

# The activities that constitute the phases of the social innovation process: A study in the context of social impact businesses

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the activities that constitute the phases of the social innovation process in the context of social impact businesses.

**Theoretical framework** – The literature on social innovation, social impact businesses, and the social innovation process was used. The Bhatt and Altinay (2013) model was applied as the basis for the study.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on a qualitative case study approach, nine Brazilian cases of social impact businesses that generate social innovation were investigated. Data were collected from direct observation, documents, visual data, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using the content analysis technique.

**Findings** – The main findings indicate a complex process involving numerous activities in its different phases (initiation, development, restructuring, and scaling), as well as the important role of the entrepreneur, who is considered a highly relevant member of the process.

**Practical & social implications of the research** – The study demonstrates that the social innovation process is more complex than the literature has shown. The findings may also contribute to the practical field, whether for beginner entrepreneurs seeking to structure their businesses, or to more advanced initiatives that seek to give scalability to their proposals.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the literature by exploring the activities that make up the social innovation process and identifying a complementary phase in the process proposed by Bhatt and Altinay (2013).

**Keywords** – Social Innovation; Social Innovation Process; Social Impact Business.

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## I Introduction

Social innovation has been gaining prominence in academic discussions in the field of business and management since the early 2000s (Eichler & Schwarz, 2019; Van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016), and it has been among the most debated topics in the area of innovation in recent years (Dionísio & Vargas, 2020). This relevance stems from the intention of social innovation to address complex social problems, such as social inequality, unemployment, and difficult access to healthcare and education, seeking to provide better social and environmental conditions for everyone (D’Amario & Comini, 2020; Lee, Spanjol, & Sun, 2019; Pol & Ville, 2009).

Social innovation is defined and understood from different perspectives. This study is based on the perspective that understands social innovation as a result, as it is composed of “innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose main objectives are social” (Mulgan, 2006, p. 146). Thus, social innovation can be generated from the actions of governments, third sector organizations, private companies, and social impact businesses, among others (Groot & Dankbaar, 2014).

Specifically, social impact businesses, as organizations capable of generating social innovations, are considered to be agents located between the private and philanthropic sectors that have an established social and/or environmental mission, value their social and/or environmental impact, and are financially sustainable by generating revenue (Pessanha, 2014; Barki, 2015; Petrini, Scherer, & Back, 2016). The term social impact businesses, used mainly in Brazil, may be substituted by other nomenclatures, such as social businesses and social enterprises, depending on the geographic context in which these organizations are located.

The way in which social impact businesses are organized to generate social innovations is still being discussed in the literature. Included among the various perspectives and approaches studied is the process by which social innovation is developed over time. The literature in the area has highlighted that social innovation occurs through a complex process (Cloutier, 2003; Westley & Antadze, 2010), as it involves the participation of different actors (Kolk & Lenfant, 2015; Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O’Regan, & James, 2015; Saji & Ellingstad, 2016) and

seeks to achieve ambitious goals, which have not yet been reached in the social and environmental spheres.

Several proposals regarding the phases that make up the social innovation process have already been presented in the Brazilian literature (Correia-Lima, Costa, Cabral, Silva-Filho & Santos, 2013; Silva, Takahashi & Segatto, 2016; Silva & Segatto, 2020) and abroad (Belayutham, Ibrahim, Zulkifli, & Ibrahim, 2019; Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; Bhatt & Altinay, 2013; Herrera, 2015; João-Roland & Granados, 2020; Mulgan, Tucker, Ali & Sanders, 2007; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010; Oeij et al., 2019; Vézina, Ben Selma, & Malo, 2019). However, the national and international studies have focused on the general phases of the process, and not on their details, which reveals the need for further research.

This need is also pointed out by Belayutham et al. (2019), Vézina, Ben Selma, and Malo (2019), and Foroudi, Akarsu, Marvi, and Balakrishnan (2020), who all argue that new studies are needed that explore the social innovation process. For Carl (2020), further research on this topic is important due to the organizational complexity inherent to goals as ambitious as those pursued by social innovation initiatives.

Considering the theoretical gap presented, this article seeks to answer the following question: **how are activities structured in the phases of the social innovation development process in the context of social impact businesses?** For this, a qualitative case study was developed of nine social impact businesses that generate social innovation in the Brazilian context.

This study intends to contribute in a number of ways to the field of social innovation. First, in presenting the activities that make up the phases of the social innovation process, attention is drawn to the need for a more specific analytical perspective at the activity level, since the phases of the process have already received greater dedication from researchers from a broader perspective. In addition, although a pre-existing phase model from the literature has been used (Bhatt & Altinay, 2013), this study suggests the inclusion of an unprecedented phase in that model, in addition to detailing the activities that comprise it, thus contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

As for the practical context, this article seeks to provide contributions, based on the schematization of activities that constitute the phases of the social innovation process, for entrepreneurs and their teams involved in businesses with social impact. This can be useful for the

management and planning of the activities of start-up ventures, as well as in helping entrepreneurs seeking to scale up their proposals.

## 2 Literature Review

The theoretical assumptions that support the concepts used in this research – social innovation, social impact businesses, and social innovation process – are explored in the following subsections.

### 2.1 Social innovation and social impact businesses

Social innovation arose, in part, from the insufficiency of traditional innovation in serving society as a whole (Dawson & Daniel, 2010). While any innovation can have a positive social impact and meet social needs, not all can be considered social innovations. For Cuntz, Foray, and Mostovova (2020), the term “social,” when linked to innovation, is related to the need to share with society the value generated, which does not always occur with traditional innovation, in which most of the value created is captured by the private innovative agent.

In the field of applied social sciences, there are two main lines of understanding regarding the definition of social innovation, namely: one that understands social innovation as a participatory process, in which actors are part of the construction of initiatives (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Dawson & Daniel, 2010); and another that understands social innovation as a result, in which social value can be generated by an external organization and then its benefits are shared with society (Lettice & Parekh, 2010; Mulgan, 2006). This study follows the second viewpoint (the result perspective) and adopts the concept of social innovation suggested by Mulgan (2006, p. 146), who presents it as “innovative activities and services that are determined by the goal of meeting a social need and that are disseminated through companies whose main objectives are social.”

