

## Research Article

# How does social innovation generate social impact? Contributions from a meta-synthesis

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To analyze how social innovation actions and practices presented in case studies, generate social impact. **Methodology:** The meta-synthesis was adopted, which, by identifying empirical research (case studies) and establishing comparative analyses, revealed new possibilities for investigation, deepening and theoretical expansion. **Results:** The results show the heterogeneity of the concept and actions of social innovation, identify its promoters, driving and/or enabling elements, actor networks, and forms of social impact, and link social innovation and impact to other approaches and opportunities for innovation. **Theoretical/Methodological contributions:** The study was able to synthesize preponderant elements to reach social impact from social innovation actions, themes little explored in an integrated way. In addition, it explored the meta-synthesis method, reinforcing the application of this research strategy as a tool for building theories and identifying findings that surpass the original conclusions of primary case studies. **Originality:** Given the differences in social impact detection and measurement, and the lack of a standard for social impact generation through social innovation, this study summarizes empirical findings, categorizes, and identifies aspects and elements that condition social impact generation through social innovation. **Social / Management Contributions:** In addition to portraying conceptual aspects, drivers and forms of social impact, this study offers a discussion on the integration between driving agents, boosters and networks of actors that can help practitioners of social innovation, public and social managers in stimulating and generation positive results (social impact) from this innovation.

**Keywords:** Social innovation promoter agent. Social innovation Drivers/Facilitators. Network of actors.

## Como a inovação social gera impacto social? Contribuições de uma meta-síntese

### Resumo

**Objetivo:** Analisar como ações e práticas de inovação social, retratadas em estudos de caso, geram impacto social. **Metodologia:** Adotou-se a meta-síntese, que ao identificar pesquisas empíricas (estudos de caso) e estabelecer análises comparativas, revelou novas possibilidades de investigação, aprofundamento e ampliação teórica. **Resultados:** Os resultados demonstram a heterogeneidade do conceito e ações de inovação social, identificam seus agentes promotores, elementos impulsionadores e/ou ativadores, redes de atores e formas do impacto social, assim como associam a inovação e impacto social a outras abordagens e possibilidades em inovação. **Contribuições teóricas e metodológicas:** O estudo conseguiu sintetizar elementos preponderantes ao alcance de impacto social a partir de ações de inovação social, temáticas poucas exploradas de forma integrada. Além disso, explorou o método da meta-síntese, reforçando a aplicação dessa estratégia de pesquisa como instrumento para construção de teorias e identificação de achados que superam as conclusões originais de estudos de caso primários. **Originalidade:** Considerando as diferenças no reconhecimento e medição do impacto social, assim como a inexistência de um padrão sobre sua geração a partir da inovação social, esse estudo sintetiza resultados empíricos, categoriza e identifica aspectos e elementos que condicionam a geração de impacto social a partir da inovação social. **Contribuições sociais/para a gestão:** Além de retratar aspectos conceituais, impulsionadores e formas de impacto social, esse estudo oferece uma discussão sobre a integração entre agentes propulsores, impulsionadores e redes de atores que podem auxiliar praticantes de inovação social, gestores públicos e sociais no estímulo e geração de resultados positivos (impacto social) a partir dessa inovação.

**Palavras-chave:** Agente promotor de inovação social. Facilitadores/impulsionadores da inovação social. Rede de atores.

## INTRODUCTION

Social innovation is a rapidly growing phenomenon (Grilo & Moreira, 2022; Campopiano & Bassani, 2021) as more and more companies and nonprofits seek appropriate management tools based on this innovation (Comini et al., 2022) in order to understand how this phenomenon can optimize their business models (Davies, 2014). In this sense, despite the broad debate on social innovation as a field of research (Pol & Ville, 2009) and business strategy (Martinez et al., 2017), one notes that there is still an inconclusive academic debate on its concept (Babu et al., 2020) and the circumstances in which this phenomenon emerges, functions, and scales (Have & Rubalcaba, 2016).

On this topic, Warnock (2014) explains that social innovation has emerged in response to complex social, environmental, and demographic challenges and has prevailed because of the inadequacy of existing structures and policies to address social problems. From this perspective, although there is no consensus on its concept (Amanatidou et al., 2018), Moolaert et al., (2005) report that social innovation can involve new forms of institutions, social relationships, and business practices. Complementing and extending this understanding, Cajaiba-Santana (2014) argues that social innovation includes the creation and/or improvement of organizational forms, social practices, collaborative work structures, social movements, knowledge, and technologies with the aim of promoting social and technological advances that improve the quality of life of individuals.

Based on this understanding of social innovation as the creation and/or improvement of organizational designs (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) and new forms of institutions and business practices (Moolaert et al., 2005), and considering that social innovation can be seen in the form of social business and non-profit organization actions (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012), this paper considers social innovation in all these forms.

In this context, it is argued that social business can be characterized by its impact and transformation, challenging existing ideas and building a sustainable social support system (Hysa et al., 2018), in addition to being a form of impetus for change that benefits society (Gigauri et al., 2022).

In contrast to traditional ventures and commercial innovations, where impact is primarily related to business continuity and growth, impact in social enterprises is perceived through the creation of social value (Maniam et al., 2018), which contributes to the improvement of social well-being and social inclusion of marginalized groups (Głodowska & Szarucki, 2018). Moreover, Manian et al., (2018) affirm that social impact is associated with the acceptance and diffusion of outcomes promoted by social innovation.

