SUCCESS FACTORS, ENABLERS AND BARRIERS IN SOCIAL PROJECTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted a systematic literature review of articles that described projects focused on resolving social issues, frequently associated with the terms base/bottom of the pyramid (BoP), social entrepreneurship and social innovation. Projects are classified accordingly to the source of the idea (top down or bottom up) and the project type (commercial, creative, assistance, collaboration, entrepreneurial or cooperative). They are also compared considering target population, socio-economic context, geography, motivation, critical success factors (CSF), enablers and barriers. The results indicate that most projects are top down, creative or commercial, connected to social innovation or social entrepreneurship approaches, implemented on European countries, aiming at solving local issues related to the management of rural and urban territories, healthcare, education or energy. The themes mostly associated with social projects are territory management and transition to renewable energies. BoP-related projects are almost inexistent, and so are projects aiming at poverty-related issues. Nonetheless, the CSF encountered in these projects are very similar to the ones reported in BoP literature, mainly including legitimacy with local communities, network building, strategic partnerships, development of local capabilities, and access to resources – financial, technological, human and material.

Keywords: *Base of the pyramid, bottom of the pyramid, social innovation, social entrepreneurship, poverty*

1. INTRODUCTION

Projects are suited to achieve agility and innovation (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020). Projects and business ventures that aim at solving social problems suffer the pressure of getting more done with less, acting in contexts poor in resources and knowledge, where small-scale incremental projects are suited to creating economic value while also addressing social and environmental issues (Galdini, 2020; Malsch & Guieu, 2019). Therefore, this context seems appropriate for the flourishment of projectified logics aiming at solving social problems, some of them related to 'bottom or base of the pyramid' (BoP) issues.

Social innovation and social entrepreneurship theoretical streams are frequently associated with social problems' solutions. Nonetheless, social entrepreneurship is more associated with sustainability projects – energy sources, farming technologies, and waste management – and to business models. Social innovation, with urban regeneration, rural development and solution of community-related issues through social design and participatory design.

Despite the potential for generating solutions for untapped market segments, social projects frequently fail to achieve their objectives. This article aims to analyze projects designed to solve social problems to obtain a better understanding of the reasons that explain their success or failure, paving the way to avoid common pitfalls and increase social projects' success rate.

Contributions for the practice include a presentation of CSF and enablers that contribute in overcoming challenges encountered in social projects. Contributions for the theory includes the analysis of different theoretical perspectives that have been applied in similar contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bottom/Base of the Pyramid (BoP)

BoP refers to the bottom-tier of the world income pyramid, a cross-national class of population living in a situation of extreme or moderate poverty (Gold et al., 2013; Hahn, 2009; Sharma & Jaiswal, 2018), residing primarily in urban slums, semi-urban and rural areas, living and transacting in an informal economy, and lacking access to mechanisms for the fulfilment of basic human needs (Goyal et al., 2020; Prahalad & Hart, 1999; Viswanathan & Sridharan, 2012).

It is often associated with different strategies to alleviate global poverty. The most common one advocates the application of a market logic, with the engagement of the private sector to transform the poor into consumers of products and services to which they are currently

underserved, exploring the potential of profitable segments in this largely untapped market, while simultaneously contributing to the development of local economies and to the resolution of significant societal problems in these regions (Hahn, 2009; Olsen & Boxenbaum, 2009; Seuring et al., 2019; Viswanathan & Sridharan, 2012).

The interest on designing business ventures to serve the BoP is based on a mutual value creation perspective that advocates the possibility to generate profitability and provide social value to the communities served. Approaches may vary, with some initiatives focusing more on the development and selling of products, while others are more concerned with the development of business partnerships, regarding BoP population not only as consumers, but primarily as integrative parts of all segments of the value creation process (Hahn, 2009; Karnani, 2007; London et al., 2010).

An important feature of BoP approaches is a rationale that includes making a profit, and therefore the business model includes the generation of a revenue stream. Nonetheless, operating in BoP markets implicates facing constraints that are context-specific, mostly related to operating in informal sectors, that have not yet been experienced by multinational companies or outsiders trying to enter these markets. These contexts pose real challenges to social ventures, and few companies have succeeded in implementing them. Thus, understanding and working on contextual constraints is critical for their success (London et al., 2010; Olsen & Boxenbaum, 2009; Reficco & Márquez, 2012).