As for the means by which social innovation is developed, the literature has highlighted hybrid organizations. These organizations are an important component for the development of new products and/or services that meet social needs in an innovative way (Cavazos-Arroyo, Puente-Díaz, & Agarwal, 2017; Mongelli, Rullani, Ramus, & Rimac, 2019; Mulgan, 2006) by combining social goals with financial sustainability (Di Domenico, Haugh, & Tracey, 2010). The nomenclature for these organizational forms depends on the context they form part of,

and mainly vary between social enterprises, social businesses, businesses focused on the base of the pyramid, and inclusive businesses (Comini, Barki, & Aguiar, 2012).

In the Brazilian context, these organizations can also be called social impact businesses, a term adopted in this study. These are organizations that sell products and services that meet the social needs of the low-income population and, thus, obtain a financial return concurrently with the social return (Barki, 2015; Petrini et al., 2016). In this way, according to McQuilten, Warr, Humphery, and Spiers (2020), hybrid organizational forms have come to engage in a new way of solving social problems, which were previously basically addressed by governments and third sector organizations.

### 2.2 Social innovation development process

Social innovation emerges in the field of innovation (Chalmers & Balan-Vnuk, 2013), which makes it relevant to include a brief discussion on innovation processes in their conventional form. The conventional innovation process has been researched since Gruber and Marquis (1969) initially explored it with a focus on technological innovation. Thus, this field has a long history of discussions that have resulted in the construction of different models such as the linear and funnel ones, focusing on strategy and organization and on the interaction between organizational elements (Bagno, Salerno, & Silva, 2017).

The study by Utterback (1971) developed one of the first models based on the linear perspective, dividing the innovation process into four phases: i) generation of ideas; ii) invention; iii) implementation; and iv) dissemination. Since then, many other models have been presented using different approaches and considerations, such as the ones from Cooper (1993), Thomas (1993), and Kumar, Persaud, and Kumar (1996). In short, they are models of processes that group the construction of innovation into phases and, although they are presented in a serial way, in practice they reflect a sequence that can be repeated at various times throughout the process (Van de Ven, 2017).

Some literature reviews have tried to synthesize the conclusions of different studies that explore the process by which innovations are developed and implemented. Garud, Tuertscher, and Van de Ven (2013) consider that the literature has approached the innovation process as being composed of the phases of invention, development,

and implementation. For Bagno, Salerno, and Silva (2017), these processes begin with ideation, followed by the operationalization of the proposal, and finish with the launch and expansion of the innovation developed.

Following this same logic, the social innovation development process can be conceptualized as the grouping of phases that are performed over time, ranging from the idea to the dissemination of the proposal to other locations. The literature already presents different models that seek to explain which phases a social innovation passes through over time. However, it is worth emphasizing some of the findings.

Two studies (Mulgan et. al., 2007; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010) are directed at the empirical field (grey literature), without presenting methodological rigor and theoretical assumptions of the field. In addition, both studies only mention what each phase contemplates in general terms, without going into the specifics of the activities.

Other studies (Belayutham et al., 2019; Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; João-Roland & Granados, 2020; Silva, Takahashi & Segatto, 2016; Morais-da-Silva & Segatto, 2020) suggest the social innovation process without direct empirical evidence, as they are based on literature reviews. In two of these studies (Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; Belayutham et al., 2019), some activities are mentioned for each phase, but the focus remains on the university context, as both focus on the role of the university in promoting the development of social innovations. Three other studies (João-Roland & Granados, 2020; Silva, Takahashi, & Segatto, 2016; Silva & Segatto, 2020) detail the process of social innovation from different perspectives. Silva, Takahashi, and Segatto (2016) identify the factors that promote the scaling of social innovation, that is, the focus is on a specific phase of this process. Silva and Segatto (2020) propose a theoretical-explanatory model on the process of social innovation, signaling collectivity as an important strategy for its development. Finally, João-Roland and Granados (2020) explore the drivers for the development of the social innovation process.

The studies by Bhatt and Altinay (2013), Correia-Lima et al. (2013), Herrera (2015), Oeij et al. (2019), and Vézina, Ben Selma, and Malo (2019) approach the process of social innovation based on empirical findings. The study by Bhatt and Altinay (2013) presents the phases of the social innovation process, but reveals little about the activities that comprise them. The study by Correia-Lima et al. (2013) investigates humor in the Brazilian

state of Ceará, as a process of social innovation; however, although they describe the development of this process, the focus is on technical and institutional aspects.

Herrera's (2015) research is an investigation based on three illustrative case studies and, thus, her conclusions on the social innovation process are restricted regarding the details of the activities of each phase. The study by Oeij et al. (2019), based on quantitative research, indicates six possible paths for social innovation to be developed, without, however, taking into account the phases of the process. Finally, the study by Vézina, Ben Selma, and Malo (2019) addresses the dynamic capabilities exercised over time by a large credit union, but focuses only on the initial phases of social innovation, without paying attention to the diffusion and scalability phases.

Therefore, the models presented in the literature derive from publications in the practical field (grey literature), ranging from models developed based on literature reviews to models extracted from empirical studies, but the main objectives are not related to the exploration of the activities that comprise the process of social innovation. These factors can help explain the existence of less complex and detailed models to represent the social innovation process. Thus, new studies are needed that are exclusively dedicated to investigating the activities that make up this process in the empirical environment.