In addition, Bloom & Smith (2010) emphasize that the field of social entrepreneurship has given little theoretical and empirical attention to examining the scale of social impact, neglecting that scaling a social innovation offers the potential to extend its value to a larger number of beneficiaries.

About this theme, Barki et al., (2015) mention that the process of social innovation and impact measurement are topics that should gain more importance due to their central role in this field of study, which seeks a higher level of professionalism. The same authors emphasize that investors, entrepreneurs, and researchers still have a long way to go in defining social innovation processes and making progress on measurement methods and impact indicators.

As a result of the discussions presented, this study addresses the following problem: How has social innovation generate social impact? To answer this question, meta-synthesis was chosen as the methodological strategy in this study (Hoon, 2013). This method was chosen because of its power for qualitative analysis of case studies and the intention to build, refine, and extend existing

theories. For this study, meta-synthesis was chosen to highlight the actions, aspects, and processes that lead to social impact from social innovation. Thus, the goal of this study is to analyze how the social innovation actions and practices presented in the case studies generate social impact.

Among the reasons to address this issue is that social innovation has the potential to increase local job creation, generate wealth, and engage talent (Rioli et al., 2016), alleviate the consequences of food insecurity, and promote better health conditions (Hysa & Zerba, 2015).

On the other hand, it should be noted that there are differences between countries in the recognition and measurement of social impact, as in Belgium the number of jobs created, economic indicators and citizens served are important factors (Huysentruyt et al., 2013), while in Germany the impact is assessed based on the scalability of the proposed social innovation (Scheuerle et al., 2013). In this context, it is expected that case studies analysis (meta-synthesis) will provide a valuable contribution to this discussion.

In order to facilitate the understanding of the proposed aim of this research, this article was divided into 4 sections. The first was this introduction with an overview and connection between the topics of innovation and social impact. The second section presents the theoretical discussions on social innovation and social impact, the third explains the methodological approach, while the fourth presents the analysis of the results from a meta-synthesis. Finally, the fifth section presents in general terms the conclusions obtained.

## SOCIAL INNOVATION

The expression social innovation was first identified in the early years of the 21st century in the work of Taylor (1970) (Cloutier, 2003) and quickly gained space in the discussions of innovation scholars (Rocha et al., 2019). Since then, while it has been discussed from different perspectives, such as public goods, service orientation, institutional change, and social change, improving people's quality of life has always been at the heart of the concept (Harrisson et al., 2012; Mckelvey & Zaring, 2018).

Thus, social innovation is a plan for change implemented by operationalizing ideas to improve the quality of life of the population, promote social change (Kassim & Habibi, 2020), and develop and implement adequate and sustainable solutions to the current social and environmental problems of economies (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2021).

Babu et al., (2020) and Pol & Ville (2009) explain that social innovations are ideas that solve social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges and lead to lasting impacts on the perceptions and behaviors of the individuals and groups involved. In this way, is a more effective, efficient, equitable, and sustainable solution to existing problems (Murphy & Parsons, 2021) and for which the value created accrues to society (Terstriep et al., 2021) and not only to private individuals.

Furthermore, Saji & Ellingstad (2016) argue that social innovation occurs in the space between commercial, nonprofit, and government entities that develop and share ideas and technologies to provide innovative solutions to social and environmental problems. Ramani et al., (2017) expose that social innovations are characterized by the creation of ideas, solution of social and environmental problems that contribute to economic, community and social development. Fougère et al., (2017) argue, based on the European Commission's understanding that social innovation aims to empower people to drive sustainable social change and inclusion. Thus, their main goal is to promote the expansion of citizenship and support the inclusion of vulnerable groups (Oeij et al., 2019).

Herrera (2015) classifies social innovation as a measurable and replicable initiative that uses new concepts, applications of existing techniques and strategies to create collective social

value. Moreover, socially innovative products and services reach economically vulnerable consumer groups through social innovation (Boguslavskaya et al., 2021).

In short, these various conditions for framing as social innovation were summarized and classified by André & Abreu (2006) into three basic conditions: (I) satisfaction of human needs that are not met by the market and governments; (II) promotion of social inclusion; and (III) education of people exposed to processes of exclusion and marginalization.

In addition to these aspects, the promotion and maintenance of social innovation processes depend on the social capacity of the actors involved, that is, on: 1) technical competence, qualification and educational level; 2) experience in organizing and managing large companies or projects; 3) presence of financial institutions and the capacity of the market to mobilize capital on a large scale; 4) honesty and trust between the different types of actors; and 5) stability and effectiveness of the government in establishing rules to support economic development (González et al., 2022).

In this context, the adoption of social innovation may involve adjustments and improvements in the business models of adopting institutions, such as the adoption of sustainable practices in community-based social enterprises (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022), the adoption of circular economy activities, and sustainability (Dominguez & Bhatti, 2022). In addition, social innovation can drive new business models that contribute to the low-carbon energy transition, citizen empowerment, and social goals through initiatives such as new forms of governance, social frameworks, supportive policies, and regulations (Dall-Orsoletta et al., 2022).

Due to the diversity, complementarity and implications of the concepts of social innovation, this work adopts the concept of Cajaiba-Santana (2014), which assumes that social innovation is the creation and/or improvement of organizational designs, social practices, collaborative work, social movements, knowledge and technologies with the aim of promoting social progress and improvements in the quality of life of individuals.

