

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT: A CONTINENTAL COUNTRY IN SEARCH OF TRANSFORMATION

How to think about sustainable Social Innovation initiatives in a country with vast geographic distances and so many differences in terms of culture, income distribution and opportunities? We address this challenge by analysing cases from all over Brazil against the background of demographic and socio-economic data.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of social innovation (SI) has been used in several different ways by researchers and practitioners. In Brazil, we identified that the concept has been approached by different authors, who most cited Mulgan et al. [1] on the process of social innovation and Cloutier [2], who presents social innovation as innovative responses providing sustainable changes.

Accordingly, it is necessary to understand these different arguments and contexts to better understand what SI represents. This paper aims to identify how SI has been applied in Brazil by analyzing illustrative cases and concepts that have been developed in recent years.

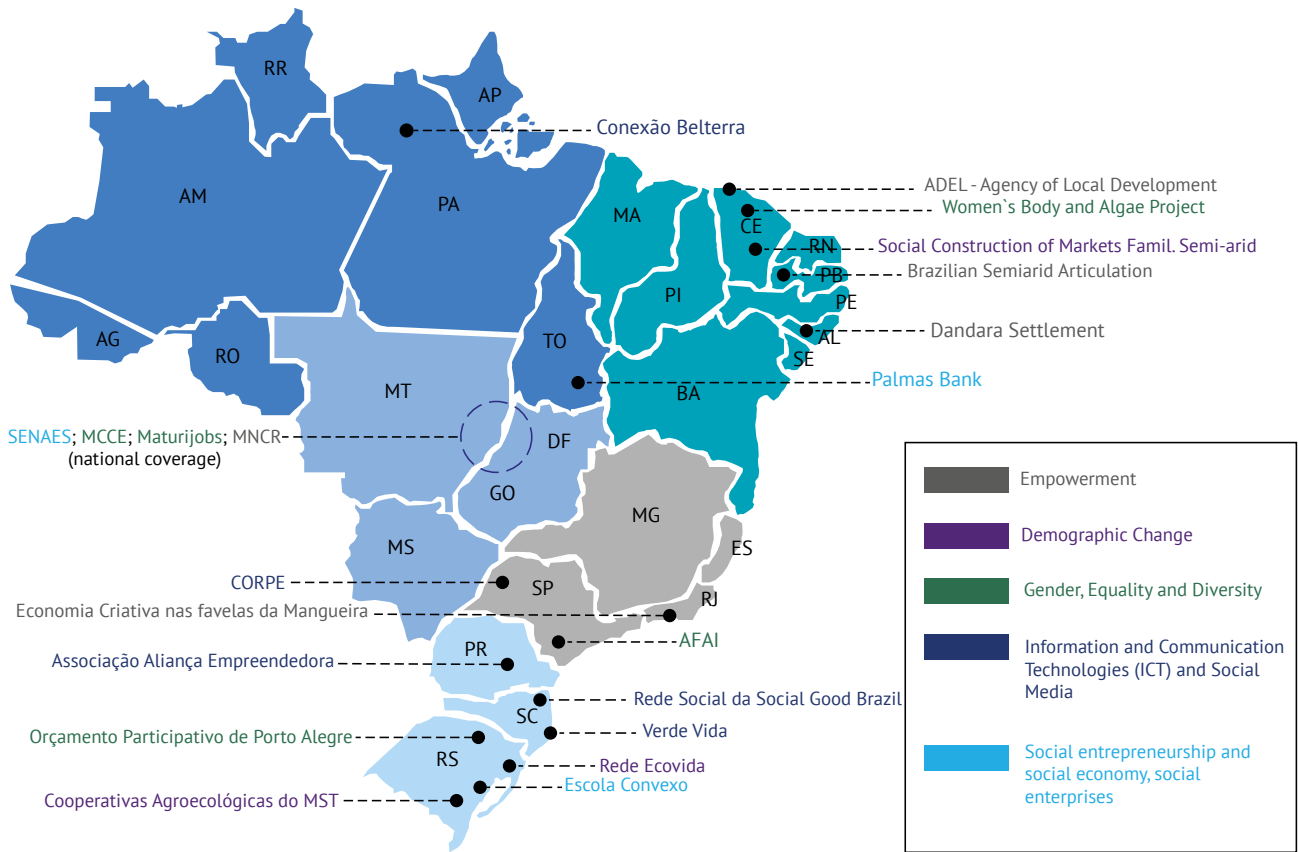
Brazil is a country located in South America, with an area of 8,510,820.623 km² [3], making it the fifth largest country in the world with an estimated population of 208,494,900 in 2018. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018 totalled R\$ 6.8 trillion, with a per capita GDP of R\$ 32,747. Nevertheless, 15 million (7.4%) people are below the poverty line with a per capita family income of less than US\$ 1.90 per day, or approximately R\$ 140.00 per month [4]. The measurement of critical restrictions to living conditions highlights that 28.2% have restricted access to education [4], while the illiteracy rate of individuals aged 15 years or older reaches 7% of the population [3]. Furthermore, 15% of the population has restricted access to social protection and 13% has restricted access to housing conditions, while 37.6% suffer deprivations from a lack of basic sanitation and 25.2% have communication restrictions (internet). The country is marked

by inequalities, leading to the proposal of numerous initiatives to reduce inequality and ensure a life with better and more numerous opportunities for the population.