To explore this point, this study adopted the phases of the social innovation process of Bhatt and Altinay (2013), understanding that their definitions are specifically aimed at the organizational level and are empirically tested in a developing country, which is similar to the proposal of this study. In general, Bhatt and Altinay (2013) found that the social innovation process generally depends on social, human, and financial capital, considering that this type of innovation is commonly immersed in environments with limited resources. Furthermore, their social innovation process was inspired by the traditional innovation process outlined by Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, and Venkateram (2008). In this case, the process is divided into three phases: initiation, development, and scaling (Bhatt & Altinay, 2013). In the initiation phase, the social need is identified based on a considered collective interest, a viable solution is sought, and studies of the resources needed to implement the proposal are carried out. Therefore, it is a phase aimed at reflection and refinement of the idea, which seeks to identify opportunities and capacities for solving social problems. The development phase is when the social innovation idea is materialized and put into practice through



experiments, research, tests, and prototypes. Therefore, it is a phase aimed at consolidating relations with investors, in order to gain access to more restricted resources, and thus solidify the new idea. The scaling phase, on the other hand, is the one in which the initiative grows, reaching a greater number of people, usually with the support of external organizations, through collaborations and alliances that enhance the generation of social value. In this way, it is a phase of closer contact with the beneficiary of social innovation and collaboration with other organizations in the social sector. This model, composed of three detailed phases, was used as a starting point for the development of this study.

### 3 Methodological Procedures

#### 3.1 Research approach

To investigate the activities that constitute the phases of the social innovation process in the context of social impact businesses, a qualitative approach was adopted. This approach was chosen due to the researchers' need for an inductive interpretation to identify information on the environment and individuals investigated, based on a reinterpretation of what is behind the messages (Yin, 2016). Therefore, a multiple case study was carried out due to the need to describe the phenomenon in depth, as well as to try to identify characteristics, behaviors, processes, and changes, among other elements that involve the object of the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2016).

#### 3.2 Selection of cases

The cases investigated in this study were selected according to the following criteria: i) businesses offering

products and/or services that seek to meet a social need in an innovative way; ii) initiatives at a more advanced stage of development, given the need to fully investigate the process of these innovations; iii) cases in existence for at least five years, also due to the need to investigate more advanced processes; and iv) businesses that generate revenue from market operations, especially with individuals from lower classes. These criteria were applied to the SIB (Social Impact Businesses) database created by PIPE (2021), which maps 1272 of these businesses in all regions of Brazil. To capture the most representative SIB for the study, an additional criterion (v) was applied related to the receipt of financial contributions from impact investment funds. This criterion was used because, in order to receive financing from these funds, the business should be in an advanced phase of development and have its business model validated in the market. In view of these criteria, and aiming to achieve the objectives more assertively, the cases that fit were invited to participate in the research (selection by adhesion phase).

Based on the adopted criteria and accessibility, nine cases were selected. To preserve the names of the organizations, the following codes were chosen: SIA, SIB, SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, SIH, and SII (SI being the abbreviation for "Social Innovation"), as can be seen in Table 1. The number of cases was also determined taking into account the data saturation criterion (Eisenhardt, 1989), which was perceived after the nine selected cases.

From Table 1, it can be seen that the cases of social innovations were identified in areas such as health (platform for online appointments and exams, prepaid health card, diabetes app), education (teaching methodology for the base of the pyramid), housing (land title regularization in urban areas), human resources (employment for the

Table 1  
Cases of social innovations

Cases	Innovative Products/Services
SI A	Microcredit for entrepreneurs from underprivileged communities
SI B	Online consultation and exam platform for classes C and D
SI C	Prepaid card for classes C and D
SI D	Deforestation reduction services and community development
SI E	Land regularization services in urban areas
SI F	Waste management services, environmental education, and professionalization of waste picker cooperatives
SI G	Online courses for the base of the pyramid
SI H	Jobs platform for the base of the pyramid
SI I	Diabetes control app

Caption: SI: Social Innovation. Source: Prepared by the authors



base of the pyramid), the environment (environmental deforestation, management of recyclable materials, and informality of cooperatives), and finance (microfinance for micro-entrepreneurs from poor communities).

### 3.3 Data collection

After choosing the cases, the data collection followed using interview techniques, observation, and document analysis (Yin, 2016) and visual data (Banks, 2009). This strategy was guided by the assumptions of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2016), who point out the importance of using multiple data sources in order to triangulate the information. Thus, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 founding partners, current partners, managers, and/or business collaborators, resulting in 834 minutes of recordings. All the interviews were transcribed by the authors themselves in order to ensure greater familiarity with the data. The participants were not identified in the analysis, instead being coded from E1 to E17. These interviews were conducted based on a six-question script, which can be viewed in Appendix 1.

We placed emphasis on the use of the participant observation technique in most cases, so that it was possible to obtain additional information about the investigated object. The observations mainly showed elements related to the physical structure and the innovative process. As for documentation, we used documents such as websites, contracts, leaflets, and information available in articles published in the media by the organizations. For the visual documents, videos available on the internet were used.

### 3.4 Data analysis

For the data analysis, the content analysis technique was applied, based on Bardin (2004), consisting of three phases: i) pre-analysis: a phase dedicated to organizing the data by skimming the texts; ii) exploration of the material: a phase dedicated to coding and categorizing information using the Atlas TI software; and iii) treatment of results, inference, and interpretation.

All materials collected in the Atlas TI software were included for the categorization and codification of information, as shown in Table 2.

After categorization, each individual case was analyzed and then a cross-analysis was performed to search for patterns and divergences between cases. This process was accompanied by inferences and interpretations of the data, using excerpts from the interviews, field notes, and

**Table 2**  
**Categories and Analysis Codes**

Analysis Categories	Codes
SIB	SIB - History of Social Innovation
	SIB - Characterization of Social Innovation
Phases of SI Process (based on Bhatt & Altinay, 2013)	Initial Phase
	Development Phase
	Scaling Phase

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2020.

documents to support the research findings. It should be noted that although the data collection in the field started with pre-defined categories, we included a further *a posteriori* code, called the “restructuring phase.” Then the results were compared to the conflicting literature and to similar literature, raising the theoretical level, improving the construct definitions, as well as increasing the theoretical generalization.

In order to give rigor to the research, validity and reliability procedures were adopted, following some of the strategies suggested by Paiva, Leão, and Mello (2011). Thus, this study used: the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence (interview, documents, visual data, and direct observation); the repetition of the interview script with informants from different levels of management; detailing of the methodological trajectory documenting the procedures carried out until reaching the results; the triangulation of researchers to avoid interpretive biases; and the search for data saturation.