In this respect, it should be explained that understanding the concept of social innovation is as important as recognizing its outcomes and impacts, as discussed below.

### Social impact

The need to develop social impact measurement is becoming increasingly important as social organizations are pressured to make their social value visible because government funding and donations are insufficient to meet the requirements social (Murad et al., 2020).

In this discussion, the impacts resulting from social innovation can reach a wide range of possibilities, such as: innovative forms of organization and social relations, social inclusion and impacts on development policies (Londoño et al., 2021) from the creation of mechanisms to generate and capture economic, social, cultural and ecological values (Gasparin et al., 2021). Moreover, scholars assume that the impact of social innovations has a multisectoral and multi-duration character, affecting several areas in the social, economic, institutional, and environmental spheres (Novikova, 2022; Ravazzoli et al., 2021). In addition, this impact is also associated with the creation of social value for customers, employees, suppliers, investors, and society (Sardana, 2013).

Bloom & Chatterji (2009) explain that creating value and social impact involves achieving common social change goals, such as providing capital, supporting business development, improving health and education, providing resources, and offering and accepting products/socially innovative services. The same authors, in an initial effort and with subsequent evaluation by Blomm & Smith (2010), developed the SCALERS model in which

they identified seven factors for scaling social impact: Staffing, Communicating, Alliance Building, Lobbying, Earning generation, Replicating and Stimulating market forces.

In summary, the staffing element is the organization's ability and effectiveness to meet its labor needs with qualified staff; alliance building refers to the ability to form partnerships, coalitions, and other connections to bring about desired social change; "lobbying" is the ability to defend government policies that favor social enterprises; Earning generation is the success in promoting an income stream that exceeds expenditures; replicating reflects the effectiveness with which social programs and initiatives are reproduced; and stimulating market forces involves the ability to create incentives that encourage people or institutions to pursue private interests while serving the public good (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; Bloom & Smith, 2010).

Extending this understanding, Hein & Kappel (2015) highlight that social impact is demonstrated through the provision of goods and services in the marketplace in an entrepreneurial and innovative manner. The authors add that impact is demonstrated in job creation, increased productivity, and economic growth inclusive and shared.

Social impact refers to the process of defining, monitoring, and applying actions to demonstrate benefits to users and communities through social outcomes (McLoughlin et al., 2009), establishing legitimacy and accountability of actions in social innovation (Nicholls, 2008) and supporting decision making by social funders (Nguyen et al., 2015). Thus, the ultimate goal of social impact recognition is to understand how social innovation meets and satisfies human and societal well-being needs (Kroeger & Weber, 2014), such as health, education, happiness, equity, and inclusion.

In this context, this paper adopts as a concept of social impact the acceptance and diffusion of outcomes promoted by social innovation (Maniam et al., 2018), based on the outcome/impact on people and the environment and not only on the amount of monetary gain obtained (Geumpana et al., 2018).

After discussing the conceptual and constitutive aspects that link social impact and innovation, the next topic presents a meta-synthesis that attempts to analyze how social innovation generate social impact based on a secondary and an in-depth analysis of qualitative case studies.

### METHODOLOGY

In this study, meta-synthesis was used as research strategy. Meta-synthesis is an exploratory and inductive research project that aims to synthesize primary qualitative case studies with the goal of making contributions that go beyond the findings obtained in the original studies (Hoon, 2013). According to this author, meta-synthesis consists of eight steps: Formulating the problem, finding relevant research, defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, extracting and coding the data, analyzing at a specific case level, synthesizing at a cross-study level, theory building, and discussion.

Thus, the first four phases involve the operational procedures of the method, while the others deal with the results and analysis. It is also worth explaining that the discussion stage is the phase where researchers can comment on their perceptions about the progress of the research and the application of the method. In this context, this step was developed in the Conclusions section.

#### Steps 1 and 2: Formulating the research question and searching relevant research

As explained by Hoon (2013), the first stage of meta-synthesis is the definition of the research problem. For this reason, an initial review of the academic literature on the relationship between social innovation and social impact was conducted, identifying a

small number of qualitative studies. On the other hand, while many studies on innovation and social business have been conducted to assess the benefits to society, how these benefits generate social impact has not been well researched (Kassim & Habibi, 2020). Given this context, the question guiding this meta-synthesis is: How has social innovation generate social impact? To answer this question, a review of relevant research on the above topics was conducted, using the Web of Science (WOS), SCOPUS, and EBSCO databases.

It should be noted that given the breadth of social innovation as a subject of study in various fields (Agostini et al., 2015) such as education (Rivers et al., 2015), psychology, creativity, social challenges, and local development (Fazekas et al., 2020), no restriction filters were applied to the field of "business, management, and accounting." In addition, the term "social innovation" was used instead of "social business", "social venture", or "social enterprise" because the intent of the study was to capture perceptions of the impact of social innovation, regardless of the organization implementing it, since these innovations may or may not be used in these enterprises (Grilo & Moreira, 2022).

It is worth noting that social innovation can be viewed as the largest field of action, encompassing any new idea or model that meets a social (or environmental) need, while social business is a subset of this process, targeting the organizational performance of ideas and social innovation models (Nicholls et al., 2015). Thus, it was assumed that the search for "social innovation" would include discussions of this phenomenon in its various forms.