2.2 Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation

Social entrepreneurship integrates economic and social value creation (Mair & Martí, 2006). Social entrepreneurs differentiate themselves from commercial entrepreneurs through the adoption of business models that offer creative solutions to complex and persistent social problems, exploiting opportunities to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner (Austin et al., 2006; Zahra et al., 2009).

Although the economic value is crucial for the sustainability of social entrepreneurial ventures (Dacin et al., 2011), the central driver for social entrepreneurship is the social problem being addressed (Austin et al., 2006). Therefore, local entrepreneurs and cooperatives are also considered capable of mutual value creation within the BoP, posing as an alternative solution to enhance life conditions when they manage to combine commercial enterprises with social

impacts through the creation of enterprises that accomplish social purposes, in addition to being commercially viable (Alvord et al., 2004; Seuring et al., 2019).

Another strategy to approach the socio-economic issues related to BoP population is the use of social innovation tools – through the development of public policies or fostering the development of novel social forms and competitive advantages that promote social inclusion and improvement in living conditions (Bevilacqua & Ou, 2018; Cazini & Frasson, 2011; Gürdere Akdur & Kaygan, 2019; Souza Costa et al., 2011).

The expression 'social innovation' refers to the use of new forms of collaboration – such as co-creation and co-production – to respond to challenges that are not being addressed through conventional approaches (Conrad, 2015). It is motivated by the goal of meeting a social need (Mulgan, 2006), and searches for a creative solution that will act on the roots of the social problems (Raynor, 2019) through the active involvement of social actors in the process, using of empowerment, fostering inclusion and wellbeing, and improving social relations to achieve the transformation of individuals themselves, changing the beliefs of the social system where the innovation occurs (Cox et al., 2014; De Filippi et al., 2017; Manzini & Rizzo, 2011; Morelli et al., 2017; Souza Costa et al., 2011; Swagemakers et al., 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

The sampling process was conducted in Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases due to the search mechanism capable to reach all indexed journals with an impact factor in the Journal Citation Report (JCR).

The research used the keyword "project" in the title, and the keywords "base of the pyramid" or "bottom of the pyramid" or "social entrepreneurship" or "social innovation" in the title, abstract or keywords. Only "articles", "reviews", and "early accesses" were included. All publications until November 2020 were included.

The search returned 53 papers from WoS, and 80 from Scopus. Their merge left the sample with 93 single papers. Titles and abstracts were analyzed, determining their alignment with research goals. The exclusion protocol included the reading of the whole paper for confirmation. Papers not written in English or unavailable were also excluded. As a result of the refinement process, 33 papers were excluded, leaving the sample with 61 articles. Figure 1 represents the complete sampling process.

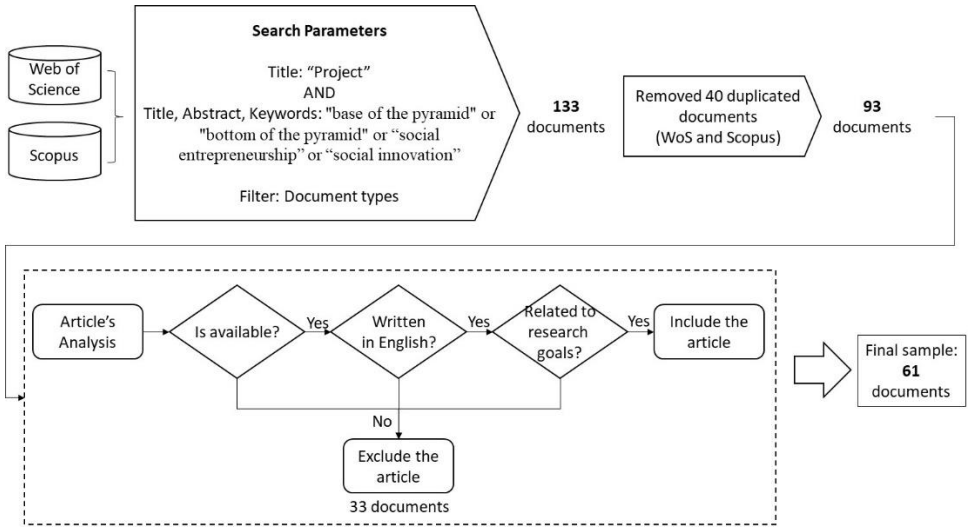

Figure 1. *Sampling workflow*

Keywords co-occurrence and reference co-citation analyzes were performed using VOS Viewer. A manual screening attributed codes using NVivo11, the abductive coding process applied following the coding cycles described by Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019). A backward snowballing process included 84 articles in the literature review, but not in the systematic bibliographic review to avoid conflicts with research´s goals.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Network Analysis

The keywords co-occurrence analysis presented in Figure 2 indicates six different clusters.

