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Papéis dos atores do ecossistema de negócios de impacto social: evidências encontradas no interior da Paraíba

Roles of actors in the social impact business ecosystem: evidence found in the interior of Paraíba

Papel de los actores en el ecosistema de negocios de impacto social: evidencias encontradas en el interior de Paraíba

Téssio Alves da Silva Dias

Universidade Federal de Campina Grande (UFCG)
Rua Aprigio Veloso, 882, Bairro Universitário - Campina Grande, PB - CEP: 58.429-900
<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2522-3386>
tessioasd@gmail.com

Suzanne Érica Nóbrega Correia

Universidade Federal de Campina Grande (UFCG)
Rua Aprigio Veloso, 882, Bairro Universitário - Campina Grande, PB - CEP: 58.429-900
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3613-234X>
suzanne.eric@professor.ufcg.edu.br



PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Negócios de Impacto Social. Ecossistema de Inovação. Atores Sociais.

Resumo: O debate sobre alternativas para mitigar os problemas críticos de ordem social, ambiental e econômico vêm ganhando ênfase nos últimos anos. O aumento de crises humanitárias e ambientais, bem como a ausência de organizações que atendem as demandas sociais emergentes, ressaltam a importância de se aproximar de iniciativas socialmente responsáveis. Em meio a esse contexto, surge um fenômeno com a missão de equilibrar aspectos financeiros e impacto social: os Negócios de Impactos Sociais (NIS). Tendo em vista que esses negócios são desenvolvidos em meio a um ecossistema de inovação social competitivo e cooperativo, e que criam mudanças sociais positivas por meio de mecanismos de mercado, este estudo teve como objetivo compreender como os principais atores envolvidos no ecossistema de Negócios de Impacto Social interagem com cooperativas situadas no interior da Paraíba. Este trabalho visa contribuir para o entendimento deste tema que vem recebendo crescente atenção, a partir de uma estrutura analítica para a compreensão do campo de ecossistemas de negócios sociais. Assim, a metodologia empregada foi de um estudo qualitativo. Ao observar as análises dos resultados, é possível perceber que os negócios investigados receberam apoio dos atores sociais para o seu



desenvolvimento, se relacionando de maneira harmoniosa, criando conexões que contribui com o desenvolvimento do ecossistema de NIS.

KEYWORDS

*Social Impact Businesses.
Innovation Ecosystem.
Social Actors.*

Abstract: *The debate on alternatives to mitigate critical social, environmental and economic problems has gained emphasis in recent years. The increase in humanitarian and environmental crises, as well as the absence of organizations that meet emerging social demands, highlight the importance of approaching socially responsible initiatives. Amid this context, a phenomenon emerges with the mission of balancing financial aspects and social impact: Social Impact Businesses (NIS). Considering that these businesses are developed within a competitive and cooperative social innovation ecosystem, and that they create positive social changes through market mechanisms, this study aimed to understand how the main actors involved in the Impact Business ecosystem Social interact with cooperatives located in the interior of Paraíba. This work aims to contribute to the understanding of this topic that has been receiving increasing attention, using an analytical framework for understanding the field of social business ecosystems. Thus, the methodology used was a qualitative study. When observing the analysis of the results, it is possible to see that the businesses investigated received support from social actors for their development, relating in a harmonious way, creating connections that contribute to the development of the NIS ecosystem.*

PALABRAS CLAVE

Negocios de Impacto Social. Ecosistema de Innovación. Actores Sociales.

Resumen: *El debate sobre alternativas para mitigar problemas sociales, ambientales y económicos críticos ha ganado énfasis en los últimos años. El aumento de las crisis humanitarias y ambientales, así como la ausencia de organizaciones que atiendan las demandas sociales emergentes, resaltan la importancia de abordar iniciativas socialmente responsables. En este contexto, surge un fenómeno con la misión de equilibrar los aspectos financieros y el impacto social: los Negocios de Impacto Social (NIS). Considerando que estos negocios se desarrollan dentro de un ecosistema de innovación social competitivo y cooperativo, y que generan cambios sociales positivos a través de mecanismos de mercado, este estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender cómo los principales actores involucrados en el ecosistema de Negocios de Impacto Social interactúan con las cooperativas ubicadas en el interior de Paraíba. Este trabajo tiene como objetivo contribuir a la comprensión de este tema que ha estado recibiendo cada vez más atención, utilizando un marco analítico para comprender el campo de los ecosistemas de negocios sociales. Así, la metodología utilizada fue un estudio cualitativo. Al observar el análisis de los resultados, es posible ver que los negocios investigados recibieron apoyo de los actores sociales para su desarrollo, relacionándose de manera armoniosa, creando conexiones que contribuyen al desarrollo del ecosistema NIS.*