Initially, considering the period between May 10 and June 10, 2021, we searched for studies dealing with social innovation and social innovation impact by searching for key terms such as "social innovation" and "impact of social innovation" OR "social innovation impact" OR "social impact\* indicator\*" OR "social impact measurement indicator\*" OR "social innovation process." However, given the small number of results, it was decided to search for broader search terms: 'social innovation' and 'social impact'. Table 1 shows the general results of the initial surveys.

**Table 1**  
*Criteria and preliminary search results*

Database	Search category	Search expressions	Primary result
Web of Science	Topic	"Social innovation" AND "social impact*"	79
SCOPUS	Article title, Abstract, Keywords	"Social innovation" AND "social impact*"	122
EBSCO	AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract	"Social innovation" AND "social impact*"	6
Total			207
Repeated			64
Other forms of presentation (9 book chapters, 1 books, 1 conference proceedings, 1 reviews and 2 editorials).			14
Primary sample			129

Note: Elaborated by the authors.

Based on these results, inclusion and exclusion criteria for the articles were established and are presented below.

**Steps 3 and 4: Definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria and data extraction and coding**

Considering Hoon's (2013) guidelines for building a meta-synthesis, one of the main requirements for inclusion in the study is that the research has been carried out with qualitative case studies.

For this reason, based on the previously identified search criteria (Table 1), a new search filter was applied in the same research bases and fields, but adding the article and case study typification, which redefined the search results, as demonstrated in Table 2.

A total of 35 results were found, of which 12 studies were repeated, resulting in 23 articles. It is also explained that, in addition to these papers, when reading the titles and summaries of the collected studies (in the previous step), four studies indicated that they conducted a case study (they mentioned the number of cases in the abstract or adopted the terminology case, but not in the form "case study\*"). These papers were fully consulted and two of them used the case study method (Adham et al., 2019; Kassim & Habibi, 2020), so they were considered at this stage of the research. Thus, the textual corpus of case studies was initially composed of 25 articles.

Furthermore, in accordance with the requirements of the method, studies that were not reviewed as part of the double-blind review and quantitative case studies were excluded (Hoon, 2013). Similarly, articles that did not fit the research topic (generation of social impact from social innovation) and those that were not available through the Capes Periodicals Platform were not included. These procedures can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Refinement of the search criteria*

Database	Search category	Search expressions	Primary result
Web of Science	Topic and Document type	("social innovation" AND "social impact" AND "case stud*") AND DOCUMENT TYPES: (Article)	12
SCOPUS	Article title, Abstract, Keywords and Document type	((("social innovation" AND "social impact*" AND "case stud*") AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "cp") ))	22
EBSCO	AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract	"Social innovation" AND "social impact*"	1
Review by individual reading			2
Total			37
Repeated			12
Secondary sample			25
Not reviewed in the Double-Blind Review system			2
They did not meet the scope of the research			12
Not available by capes periodic platform			2
Quantitative case studies			4
Final sample			5

Note: Elaborated by the authors.

In this way, 20 articles were excluded, resulting in a final textual corpus of 5 studies for analysis, presented in Table 3. Regarding the number of papers considered for the study, a brief review in the databases SPELL and Scielo shows that in Brazil some of the articles that adopted the meta-synthesis worked with an interval between five and ten papers (Serpe & Kaniak, 2021; Silva & Takahashi, 2021; Vaz et al., 2020; Morais-Da-Silva et al., 2016), so the textual corpus of this study meets the requirements of the method.

Table 3 shows that the papers meeting the criteria for this study were published in five different journals between 2012 (year of the first publication that met the requirements of the method) and 2021. In addition, the selected studies fit the previously adopted concepts of social innovation and social impact. That is, social innovation was considered through the creation and/or improvement of organizational designs, socially innovative

practices, and collaborative work (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), while social impact was associated with the acceptance and dissemination of the outcomes promoted by the innovation (Maniam et al., 2018), based on the outcome/impact on people and the environment rather than just the amount of profit achieved (Geumpana et al., 2018).

**Table 3**  
Selected articles

Title	Journal	Author(s)	Case study
An incubation perspective on social innovation: the London Hub – a social incubator	R&D Management	Nicolopoulou et al., (2015)	Single case (holistic)
Bridging the health inequality gap: an examination of South Africa’s social innovation in health landscape	Infectious Diseases of Poverty	Villiers (2021)	Multiples
Competitive strategy in socially entrepreneurial nonprofit organizations: Innovation and differentiation	Journal of Public Policy & Marketing	Weerawardena & Mort (2012)	Multiples
Diagnosing Business Incubation for Social Purpose: A Viable System Model Approach	Systemic Practice and Action Research	Adham et al., (2019)	Single case
Social Enterprise and Creation of Social Value Chain	International Journal of Supply Chain Management	Kassim & Habib (2020)	Multiples

Note: Elaborated by the authors.

To further our understanding of each of these studies, the selected articles underwent a process of extraction and encoding. Hoon (2013) explains that in this phase, evidence is extracted, coded, and categorized from studies that meet the research inclusion criteria. For this article, this process, considering the research question and objective, was performed using an adaptation of the form proposed by Hoon (2013), in which different aspects related to the general details of the studies, the authors’ intention, results, and the theoretical framework were identified.

**PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

In the four final phases of the meta-synthesis, the results and conclusions from the selected studies are presented. For this reason, this section presents and analyzes the results after the case-specific analysis, study-level synthesis, theory building from the meta-synthesis, and discussion (in the conclusion section).

