate the minimum wage to twenty women who take part in the project, since social business should focus on low income, according to Artemisia (2015). This context led to the need to involve people from different realities in order to build a collaborative solution to solve a real problem.

Project 2: The process of implementing the cooperative led to the participants' need for more knowledge of management. Therefore, Project 2 was designed to include undergraduate and graduate Business Management students from two universities located in the region. It aimed at enabling students and their mothers to get in touch with people who study and/or work in the management area. Besides, activities were planned so as to develop entrepreneurship and collaboration as a result of the example and the exchange of ideas.



Figure 2 – Project 2: Interaction between students from Escola Convexo and Business Management students.

Project 3: beyond management development, a group of volunteers was interested in contributing to the cooperative by working on those mothers' personal development. As a result, Project 3 dealt with the women's self-esteem and empowerment, issues which complement the activities related to their income. In this case, meetings were held with students and their mothers – who took part in the cooperative (Project 1) – before or after their regular schools hours, to discuss themes related to the female universe. Activities of each project are described in the following section.



Figure 3 – Project 3: Mothers learning about handicraft with volunteers

Act and Observe

This section describes the processes that compose each project and their outcomes in details.

Project 1: women's cooperative

The first project refers to the construction of a cooperative with *Convexo* students' mothers. As mentioned before, this initiative came up as a way to solve the problem related to these women's lack of income. The development of the project was carried out in the meetings help by *Escola Convexo*: students were involved, from the identification of the problem to the implementation of the solution, i. e., the opening of the cooperative. In this case, they worked with a food company, which was in charge of sharing technical and financial knowledge needed for the development of the first product. Besides, students were responsible for engaging their mothers in the activity.

Along the process of Project 1, students learned about theories and tools of entrepreneurship while developing competences regarding communication and logics. At the same time, the business partner warned the people involved in the project that the product should have easy operation and high aggregated value in order to stimulate those mothers' participation. The chosen product was aromatized olive oil; participants had to aromatize the oil and wrap the final product. At first, several mothers showed interest but only two of them actually took on the challenge.

From then on, mothers began to take part in the meetings held by *Escola Convexo*. They accompanied the students in market surveys, business modeling and action planning. The work was marked by collectivism, i. e., every actor got involved and contributed to the project with

his/her knowledge. The project also had some concern regarding the commitment of the community, a fact that was observed when the choice of the scents of the first products was based on the result of a degustation and election carried out by members of the community who met in the school to give their opinions.

The first products were yielded in the school kitchen: 200 bottles of olive oil with three scents – fine herbs, lemon and garlic – chosen by the community. The business partner not only took part in most meetings and provided technical and operational support, but also raised the initial funds by organizing a charity lunch in their restaurant. Besides, it enabled the product to be sold there and recommended other partners that could also sell the product.



Figure 4 – A mother working at the cooperative



Figure 5 – Aromatized olive oils produced by the women's cooperative

At the beginning of 2016, the cooperative had already begun to produce the second batch of olive oil bottles and developed other partnerships and products, such as chocolate. It shows the continuity and evolution of the project but there is much to be done so that its initial goal – income generation for 20 women – may be reached. Project 2, which is described below, complements Project 1.

Project 2: higher education and *Escola Convexo*

This project originated from Project 1. The members of *Escola Convexo* and the mothers involved in the implementation of the cooperative realized the need for technical assistance, mainly related to management areas. Thus, two universities and their management programs were invited to participate. Firstly, undergraduate students' participation, which lasted 6 hours, was conducted on May 8th, 2015. Secondly, graduate students' participation, which lasted 3 hours, was carried out on June 26th, 2015. In both cases, based on problem-solving activities, the management students interacted with the students from *Escola Convexo* and with other actors involved in the process, e.g., school principals and students' mothers.

The first interaction session was carried out with undergraduate students who prepared tasks

that were related to financial education, sustainability and consumption. They were advised by an expert in financial education for children. Three tasks, which involved dynamics, recycling, thinking about priorities and consumption were developed with more than 120 children and integrated 30 undergraduate students in the *Escola Convexo*.

