

Research Article

# Social Innovation and Sustainable Development: An analysis of its impact areas and its relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals

## Innovación Social y Desarrollo Sostenible: Un análisis de las áreas de impacto y su relación con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible

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**Abstract:** In the last decade, social innovation has emerged as a multidisciplinary solution to address various social issues. This study employs a methodology that combines literature review and interviews with experts in social innovation. As a result, 17 main impact areas were identified, categorized into three blocks: economic, global, and social. Most notably, these areas are significantly related to all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This suggests that social innovation has notable potential as a facilitating tool for achieving the SDGs, highlighting its importance in the pursuit of effective solutions to global challenges in sustainable development.

**Keywords:** third sector; innovation; qualitative analysis; social impact; SDG; sustainable development.

**Resumen:** En la última década, la innovación social ha surgido como solución multidisciplinar para abordar diversos problemas sociales. Este estudio emplea una metodología que combina la revisión de la literatura y entrevistas con expertos en innovación social. Como resultado, se identificaron 17 áreas de impacto principales, clasificadas en tres bloques: económico, global y social. Lo más notable es que estas áreas están significativamente relacionadas con todos los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS). Esto sugiere que la innovación social tiene un notable potencial como herramienta facilitadora para la consecución de los ODS, destacando su importancia en la búsqueda de soluciones eficaces a los retos globales del desarrollo sostenible.

**Palabras clave:** tercer sector; innovación; análisis cualitativo; impacto social; ODS; desarrollo sostenible.

### 1. Introduction

Social innovation has evolved throughout history as a means to address social problems and needs. However, its definition, characteristics, and scope did not become clear until the 1990s, as noted by García-Flores and Palma in 2019. Nevertheless, it was only in the year 2000 that social innovation began to gain relevance in key documents and policies aimed at addressing pressing social issues, as pointed out by Moulaert and McCallum (2019). The consolidation of this concept

occurred after the 2008 crisis when the European Commission identified it as a means to promote a more socially oriented market economy.

Today, there is broad consensus among politicians, public officials, scientists, and civil society in general regarding the positive impact of social innovation. However, there is still a lack of agreement on the specific areas and sectors where social innovation practices can generate the greatest impact.

This is where social innovation emerges as a novel means to carry out actions through alternative forms of social organization. In this sense, it is of particular interest to identify the fields in which social innovation can be most effective. Therefore, the main objectives of this article are to identify and analyze, based on their relevance, the areas in which social innovation has the greatest potential for development. Additionally, it aims to highlight the potential implications that social innovation could have in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015.

This approach is of vital importance because the SDGs represent a set of critical goals and challenges to address fundamental issues such as poverty eradication, gender equality, access to education, and environmental sustainability. Social innovation can play a key role in achieving these objectives by providing creative and effective solutions to complex and urgent social problems.

The structure adopted to address this article is organized as follows: first, this introduction is presented, serving as the starting point for the study. Next, in the second section, a comprehensive review of existing literature on the subject is conducted. In the third section, the research methodology employed is described in detail. The fourth section is dedicated to presenting the results obtained, identifying 17 impact areas and analyzing their relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Finally, in the concluding section, the main conclusions derived from the study are presented, and the bibliography used as a reference is provided.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1. The Impact of Socially Innovative Initiatives*

The existing body of literature on social innovation encompasses a wide array of perspectives and definitions (Pastor & Balbinot, 2021). Nevertheless, a common thread runs through these diverse viewpoints: social innovation is fundamentally characterized by its ability to address societal challenges and fulfill social needs, ultimately aiming to enhance overall well-being (García-Flores & Palma, 2019). Social innovation initiatives often embrace a collaborative, grassroots approach involving citizens, primarily seeking to tackle a broad spectrum of social issues by providing alternative solutions distinct from traditional market or public sector offerings (Martínez et al., 2019). According to Boni et al. (2018, 68), social innovation comprises a set of practices and activities designed to address social problems and human needs. However, these authors underscore that social innovation extends beyond mere immediate problem-solving, as it should involve the enhancement of social relationships and structures.