Introduction

Research on Social Impact Businesses (NIS) has advanced in recent years (Barki et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020), and there is growing attention to the role of the innovation ecosystem in the economy (Gomes, 2021). It is recognized that there needs to be more understanding of entrepreneurial activities concerning the emergence of innovation ecosystems that focus on addressing social challenges (Gifford, McKelvey, & Saemundsson, 2020).

Ecosystems are networks in which relationships are intensified, and information and talent flow through systems of sustained value co-creation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). A social business ecosystem consists of actors from various sectors of society and their environments, with legal and cultural norms, support infrastructures, and other elements that either enable or inhibit the development of social innovations, with challenges such as the reuse and integration of information (Chueri et al., 2019).

The critical actors identified in social impact business ecosystems are the government, universities, the private sector, and civil society, which help social entrepreneurs develop new businesses (Björk et al., 2014; Carayannis et al., 2021). These actors can play a crucial role in promoting social entrepreneurship. The government intentionally stimulates science through research and public-private partnerships (Halibas, Maata & Sibayan, 2017).

Universities are recognized for disseminating knowledge in society (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000); the private sector is responsible for offering products and services that meet social needs; civil society contributes with new ways of thinking. Lastly, social entrepreneurs are key players in this ecosystem (Carayannis et al., 2021). However, despite growing interest, there are still many uncertainties regarding the interactions among the various Social Impact Business ecosystem actors, especially in local and regional contexts. These uncertainties are particularly relevant in less developed regions, such as the interior of Paraíba, where social and environmental challenges are significant and

business opportunities are still being explored.

This study investigates a specific model of NIS, focusing on cooperatives within the innovation ecosystem of Paraíba over the last 13 years. The research seeks to understand the relationship of social actors in developing these businesses. The study relies on field research with social entrepreneurs who received impact investments and/or participated in acceleration programs.

These actors maintain direct relationships with Social Impact Businesses since they aim to minimize critical problems in society, whether environmental or social, by combining financial sustainability with market mechanisms (Teodósio & Comini, 2012; Petrini, Scherer, & Back, 2016; Comini, Barki, & Aguiar, 2012; Rosolen, Ticoski, & Comini, 2014). Understanding the dynamics of the ecosystem requires getting closer to the actors involved in this social and economic transformation and development process.

In this context, Social Impact Businesses emerge as an innovative approach to addressing social issues and complex needs. They have developed as a phenomenon aligned with socio-environmental transformations, bringing discussions on responses to the world's most pressing problems and aiming for social and sustainable changes. Their essence lies in seeking solutions to the problems businesses face (Sharma & Kumar, 2019).

While a limited number of theoretical studies on social impact businesses explore interaction with their crucial ecosystem actors, there is a need for studies that specifically focus on these relationships. Therefore, this paper addresses the following problem: How are the relationships among the critical actors in the social impact business ecosystem constructed? By analysing these interactions, this study contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of the Social Impact Business ecosystem in Paraíba. It provides essential insights for developing public/private policies for this sector. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the sustainable growth of the local economy and resolve social and environmental problems in the region.

Theoretical elements of the research

Conforme observa-se, a maneira tradicional como as economias liberais se comportam, atualmente, não conseguem atender de forma simultânea e satisfatória os aspectos sustentáveis e econômicos, dessa forma, acabam negligenciando algumas necessidades sociais e ambientais básicas, revelando a fragilidade desse sistema. Por outro lado, as organizações sem fins lucrativos ou não governamentais (ONGs), apesar de satisfazerem algumas demandas sociais, são ineficientes do ponto de vista econômico. Portanto, essas duas ideologias coincidem com os princípios de negócios de impacto social (Hysa et al., 2018). Nesse contexto, os NIS surgem como alternativa ao sistema capitalista vigente, em meio ao desenvolvimento sustentável, buscam atender as demandas sociais e atuam de forma rentável. Dessa forma, tem se mostrado um tema de extrema importância na literatura, tanto no Brasil como no mundo (Romani-Dias et al., 2017).