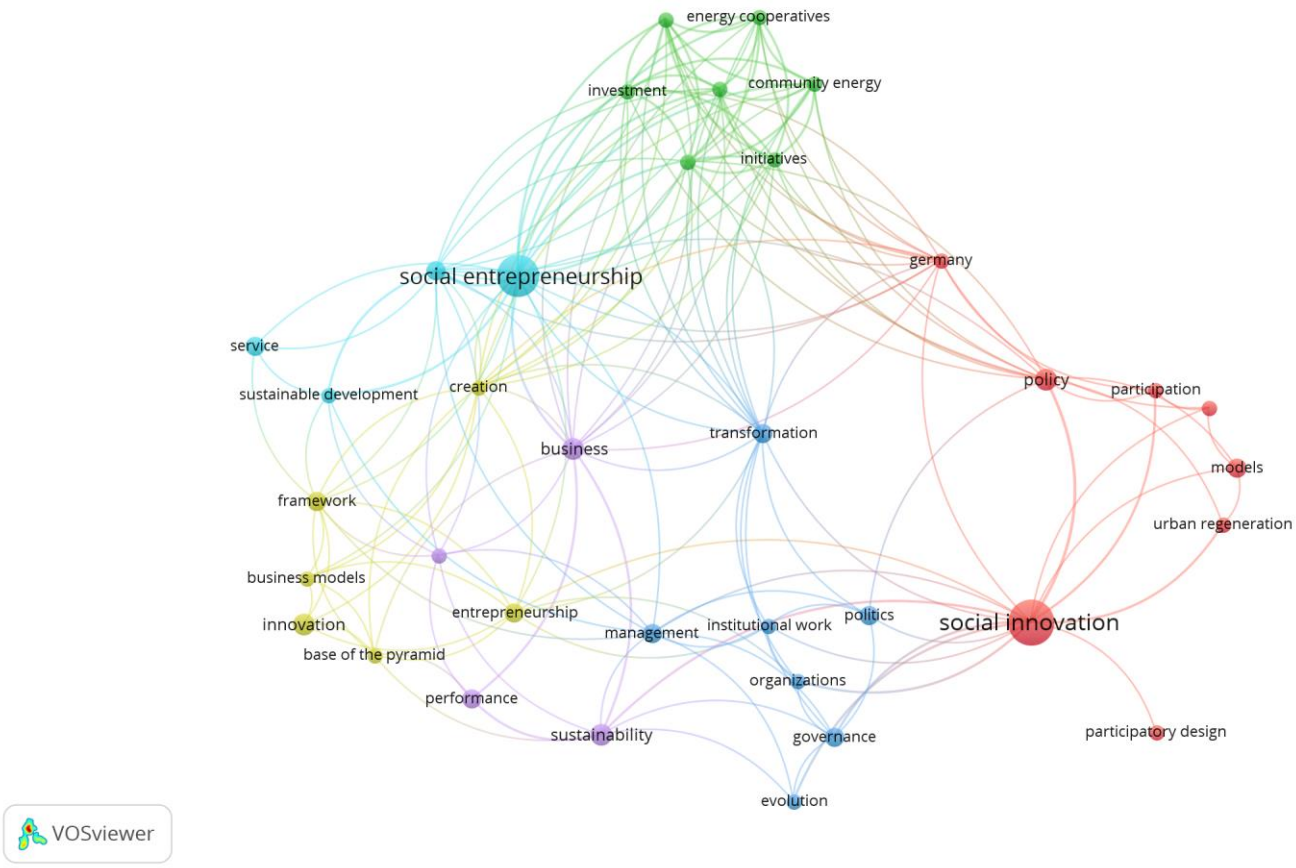

Figure 2. Keywords co-occurrence analysis produced with VosViewer 1.6.15 using WoS bibliographic data

The co-citation analysis presented in Figure 3 indicates the existence of four groups.

