

THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN MEXICO

In Mexico, 53.4 million people live under poor conditions, and the numbers keep rising. Violence and insecurity strike the country at different levels. Social change is required, but what can be done? The emergence of a culture of social innovation that combines art, science, knowledge and technology could make the difference.

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ABOUT SOCIAL INNOVATION

The increase of inequalities and disparities of living conditions demand a different approach to promote the development and welfare inside societies. An essential element to develop these strategies is to encourage a culture of Social Innovation (SI) as a process focused on looking for original forms to improve social standards of living and dignity inside communities. Through these solutions, social innovators take advantage of the opportunities inside and outside the community to promote a transformation at a structural level changing community behavior [1].

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE CASE OF MEXICO

It is essential to recall the specific experience of Mexico for the development of a culture of SI. SI has become more important in Mexico, as innovative social initiatives are required to solve problems like poverty, social inequality, education, food security, and health [1]. Recently studies show that 43.6% of the Mexican population (53.4 million persons) is living in poor conditions [2]. In this sense, the priority for the emergence of a culture of SI in Mexico targets the relevance for assuring a social change and development that could revert conditions of inequality and poverty.

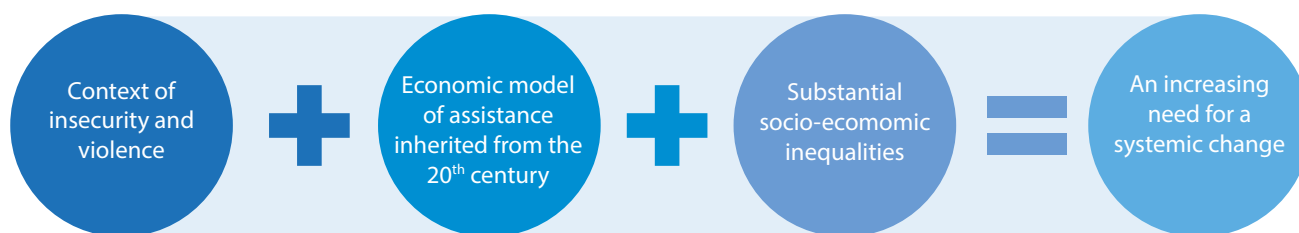
Even when Mexico is seen as a leader of innovation in the Latin American region [3], its overall results show that there is still work to be done. Following *The Social Innovation Index* developed in 2016, Mexico is ranked on the 32nd position out of 45 [4]. This index considers the institutional framework, the financial opportunities, the level of entrepreneurialism inside the country and the civil society networks available for the projects. Mexico's performance was below the average of other Latin-American countries [4]. Then, the challenge is to conjoin the efforts of different

actors to develop a suitable environment for initiatives on SI. Commonly, projects arise and survive due to the energy of some specific persons or agents, but they require to reinforce a network among those actors, as governmental institutions, civic associations, investors, universities and ordinary citizens.

Since 2000, Mexico has been focusing on policies that could contribute to regional economic growth by endorsing activities of research and development that combine the implementation of knowledge from science and technology research. The intention is to move from hand-out programs that at the end offer temporary assistance, to programs that encourage the participation of different actors affected and involved in specific social problems, and ultimately reduce the technological, economic and social gap that impacts the welfare of people [5]. However, this requires to transform the culture of support and assistance that was inherited from an import substitution industrialization model from the 1930s to the 1980s, into a culture that encourages social innovation through scientific and social research, entrepreneurship and civic participation.

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From 2012 to 2018, specific initiatives of the Federal government supported projects of SI that focused on improving the living conditions of the most disadvantaged population. First, the topic of innovation was included in the National Plan of Development from 2013 to 2018 to regulate the activities performed by civic associations [1]. Some of the programs encouraged rural, textile, handicraft and environmental movements, as well as the development of capabilities of management, investment and marketing of



Circumstances highlighting the need for a new culture of SI

products, as part of the *Program for Social Co-investment* supported by the National Institute of Social Development. There were other programs focused on supporting civil societies through financial incentives from the Secretariat of Social Development and the Secretariat of Economy. However, with the current government, these programs are less active.

SI INITIATIVES IN MEXICO

In addition, some initiatives are supported by local governments, such as the *Digital Agency for Public Innovation* in Mexico City, which works with the use of digital technology and its impact on political and social life. Another example is the government of Jalisco's work with the ITESO (a local university), the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACyT) and a Center of Research and Specialised Studies on Social Anthropology (CIESSAS) to create the *Center for Social Innovation of High Impact* (CISAI), which endorses projects that combine technology with the goal of a social change. Currently, they are working on projects of applied research, medicine, agriculture, youth population and decrease of hunger in the Jalisco [6].

Following this, universities are taking a more active role, reinforcing the academic links with social organisations. As an example, there are citizen labs like the *Lab for Mexico City*, which was active from 2013 to 2018. This lab conjoined efforts from government, academia and civic associations in projects that propose creative solutions to problems of Mexico City, such as safe transport, sustainable mobility, public participation, migration, urbanism or recreational areas. Another example is the *Lab for Research and Applied Social Innovation* (LIISA) that uses art, science and strategic planning as part of the solution to social problems in Tijuana, Baja California.