Por se tratar de uma nova forma de organização em evolução, combinando aspecto financeiro e social, há várias influências relacionadas para classificar as organizações que visam resolver problemas sociais, elas foram chamadas de empresas sociais, negócios híbridos, negócios inclusivos ou simplesmente Negócios de Impacto Social, embora sejam apresentados diferentes termos, há convergência para um mesmo caminho, todos têm por finalidade minimizar os problemas críticos que assolam a sociedade, seja de ordem ambiental ou social, combinando sustentabilidade financeira e mecanismo de mercado (Teodósio & Comini, 2012; Petrini, Scherer & Back, 2016; Comini, Barki & Aguiar, 2012; Rosolen, Ticoski, & Comini, 2014).

A diversidade de nomenclaturas e variados conceitos encontrados na literatura, pode ser justificada por distintas realidades em que esses empreendimentos sociais se formam, sofrendo influência de acordo com seu contexto político, econômico e social de cada região. (Young, 2008). Vale ressaltar que Negócios de Impactos Sociais é mais bem aceito e difundido em países

emergentes, o que se aproxima mais da nossa realidade.

Nesse cenário de diversidade de Negócios de Impacto Social, as cooperativas em análises podem assumir o formato de NIS na medida em que desenvolvem ações que geram desdobramentos que minimizem a condição de vulnerabilidade e pobreza, também assumem um modelo de gestão baseado na autonomia, democracia, solidariedade e lucratividade. Logo, as cooperativas são uma alternativa econômica viável e sustentável para promover mudanças sociais positivas.

Negócios de Impacto Social são organizações que adotam estratégias para mitigar as injustiças sociais que perpassam a sociedade, ao mesmo tempo que encontram oportunidades de mercado, (Alter, 2007), permitem trazer respostas às necessidades dos cidadãos de maneira mais rápida. Entre as suas principais características, se diferenciam de negócios tradicionais por possuírem a peculiaridade e vantagem única por compreender, além de identificar os problemas regionais. Geralmente, sua missão social tem o apoio de diversos atores sociais (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017).

A compreensão dos Negócios de Impacto Social pode ser ampliada a partir de outra linha de pensamento, na qual entende que esse modelo de negócio se difere de negócios tradicionais em seu propósito principal, surgem para servir a sociedade e melhorar as condições de vida da população de baixa renda, sendo autossustentáveis, a riqueza captada deve ser reinvestida no próprio negócio, sem a distribuição do lucro entre seus proprietários (Yunus, Moignon & Lehmann-Ortega, 2010).

Por outro lado, há uma necessidade de aproximar os estudos de negócios de impacto social com os atores do seu ecossistema (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Roy & Hazenberg, 2019), pois naturalmente operam em um contexto local, visto que é importante romper sua fronteira, buscando compreender atores que influenciam o seu ambiente interno (Roy & Hazenberg, 2019).

Social Business and Innovation Ecosystem

Prahalad's work popularized the term ecosystem, which identified the interaction between social actors and the private sector with the aim of generating income (Prahalad & Hart, 2010). This gave rise to a new way of viewing corporate environments driven by competition (Jacobides, Cennamo & Gawer, 2018). The term ecosystem generally refers to "a group of interacting companies that rely on each other's activities" (Jacobides, Cennamo & Gawer, 2018, p.4).

Business ecosystems are spaces where organizations work competitively and cooperatively to develop themselves in the pursuit of innovation (Moore, 1999). They interact in a community of businesses, actors, and institutions, where knowledge is exchanged among the members. The mission of business ecosystems is to impact their production chain by promoting sustainability and creating new ventures (Teece, 2007; Cohen, 2006; Isenberg, 2010).

This environment is conducive to social business ecosystems, which are formed through the daily interactions of their members to share meaning, resources, and infrastructure. These ecosystems are crucial for the new businesses that emerge in the network. They focus on creating social impact, distancing themselves from the high returns that traditional market-based businesses demand (Thompson, 2017).