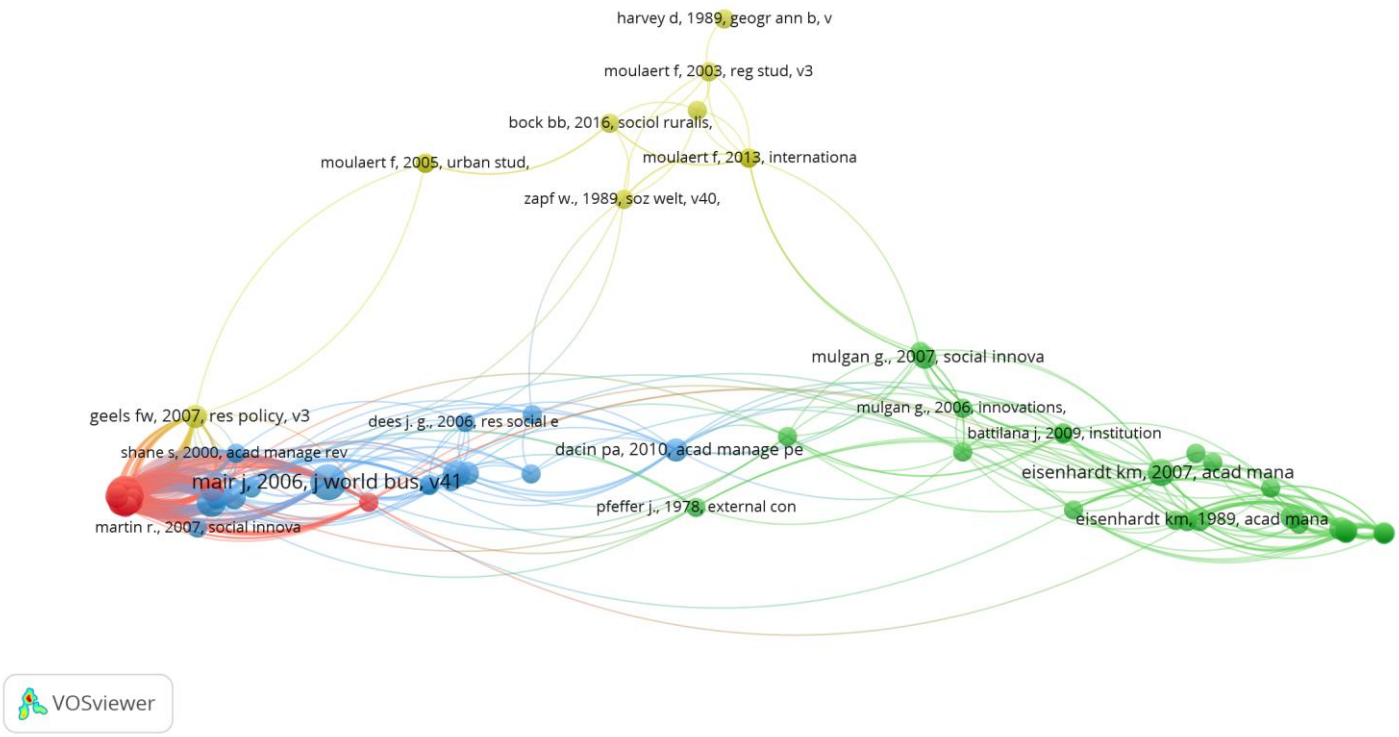

Figure 3. Co-citation analysis graphic produced with VosViewer 1.6.15 using WoS bibliographic data.

4.2 Content Analysis

The papers worked with case studies, using descriptive or qualitative approaches to provide an account of the projects – single projects being the most common analytic unit. Projects concerned with small regions are the most common ones, focused on resolving localized social problems. The existence of many international projects is explained by the abundance of projects funded by the European Union. Table 1 provides the complete results for the deductive coding process.

Research Method	**# of articles**
Case study	39
Theoretical-conceptual	9
Survey	5
Action-research	4
Modeling	2
Experimental	2
Approach	**# of articles**
Descriptive	34
Qualitative	18
Mixed	7
Quantitative	2
Sources of evidence	**# of articles**
public data	16
Interview	11
Questionnaire	6
Bibliography	5
document analysis	4
press information	1
Multiple	18
Analytic Unit	**# of articles**
Groups/ projects	50
Persons	7
Companies	3
Government	1
Geographic Scope	**# of articles**
Regional	27
International	18
National	16

Table 1. *Deductive coding results*

The abductive codes show a predominance of social innovation as a theoretical lens, followed by social entrepreneurship. Social groups were commonly defined as “local community”. Projects were mainly implemented in European countries, aiming to solve problems related to aging population, urban deterioration and rural areas’ development. BoP approaches were applied only to Asia, Africa and Latin America contexts. Additional codes that emerged from the coding process are represented in Table 2.