**Step 5 and Step 6: Analysis at a specific level by case study and Synthesis at a cross-study level**

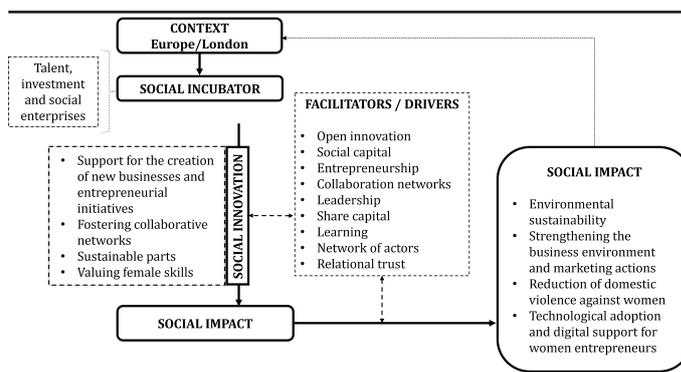
Hoon (2013) explains that in the phase of analyzing the specific level, it is necessary to select the techniques that allow the most appropriate understanding of the studies. For this reason, the analytical structure was used in this article, as this technique allows for a better understanding of how social innovation actions and practices generated social impact in the case studies.

As a result, five analytical structures were created, linking the results obtained in each of the articles evaluated. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the careful reading of the selected studies showed that the link between social innovation and social impact was arranged in some fundamental aspects such as the identification of an actor/institution that promotes innovation, driving and facilitating elements, a network of actors and social impact.

On the links between social innovation and social impact, Nicolopoulou et al., (2015) show that the impact of social innovation results from the creation of value in companies that

operate in incubators and involve a wide range of stakeholders working in networks (collective managerial action), with broad support from social capital to jointly create solutions and address challenges, through the integration of talent, investment and social business initiatives. In addition, this study shows that the operation of social incubators and social innovation practices to improve women’s capabilities leads to a reduction in domestic violence against women (including by the use of information technology-based tools and strategies). A summary of the results of this study is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
An incubation perspective on social innovation: the London Hub – a social incubator

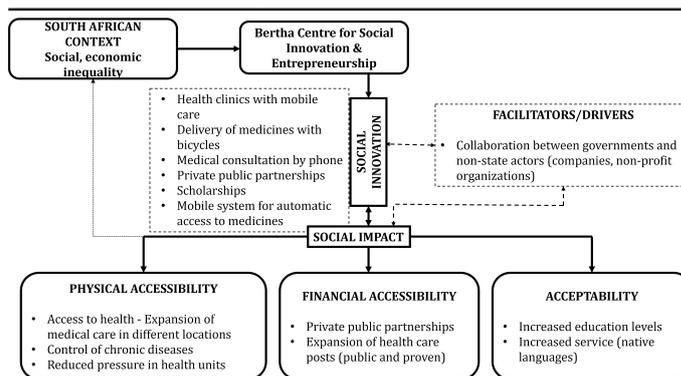


Note: Elaborated by the authors.

In other words, this study advocates for a social innovation framework supported by open innovation and impact creation by focusing on sustainability, community approach, technology, market, and inclusivity through capacity building and partnerships.

Another study found that social innovation actions aimed at providing health services have social impacts in the dimensions of physical, financial, and acceptability (Villiers, 2021). The main aspects discovered in this article are shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
Bridging the health inequality gap: an examination of South Africa’s social innovation in health landscape



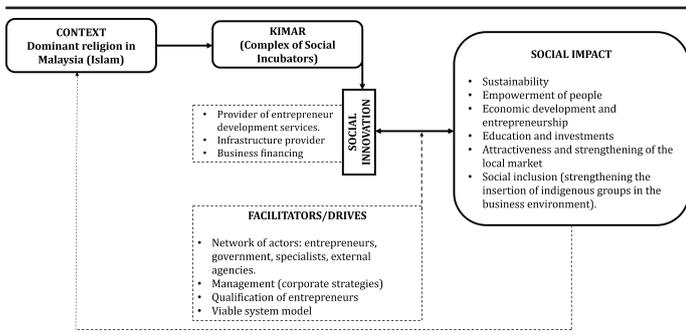
Note: Elaborated by the authors.

In this way, the physical accessibility dimension is about the availability of good health services (health trains, specialized medical deliverers, telephone medical providers) within reasonable reach of those who need them. In the affordability dimension, mechanisms are sought to enable users to pay for medical services without financial hardship. Finally, acceptability is about strategies that facilitate access to medical services, especially when there are barriers related to social and cultural factors such as language, age, gender, ethnicity, or religion.

A further perception obtained is that management models can be facilitators of innovation processes, especially when intermediated by entrepreneurs, government and specialists, generating an impact on sustainability, education and social inclusion, as can be seen in the study by Adham et al., (2019), represented by Figure 3.

Figure 3

Diagnosing Business Incubation for Social Purpose: A Viable System Model Approach



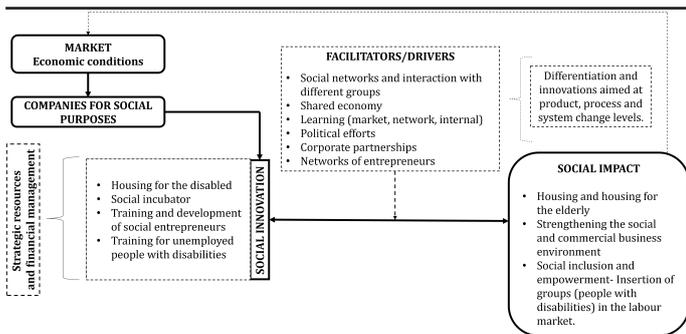
Note: Elaborated by the authors.