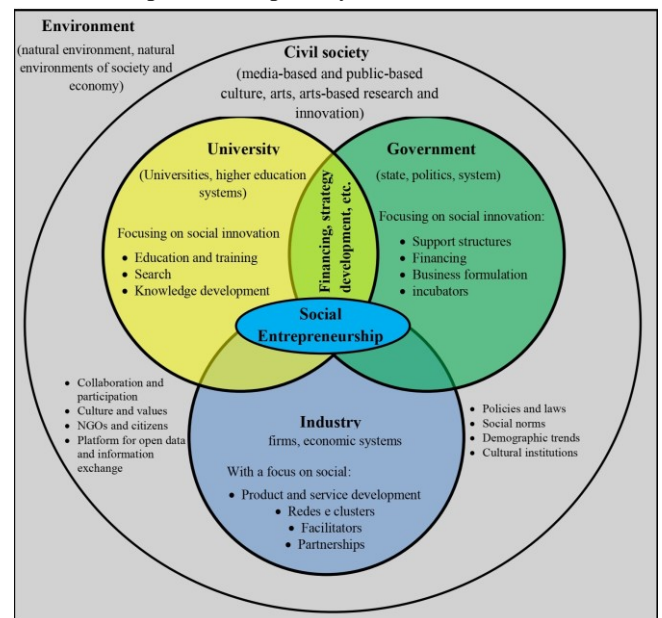
Several previous studies have attempted to define innovation ecosystems. They tend to focus on collaborative relationships and actors, while competition is less frequently addressed. Although there is no theoretical consensus on the concept, empirical models of innovation ecosystems reveal that actors compete and collaborate simultaneously (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020).

Oh, Phillips, Park, and Lee (2016) discuss the different contexts in which innovation ecosystems can operate, ranging from corporate and university innovation ecosystems to regional and national ecosystems, digital innovation ecosystems, and even innovation ecosystems based in cities and innovation districts. There are also ecosystems focused on small and medium-sized enterprises

(SMEs) in high-tech industries and innovation ecosystems of accelerators and incubators.

Thus, based on these approaches, the literature identifies a model of economic and social development (see Figure 1) that suggests five actors capable of driving the development of innovation ecosystems for social impact businesses. These are the government, the private sector, universities, civil society, and social entrepreneurship in general. These actors can facilitate social innovation, finding viable solutions to social problems through collaboration and beneficial partnership networks (Carayannis et al., 2021; Arabadzhieva & Vutsova, 2020).

Figure 1
Social entrepreneurship ecosystem model



Source: Carayannis (2021).

This model emerges with the proposal of promoting a culture based on innovation, providing a creative environment where knowledge is exchanged among its members. A strong sense of cooperation is identified, where various societal actors come together to share a common idea and develop a community-driven environment propelled by specific skills and resources, with the larger mission of addressing societal challenges and moving towards social innovation (Halibas, Maata & Sibayan, 2017).

The model presented in Figure 1 highlights

social entrepreneurship as occupying a central position in the ecosystem, interacting with the other actors that form the broader environment, which includes the government, the private sector, universities, and civil society. These actors are naturally influenced by external factors such as the political and social system, the legal system, demographic trends, cultural institutions, and social aspirations. The intention is to create economic and sustainable value, resulting in a dynamic process of competition, collaboration, and co-specialization, setting it apart from other approaches that emphasize the competitive interaction of stakeholders. Studying the actors involved in a social business ecosystem allows for a better understanding of the dynamics of ecosystems and the different elements that constitute them while also enabling the analysis of the specific roles played by each actor (Carayannis et al., 2021).

Thus, as shown in Table 1, the actors' interactions in promoting the social business innovation ecosystem vary according to their characteristics and strategic actions.

The government is primarily recognized for supporting both public and private financing, driving social entrepreneurship through the emergence of new business models, and providing consulting for research projects with socioeconomic impact. Intentionally, it stimulates science through research and contributes to the development and support of knowledge. In this way, it promotes social initiatives through public-private partnerships (Halibas, Maata & Sibayan, 2017).

According to Arabadzhieva and Vutsova (2020), Social Businesses benefit from additional government support through direct and indirect financial incentives. It is common for these businesses to receive relevant preferences for their operation, regardless of the company's legal format, such as tax benefits. As noted by Björk et al. (2014), the public sector also meets the needs and expectations of citizens, collaborating on well-being and developing social assistance services.