While there is a consensus on the positive potential of social innovation for enhancing overall well-being, a clear consensus is lacking regarding the specific domains where its impact is most significant (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2016, 178). Moreover, due to its interdisciplinary and cross-cutting nature, delineating its impact within a single specific area is challenging, as pointed out by Moulaert et al. (2017). In this context, it becomes paramount to explore the domains that existing literature has identified as conducive to the emergence and effectiveness of social innovations. In Table 1 below, we present areas highlighted in the literature as contexts where social innovations can flourish.

**Table 1.** Literature Review. Areas of Impact of Social Innovation.

Areas	Areas Authors point out
Better healthcare	(Mulgan, 2006; Howaldt et al., 2016)
Contributes to reducing unemployment	(Grimm et al., 2013; Howaldt et al., 2016: 187)
Empowers the role of women in society	(Mulgan, 2007; Peeters & Ateljevic, 2017)
Enhances local development	(García-Flores & Palma, 2019)
Facilitates access to housing	(Villa & Melo, 2015)
Facilitates sustainable development	(Buckland & Murillo, 2014; Howaldt et al., 2016; Millard, 2018; Eichler & Schwarz, 2019; Kruse et al., 2019)
Favors better transportation and mobility	(Howaldt et al., 2016)
Generates sustainable tourism	(Villa & Melo, 2015)
Helps to reduce domestic violence	(Mulgan, 2006)
Improved environmental quality	(Howaldt et al., 2016; Chueri & Araujo, 2019)
Improved quality of life	(Echeverría, 2013; Villa & Melo, 2015)
Improves governance	(Irizar, 2008; García-Flores & Palma, 2019; Chiuer & Araujo, 2019, 28)
Improves rural conditions	(Soto et al., 2015; Novikova, 2021)
Increased civic participation	(Echeverría, 2013)
Increased quality of education	(Morales-Gualdrón & Giraldo Gómez, 2015; Howaldt et al., 2016; Sanz & Marianna, 2020; Behrend et al., 2022)
Increases the capacity of the third sector	(Hernández-Ascanio & Rich-Ruiz, 2020; García-Flores & Palma, 2020)
Promote better finance conditions	(Martínez et al., 2019; Chueri & Araujo, 2019, 28)
Social inclusion and poverty reduction	(Mulgan, 2006; González et al., 2014; Howaldt et al., 2016)

Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 1 shows that different authors have identified multiple areas of social innovation impact, covering a wide range of domains and issues. Despite the apparent versatility and capacity of social innovation to address a wide range of needs and problems, it is essential to have a more precise understanding of the areas in which social innovation initiatives are more likely to excel and achieve the desired success.

The importance of identifying the areas where social innovation can have a greater impact lies in the ability to strategically allocate resources, such as time and funding, to achieve effective results. This avoids scattering resources across a wide range of social challenges and instead increases the efficiency of interventions, as well as their visibility and attractiveness to those responsible for designing and implementing them.

Furthermore, this precise understanding facilitates the alignment of social innovation initiatives with broader development goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This helps to address critical challenges in a way that is consistent with global goals.

For this reason, section 4 provides a more detailed analysis based on interviews with experts in the field. The aim is to identify and highlight the key areas where social innovation practices have the greatest potential for impact.

## 2.2. The potential of social innovation to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The existing literature highlights the remarkable capacities of social innovation in the context of sustainable development. This close connection stems from the global growth of social problems and challenges, which has put increasing pressure on various organisations to adopt and implement social innovation approaches (Eichler & Schwarz, 2019; Kruse et al., 2019). As Angelidou and Psaltoglou (2017) point out, civil society, the private sector and the public sector

have begun to recognise that the current system of production is showing signs of exhaustion and requires a profound overhaul. As a result, the pursuit of the desired sustainable development, as shown by Rodrigo and Arenas (2014), involves significant changes in governance, which has led to a greater emphasis on social aspects in a possible alternative paradigm.

This growing interest in sustainable development reached an important milestone in 2015, when the United Nations General Assembly approved an agenda for sustainable development with 17 main goals and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were endorsed by 193 countries, including emerging economies such as India and Brazil (Millard, 2018).