To analyse how the concept of SI is being used in the Brazilian context, we did a desk study searching for SI initiatives in Brazil. In the end, 30 studies were analyzed. We identified that SI is being seen in Brazil as an innovative solution to social problems or unsatisfactory situations. These SI initiatives are based on new ideas, processes, products and methodologies to improve quality of life and reduce social inequalities. We also perceived an attempt to make these initiatives scalable. In this sense, SI is approached as an engine of growth, stimulating economic restructuring to meet these demands. To this end, Brazilian experiences point to the need to establish new forms of relationship and collaboration that provide new possibilities for social action. Most of the Brazilian authors follow the research group of CRISES [5], which defines social innovation as a process of change in a broader concept of social relations.

SOCIAL INNOVATION INITIATIVES IN BRAZIL

In terms of location, we can see that SI initiatives have been developed in different regions of Brazil; with a predominance in the Northeast and Southern regions. We categorized the cases according to the cross-cutting themes identified and developed by the SI-DRIVE project. In the end, we categorized 20 cases into five areas (empowerment; demographic change; gender, equality and diversity; information and communication technologies and social media; and social entrepreneurship and social economy, social enterprise).



Map of the SI cases in Brazil and their thematic focus

The majority of Brazilian cases comprise initiatives that seek to integrate marginalized citizens into society. In other words, through **empowerment** the initiatives aim to mitigate problems such as social exclusion, poverty and unemployment by promoting strategies aimed at training, developing skills for entrepreneurship, generating employment and income and improving quality of life. For example, the Regional Tourism Association Dandara Settlement (AL) adopts practices that introduce principles such as mutual help and solidarity in a cooperative, supporting the development of social actions.

We also observed initiatives that fit the **demographic change** category, in which we highlight the case of cooperatives aimed at strengthening the autonomy of farmers, such as the Ecovida Agroecology Network (RS) involving different social actors for participatory certification that benefits agro-ecological family farmers and their organizations.

The initiatives linked to the **gender, equality and diversity** category include issues such as the ageing of the population, in which the aim is to promote lifelong learning, health, participation and safety/protection of elderly individuals, as in the Company Maturijobs initiative (National) and the AFAL Institution – the Association of Families and Friends of the Elderly (SP). Other initiatives aim to protect gender issues, such as the Women's Body and Algae Project (EC) or to develop mechanisms that provide greater control of the

activities of government actors and consequently ensure principles of equality. For example, the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre (RS) involves the state and civil society actors for a new form of local governance in which these actors get together to collectively discuss and plan urban development.

Brazil's extensive territory is another issue that causes, to an even greater extent, the exclusion of some communities. At this point, initiatives are developed to improve the inclusion of these communities by making use of **information and communication technologies** such as the case of Belterra Connection (PA), which aims for inclusion through the connectivity project.

In the same way, we highlight the cases of **social entrepreneurship and social economy** as alternative initiatives for inclusion. For example, the project of Palmas Bank (TO) was created to promote income generation and employment using a corporate economic system.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE HEART OF THE AMAZON RAINFOREST – THE BAILIQUE EXPERIENCE

Another Brazilian SI initiative that our research group studied is the Bailique Case, located in a globally important

region: the Amazon Forest. In these more distant regions of Brazil, the communities have great difficulty in gaining access to the traditional market without suffering pressure or abuse from large business groups. To address this issue, the initiative created alternatives to empower communities by implementing the so-called Community Protocol, an instrument that establishes the conditions that the community creates for the exploitation of natural products.

Several measures were taken to create the conditions needed for the development of these communities: leadership skills workshops, autonomy projects, the development of business skills and countless discussions with community members to listen to their demands. As such, the protocol was created by the community that holds the power to amend this document. It was in this document that the community of Bailique defined that its best product for commercialization is the açai berry and with it, they could guarantee the economic and social development of the region. Subsequently, the community sought a certification that would confer the quality stamp of products originating from good forest handling – the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). This label added value to the product and became responsible for the main source of income for local families. With that growth, the community acquired a boat to transport the açai berry, excluding the main players that explored the region, the distributors. Accordingly, the producers themselves take the product to the state capital and sell it directly to the end customers.

This case illustrates the application of SI Brazil, as the increase in income generates the social and economic development of the community. This initiative was developed by local actors changing the previously dominant institutional structures (intermediaries and large business groups). Additionally, we observed growth based on the autonomy and empowerment of local leaders, with education being a priority for current and future generations. A significant change in the local situation was also apparent, which had been one of extreme social and economic vulnerability.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Brazil, SI has been observed especially in the context of vulnerability and exclusion. Most of the situations focus on the context of poverty and voids, and demonstrate difficulties to scale or promote a systemic action of transformation going beyond punctuated change. The Bailique case is an exception due to the way the community organized themselves and created the first Brazilian Community Protocol, which can be replicated in other communities (scalability). Specifically, the Bailique community promoted an increase in income for açai berry producers; stimulated a transformation of dominant market institutions; alerted community members to the need to think about education to generate changes for future generations; and made the community visible to the world, since it is the first sustainable açai berry in the world (inclusive economy, social development and environmental protection).

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