Overall, this study demonstrates that social impact is a result/dependent on business practices based on management systems, entrepreneurial skills development, and business strategies that, when integrated, produce social innovation actions in entrepreneurial development, infrastructure provision, and financing.

Moreover, considering strategic resources and financial management to create social innovation, Weerawardena & Mort (2012) have shown that social impact emerges from the learning and integrated action of different actors such as market actors, collaborative networks, and social enterprises, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Competitive Strategy in Socially Entrepreneurial Nonprofit Organizations: Innovation and Differentiation



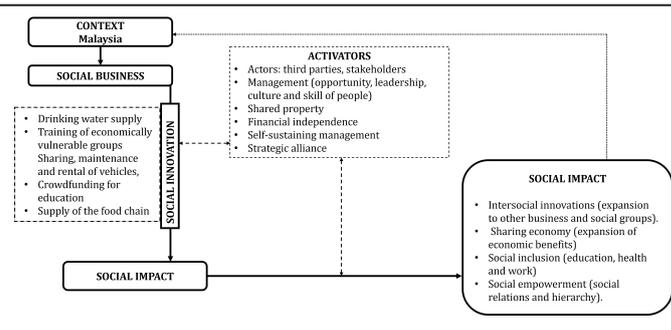
Note: Elaborated by the authors.

The study by Weerawardena & Mort (2012) shows that innovation-based competitive strategies of nonprofit and social entrepreneurial organizations contribute significantly to achieving social impact. According to this study, the impact of social innovation is enhanced by innovative strategies that are characterized by a focus on differentiation, with innovations targeting levels of product, process, and system change.

Similarly, Kassim & Habib (2020) found that social innovation achieves better outcomes when management factors such as opportunity, leadership, and culture are combined with financial management, shared ownership, and strategic alliances, which together have implications for social empowerment and innovation sharing for social and business groups, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Social Enterprise and Creation of Social Value Chain



Note: Elaborated by the authors.

The analysis of the study by Kassim & Habib (2020) reveals that social impact is promoted through the creation of partnership innovations that promote the sharing economy, strengthen inclusion and social empowerment through the proper use of financial resources and strategic management.

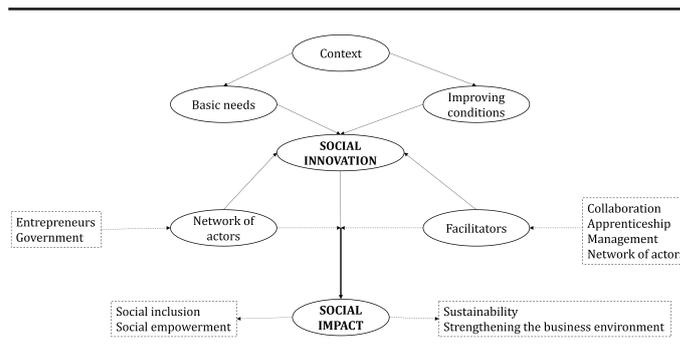
In the phase of Synthesis at a cross-study level, in order to expand the insights that emerge from the codification of the works and the analytical structures, the main categories identified in the evaluated studies were merged. Hoon (2013) argues that at this stage, specific cases form the basis for further exploration of the relationship or asymmetry of studies through comparison and contrast at the case study level. This comparison is illustrated in Table 4, where common aspects in the evaluated studies are highlighted (bold).

Thus, careful analysis of the studies in conjunction with the coding forms, the individual analysis structures, and Table 4 allowed us to develop a meta-analytical framework (Figure 6) that encompasses the major categories identified in the studies: Social innovation promoter agent, Drivers/Facilitators of social Innovation, Network of actors and Social impact.

It should be noted that although Table 4 shows the cross-analysis between the selected cases, Figure 6 represents an integrated analysis of the articles evaluated in this research, with the aim of gaining insights and perceptions that go beyond the individual results obtained in the original studies. Thus, this phase of the meta-synthesis was concerned with summarizing the findings of the primary studies consulted and highlighting aspects that were present in all of the articles. These were integrated into the categories of actor networks, facilitating/driving factors, and the categorization of outcomes classified as social impact in the studies analyzed. A more detailed discussion of Figure 6 is presented in the next step of the meta-synthesis.

Figure 6

Analytical meta-structure of social innovation and social impact from case studies



Note: Elaborated by the authors.