Millard (2018) highlights that, according to the United Nations, sustainable development involves meeting the needs of the present without compromising the opportunities of future generations. This definition first appeared in the Brundtland Report in 1987. The UN resolution adopted on 25 September 2015 emphasises that to achieve sustainable development, progress must be balanced across economic, social and environmental dimensions. In this context, Millard (2018) argues that the failure to achieve sustainable development is due to the lack of consideration of any of these three dimensions, a perspective that applies to all the SDGs, which address a wide range of areas.

The SDGs represent a set of essential challenges and goals to ensure sustainable development in the medium and long term. They currently constitute the most ambitious global agenda agreed by the international community to mobilise collective action around goals shared by all countries (Gil, 2018). However, it is important to note that while the SDGs provide a common framework, each government must set its own national goals and decide how to incorporate these aspirations into its plans, strategies and actions (United Nations, 2015).

Social innovation is emerging as an essential phenomenon that public decision-makers can promote to contribute to the achievement of these goals (Moore, 2015; Millard, 2018). In this regard, Herrero (2019, 49) emphasizes the potential of social innovation to address the key European and global social challenges, with a particular focus on the SDGs. Eichler and Schwarz (2019), in their study of 128 social innovation initiatives, investigated whether they contributed to addressing any of the SDGs. They found that a total of 115 initiatives were linked to solutions for at least one of the SDGs, representing over 89% of the total. This led them to conclude that social innovation and the SDGs are fully aligned. In the same vein, Millard (2018) argues that the UN's 2030 SDGs have contributed to the recognition of the relationship between social innovation and sustainable development, which has led to increased attention on this approach.

### **3. Methodology**

A number of primarily qualitative analytical techniques were used to complete this research article. Specifically, a methodology combining literature review and semi-structured interviews was developed.

With regard to the literature review, an exhaustive study was carried out of the most cited academic works, as well as the main reports published by local, national and international institutions. This allowed for an understanding of the different impacts, areas and implications that social innovation can have.

Once the literature review was completed, and with an understanding of the issues at hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted to analyse the discourse and explore the areas where socially innovative initiatives could have a greater impact.

Finally, once the different areas where socially innovative initiatives are more likely to develop were known, the possible alignment of these areas with the Sustainable Development Goals was analysed.

### 3.1. Interview methodology

The existing literature highlights the remarkable capacities of social innovation in the context of sustainable development. This close connection stems from the global growth of social problems and challenges, which has put increasing pressure on various organisations to adopt and implement social innovation approaches (Eichler & Schwarz, 2019; Kruse et al., 2019).

A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to identify the sectors where social innovation can have a greater impact. These interviews were divided into several parts: In the first part, general questions about social innovation were asked; in the second part, inquiries were made about the most relevant aspects of the creation process of social innovation; and finally, there was a section dedicated to exploring the effects and results that, according to the interviewees, social innovation could generate. The script used for the semi-structured interviews can be found in Annex 1.

The interviewees were divided into three categories: leaders of initiatives recognised as socially innovative, agents and promoters of social innovation, and academics who have published prominent research in the field. The full list of interviewees can be found in Annex 2.

The interviewees were selected on the basis of the relevance of their experiences and projects, their academic and professional background, and the awards and recognition they have received from prestigious organisations in the field of social innovation.

A total of 87 people were contacted, of whom 24 agreed to participate in the interviews. In addition, in some cases, ongoing research allowed the identification of experts and interesting profiles that met the established criteria. The interviews took place during the months of June, July, September, October and November 2018, both in person and remotely, with an average duration of 50 to 75 minutes.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Atlas.ti software was used to analyse the content of the 24 interviews. According to Prados (2007), Atlas.ti is a computer tool capable of structurally analysing complex qualitative data based on grounded theory, which aims to generate theory while studying the phenomenon.

Content analysis made it possible to identify the key elements of a phenomenon based on the words and phrases used by the interviewees (Noguero, 2002). The linguistic and semantic contexts of words or phrases expressing relevant concepts were examined. A total of 24 primary files corresponding to interview transcripts were analysed.