## 4 Analysis and Discussion of Results

The analysis was divided into four phases of the social innovation process in order to describe the activities that occur in each of the phases identified in the literature: i) initial stage; ii) development phase; iii) restructuring phase; and iv) scaling phase.

### 4.1 Initial phase

In the initiation phase of social innovation, it was noted that the first activity found in the analyzed processes was the identification of a social need, which was present in all the businesses studied. It was in this sense that the investigated entrepreneurs asked themselves how they could improve the quality of life of their target audience.

In most cases (SIA, SIC, SID, SIE, SIG, SIH, and SII), the social need was delimited by the experience

that the entrepreneurs had in their previous areas of activity, corroborating the statements of Murray et al. (2010) and Silva and Segatto (2020), who indicated that the idea may arise from the previous experiences of the entrepreneurs. This identification can be evidenced in the following excerpt: *“I was already working [...] on a land regularization project”* (SIE\_E10).

In some cases (SIA, SIC, and SIG), the idea for innovation also emerged through benchmarking in order to seek ideas with added social value in other countries, but which were within the scope of the founding partners' area, as can be confirmed in the following excerpt: *“We ‘benchmarked’ Portugal, Kenya, India, USA, but because some had the best and most modern solutions and others because they had more similar markets to Brazil”* (SIC\_E7).

Some managers, such as those of SIG and SII, experienced the problem before undertaking the work, which is in line with the studies by Murray et al. (2010) and Mulgan (2006), who emphasized that the idea can be delimited by a problem experienced by the entrepreneur or by a critical personal. In fact, this is common, considering that social innovations are generally developed by individuals who have already experienced the social problem, that is, they experienced the problem very closely, making the entrepreneurs more engaged in solving it. This result can be seen in the following excerpt describing the motivators for the development of SII: *“The founding partner is an endocrinologist, she has had diabetes since the age of seven”* (SII\_E21). This demonstrates the relevance of addressing the beneficiaries of the social innovation, who can provide ideas about solving the problem.

In the specific case of SIB, the idea initially originated from a market opportunity, but it was only after some time that the manager also identified the possibility of generating a social impact. It is noteworthy that there is no expressive imposition that social innovation initiatives cannot take advantage of market opportunities and generate profitability for the partners, since, as long as they generate intentional social impact, profits can even be motivators for these innovation proposals (Sanzo-Perez, Álvarez-González, & Rey-García, 2015).

Another activity developed in the initial phase was the research to better understand the field in which one intends to operate, as occurred in the case of SIF: *“She started to do market research to begin to understand what she could do with this knowledge of video classes she acquired”* (SIG\_E16). The literature has also shown this need to understand the profile of the target audience of

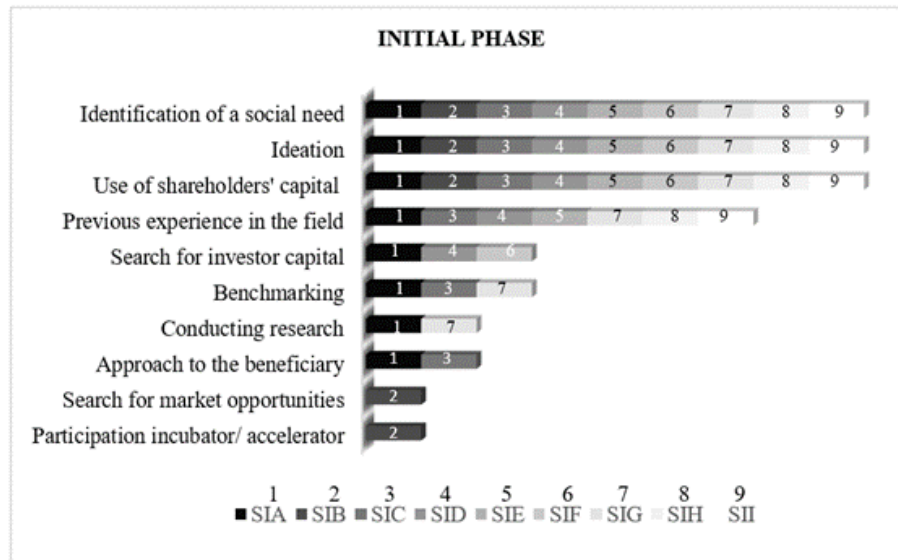
social innovations (Murray et al., 2010). Moreover, the managers reported that in this phase they take an active approach to their target audience, in order to better understand the problems they face.

As for financial capital, it was identified that all social innovations investigated required the partners' own capital in the initial phase. However, besides the partners' capital, SIA, SID, and SIE also sought capital from investors; SIA's capital came from angel investors [*“Since the beginning we have raised money from angel investors”* (SIA\_E2)] and SID and SIE's came from impact investment funds [*“The company was founded in early 2008, and even that year we had one, in fact we brought investors to the company who became partners”* (SID\_E9)]. This result is also pointed out in the study by Bhatt and Altinay (2013), which signaled the need for own or third-party investments to initiate social innovation.

On the other hand, of the nine businesses analyzed, six did not have access to financial capital from investors due to impediments given their initial conditions and social mission. It was observed that investment funds invest in more advanced phases of innovation, and some do not focus on social missions. Due to these aspects, it is suggested that in the initiation phase of social innovation, businesses should look for angel investors or funds that are interested in innovations that generate social value and that are still in the initial phases. The studies by Bhatt and Ahmad (2017) and Moore, Westley, and Brodhead (2012) pointed out that some of the businesses featuring social innovations that are still startups have financial constraints and difficulties in obtaining financing.

It can be highlighted that some social innovations (SIA, SIB, SIC, SIG, SIH, and SII) are not inherently new, but rather a recombination of elements aimed at the development of a product and/or service associated with the social and/or environmental aspect. Thus, it is noted that social ideas are rarely totally new, but instead creative combinations that attempt to solve a social problem, in a context not yet worked on (Mulgan, 2006). This result is also in line with a study applied in Turkey, which found the profusion of social innovations at incremental and institutional levels, while disruptive innovations were rarely observed due to the difficulty in creating radical technological change (Turker & Vural, 2017).