Participants were divided into three groups and allocated two rooms to develop a set of tasks that dealt with contents, such as currency, importance and awareness of money, financial mathematics and sustainability. From the beginning, there was clearly close rapport among all people involved, mainly because the undergraduate students prepared tasks that were meaningful to the students.

The second interaction session was carried out by Master's program students with *Convexo* students and their mothers. In a practical activity, participants were divided into work groups to assist in the founding of the cooperative. The purpose of this task was to think of business development. There was a type of consultancy on the structure that was required to manufacture the products, including materials and the necessary partnerships.

Firstly, everyone sat in a circle and introduced him/herself by briefly talking about his/her personal characteristics, thus fostering a greater connection among the participants. After that, a challenge was posed: it consisted of a playful activity, a kind of board in which each step involved a different aspect of the planning and founding of the cooperative. The idea was that the MBA students should provide advice in each step. For this purpose, they were divided according to their abilities in different areas (production, people management and marketing).

The collective exchange of ideas was very intense and brought together different views on the same theme. Although the participants were divided into different fields for the resolution of various problems, there was clearly a high sense of teamwork. At particular moments, there was interaction among members of different groups. At the end, each group presented its solutions and sought solutions together.

It was observed that the sharing process that went on among the people involved in the project gave them managerial subsidies to (re)think the development of the cooperative. The next project, whose details are described in the next item, also complements Project 1.

Project 3: fashion and lives

This project also resulted from Project 1. Besides the need for income generation and technical knowledge of business, more personal work with the students' mothers was needed. Since some mothers had not shown any interest in the production of aromatized olive oil, other possibilities had to be found. Therefore, a project which could empower women in the community and increase their self-esteem, together with a new opportunity to generate income, was then planned.

The idea was developed by a group of women volunteers who took part in the network of coordinators and researchers who worked on the projects. This fact reinforces what Simanis and Hart (2009) stated: "innovation is not enabled by new relationships; it is the relationship" (Simanis and Hart, 2009, p.83). One of the volunteers, who is a stylist, pointed out the specific need for dressmakers able to embroider wedding dresses and evening gowns. As a result, the Project Fashion and Lives connected the development of textile abilities and the need for women's empowerment. It aimed at teaching embroidery techniques to women and at promoting group discussions about several themes related to the female universe.

After the planning meetings with the developers of the project, the first meeting was held in October 2015 with five mothers while their children were attending regular classes. Firstly, they introduced themselves and told their history of life, strengths and dreams; these moments created bonds among them. Afterwards, they watched a motivational video and took part in the first embroidery workshop. These women got very enthusiastic with the new learning experience and the possibility of generating income.

The second meeting was held in December. Participants watched a video of the *Escola de Você*,

a Brazilian online education project which aims at women's empowerment. It has already reached more than 120 thousand students all over the country and one of its partners is the Inter-American Development Bank. The video, which shows a situation that is quite common in the female universe, enabled women to discuss self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, female autonomy, the importance of jobs and income, besides the influence of women on children education.

These meetings are supposed to be periodic and the catalysts of those women's dreams. The main goal is to make participants feel safer towards their professional and personal objectives so that they may be hired by the stylist. The next section describes the reflection generated from the projects.

Reflect

It may be pointed out that the projects had surprising results, considering the importance of the benefits that were obtained. The starting point of all activities was the fact that students from the *Escola Convexo* identified a very common social demand in poor realities: the need for income generation for women. Many cannot leave their homes because there are not enough public day care centers to take care of their children. Project 1 was implemented to think of solutions for this core problem and enable women to have access to income in their community. The network of actors who were interested in supporting the students' mothers' cooperative made it come true. Nowadays, the production and commercialization of aromatized olive oil gave some families the perspective of a better future.

It should be pointed out that the method applied to this study enabled researchers to feel the enthusiasm and the commitment of the people involved in the project. In general, the interaction and partnership between *Escola Convexo* and its stakeholders enabled the development of participants' socio-emotional skills, e.g., empathy, collaboration, awareness and respect. Firstly, making students from *Escola Convexo* and their mothers interact with professors, Business Management students and managers (projects 1 and 2) enabled them to develop a more entrepreneurial view regarding the cooperative, since they could see possibilities of improvement in financial, commercial and operational areas. Besides, the experience encouraged them because they felt they had real support.