First, the interviews were coded, which involved segmenting relevant fragments of information (quotes) and labelling them with codes representing attributes related to the content of the quotes. Each time a quote related to an area where social innovation practices could be developed, a specific code was assigned. This coding made it possible to establish links between different parts of the information.

Atlas.ti was also used to count the absolute frequency of the codes assigned. This provided information on how often a particular attribute was mentioned in the content of the interviews. Then, to assess the relative importance of each attribute, its relative frequency was calculated, which refers to the number of times a particular code is repeated in relation to the total number of repetitions of all codes.

This statistical content analysis helped to identify the most important areas where social innovation could have a significant impact.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Areas of Social Innovation Development Identified from Interview Analysis

After analyzing the content of the interviews, we have identified a total of 17 codes related to areas where social innovation can have a significant impact. Each of these codes represents a

specific domain in which social innovation could play an important role. Furthermore, we have categorized these areas into three main spheres based on the relationships observed during the content analysis: the socioeconomic sphere, the sustainability and well-being sphere, and the social sphere.

**Table 2.** Weighted areas conducive to the development of social innovation.

<b>Socioeconomic Sphere</b>	<b>Absolute Frequency</b>	<b>Relative Frequency</b>
Governance	17	0,0858
Employment	16	0,0808
Citizen empowerment and community development	16	0,0808
Rural Development	15	0,07575
Local Development	10	0,0505
Alternative consumption patterns	6	0,0303
<i>Total</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>0,40395</i>
<b>Sustainability and Well-being Sphere</b>	<b>Absolute Frequency</b>	<b>Relative Frequency</b>
Environment	19	0,0959
Education	12	0,0606
Housing	11	0,05555
Agriculture	10	0,0505
Health	10	0,0505
Energy	5	0,025252
<i>Total</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>0,338302</i>
<b>Social Sphere</b>	<b>Absolute Frequency</b>	<b>Relative Frequency</b>
Social Inclusion	18	0,0909
Social Rights and Social Justice	14	0,0707
Women's Empowerment	8	0,0404
Persons with Disabilities	6	0,0303
Active Aging	5	0,025252
<i>Total</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>0,257552</i>

Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 2 shows the priority areas where social innovation initiatives can have a more significant impact. Columns two and three show the absolute and relative frequencies of these areas, respectively. These frequencies are used as indicators to assess in which areas social innovation is more likely to have a greater impact. A higher frequency indicates that respondents repeatedly mentioned that area as conducive to the development and impact of social innovation.

The identification and weighting of these areas provides valuable information for those responsible for promoting, driving or developing initiatives in specific areas. It allows them to understand whether experts see opportunities for significant impact through social innovation in specific areas. Knowing that there are socially innovative approaches that differ from traditional methods is a crucial resource that can guide those who want to initiate projects to achieve impact in a particular area.

Moreover, by grouping all these fields into three main areas, we can see that social innovation faces three main types of challenges: economic and political, global and social. Below we will analyse each of these identified areas based on their relative importance within these spheres.

### *Socioeconomic sphere*

This sphere encompasses the primary impact areas of social innovation in relation to the socioeconomic domain, comprising a total of six fundamental areas:

1. **Governance:** Governance reflects the space where decisions that influence economic and social development are made. Historically, this domain was dominated by actors from the public sector. However, today, socially innovative initiatives are emerging that promote new models and approaches, challenging traditional governance. These initiatives drive a transition from a vertical and dominant focus of the public sector toward a more democratic and participatory model, creating inclusive governance.
2. **Employment:** Generating employment and reducing unemployment are economically and politically relevant goals in contemporary societies. In this context, numerous socially innovative initiatives focus on addressing unemployment, improving working conditions, and promoting employment. The rise of co-working spaces is mentioned as an example of innovative practices that respond to labor precarity and isolation resulting from transformations in work patterns.
3. **Citizen Empowerment and Community Development:** This area is closely related to the previous two. It focuses on empowering citizens and promoting community development, fostering a sense of individual and collective capacity and relevance. Many socially innovative initiatives in this domain promote the creation of networks that enable people to act collectively to achieve goals that would be unattainable individually. Furthermore, these initiatives often indirectly contribute to governance and employment, as organization and empowerment facilitate decision-making on a larger scale and the implementation of planned and effective social actions.
4. **Rural Development:** Rural development has become a focus of interest for socially innovative initiatives, as many rural communities face challenges such as depopulation, unemployment, and a lack of economic dynamism. These initiatives seek to promote more sustainable rural development models, which are fundamental for economic development and social well-being. Examples include the production of regional ecological products and sustainable cultural tourism.
5. **Local Development:** Similar to rural development, many regions face challenges due to their high economic dependence. Socially innovative initiatives propose alternatives to boost local community development by identifying and leveraging local resources, both tangible and intangible. This involves decision-making from a bottom-up perspective, fostering local economic development closely linked to citizen empowerment and more democratic governance.
6. **Alternative Consumption Models:** Traditional consumption models have posed significant problems for sustainable development. Socially innovative practices identify and generate new forms of production and consumption. These alternative models include self-consumption, the consumption of ecological and local products, collaborative consumption, and fair-trade practices. In addition to creating a new consumption paradigm, these practices impact areas such as rural development, local development, employment, and citizen empowerment.

These areas are not only essential for the socioeconomic sphere but also interconnect and influence each other, highlighting the importance of social innovation initiatives in addressing contemporary challenges.

### *Sustainability and Wellbeing Sphere*

This sphere encompasses the primary impact areas of social innovation related to sustainability and wellbeing, comprising a total of six fundamental areas:

1. **Environment:** Highlighted as the primary focus area, the environment constitutes a critical field. Social innovation has become a key driver for addressing sustainability issues that affect both present and future generations. Innovative initiatives play a crucial role in combating climate change, reducing pollution, managing water scarcity, and preserving biodiversity.
2. **Education:** It is identified as an essential domain where social innovation is indispensable. Education is being transformed by initiatives that aim to turn educational institutions into spaces for creativity and knowledge development. Furthermore, these initiatives improve collaboration among actors in the education system and promote technical and social skills for employability.
3. **Housing:** Access to adequate housing is a fundamental right facing significant challenges in today's society. Here, social innovation stands as a crucial tool to address this issue. Creative initiatives are facilitating housing access through solutions such as prefabricated housing for the homeless, collaborative housing models (cohousing), and floating houses in flood-prone areas.
4. **Agriculture:** Agriculture, beyond food production, is becoming an important field for social innovation. Initiatives such as urban agriculture, agrarian systems that ensure food sovereignty, and social agriculture are proliferating. These practices have an impact that extends to areas such as employment and the reduction of social exclusion.
5. **Health:** Healthcare is a fundamental concern in society. Social innovation positions itself as an effective tool to address issues and demands in this sector. It facilitates coordination between the public and private sectors for more effective solutions and promotes collective action by civil society to address unmet health needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many socially innovative initiatives emerged to address the psychological needs of the population.
6. **Energy:** Access to energy services is essential for wellbeing but is not always guaranteed for those with limited resources. Social innovation presents itself as a solution, promoting more decentralized energy models with a focus on self-consumption and alternative energy sources. These initiatives seek to eliminate economic barriers to energy Access

These interconnected and high-impact areas demonstrate the importance of social innovation in transforming our world toward a more sustainable and prosperous future.

### *Social Sphere*

In this sphere, crucial areas of impact for social innovation initiatives related primarily to social challenges converge. Five areas that address fundamental needs and rights for social wellbeing stand out:

1. **Social Exclusion:** Social exclusion, a result of systemic inequalities, is a central concern. Social innovation is recognized for its ability to address and reduce social exclusion. Numerous socially innovative initiatives work on creating social and symbolic capital to ensure the basic rights and freedoms of individuals.
2. **Social Rights and Social Justice:** Closely related to social exclusion, the emphasis on achieving greater social justice and social rights goes hand in hand with reducing social exclusion. Many social innovation initiatives designed to improve this area also have a positive impact on reducing social exclusion.
3. **Women's Empowerment:** Addressing gender inequality is a key priority in modern society. Women's empowerment is essential to overcome structural barriers. Many socially innovative initiatives focus on promoting women's empowerment as part of the national and international social agenda.
4. **Persons with Disabilities:** Personal identity and independence for people with disabilities are essential. Social innovation initiatives align with this goal, working to eliminate



discrimination and exclusion. These initiatives seek to facilitate the lives of people with disabilities, promoting their personal and professional development for independent living.