Finally, taking into account the findings on the initiation of social innovations in the cases analyzed, Figure 1 presents a summary of the main activities



**Figure 1.** Activities of initial phase of the social innovation process.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

developed by the investigated cases (in order of perceived frequency in the cases).

From Figure 1, four activities stand out in the initial phase: identifying a social need, structuring the idea, using the partners' capital, and previous experience in the field of activity.

#### 4.2 Development phase

It is observed that the social innovation idea already defined in the previous phase then starts to be developed and tested in practice (Mulgan, 2006). In some cases (SIA, SIB, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, and SII) it was possible to identify, in this phase, the financial contribution of investors to the realization of the construction of social innovations. This result is in line with Bhatt and Altinay (2013), who delineated that this phase is conducive to consolidating relations with the investors. Furthermore, Mulgan (2006) had already commented on the importance of financial capital in this phase, which is marked by uncertainties.

Additionally, the development phase is also characterized by the relevance of the entrepreneur's role. In the cases of SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, SIH, and SII, the idea was developed by one of the founding partners who had previous skills, competences, knowledge, and sufficient experience to build the social innovation. This verifies that the entrepreneurs themselves leverage their skills, competences, and knowledge to build social innovation.

There were a couple of cases (SIB and SIE) in which human capital was required to contribute to the development of social innovation, as well as to the business. In addition to hiring, the literature on social innovation highlights that employees of organizations that generate this type of innovation should receive specific training in the area to enable the development and advancement of the proposal, since the entrepreneur, in later phases of the venture, can no longer develop all activities or follow them (Kolk & Lenfant, 2015). However, this hiring is different from in traditional companies, as social engagement was observed as an elementary criterion for choosing employees in the selection process.

In addition to the experience of the partners, there were social innovations developed with the support of stakeholders, as in the case of SID, SIE, and SIF; with the participation of strategic partners, as in the case of SIB, SID, SIE, and SIF; through approaching beneficiaries of the social innovation, as in the case of SIA, SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, and SII; as well as with the participation of accelerators, as in the case of SIB and SII. The participation of accelerators can be seen in the following excerpt: *"The product was already under development within the accelerator, [...] there was a contribution to the development of the product"* (SIB\_E4). The high complexity of the social problems dealt with by the innovative proposals of organizations dedicated to creating value for society makes the participation of external agents a common



occurrence (Silva & Segatto, 2020; Oeij et al., 2019; Turker & Vural, 2017).

After building the product, it was found that some products and/or services created tests and validations, such as in the cases of SIA, SIB, SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, SIH, and SII. In their studies, Murray et al. (2010) identified the relevance of doing tests and using prototypes to better develop social innovations. Mulgan (2006) signaled that based on tests and prototypes, social innovations can achieve faster progress. Some evidence demonstrates this: “It was a very good TPI (test process improvement) concept” (SIA\_E2); “And then we started these two and a half years of testing” (SIG\_E15); “We put forward the project for validation” (SIH\_E18); “We spent the entire second half of 2014 building networks, developing technology [...] we started piloting in some clients and understanding how this product would work and how to make it work” (SIC\_E8).

Finally, considering the findings for the development phase of social innovations in the cases analyzed, Figure 2 presents a summary of the main activities.

From Figure 2, it can be noted that seven activities stand out: operationalization of the idea, carrying out tests and experiments, approaching the target audience, developing skills, improving the idea, procuring financial capital from investors, and investment in technologies.

### 4.3 Restructuring phase

After developing the idea, a restructuring step was observed, which takes place after prototypes, tests, validations, and contact with stakeholders, the target audience, and partners. After the development of products and/or services, it was observed that some of the companies structured their business model, particularly influencing the innovations in SIA, SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, and SII. Managers noticed some important points that would need to undergo changes due to the difficulty they were having in the financial sustainability of the proposal or in the generation of the social impact itself. Therefore, this phase concerns improving the innovation and changes aimed at enhancing the generation of social and/or economic value.

The difficulty of monetization was identified in some social innovations (SID, SIE, and SIG), which led to financial crises due to not having a profitable model, as can be seen in the following excerpt: “We had a lot of financial difficulty to be able to consolidate our methodology” (SIE\_E11). The difficulty of monetization is an aspect pointed out in the study by Murray et al. (2010). According to Di Domenico, Haugh, and Tracey (2010), it is important that organizations aimed at creating social and environmental value are able to generate profitability and sustain their proposals, since maintaining this type of proposal based only on donations can be detrimental to

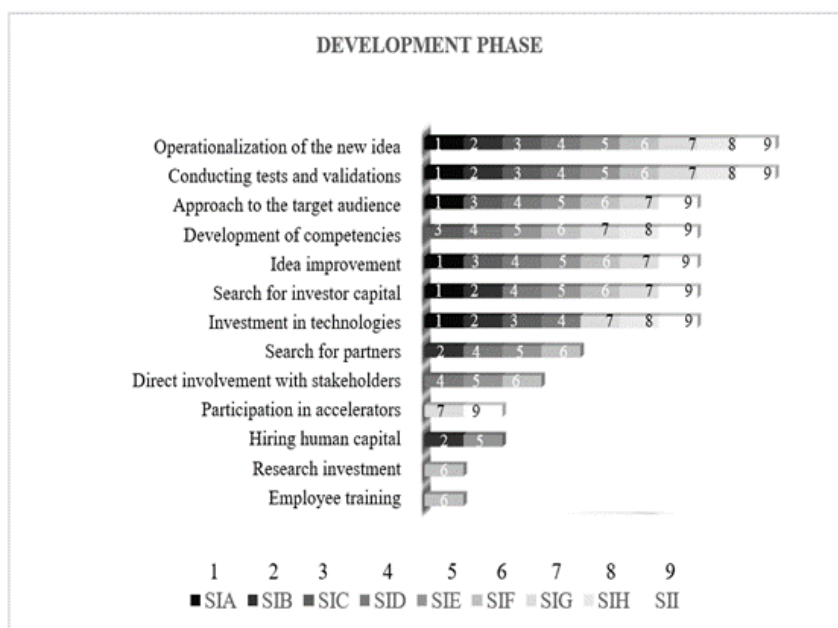


Figure 2. Activities of the development phase of the social innovation process.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

social innovation due to the lack of regularity of donations and the difficulty obtaining them.