Secondly, especially when Business Management students and managers (Projects 1 and 2) become acquainted with reality, it was possible to stimulate the change of their worldviews and the development of professionals that are aware of new ways and a new logic of doing business. Another point that should be highlighted is the fact that the participants realized that they were also learning while teaching (Project 2) and sharing their abilities (Project 3). Table 2 shows excerpts of some participants' testimonies.

Table 2 – Respondents' Testimonies

<p>"It was an experience and a learning opportunity that I and my students are going to remember for the rest of our lives. An opportunity to consider people around us and reflect on life, but it's a reflection that allows you to move towards bigger dreams and transform people's lives".</p>	
<p>"[...] the results went far beyond: an encounter of two worlds, where one learns from the other; a chance to challenge preconceptions, make the most of the opportunities that we have and, above all, a deep human connection and plenty of affection and gratitude. Having future managers get acquainted with reality enables reflections and personal changes that are necessary to build better business and improve Brazil".</p>	<p>Professors (Project 2)</p>
<p>"A few hours of intense work became seconds when we saw that the children, the young people and the parents were keen on using the management tools and highly</p>	

<p>motivated to change their reality. And the experience did not have such effect only on them, but also on me and certainly on many of my colleagues from the MBA program".</p>	<p>Graduate students (Project 2)</p>
<p>"Sharing ideas and realities makes a difference and turns divergence into convergence, causing what is different to become unique and changing a difficult reality into an opportunity for effective change".</p>	
<p>"We stepped out of our comfort zone, our reality, and we were able to experience a completely different reality and challenge our preconceptions. We thought that we were going to teach, but we ended up learning a lot, too. It is an exchange of experiences that I will remember for the rest of my life".</p>	<p>Undergraduate student (Project 2)</p>
<p>"We've always wanted to invest in a social project but we didn't want it to be something punctual, but with continuity. With the cooperative, we got it faster that we thought it would be."</p> <p>"What we donated most was energy, rather than money or anything; it was energy and time to articulate the right people."</p>	<p>Company (Project 1)</p>
<p>"It was very grateful: mothers and two adolescents got into it since the introduction, they told their histories of life and, little by little, we could start a discussion about their qualities. We talked about people who inspire us and they told us incredible stories. We learned a lot with them. The part of fashion was great."</p>	<p>Volunteer (Project 3)</p>
<p>"This model allows the children to open up to learning, which does not happen only in the classroom, but also when these children interact with other people, with the world, on a daily basis. This increases their self-esteem and their desire for change".</p>	<p>Teacher from <i>Convexo School</i></p>
<p>"The changes are also perceived in their homes. My daughter is more closely connected with our family. She helps around the house more often. Her interaction with her classmates has also improved".</p>	<p>Student's mother</p>
<p>"Some people came over to help the Cooperative. We told them about <i>Escola Convexo</i> and after that we showed them data from the survey that we made in the community. We had a sort of a racing game on a board placed on the floor. We had to include the problems/obstacles that the cooperative may have to face. It was very nice, I love to meet new people and enjoy being at <i>Convexo</i>".</p>	<p>Student from <i>Convexo School</i></p>

In general, the empowerment generated by the projects happened to all participants. Testimonies showed that everyone felt important with the presence of each other. They all clearly felt as participants in a process of major change and saw the interactions as a possibility of promoting changes in the social sphere. Besides, Business Management students (Project 2) experienced what a social businesses, besides studying it theoretically. Experiential learning, solving society's problems and emerging in the field (Kickul *et al.*, 2012; Elmes *et al.*, 2012) not only reinforce the concepts studied in management classes but also help to make students internalize their consequences in the community and in people's lives.

Projects were observed to lead to several benefits; many had been considered intangible and unexpected. Table 3 shows a summary of the opportunities and benefits perceived and reached by each project.

