

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In Latin America and the Caribbean, a very active civil society has been able to bring about much social innovation at the local level, in order to face challenges related to poverty, inequality and social exclusion. However, challenges remain in scaling up and replicating successful initiatives.

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SEEKING TO IMPROVE THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE POPULATION

Latin America and the Caribbean are a hotbed of social innovation. This is due, in part, to the fact that the region, one of the most unequal on the planet, has not yet been able to establish genuine welfare states. Different actors, including civil society, local communities and, at times, local governments, have been very creative in devising initiatives to face social and developmental problems which had not been solved, or which had partial solutions that left aside a large share of the population, especially the poorest. Innovative solutions have thus been found to tackle issues like income generation, mother and child mortality, school desertion and low levels of learning, and intra-family violence [1]. However, the main goal of these initiatives was never to be innovative, but rather to improve the living conditions of the population.

LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons can be drawn by analyzing the characteristics of social innovation in the region [2]. Firstly, it is key that local communities are in the driving seat, a point that unfortunately is not yet understood by some international organizations and development agencies. Solutions have to be built together with the community, even when trying to implement a proven model that has been developed in places with a similar context. The microfinance project “Strengthening Popular Finances” developed since 2004 by the Ecuadorian Populorum Progressio Fund (FEPP) in several provinces of Ecuador is an excellent example of long-term commitment to communities, which led to the active participation and empowerment of local partners. Instead of FEPP offering financial intermediation, communities undertook the management of microfinance institutions, with the understanding that they are subjects of their own local

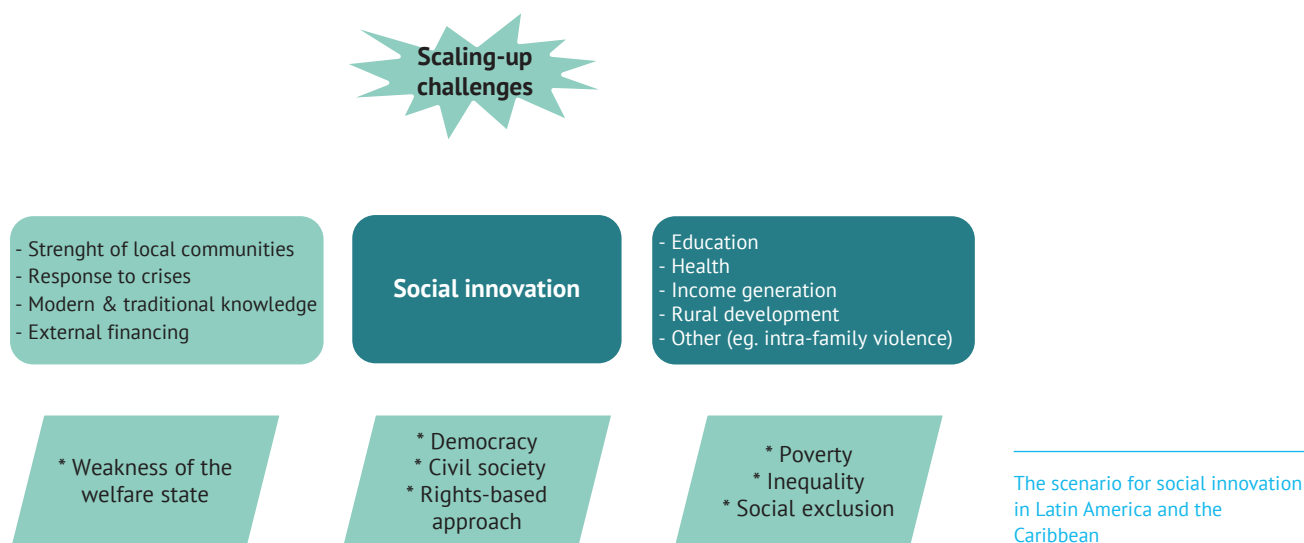
development. Similarly, the “Lèt Agogo” (“Lots of Milk”, in Creole) project in Haiti is another example of active and long-lasting participation by local communities. In 2001, local micro milk producers, with the support of the NGO Veterimed, organized a cooperative system which allows

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them to process and sell dairy products, contributing to overcome poverty. Since 2007, Lèt Agogo has been supplying several rural schools in the Limonade an Cap Haitien area.