Based on the cases studied and considering the contextual differences of this research in comparison to the phases delimited by Bhatt and Altinay (2013), complementation of their model is suggested. Thus, this study suggests the creation of the restructuring phase, considering that the cases analyzed show that, before proceeding to the scaling phase, they underwent restructuring due to difficulties in structuring the social innovation and generating revenue.

Thus, it was possible to notice that all the social innovations studied here, after being introduced in the market, underwent modifications, whether related to their functionalities, or to other factors, such as target audience, value delivery, and building of new products. Considering the findings for the restructuring phase of the social innovations analyzed, Figure 3 presents a summary of the main activities.

It can be seen in Figure 3 that three activities stand out in the restructuring phase: reflection on social innovation, improvement of the idea, and structuring of the business model.

#### 4.4 Scaling phase

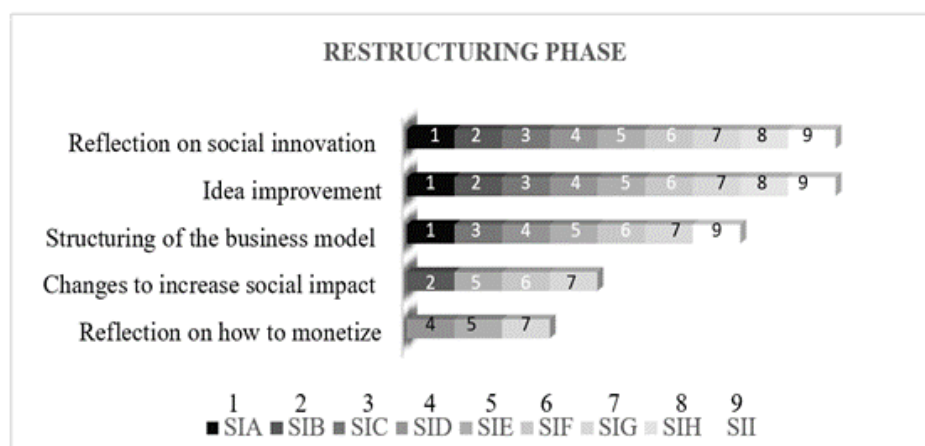
In the scaling phase, it was identified that all the social innovations analyzed in this research received financial capital contributions from impact investment funds, illustrating that in this phase, specifically, there is a greater lack of funding for the dissemination of social innovation (Mulgan, 2006; Bhatt & Ahmad, 2017; Arena, Bengo, Calderini, & Chiodo, 2018). The study by Silva,

Takahashi, and Segatto (2016) reveals that the support of external partners, mainly as providers of financial resources, is essential for the expansion stage of the proposal.

Additionally, in all cases, the expansion of the social innovation was identified, that is, the number of beneficiaries increased, as evidenced by the measurement of the social and/or environmental impact. This measurement is performed in all cases, specifically in SIA, SIB, SIC, SID, SIE, and SIF, which used the “Theory of Change” as a method, a metric that quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes input, process, output, and the results of social innovation. Jackson (2013) confirms it is one of the most widely used metrics for measuring social and/or environmental impact. On the other hand, SIG, SIH, and SII used quantitative data to verify this expansion, which can be evidenced in the following excerpt: “*We started to have greater involvement with bodies related to companies that had social impact, we even started to have a measurement of research*” (SIH\_E18).

Furthermore, it was revealed that the expansion of social innovations occurred in the following ways: SIA, SIB, SID, SIF, and SIG with the creation of new products and/or services; SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIH, and SII by adding value to existing social innovations, through new features or improvements; and SID by creating a joint-venture to start a new company in partnership with another organization. Another sign of scaling was the hiring of more employees in the cases of SIA, SIB, SIC, SIF, SIG, SIH, and SII, as business operations increased. In these cases, the hired employees had to be trained.

Other evidence related to expansion was that SIA, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, SIH, and SII got closer to their



**Figure 3.** Activities of the restructuring phase of the social innovation process.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

stakeholders; SIA, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, and SII established more strategic partnerships, as can be seen in the following excerpt: *“To further expand the company’s impact, we have worked on two fronts: partnerships with other companies [...]; and alliances with NGOs to provide training to all members of the communities”* (SIE\_E12). SID outsourced one of its activities and established ties through strategic alliances; and SII is undergoing a “post-acceleration” process.

The approach to stakeholders, the establishment of strategic alliances, and contacts with other organizations in the social sector, as a way to generate scalability for social innovations, were also identified in the empirical study carried out in the Indian context by Bhatt and Altinay (2013). Additionally, Le Ber and Branzei (2010) highlight that partnerships are key elements for the development and expansion of social innovations, as in the Canadian cases analyzed by the authors, in which partnerships between companies and non-profit organizations were essential for accessing new technologies and for spreading the risk of innovations among partner companies.

It can also be observed that some cases (SIA, SIC, SID, SIE, SIF, SIG, SIH, and SII) were closer to the beneficiaries of the social innovation, in which besides communicating, the business managers could perceive flaws and better identify how to scale them up. The literature points to this as a favorable phase for contacting the target audience of social innovation, in addition to the fact that such actions help to reduce marketing and research costs (Bhatt & Altinay, 2013, Bhatt & Ahmad 2017).

The present study also pointed out that some cases (SID, SIE, and SIF) are starting to approach universities and research institutes in order to develop studies and knowledge for the field, as can be seen in the following evidence: *“So nowadays we have FGV and FEA-USP, starting two studies for us to get the real depth of what we are creating”* (SIF\_E13). Thus, it is revealed that universities can be key partners of these businesses for the escalation of innovations, since university-industry cooperation can promote better use of resources, the sharing of technologies, greater exports of products and knowledge, as well as science and technology, meaning social changes can occur more easily (Segatto-Mendes & Sbragia, 2002).