5. **Active Aging:** The aging of the population is a challenge in modern society. Social innovation addresses these issues with practices that respond to the needs of aging societies. Initiatives promote activities to improve the physical and mental health of older people, encourage intergenerational spaces, provide transition measures into retirement, and offer creative workshops to contribute to the well-being and active participation of older people in society.

These interconnected areas highlight the crucial role of social innovation in promoting equity, inclusion, and social justice in our communities. Social innovation acts as a driver to address complex social challenges and advance toward a more equal and just society.

#### 4.2. Alignment of Social Innovation Impact Areas and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

We have previously established the close relationship between sustainable development and social innovation. Now, it is essential to analyze how the impact areas of social innovation align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), allowing us to understand how these initiatives can contribute to addressing global challenges and advancing toward a more sustainable future.

The following Table 3 shows this direct connection between the SDGs and the impact areas of social innovation:

**Table 3.** Connection between the SDGs and the impact areas of social innovation.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)	Areas of Social Innovation Impact
<b>SDG Goal 1:</b> End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Social exclusion, Employment
<b>SDG Goal 2:</b> End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture	Agriculture, Rural Development
<b>SDG Goal 3:</b> Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	Health, Active Aging
<b>SDG Goal 4:</b> Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Education, Social Exclusion
<b>SDG Goal 5:</b> Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Women's Empowerment
<b>SDG Goal 6:</b> Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	Environment, Health
<b>SDG Goal 7:</b> Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all	Energy, Environment, Rural Development
<b>SDG Goal 8:</b> Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all	Employment, Social Exclusion
<b>SDG Goal 9:</b> Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation	Local Development
<b>SDG Goal 10:</b> Reduce inequality within and among countries	Social Rights and Social Justice, Social Exclusion

<b>SDG Goal 11:</b> Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable	Local Alternative Models	Development, Consumption
<b>SDG Goal 12:</b> Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	Alternative Models	Consumption
<b>SDG Goal 13:</b> Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	Environment	
<b>SDG Goal 14:</b> Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development	Environment	
<b>SDG Goal 15:</b> Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss	Rural Environment	Development,
<b>SDG Goal 16:</b> Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels	Social Rights and Justice, Social Exclusion	Social
<b>SDG Goal 17:</b> Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	Governance	

Source: Author's elaboration.

This table shows that all identified areas of social innovation impact are directly related to one or more SDGs. Furthermore, some areas have links to multiple SDGs, highlighting the ability of socially innovative initiatives to address multiple goals simultaneously.

Given this close correspondence between social innovation and the SDGs, socially innovative initiatives emerge as essential tools for decision-makers at the national and international levels to achieve the SDGs and advance sustainable development. Social innovation becomes a valuable tool to effectively address social and environmental issues, promote positive change in society, and significantly contribute to the realisation of global sustainable development goals.

## 5. Conclusions

Social innovation is a phenomenon that generates social value and well-being. Its positive effects go beyond its final impact, with great importance attached to the processes and new methods of participation and work developed to achieve better social results. This contributes to the fact that a number of common elements and characteristics are present in the logic of action of any socially innovative initiative, allowing a novel approach to the most important social objectives in a wide range of areas.

In this study, we have thoroughly explored the complex relationship between social innovation and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), discovering a synergy that offers a promising path towards a more equitable and sustainable world. Our key findings shed light on the powerful impact of social innovation in achieving social and environmental goals with global reach.

At its core, social innovation goes beyond the mere generation of value and wealth; it is a catalyst for processes and methodologies that promote superior social outcomes. This innovative and participatory approach is a common denominator of all the initiatives we have studied, enabling them to address the most pressing social challenges in different fields in a unique and effective way.

This inherent logic of action of social innovation initiatives, combined with their close link to sustainable development, allows them to contribute both directly and indirectly to the

achievement of socially desirable goals, such as the SDGs. Some of these initiatives may start with primary objectives related to the environment, employment or gender equality, while others, even if these objectives are not a priority, incorporate these aspects into their modus operandi (such as respect for the environment, labour inclusion and gender perspective).

