



# Social Innovation and Applied Research for Social Entrepreneurship. An Experience of Linking with the Environment Carried Out with Entrepreneurial Older Adults in Nueva Braunau, Los Lagos Region

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## Abstract

Social innovation has emerged as a new way of thinking and acting, which challenges existing paradigms and arouses the interest of broad sectors of society. Social innovation makes it possible to propose novel solutions to controversial social problems, more effective, efficient, and sustainable alternatives to existing or traditionally considered solutions, and for which the social value created is installed in the social fabric of society, in the communities and their territories.

On the other hand, applied research is defined by the intentionality it establishes with respect to problems, for example, social. It is an option that aims to solve a specific problem or specific approach, directing its efforts in the systematic application of techniques and instruments to produce scientific knowledge. Processes and procedures that are mediated by theories and concepts that make possible not only the intervention but also the accompaniment of communities to achieve the reduction or elimination of a given problem.

Both social innovation and applied research make possible the enrichment and cultural and scientific development of communities. Both have great relevance when it is possible to relate them to the concept of social entrepreneurship, where it is possible to adapt business strategies with the objective of contributing to social welfare.

The experience presented in this article has been conceived as an innovative way of contributing to social entrepreneurship that involves a sustainable social transformation of a group of entrepreneurs from Nueva Braunau in the Los Lagos region. The project will be presented from its methodological framework structured in the following phases: Phase 1) Identification of the needs of the participants; Phase 2) Action plan with the community; Phase 3) Development of participatory workshops; Phase 4) Evaluation of the process and Phase 5) Feedback to the community.

**Keywords:** Problem-Based Learning; Applied Research; Social Innovation; Outreach Project

**Abbreviations:** PAR: Participatory Action Research

## The Innovation of Social Innovation

Social innovation is defined as all those new ideas about products, services and models that solve a social problem or cover a need in a more effective and efficient way than the current alternatives, while it is possible to establish new social relationships and synergies to enhance applied research, finding multiple relationships with social entrepreneurship. This was evidenced by the development of the present project.

The beneficiaries, the project leader and the counterpart actively participated in the design and planning of the project. The involvement of these actors is possible due to the Participatory Action Research methodology, which allows the beneficiary's voice to be heard through a needs assessment. This is fundamental for the subsequent development of the project.

This first stage is a crucial moment where the reflection of the participants makes possible the beginning of the research process and is oriented to think about those needs that must be overcome, both individually and collectively, based on actions that they themselves must consider transforming their social reality. This methodology is fully in line with the principles of social innovation, where it is possible to install capacities to develop people's potential.

Together with the group, needs were identified, and priorities were determined, then organized into an action plan in which each participant also had to consider an active role in front of the group.

This project is an experience of linkage with the environment developed by the author from the Universidad San Sebastián, co-constructed with the beneficiaries and the counterpart, enhancing the processes of intervention and support to the rural territories of the Los Lagos region. Students and academics from the Psychology and Commercial Engineering careers of the Universidad San Sebastián participated in this experience.

<sup>2</sup>The Nueva Braunau Entrepreneurs Bazaar and the Agrupación Mercado Rural Intercultural de Nueva Braunau (Intercultural Rural Market Group of Nueva Braunau) participated in this project. Also, the Office of Product Development of the Municipality of Puerto Varas.

Subsequently, in the action, the participants develop a critical awareness of the causes of their difficulties, which increases their commitment to the solution, allowing them to develop their maximum potential, distancing them from victimizing positions or learned hopelessness (a position that in the case of the elderly is more frequent in society).

On the other hand, the role of the participants is a key element to be considered. Through their opinions and experiences, it is possible to link them with the search for new actions to implement practical solutions to their problems, using their own resources or in solidarity with other groups. These activities are interrelated and form a virtuous circle that can be replicated.

## Participatory Action Research Methodology as a Potential for Applied Research

The methodology implemented in the project, Participatory Action Research (PAR), is innovative in that it seeks the involvement of the beneficiaries in the entire design and development of the project. This methodology establishes three stages that will be explained below.

**Research:** At this stage, it is crucial to count on the active role of the participants, who are the ones who experience the problem to be addressed. In this sense, the researcher (project leader) analyzes a problem and its conditions from the natural environment where it develops, considering its causes, consequences and from his knowledge, contributes with the community to its improvement or reduction. In this instance of research, the participatory strategy of needs identification is used. Subsequently, together with the community, the identified needs are prioritized, and different solution alternatives are elaborated. This aspect allows participants to reflect on their realities, identify the main causes and develop critical thinking.

**Action:** At this stage, the design of an action plan proposal is important, especially if it has been previously validated by the community. In this case, the action will involve meetings with the participants, where the best moments for each of them will be agreed upon, with a special focus on the solution. The execution of the action plan is important to the extent that it carries with it a series of agreements previously made by the group of participants and strengthens the intervention.

**Participation:** This stage includes actions aimed at improving the plan carried out in the previous stage, generating special attention to the transformations or changes that are considered pertinent. This is an innovative methodology in that it is co-constructed with the community, involving it from the very beginning of the project. Strengthening the bonds of trust and ensuring greater results in the process.

## The Challenges of Society from the Perspective of Social Innovation

Social innovation and applied research enable new ways of thinking and acting that challenge existing paradigms about the lives of people in the regions, rural areas, and even entrepreneurship in older adults. The solutions that can be

proposed in a context of social innovation will strengthen the links with the environment, the social fabric and, especially, the creation of methodological alternatives to solve problems with those who suffer from them. This is not a new aspect that currently deserves more attention as social problems have deepened and require more collaborative work, where universities participate and dynamize the processes of diagnosis and subsequent intervention. Therefore, social innovation and applied research can underpin initiatives that strengthen the welfare of society, developing scientific knowledge that in turn will enhance such actions, in a permanent recursion.

The challenges that society demands today, its problems and especially the gaps that the Pandemic has widened, demand from us, the social scientists, greater commitment and connection with the environment and its needs, with the communities and the voices of its inhabitants, with scientific knowledge and with the experiences and daily lives of their inhabitants. We must recognize that the challenges we face today in health, education, employment, among others, continue to be active for decades and therefore require a more powerful, sharp, and innovative look to identify problems and create strategies for their reduction. The development of diverse actions for the improvement of the reality that each one of us investigates and intervenes, mental health, education for life, labor precariousness, just to mention some of these challenges, can also become an instance to accompany the communities and learn from them.

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