It was also found that all the businesses studied have a website and accounts on social networks and used them to publicize their business and offer information to their clients/beneficiaries, which corroborates Mulgan (2006) by pointing out that the internet, through institutional websites and social networks, can facilitate the spread of innovation.

It was denoted that all the social innovations studied are in the expansion phase. However, while some are at the beginning of this phase, others are at a more advanced stage and have a consistent business model, with the delivery of social and/or environmental value being conducive to scalability. This finding confirms the study by Murray et al. (2010), noting that after social innovations undergo a moment of alignment, a consolidated business model is required. It is noteworthy, however, that not all organizations that generate social innovation are destined for growth and scalability, as, according to Westley, Antadze, Riddell, Robinson, and Geobey (2014), some cases may maintain their local focus, with no desire for growth and dissemination.

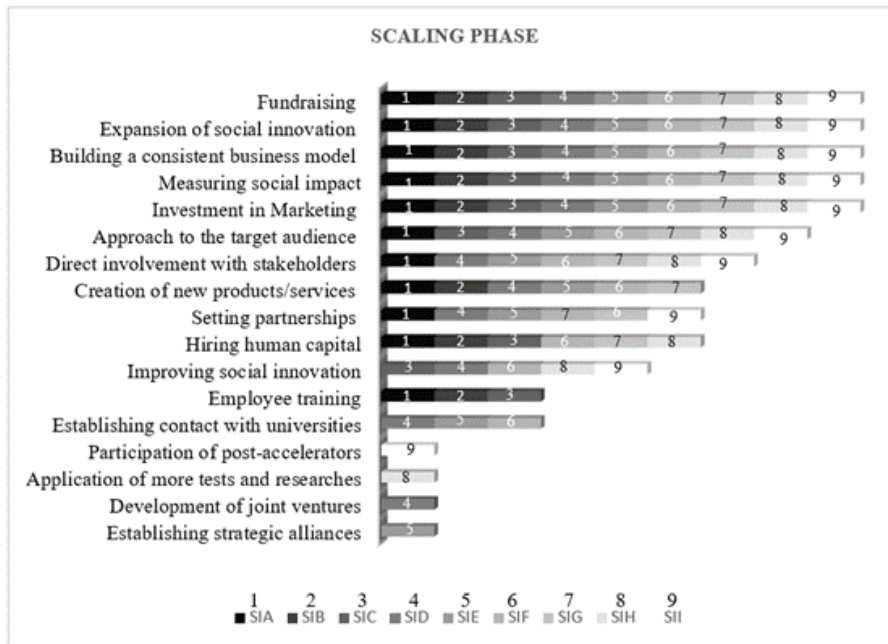
Finally, taking into account all the findings for the scaling phase of social innovation of the cases analyzed, Figure 4 presents a summary of the main activities.

In Figure 4, it can be seen that six activities stand out: raising financial resources, expanding social innovation, developing a consistent business model, measuring social impact, investing in marketing, and engaging with the target audience and stakeholders.

#### **4.5 Proposal for an analysis model of the activities that constitute the social innovation process in the context of social impact businesses**

The analysis of the activities that constitute the social innovation process, as well as the identification of a new phase (restructuring) in the process proposed by Bhatt and Altinay (2013), led to the creation of a proposal for an analysis model of the components of the social innovation process, as shown in Figure 5.

Based on Figure 5, it is possible to note that the social innovation process takes place based on a series of activities that are carried out in each of the phases. These activities can be unique to one phase or can be repeated throughout the entire process. Therefore, it is a complex and non-linear series of activities, which has already been mentioned in the literature in the area (Cloutier, 2003; Oeij et al., 2019). In addition, the role of the social entrepreneur at all stages was found to be relevant, which has already been addressed in the literature (Morais-da-Silva, Takahashi, & Segatto, 2016; Turker & Vural, 2017). This study showed that the entrepreneur’s participation is important, since they are the main individual responsible for choosing the activities to be developed.



**Figure 4.** Activities of the scaling phase of the social innovation process.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The main advance of this study is related to detailing the activities that make up the social innovation process. Unlike what was found in other studies that have investigated the stages of the innovation process (Belayutham et. al., 2019; Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; Bhatt & Altinay, 2013; Correia-Lima et al., 2013; Herrera, 2015; João-Roland & Granados, 2020; Silva & Segatto, 2020; Silva, Takahashi, & Segatto, 2016; Mulgan et al., 2007; Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010; Oeij et al., 2019; Vézina, Ben Selma, & Malo, 2019), the present study provided evidence that this process is composed of several activities distributed over time. These contributions are relevant for both the Brazilian and international contexts.

It is also important to highlight the correspondence between the social innovation process and the conventional innovation process in terms of phases, including nomenclatures and approaches. However, the findings of this study revealed some activities that are mainly noted in the social innovation process, such as the search to identify a social need, concern with the social and environmental impact generated, efforts to assess the social and environmental impact generated, and the drive to establish partnerships throughout the process. Thus, this study suggests that the social innovation process is linked to conventional innovation and is a typology of this larger group. However,