In this work we have identified and assessed a total of 17 impact areas, which we have grouped into three categories: political and economic challenges, global challenges and social challenges. This identification and evaluation has led us to conclude that social innovation initiatives have a significant impact in a wide range of areas, with particular emphasis on the environment (0.0959), combating social exclusion (0.0909) and strengthening governance (0.0858). These areas, which have historically been challenging and where traditional policies have proved ineffective, find in social innovation initiatives a new perspective that can provide more effective responses to recurring problems.

The identification of these areas has also allowed us to conclude that social innovation initiatives, even when focused on a specific area, can contribute to the achievement of several SDGs. This close link between the SDGs and the areas of social innovation impact clearly shows that both public and private entities can find in this work a solid guide for developing socially relevant, innovation-based initiatives.

Finally, it is important to highlight two fundamental contributions of this study. On the one hand, we provide solid evidence for entrepreneurs and social organisations wishing to implement actions in specific areas, offering insights on how to approach them innovatively. On the other hand, we identify areas where experts believe there is a greater likelihood of success for social innovation, which is useful for public decision-makers in developing plans and policies that promote and support social innovation initiatives in areas with direct implications for the SDGs.

## Annexes

### Annex 1. Script – Interviews for Social Innovation and Sustainable Development: An Analysis of its Impact Areas and its Relationship with the SDGs.

#### *PART I: General Questions about Social Innovation*

1. In your perspective, what does social innovation mean to you?
2. What do you believe are the main characteristics and/or properties that an initiative or activity must possess to be considered a social innovation?
3. Do you think the concept of social innovation is being overused? Are you concerned it might lose its value?
4. What do you think motivates agents to engage in socially innovative practices? In your case or that of your association/company/represented sector, what was the main motivation?
5. What role do you believe innovation support centers play in social innovation? And academics? Would you identify any other relevant agents for promoting and developing social innovations? What kind of support has your association/company received?
6. What do you think is the profile of socially innovative agents? What kinds of organizations, companies (technological centers, business cooperatives, etc.), and public entities do you believe can engage in socially innovative activities?
7. What stages do you think a socially innovative initiative typically goes through from its inception to consolidation? What is the most critical phase?

#### *PART II: Identification of Variables*

8. In what types of regions do you believe social innovations tend to develop?
9. Do you think that in regions where there are more problems, more social innovations emerge?
10. What factors facilitated the launch of your socially innovative initiative?
11. What factors acted as barriers or hindered this process?

12. If you had to choose three major pillars that are essential for the development and promotion of social innovations, what would they be?
13. How do you think these factors can be measured?
14. Who do you think can promote the incentivization of the factors you mentioned?
15. What role do you think creativity plays in social innovation? What about art and culture?

*PART III: The Potential of Social Innovation*

16. What do you believe are the main benefits of engaging in socially innovative activities for society?
17. In which fields do you think the development of social innovations can be especially useful or relevant? What types of problems do you think it can help address?
18. Do you think it can be argued that in regions with fewer problems, there are social innovation initiatives? Or do you believe that the low incidence of certain problems in a region actually discourages social innovation?
19. What role do you think social innovation plays in improving and modernizing the public sector?
20. What positive implications do you think your initiative has on society?
21. What is the medium-term goal of your initiative/center/research group?

**Annex 2. Interviewee Positions.**

**Managers of centers or companies**

Local innovation agent of the Guadalinfo network.

Director of the Center for Social Innovation of the province of Malaga.

Director of the social and digital innovation laboratory "Citilab Cornellà".

Co-founder and president of the social innovation laboratory "Espacio\_Res".

Director of Innovation and Social Economy at the Seville City Council

Director of Social Innovation Programs at Innobasque (Basque Innovation Agency).

Director of Entrepreneur Recruitment at Ashoka

He is a member of the UpSocial consulting team with operational headquarters in Barcelona.

Director of the Citizen Services Area of the Provincial Council of Malaga.

**Academics**

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