Source of Idea	Description	Project Type	Related Themes	Macro Objective
Top Down	Social groups as receptors of ideas coming from external actors	Commercial	Product or solution development	Profit from selling solutions
		Creative	Urban design, Social design, Social learning, Education	Develop solutions with the communities. Solve collective problems in a collective way
		Assistance	Healthcare, age care, housing provision, people with impairments, Civil Society Organizations, NGOs	Provide assistance for marginalized populations
		Collaboration	Social shared value, sustainable supply chains	Develop solutions that address a corporation's problems, but including environmental and social concerns during solution development
Bottom Up	Social groups or individuals creating and implementing their own ideas to solve social problems	Entrepreneurial	Single man/woman solution, leaders	Solve social problems in a business way
		Cooperative	Grouping entrepreneurs or citizens with the same problem	Solve business problems in a collective way
Theoretical	Explore concepts concerning these projects	All	Knowledge management, Project management technics, Design technics, Frameworks, Project tensions	Understand the underlying factors that generate certain social or economic dynamics
Environmental	Solve environmental related problems	All	Blue Economy	Solve environmental related problems

Table 2. Abductive coding for project origin and project type, and the relationships between these concepts

The source of idea is related to the origin factor of the project: from outsiders, like academia, government or companies, in a top-down way of dealing with the existing issues; or from the people affected by the problem, in a bottom-up way of self-organizing for the solution. Type is related to the project's approach solving the social issue targeted, and different sources of idea were directly connected to different project types.

Commercial projects address social issues commercializing solutions or products. Creative projects develop partnerships with local communities, both learning from and teaching the participants. Assistance projects result from public policies and provide solutions for marginalized populations or produce awareness around important collective issues. Collaboration projects address a corporation's problem through partnerships with local communities.

Entrepreneurial projects describe business ventures initiated by an entrepreneur from the affected community. Cooperative projects unite local entrepreneurs to create collective solutions to problems affecting them.

4.4 CSF and enablers

Innovation is mentioned as a CSF for designing solutions capable of going beyond the constraints of the current situation. Since innovation implies experimentation, learning from failures, and validating hypotheses through repetitive processes, the importance of error tolerance is emphasized, as well as the inclusion of participants with diverse backgrounds, knowledge and expertise (Chou, 2018; Margarian, 2017; Martin de Holan et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2018; Ochman, 2019; Raynor, 2019).

Credibility, trust, acceptance, and awareness from the communities involved are also CSFs. Their building includes a human centric design approach, a solution concerned with the improvement of human and social capital, and the development of win-win partnerships with stakeholders, collaborating for value-based creation, and enabling the economic development of local community as business partners (Goyal et al., 2020).

Community empowerment is a CSF related to the continuity of the projects, avoiding a lack of continuity that occur if local population remain as aid receivers instead of developing an entrepreneurial mindset fostered through business partnerships (Erözçelik & Taşdizen, 2017; Kulick, 2017).

Business partnerships are not the only path to engage, though. Project results will also be optimized if the local community is included in the process of developing the solution, allowing real participation and influence in the design and in the decision-making processes. This approach also brings empowerment to the community, legitimacy to the project, builds trust amongst the actors involved, stimulates collective learning and minimizes power distortions. Local NGOs have a role in co-creating value, building trust based on long-term relationships at the BoP (Cox et al., 2014; De Filippi et al., 2017; Gold et al., 2013; Seuring et al., 2019; Ubels et al., 2019).

The importance of local communities includes a real understanding of their context and needs to align project scope with actual needs and limitations. Again, partnerships with local NGOs might work as crucial facilitators due to their unique insights into the local needs and constraints (Daub et al., 2020; Rampasso et al., 2020).

The existence of stable financial resources is another CSF because it promotes innovation and guarantees continuity. Funding might be captured through revenues or external resources and must sustain the enterprise in a way that is aligned with its proposal. It can be accessed through private or public institutions, or collaboration with available social networks – although the dependence on external financing might lead to a competition for resources,

which undermines the possibility of building cooperation networks (Ahlberg et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2014; Margarian, 2017; Ochman, 2019).