Table 1
Roles of the main social actors

Social Actor	Roles	Theoretical Basis
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote financial incentives; - Facilitate public-private policies; - Encourage social assistance 	Carayannis (2021); Halibas, Maata e Sibayan (2017); Björk et al., (2014).
Civil Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborate with new ways of thinking; - Promote social well-being; - Encourage interaction with other actors. 	Carayannis (2021); Björk et al. (2014).
Private Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> of cluster networks; - Promote the development of accessible products and services; - Stimulate societal well-being. 	Carayannis (2021); Weerawardena et al. (2021).
University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote entrepreneurship incubation; - Stimulate the commercialization of technology; - Foster and disseminate knowledge. 	Carayannis (2021); Cheah e Ho (2019); Cheah & Yu, 2016.

Source: developed based on the theoretical review.

The government (or the political system in general) can facilitate social innovation through support structures, funding, business advice, formulating appropriate policies, and creating and supporting incubators for social innovation (Carayannis et al., 2009).

The university is renowned for playing a role in transmitting and developing education and knowledge through teaching, research, and outreach, considering the challenges and complexities of economic and social problems (Faustino et al., 2019). It also stimulates social entrepreneurship through mechanisms such as the commercialization of technology, startup programs, and incubation schemes, serving as a bridge to the private sector by transferring knowledge concentrated in researchers. Universities foster cooperation for the development of new or improved accessible products and services through innovation (Cheah & Ho, 2019; Cheah & Yu, 2016).

The private sector can support social initiatives by developing products and services tailored to social needs, creating cluster networks, and establishing appropriate partnerships. It can be an essential facilitator of such initiatives (Carayannis et al., 2021). Corporate actions seek to understand how economic and social results can be integrated and measured together, facilitating more equitable economic exchanges and promoting the strengthening and well-being of society (Weerawardena et al., 2021).

With a focus on meeting social needs, civil society can be seen as a starting point for social enterprises, playing an active role in developing democratic functions and well-being at local and regional levels (Björk et al., 2014). Additionally, influenced by culture and values, civil society encompasses various stakeholders or initiatives with the same social purpose, exerting influence on both the private sector and the government, becoming the creator of paradigm shifts (Carayannis et al., 2019; Carl, 2020).

Thus, even with the understanding that social enterprises have been at the center of the debate as a way to contribute to developing practices to solve social challenges, articulation with other social innovation agents is necessary to foster a structural process and promote social change.

Considering society's environmental context, the social enterprise ecosystem model can offer a multi-actor approach. The goal is achieved through the resource of knowledge, which produces additional value for society, aiming to lead the field of sustainable development.

Methodological elements of the research

This study follows a qualitative research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), employing a multi-case study with a descriptive character (DeVaney & Yin, 2016). Five Social Impact Businesses operating in distinct productive sectors aimed at promoting the local economy in cities identified in the interior of Paraíba were analysed.

A survey was conducted on cooperatives operating within Social Impact Business ecosystems in specific regions of the interior of

Paraíba. Seven cooperatives were identified, and after selection, two were excluded. Subsequently, additional research was carried out on these businesses using information from websites and social media to identify the profiles that best fit the research objectives. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with the presidents of the selected cooperatives as the sample between November and March, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. It is worth noting that the interviewees had varying levels of education, up to higher education, which may influence how they express themselves and their views on the subject.

The objective was to collect information about their experiences and perceptions regarding their activities and the challenges and opportunities they faced. It should be emphasized that the interviews followed a pre-established script that contained relevant topics for the research. This script allowed the interviewees to freely express their opinions and experiences while also enabling the collection of comparable and relevant data for later analysis. This approach provides greater depth in the responses and a better understanding of the interviewee's point of view. The interviews were recorded and later fully transcribed for more accurate data analysis.

Table 2
General Characteristics of Social Impact Businesses and Identified Impact

Ref.	Sobre o negócio	Impacto
NIS_01	Founded in 2011, it produces and sells fruit pulp and is headquartered in Picuí-PB.	A significant example of social impact business is fostering sustainable economic development in the region. Adding value to products promotes income generation, improved quality of life, reduced inequalities, and benefits among its members.
NIS_02	Founded in 2020, it produces and sells organic cotton and is headquartered in Ingá-PB.	It was created to revive organic cotton farming, which placed Ingá as the second-largest cotton producer in Brazil in the 1940s. It empowered local small farmers' families to strengthen local