**Table 4**

Categories identified in the meta-synthesis case studies

Authors	Social innovation promoter agent	Drivers/Facilitators	Network of actors	Social impact
Nicolopoulou et al., (2015)	Social incubator	Open innovation, Entrepreneurship, Collaboration networks, Leadership, Social capital, Learning, Actor network, Relational trust.	Entrepreneurs, government (policies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental Sustainability</li> <li>• Strengthening the business environment and marketing actions</li> <li>• Reduction of domestic violence against women</li> <li>• Technological adoption and digital support for women entrepreneurs.</li> </ul>
Villiers (2021)	Bertha Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship (Public University)	Interaction and collaboration between the public and private sectors: government and non-state actors (civil society).	Senior level managers, frontline health professionals, Ministry of Health employees and beneficiaries, government (funding) and non-state actors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical accessibility (expansion of medical care, control of chronic diseases and reduction of pressure in health units)</li> <li>• Financial accessibility (partnerships)</li> <li>• Acceptability (increased levels of education)</li> </ul>
Weerawardena & Mort (2012)	Social incubator	Learning (internal, networking, market), interaction with governments, corporate partnerships, social networks and interaction with different groups, political efforts, management (strategic resources and financial management).	Governments, commercial companies, entrepreneurs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing conditions</li> <li>• Strengthening the local, social and economic environment</li> <li>• Social inclusion (insertions in the labor market of people with disabilities).</li> </ul>
Adham et al., (2019)	Social enterprises	Government, Management (viable system model/SVM)	Network of entrepreneurs, government, national and international state agencies, specialists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Empowerment of people</li> <li>• Economic development and local entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Education and investments.</li> <li>• Local attractiveness</li> <li>• Social inclusion (strengthening the insertion of indigenous groups in the business environment).</li> </ul>
Kassim & Habib (2020)	Social business	Management (opportunity, leadership, culture and people skills), shared ownership, financial independence, self-sustainable management and strategic alliance.	Support from third parties, stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intersocial innovations (expansion to other business and social groups)</li> <li>• Sharing economy (expansion of economic benefits)</li> <li>• Social inclusion (education, health and work) and social empowerment (social relations and hierarchy).</li> </ul>

Note: Elaborated by the authors.

### Step 7: Building theory from meta-synthesis

The penultimate phase of meta-synthesis involves refining, creating, or expanding a theory (Hoon, 2013). In this research, this phase sought to expand the theory by explaining how contextual differences guide the social innovation approach, how facilitators and drivers are prevalent in the process, and the importance of diversity in actor networks.

First, it is assumed that the applications of social innovations are broad, ranging from differentiated processes to satisfy basic needs such as health, education, and employment (Villiers, 2021; Kassim & Habibi., 2020) as well as the best use of the economic and social conditions of a given region (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Adham et al., 2019). Indeed, it is the social, economic, and

historical context that determines the initial characteristics of social innovation, which can follow more fundamental actions and guarantee minimum conditions for livelihoods (Villiers, 2021; Kassim & Habibi., 2020) or actions to improve existing practices, such as strengthening the business environment (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Weerawardena & Mort, 2012).

The discussion about the conditions of the context in which social innovation emerges draws attention to the understanding of the innovation ecosystem, which refers to the dynamic and collaborative set of actors, relationships, and institutions that influence the innovation process in a region (Romano et al., 2014), providing conditions for the creation of innovative solutions to consumer market needs (Silva et al., 2020).

From this concept, it can be inferred that the more consolidated and mature the innovation ecosystem, the greater the opportunities for implementing social innovations to promote and strengthen "positive" social and economic conditions, as shown in Nicolopoulou et al., (2015). In opposite contexts, social innovations are implemented to solve basic needs of individuals, as shown in Villiers (2021) and Kassim & Habib (2020). Consequently, social innovations are assumed to have more perceptible social impacts in the most basic cases because they provide solutions to more "visible" and immediate problems.

Another aspect to consider in the relationship between social innovation and social impact is the role of the network of actors, because no actor, no matter how innovative, can change the system alone (Villiers, 2021). In this sense, it seems that both the implementation of social innovation and the generation of impact are conditioned by the diversity of actors in the process (governmental, non-governmental, commercial, and international). When different actors (networks) are simultaneously involved in implementing and sustaining social innovation activities, their impacts tend to be more robust, durable, and recognized.

An additional conclusion is that the government is an extremely important actor in the implementation of social innovations. It acts as a financier in situations where the social innovation aims to solve basic problems (livelihood), and as a coordinator of efforts and public policies to promote socioeconomic development in the case of social innovations aimed at improving existing and consolidated aspects (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Adham et al., 2019).

It is also noticeable that in cases where social innovation aims to improve socioeconomic conditions (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Adham et al., 2019), lobbying practices are more common and even recommended, which the network of actors seeks to expand its capacity to advocate interests and influence government actions (Bloom & Smith, 2010) that favor the innovation process and the consolidation of positive social impacts.

The network of actors also shows the importance of collaboration between agents involved in the innovation process, because the stronger the interaction, learning and collaboration, the more meaningful the outcome in terms of social impact. The importance of this collaboration allows inferences about the relevance of open innovation (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015) for the impact on social innovation actions, whether in communication actions, partnerships (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012; Villiers, 2021; Adham et al., 2019; Kassim & Habibi., 2020; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015), expansion of practices and maintenance of activities (Kassim & Habibi., 2020). For this reason, adopting open innovation strategies seems to be a fruitful way for business and social innovations to advance, grow (Yun et al., 2017), and achieve positive impacts.

No less important for achieving social impact is the use of appropriate management practices (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012; Adham et al., 2019; Kassim & Habibi., 2020). Whether social innovation is practiced by charities, social enterprises, or nonprofits, management practices must be appropriate and, when possible, based on models (Adham et al., 2019) and management systems (Kassim & Habibi., 2020) that aim to sustain socially innovative actions and its social impacts and benefits.

The categories and processes indicated as determining the impact of social innovation confirm that this phenomenon is divided into the dimensions (Rocha et al., 2019) of motivating factors (context), responsible parties (network of actors), methods (drivers, management, collaboration), and solutions (social incubators, social enterprises, government centres) that together generate and sustain social impact.