Secondly, major social innovations have been adopted during crises, such as the one Argentina underwent in the early 2000s. Community leaders are the firsts to actively seek solutions to the social and economic consequences of crises, frequently with the support of local administrations, professionals and civil society organizations. This is the case with the education project “Storytelling Grandmothers”, an initiative in which older volunteers read books to children. This project took place in the Province of Chaco, Argentina, which suffered heavily from the consequences of the 2001-2002 crisis, not only in terms of higher levels of poverty but also of worsening reading habits [3].

Thirdly, success is often achieved thanks to the development of synergies between modern and traditional –even ancestral– knowledge. Indigenous people’s knowledge is particularly valuable, as demonstrated by the fact that they have been able to preserve natural resources better than anybody else. The “Student Lodging with Families” project in Bolivia, which allows children living in remote rural areas to attend school



by providing lodging at host families, was inspired by the Aymara ancestral custom of Utawawa. While in Utawawa families that live far from school send their children to live with a relative or friend and in exchange the child works, this project innovated by eliminating child labor [4].

Fourthly, external financing has proven key in most cases, under the condition that those providing the financing do not require very short-term results and understand that innovations have their own development and consolidation cycle, which in the region is of at least five years.

Lastly, developing income generation activities has proven less difficult than creating formal employment. As a consequence, many public programs have fostered the development of micro and small enterprises as a tool to reduce poverty. However, two points must be kept in mind: i) while production makes sense at the level of individual enterprises, associative practices have proved much more successful – and need to be fostered – in relation to the purchase of inputs (lowering the buying prices of raw materials and machinery), technical assistance and marketing; and ii) it is important to start from the labor capacities already established in the target population, rather than necessarily teaching new professions.

WHY AREN'T MOST INNOVATIONS GENERATED BY GOVERNMENTS?

With the exception of municipalities, most social innovations in Latin America and the Caribbean are not generated at the government level. On the one hand, innovation implies a trial and error process that carries the risk of failure. Failure

has high political costs and additionally it can lead to judicial processes. On the other hand, development and consolidation of an innovation generally requires a time span which is greater than the duration of a government; this creates difficulties in a region where at each government change the direction of public policy also changes.

Furthermore, it is not easy to carry out an innovation that has an impact on large sectors of the population. Pilots have to be made first on a smaller scale, but always considering that it should be an innovation that can be scaled up. Brazil provides two successful examples of innovations developed at small scale which ended up being extended to the whole country: conditional cash transfers and the “Social Mother” health program [5]. With respect to the first case, researchers at the University of Brasília studied the causes of the low levels of school assistance and high desertion, especially in

rural communities and formulated the following question: “If children do not study because their families are poor, why not pay their parents in order to send them to school?” A project implementing this idea

was first carried out in 1995 in the cities of Campinas and Riberão Preto, and in the Federal District. In 2001, it was converted into the “Bolsa Escola” national program run by the Federal Ministry of Education and in 2003 into the “Bolsa Família” program coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Social Development, which today reaches 13.6 million households.

The “Social Mother” program, in turn, which provides support to at-risk families by trained women belonging to the community, was launched in 1999. It is the result of efforts made by the local government of Sobral, in the State of Ceará, which set up a committee with health personnel,

academia and community leaders to devise solutions in order to reduce child and maternal mortality. Together, they identified the socio-economic factors that explain child and maternal deaths, which include poverty, lack of family support and lacking knowledge of risk factors. The program succeeded in reducing child and maternal mortality at levels below the national average, and was thus taken up as a model in the entire State of Ceará and later scaled up in the entire North Eastern region of Brazil by the Ministry of Health.

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Even if Latin America and the Caribbean is a very innovative region, many challenges exist at the implementation level. The greatest is definitely scaling up and replicating successful social innovations in a creative manner. Having an impact on large population groups and extending initiatives to other places is very difficult, within the same country or internationally. Very few governments test and evaluate pilots at the local level in order to convert them into a national-level public policy [1]. Academia, international organizations and development agencies can play an important role at this regard, and successful models can also be replicated creatively by local communities and civil society organizations, although this has happened infrequently so far.

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In conclusion, governments should support civil society and local communities seeking new alternatives to solve structural and emerging social problems. In particular, they should promote the evaluation of social innovations by academic institutions, adapting them as public policies, scaling up those initiatives that have succeeded in reducing poverty and improving the living conditions of the population.

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