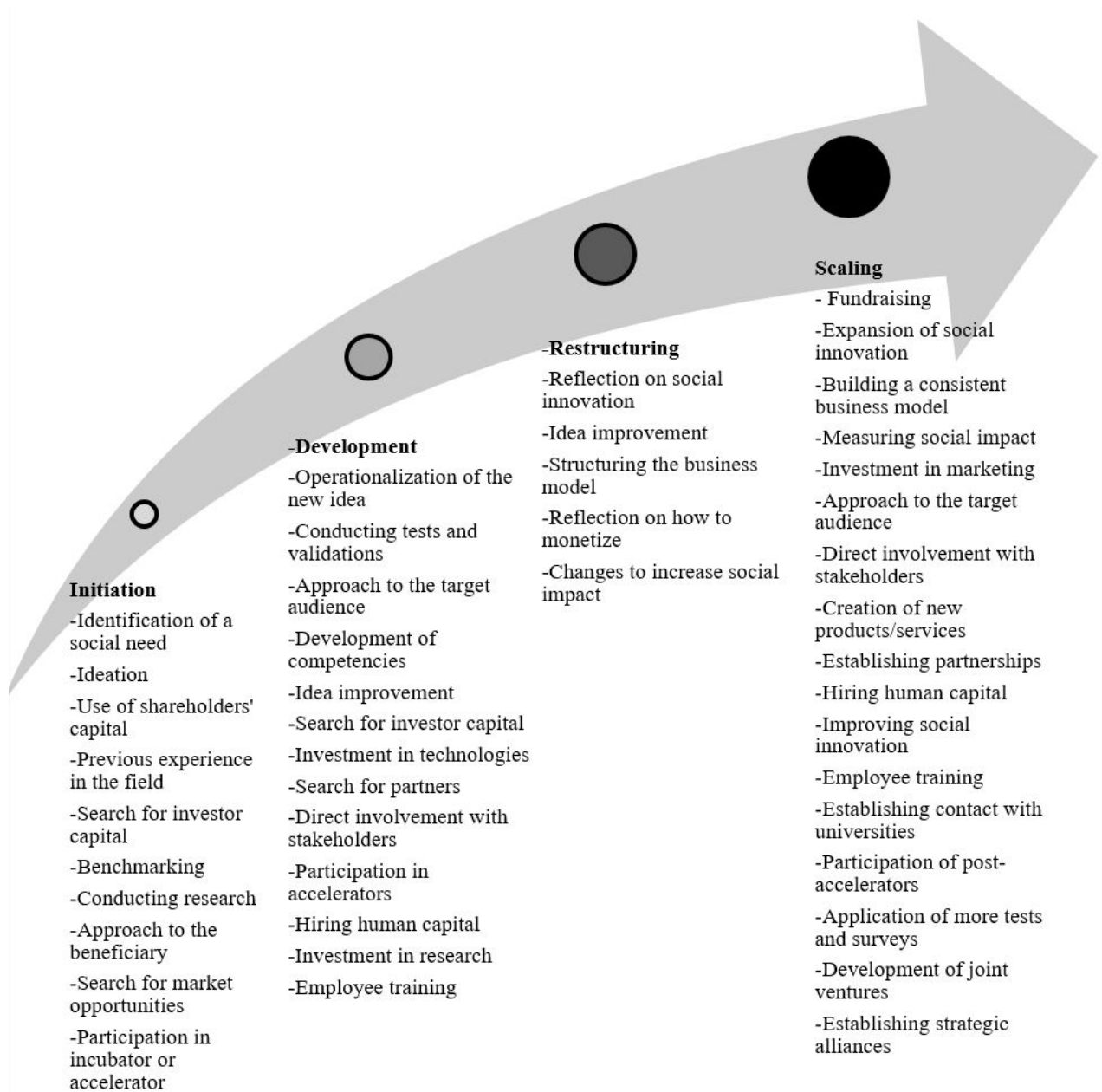
some process activities may differ due to the clearly distinct objectives between both approaches.

## 5. Final Considerations

As the main focus of this research was to analyze the activities that constitute the phases of the social innovation process in the context of social impact businesses, the study allowed us to identify a complex process that involves numerous activities in the different phases. It also revealed the importance of the role of entrepreneurs as key members of the social innovation process due to their social mission and the work they do to simultaneously make social and economic value a reality.

The results allow us to provide at least four theoretical contributions to the literature on social innovation. First, the study identifies activities that are part of the social innovation process and that had not yet been found in other research. Second, it investigates a player (social impact businesses) that has one of the most favorable environments for the development of social innovations, drawing the attention of other researchers from the area to this relevant topic. Third, it presents in detail how social innovations are created, developed, and implemented in these businesses. Fourth, it identifies a complementary phase in the process proposed by Bhatt and Altinay (2013), called the “restructuring phase,”





**Figure 5.** Model of activities of social innovation process.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

which allowed for the creation of a proposal for a procedural model for the development of social innovation.

This restructuring phase reveals that the social innovation process is not linear, due to its recursive nature of being continually revisited and reassessed to more effectively meet the social needs that motivated its creation. It is worth pointing out that this is one of the main challenges of the social impact business that aims to develop social innovations. Furthermore, this study also suggests that the social innovation process is aligned with that of traditional

innovation in terms of stages and nomenclatures. However, it differs in several activities due to the distinct objectives between these two forms of innovation.

As a practical contribution, the study allows social impact business initiatives to use the model created as a parameter in order to identify activities that can be developed in the organization to enhance the creation, development, restructuring, and scaling of social innovation. It is also suggested that social impact businesses reflect on each of the activities presented, as not all of them may make sense

for their activity niche. Furthermore, although the model presents the activities within the phases in which they were mentioned with greater intensity in the field, this allocation may vary according to the type of business and the choices made by the management team. Therefore, all phases are an act of constant reflection, so that it does not become an automatic process, respecting the individuality of each business.

It is necessary to mention that this study has as a limitation the impossibility of generalizing the findings for the population, since there was no intention to reveal elements that could be extended to a larger number of cases. However, it should be noted that the infeasibility of generalizing the results is a consequence of the methodological choices of the research, in which an in-depth investigation was sought in a reduced number of cases, which is a characteristic of qualitative research. In this study, therefore, an analytical generalization of the results was addressed.

Based on this study, it is possible to identify research opportunities, such as the study of social innovation from the perspective of stakeholder theory. Specifically, we suggest investigating the level of engagement of stakeholders involved in the development of social innovations and analyzing the intensity of engagement throughout the phases. Further research on the social innovation process developed here is also suggested, seeking validation of the model. Additionally, based on the activities revealed in this study, research using quantitative methods could analyze how these elements behave over time, seeking new evidence on the intensity of activities throughout the phases of the social innovation process.

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## APPENDIX 1

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR MANAGERS OF THE SOCIAL IMPACT BUSINESSES

1. General characteristics of the organization – year of foundation, number of employees, main activities carried out.
2. What is the product/service offered?
3. How does the product/service offered meet a social need?
4. Tell us how the creation, development, and scaling of the developed product/service happened?
5. What activities are most present in the initiation phase? And in the development phase? And in the scaling phase?
6. What are the major challenges faced in the development of this proposal?

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