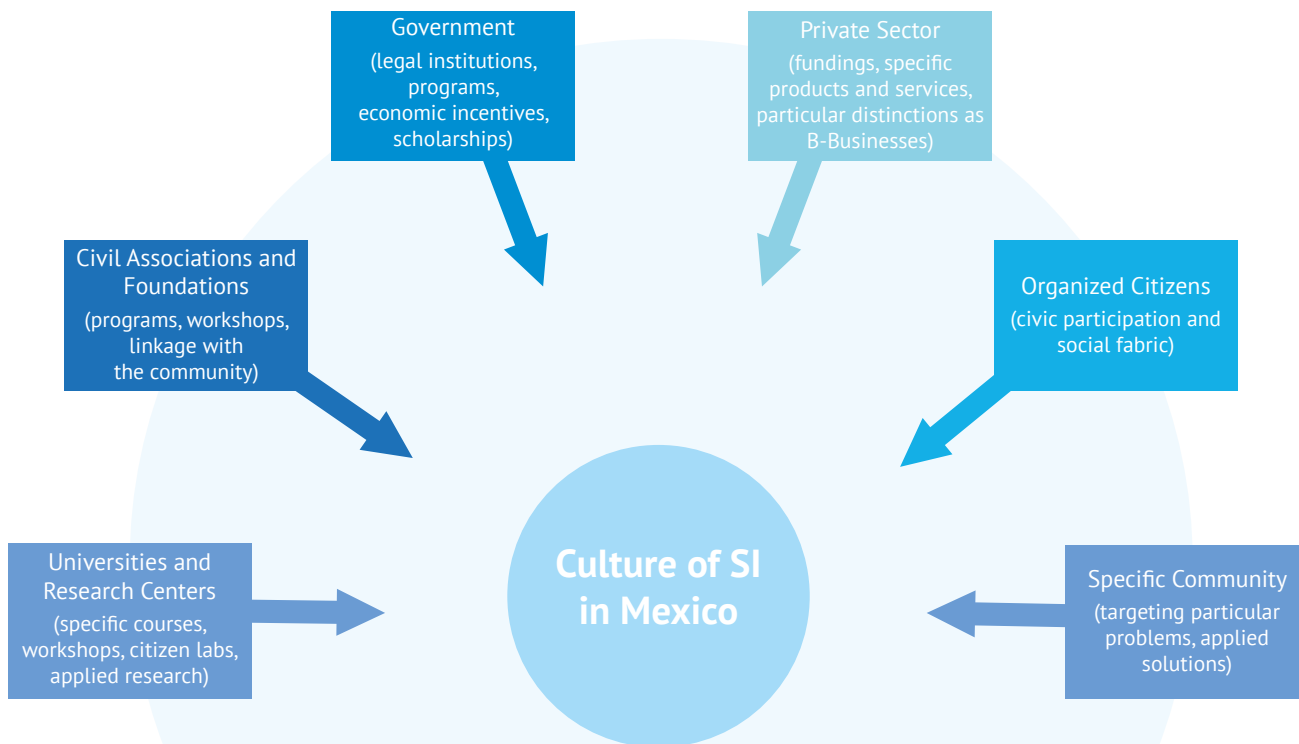
There are public and private universities that include these activities in their programs, like Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Universidad Iberoamericana (Puebla), Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Universidad de Colima, Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla, among others. They also offer courses as part of start-ups programs or social incubators. Besides, some of these institutions work together

with other NGOs, such as Ashoka México or Enactus México [1]. Academic institutions are playing an essential role in starting the awareness about social problems and the responsibility this implies for their students.

However, financial stability is one of the main struggles for Mexican projects. In this sense, there are national and international competitions and grants promoted by financial organisations (Santander, MAPFRE, BBVA), civic associations (Fundación Televisa, Fundación Bancomer) and governmental institutions (CONACyT, National Institute for Entrepreneurship, National Institute for Youth) that support projects selected at competitions and start-up programs. Yet, it is crucial to develop an administrative and financial framework for the sustainability of the project going beyond those grants. This implies making the project attractive, as well as sustainable, without losing the social value perspective. This is exemplified by the case of *Ilumexico*; a company focused on providing electricity through solar panels to communities who do not have access to light [7]. *Ilumexico* is part of the *B-Enterprises* in Mexico, which is a model of entrepreneurship that aims to promote a social agenda through enterprises that have an impact on the economy of the country.

CHALLENGES TO FACE: POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THE INCREASE OF VIOLENCE

Even though there are advances in establishing a culture of SI in Mexico, the outcomes are still not the desired ones, as the spillover effects are mainly detected in regions with better economic and welfare conditions. In the meantime, regions that suffer more from social and economic inequalities (as the Southeast) are still struggling with problems of access to among others, medicine, food, health institutions, economic opportunities, education, proper shelter. Besides, Mexico faces tough political, economic and social circumstances, that demand creative solutions to diminish the inequalities and social injustices that characterize society. There is a feeble culture of collaboration among the different instances and actors related to social projects. Moreover, there is an environment of insecurity and violence, which harms the confidence and social fabric required for a culture of SI. Furthermore, some of the projects presented above were part of the political agenda of the



Actors creating a culture of SI in Mexico

previous government, and due to the change of the ruling party in power, some of these programs have become underestimated and questioned. This perspective could lead to a reversal of the progress achieved so far. The challenge is to promote and endorse those initiatives that serve as a link to conjoin efforts coming from different actors, convincing them that working together will lead to broader and more productive results. The only way to promote a systemic change that endorses fairness and equity is by working together, in the search to overcome political polarization and social disparities. This demands to develop skills of tolerance, empathy and dialogue as part of the culture of SI.

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