		agricultural sustainability.
NIS_03	Founded in 2020, operates in the garment production industry, headquartered in Ingá-PB. Established to emancipate sewists after a textile factory closure.	The cooperative preserves seamstresses' knowledge and skills, strengthens the local economy by creating a collaborative production network, and promotes community resilience by empowering women to resume economic activities, fostering self-sufficiency.
NIS_04	Founded in 2020, headquartered in Ingá-PB. Created in response to the closure of landfills in 2010, gathering families for strategic partnerships.	This cooperative is crucial in social inclusion and income generation for vulnerable families. It has enhanced its waste processing capacity, contributing to reducing the environmental impact of urban solid waste and promoting a circular economy.
NIS_05	Founded in 2006, it operates in producing and selling fruit pulp, headquartered in Pombal-PB. Established as a strategy to combat social exclusion.	By breaking away from unequal production relations, it strengthens the autonomy and food security of local communities. The cooperative enables farmers to cultivate their land independently and directly share the fruits of their labor, promoting socioeconomic empowerment and social cohesion.

Source: Developed based on field research.

As a data collection method, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the presidents of the selected Social Impact Businesses (NIS), and document analysis was conducted through websites and articles. The goal was to analyse the entrepreneurs' perceptions of the roles of each social actor (government, civil society, private sector, and university) in promoting their respective social businesses.

To achieve the research premise, qualitative methods were employed, which, according to Flick (2009), aim to understand, comprehend, and

sometimes explain social phenomena in different ways, allowing for the analysis of individual or group experiences. The author emphasizes that this type of research is characterized by observing the world, analysing its interactions and communications.

Thus, it is reinforced that this research is classified as qualitative, as it seeks to understand the perceptions of social actors regarding the development of social impact businesses. Qualitative research aims to broaden the understanding of the explored phenomena from the participants' perspectives, seeking to deepen their experiences, perspectives, opinions, and meanings according to their perceptions and subjectivity within their context and natural environment (Sampieri, Collado & Lucio, 2013).

Definition of Research Participants

The research subjects were selected according to the social context to be studied, following the research problem. The mandatory criterion needed to be numerical, understanding that qualitative research aims not to quantify opinions but to explore and understand the different points of view that may conflict or align in a given social context (Fraser & Gondin, 2004).

To select the research participants, a set of criteria was established, including area of activity, size, years of existence, sector representation, geographic location, and accessibility of cooperatives operating in the interior of Paraíba, aiming to maximize the diversity of the study's universe. Most interviews were conducted in person, and when that was not possible, they were carried out through the online platform Google Meet. The researcher extended invitations to entrepreneurs representing the NIS under analysis.

Three cooperatives with only two years of operation were selected, as analyzing their initial development could provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced during their early years. Two cooperatives with more than ten years of operation were included to enable comparison between organizations at different stages of maturity.

Data collection

Document analysis was conducted for data collection using websites that provided relevant characteristics and information about the respective Social Impact Businesses (NIS). The semi-structured interview was chosen as the primary technique to solidify the qualitative approach of the study and meet the proposed objectives.

The semi-structured interview, also known as an individual interview, is direct and personal, where one respondent at a time is invited to reveal their motivations, beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings about a specific social context (Vieira, 2009). In this sense, the interview is the preferred choice when mapping practices where conflicts and contradictions still need to be clearly expressed (Duarte, 2004).

The interview script was designed to apply semi-structured questions from the perspective of social entrepreneurs regarding the roles of critical actors (universities, government, private sector, and civil society) in contributing to the performance of the social impact business ecosystem under study. Additionally, secondary data were collected through access to documents and websites associated with the study's objectives.

Analysis procedures

The data were interpreted using content analysis. This technique is justified by its widespread acceptance in qualitative studies in the social sciences, particularly in the field of administration. It is understood as a technique that analyses communication, aiming to assist in analysing responses from interviews or observations made by the researcher (Silva & Fossá, 2013).

The content analysis approach is a technique that involves systematizing and explaining the content conveyed through messages and their meaning using sets of partial but complementary techniques. It focuses on logical and justified deductions, considering the sender, the context of the message, and its effects (Oliveira et al., 2003).

Presentation and discussion of results

The Social Impact Businesses (NIS) studied are at different stages of maturity and are responsible for promoting positive impacts in their communities through job and income generation, local family empowerment, reduction of negative environmental impacts, agricultural sustainability, and more.

Analysing the collected data, it became evident from the entrepreneurs' experiences that social actors play a significant role in establishing and developing their respective cooperatives. As Carayannis et al. (2019) argue, to better understand how social impact businesses are sustainable and how different actors interact in promoting social innovation within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is necessary to analyse the interaction between the government, university, private sector, and civil society within a conducive environment that fosters relationships and solutions for the development of social entrepreneurship.