Consequently, and considering that social innovation is not a static and specific concept for a single process or field of action but has multiple aspects and applications (Agostini et al., 2015), this

also applies to its social impact, which includes various outcomes such as reducing domestic violence against women (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015), combating chronic diseases (Villiers, 2021), empowering people, providing education, and increasing investment (Adham et al., 2019).

In addition, a generalized analysis of the selected case studies shows that the main impacts of social innovation are distributed in sustainability actions, strengthening the social and business environment, inclusion and social empowerment, which are consolidated as robust and lasting impacts, when practices, drivers and actors development strong interaction each other.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social innovation has been the subject of studies with different approaches and theoretical lenses, which refer to it as the creation of new organizational and institutional forms, new social practices, new approaches, and new concepts that contribute to improving the quality of life of individuals (Tardif & Harrisson, 2005). However, even given the power and potential of social innovation to improve quality of life and create social impact, there is still no comprehensive discussion of the criteria, requirements, and/or opportunities for creating social impact through this type of innovation.

The analyzes and results confirm the diversity of the concept of social innovation, which can be developed through the activity of social entrepreneurs and enterprises, government agencies, non-profit institutions and social incubators, which have gained importance in promoting and expanding social innovation activities, as noted in the studies analyzed.

In this sense, the study has shown that social incubators mainly develop and implement projects aimed at improving social and economic conditions in more structured and consolidated historical contexts, while nonprofits and government agencies have focused their efforts on implementing social innovations that alleviate the consequences of basic needs such as employment, health, and education in less planned and organized social, economic, and geographic environments.

Meanwhile, social innovation has had an impact in the local contexts in which it is implemented, through the interaction of driving factors and networks of actors. While these elements are common in the development of innovation and social impact, they also have a limiting effect, as they are more common in more developed socioeconomic contexts, limiting the spaces where social innovation has generated positive and lasting social impact to beyond a limited group of people.

Therefore, it is important to strengthen the role of governments in generating social impact because, as shown by the studies analyzed, it is the government that assumes the role of introducing and financing innovations in environments with needs social more basic. However, to strengthen social impact, the government must act in a programmed and permanent way, rather than temporarily, by promoting and coordinating actions and policies to stimulate, "attract" and build innovation ecosystems that turn less favored places into attractive spaces for businesses and social incubators.

From the meta-synthesis conducted, it appears that the generation of social impact through social innovation depends on the performance of some key actors (government and entrepreneurs) and the presence of driving factors such as management, learning and collaboration (also in the form of open innovation). In other words, social innovation actions alone are not able to achieve broader impacts, but rather temporary benefits. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the contextual conditions have direct social impact in terms of social inclusion and empowerment, sustainability, strengthening of the social and economic environment.

Returning to the main question of this research, how social innovation generates social impact, the results of this article show that this innovation generates impact when it is implemented by social incubators, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies.

Furthermore, for social innovation to have its impact, it must be operationalized through the interplay of various factors, such as open innovation, entrepreneurship, collaborative networks, learning, leadership, social capital, public-private collaboration, government action (seed funding and/or government/institutional coordination), consolidated management practices, strategic alliances, and so on. Based on these components, social innovation can have an impact in various areas, whether it is environmental sustainability, strengthening the business environment, reducing domestic violence, expanding female entrepreneurship, acceptance, financial and physical accessibility of health services, improving housing, empowerment, social inclusion and professional integration, including for people with disabilities and indigenous groups, the sharing economy, and more.

For institutions working with social innovation practices, this study offers managerial contributions by highlighting the factors that determine the generation of impact, so that these organizations can adopt, adapt, and integrate these elements into their activities for the purpose of improve their strategies and increase the impact of social innovation.

Resuming the stage of discussion of the meta-synthesis method (as indicated in the methodology section), a potential difficulty with this method is the inclusion of work that does not use case study terminology, but instead uses terms such as interview, exploratory study, or simply qualitative study. Although it was possible to accept these studies, we chose to give preference to studies that explicitly identify themselves as case studies, as indicated by Hoon (2013); therefore, the adoption of alternative expressions would not respect the requirements of the method and could alter the composition of the study sample.

Due to the great theoretical and practical relevance of social innovation, it is recommended that the search terms be expanded in further research to confirm, challenge, and/or extend the proposed meta-analytical framework. Furthermore, empirical research inductive and/or deductive can validate and/or extend the categories and processes presented in this study. Although not addressed in the studies reviewed, it is believed that the digitization of social enterprises and social innovation practices may amplify the impact of this phenomenon, which should be explored in further research.

Of course, this research does not exhaust the discussions and analyzes on social impact generation from social innovation, but it stimulates their debate and offers ways and categories (theory building from meta-synthesis), even that preliminaries, with the potential to boost this process, ensure minimum conditions for survival and increase the quality of life of individuals, regions and socio-economic environments.

#### Conflict of interest statement

*The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.*

#### Authors' statement of individual contributions

Roles	Contributions		
	Rocha RO	Takahashi ARW	Segatto AP
Conceptualization	■	■	■
Methodology	■	■	
Software	■	■	■
Validation	■	■	■
Formal analysis	■	■	■
Investigation	■	■	
Resources	■	■	■
Data Curation	■	■	■
Writing - Original Draft	■	■	■
Writing - Review & Editing	■	■	■
Visualization	■	■	■
Supervision	■	■	■
Project administration	■	■	■
Funding acquisition	■	■	■

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