Table 3 – Opportunities and benefits of the projects

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	Opportunities	Benefits
Project 1	Generate income for women; Develop leadership; Take part in the Corporative Social Responsibility Project; Approximate families, community and school.	Resolution of a community problem; Professional education of young students and their mothers; Development of a new product; Mothers and children sharing the same project.
Project 2	Practice new teaching methods; Approximate different socioeconomic realities; Develop knowledge of management; Align theory and practice.	Learning through experience; Development of socio-emotional competences (empathy, responsibility and collaboration); Increase in confidence to develop the cooperative; Sense given to the content under study.
Project 3	Qualified labor force; Women's empowerment; Take part in a social project aiming at human development.	Embroidery learning (professional education of new work); Increase in self-esteem and self-knowledge; Altruism and empathy; Interaction among different worlds and awareness of similar female problems, regardless of social classes.

Altogether, as a result of the social innovation under study, an array of opportunities was generated and its different actors could notice value in their participation. In general, those opportunities generated benefits in individual, organizational and social levels. Therefore, it may be noticed that, in social innovation which connects different realities, results go beyond expected problem solving processes. In fact, it fosters distinct opportunities and benefits.

7. Final Remarks

To answer the question "which benefits and opportunities may be generated by a social business that approximates different social realities?" a participatory action research was conducted in a social-purpose organization, called *Escola Convexo*, which developed three projects. The research method was chosen to enable researchers to experience personal changes by participating in each project directly and indirectly.

Project 1 resulted from the identification of the community demand and originated two additional projects, mainly because learning in social innovation happens collectively (Bignetti, 2011). After the women's cooperative was planned, new demands came up and new partnerships developed. Activities and proposals have happened in an organic and natural way and have aimed at solving social problems. However, benefits were visible to all people involved in the projects. Some had been expected but others were generated exponentially, but naturally and unexpectedly, as described in the item Reflect.

Furthermore, the issue that joins the projects is the interaction among different people, a characteristic of social innovation since it requires several actors (Westley, 2008) with distinct interests. Each person's level of commitment depends on his/her abilities and knowledge. Participants felt as if they were part of a larger process of social change and their commitment

was directly proportional to the meaning certain activity represented to each one. Value was perceived and shared by all participants, regardless of the project they took part in.

All projects were made possible due to the opening and encouragement offered by stakeholders and their institutions, as well as the availability and interest of *Escola Convexo* whose essence is to bring together different worlds and generate change in people by solving problems. Thus, results of the *Escola Convexo* are due to adequate communication with stakeholders, its leaders' and staff's commitment (Brown, 2003; Kohli and Mulgan, 2010; Baginsky *et al.*, 2011 *apud* Brown, 2015), characteristics which enabled the beginning of the scaling-up of social innovation.

It may also be observed that *Escola Convexo* as a social business is based on three pillars of social innovation: territory, life conditions and work/job (CRISES, 2014). In the first pillar, *Convexo School* stimulates innovative practices in the territory of high economic-social-environmental vulnerability, contributing to the second pillar of social innovation – the increase in the *life quality* of children and adults involved in the projects. In the third pillar, *Convexo School* contributes to adults' access to new forms of *work and jobs*, mainly income access and women's empowerment in the community. It's important to highlight that many social business, as Grameen Bank, in order to alleviate poverty are oriented to women empowerment and access to income.

Interactions and partnerships enabled participants to develop socio-emotional skills such as empathy, collaboration, awareness and respect, besides learning to live with diversity. These benefits for Business Management students, for example, can stimulate changes in their worldviews and the development of future managers who get aware of new ways and a new logic of doing business. Thus, improving this kind of education in business schools gets increasingly important as a way to contribute to hard social problems.

The challenge of this study was to reconcile interests among actors who work in so different spheres. However, this approach and implementation of ideas is feasible when people have a common purpose. Further studies should expand this theme to other social businesses and involve other stakeholders, such as the government.

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1. MsC Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul/Brazil (UFRGS). Email: brunobittencourt@gmail.com

2. PhD University Feevale/Brazil. Email: paolaadm@gmail.com

3. PhD University Unisinos/Brazil. Email: soraiaschutel@gmail.com

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