Which bring us to another CSF: building collaborative relations with a solid and broad network, that includes diverse stakeholders - 'known strangers', academia, government agencies, policy makers, local communities, supply chain actors, stakeholders and NGOs. This network is an enabler for accessing funding, overcoming institutional barriers and creating legitimacy. It also provides access to knowledge and experience, including local traditions and community dynamics, as well as market, business, technologies, and project management tools and methods. Table 3 summarizes these results.

Additional CSFs include an entrepreneurial orientation, good communication and coordination, clear guidelines and high commitment, which can be obtained through a strong leadership. Additional enablers include technology, business incubators and funding bodies, legislative changes, policymakers' strong political support, and support from regional or national institutions (Navarro et al., 2018; Swagemakers et al., 2018).

Main CSF and Enablers	**How they contribute to social projects**
Innovation approach	• Stimulates test and validation, bringing learning from failures • Fosters error tolerance • Includes participants with diverse backgrounds, knowledge and expertise
Human centric design approach	• Builds credibility, trust, acceptance, and awareness from the communities involved • Develops human and social capital • Develops win-win partnerships with stakeholders • Stimulates value-based creation • Enables the economic development of local community as business partners
Community Empowerment through business partnerships and solution co-creation	• Increases the chances of project continuity • Develops entrepreneurial mindset • Brings legitimacy to the project • Builds trust with the community • Stimulates collective learning • Minimizes power distortions • Provides a real understanding of local context and needs • Enables the alignment of project scope with actual needs and limitations
Stable financial resources	• Promotes innovation • Increases the chances of project continuity
Collaborative relations with a solid and broad network	• Provides easier access to all sort of resources: funding, knowledge (including local traditions and community dynamic), skills, tools, and experience • Creates legitimacy • Increases the changes of overcoming institutional barriers
Strong leadership	• Provides entrepreneurial orientation • Responsible for good communication and coordination • Provides clear guidelines • Promotes high commitment

Table 3. Main CSF and enablers for social projects.

4.5 Barriers

A context of deprivation, with tight resource constraints, where resources needed are externally sourced from actors with multiple perspectives, acts as a barrier for building credibility, trust and collaborative relations (Ahlberg et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2014). Social projects and enterprises face barriers to find the necessary resources and services – financial, technological, informational and human – more frequently than purely business commercial entities (Chang et al., 2014; Kulick, 2017). When investors provide support, they tend to put strong pressure towards compliance to principles of efficiency and short-term audit (Ochman, 2019), sometimes conflicting with the long-term goals and social values of these ventures.

Police makers and regional administration act as barriers if they are not willing to legislative changes, adapting rules and policies that impose constraints to the social projects – their innovative nature creating situations that are not fully regulated – imposing bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of flexibility and top-down controls (Biygautane et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2018; Raynor, 2019). Therefore, solutions to social problems often demand fundamental transformations in political, economic, and social systems (Alvord et al., 2004).

Finally, there are important barriers related to the underlying tensions in social ventures that lead to contradictions in their business model. These tensions include efficiency vs aid, break even profits vs consumer's economic power, and economy vs ethics (Sharma & Jaiswal, 2018). Table 4 summarizes these results.

Main Barriers	How they affect social projects
Resource constraints	• Fosters competition for resources, making it difficult to build trust and collaborative relations • Brings the need to obtain resources from multiple partners, who might have objectives that conflict with the long-term goals and social values of these ventures • Creates tensions around project continuity, affecting credibility
Political or regulatory constraints	• Imposes bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of flexibility and top-down controls
Business Model Contradictions	• Creates internal tensions: efficiency vs aid; break even profits vs consumer's economic power; economy vs ethics • Leads to decisions that go against the original social goals

Table 4. Main barriers encountered in social projects.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper presented the CSF, enablers and barriers for social projects. It also analyzed their source of idea, types, targeted population, socio-economic context, geography, motivation, methodological approaches, and related research streams.

Contributions for the practice include the main challenges that will be encountered when implementing social projects, as well as enablers that will help in overcoming them.

Contributions for the theory includes the simultaneous analysis of three different theoretical perspectives that have been applied in similar contexts.

Limitations include the research string and the subjectivity of data coding and analysis.

This paper is the initial effort of a research that aims at understanding how to configure Business Models that can be profitable while properly addressing BoP needs. Social projects were considered an initial step for companies and individuals that aim at developing social businesses. Next steps include a careful definition of constructs, and then the design and execution of case studies in Brazil.

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