As defended by Carayannis, Grigoroudis, Stamati, and Valdi (2021), the interaction between actors and the NIS ecosystem shows that entrepreneurs' positive experiences are associated with their excellent relationships with social actors. This is reflected in the emergence or development of NIS, such as cooperatives, and the opportunity to receive network support, contributing to the advancement of their ventures.

Role of the government

The government has played an essential role in developing social-impact business ecosystems. This actor promotes financial incentives, facilitates public-private policies, and encourages social assistance (Carayannis et al., 2021; Halibas, Maata & Sibayan, 2017; Bjork et al., 2014). The entrepreneurs' accounts confirmed these aspects:

In 2016, we were awarded a project from the State Government, PROCASE, which brought us more innovative machines, right, with more technology [...], and in 2018, the State Government, along with the World Bank, came with another project focused on

photovoltaic energy, right! This has given our business very important sustainability, so between 2016 and 2018, we received a significant amount of two projects from the World Bank and State Government for commercialization, and we were able to walk on our own." (NIS_01)

The city hall is the biggest supporter, but we also have support from the state government, and we also had support from the federal government when Embrapa was involved [...]. We can count on Empaer, which has always participated, and the Municipal Government is everything because they provide training and secure training for the cooperative, tractors, and seeds. We received much support last year from the city hall, and I hope this year even more, so by next year, we will be walking strong, just fortifying our legs; the city hall is making sure the cooperative develops. (NIS_02)

The city hall of Ingá, located 38 km from Campina Grande, has become a key partner in the NIS ecosystem within the identified cooperatives. It provides support and incentives for the development of new social businesses in the city, as observed in the entrepreneurs' accounts, including the promotion of "Field Day." The event aims to revive and strengthen local organic cotton production—a traditional step that placed Ingá as the second-largest cotton producer in Brazil in the 1940s—bringing together farmers, sewists, and other local actors involved in the project, even featuring a fashion show with a runway built in the cotton fields. Among the results of this collaboration between government and cooperative is greater visibility for the business, moving towards internationalization, and partnerships with the private sector, as noted by one of the analysed NIS:

We've done it twice (Field Day), and every time, it spread the name of the cooperative and the municipality, both nationally and internationally, because many people from abroad have come, and they've taken cotton from here to other countries and states. We have the Cataguase and Dalila companies from Minas Gerais and Santa Catarina, and they always come here trying to encourage us.

(NIS_02)

The Empresa Paraibana de Pesquisa Extensão Rural e Regularização Fundiária (EMPAER) has contributed technical support for innovative agriculture and the promotion of NIS in the analyzed context. Other state agencies, such as Banco do Nordeste, Senai Paraíba, Sebrae Paraíba, and the State Secretariat of Family Farming and Semi-Arid Development, are essential to developing these businesses.

Therefore, from the narrative of the cooperative analysed above, the satisfactory results obtained through the productive arrangement, synergy, and cooperation among social actors are evident, ensuring the commercialization of production to textile companies in Paraíba and other states. "[...] there is no risk for farmers to plant without having someone to sell to. In the case of Ingá farmers, the price paid per kilo of cotton is the highest in the country. Another point is that the group has its seed bank with total independence" (Modifica, 2022). In this situation, it is clear that the government is making efforts to support the businesses through various stimuli and commercialization supports, resulting in production security and added value to the product:

We are only receiving the warehouse from the State Government, but from the city hall, I have no complaints because they give us all the support in the most difficult times; they have always supported us [...]. They always help, they've helped us, and they arranged the resources for us to receive this assistance for collectors. (NIS_04)

We started through a state government program, the PCPR—Rural Poverty Reduction Program—which, through the State Government and the Cooperar project, together with the World Bank, provided the structure and the first machines. After that, we received two more projects. Now, we are in the fourth project, which will be the solar energy plant and implementing some fruit trees to improve raw material production and machinery. We are part of this project with the World Bank, BB Rural Sustentável, and

we will receive a project worth R\$ 326,000.00. (NIS_05)

Thus, it is possible to observe that the five analysed cooperatives have been receiving support from public-private initiatives for establishing and developing social impact businesses. There is evidence that this actor plays a role in providing technology and access to financial resources, such as grants and incentive events, fostering projects in partnership with other actors to develop businesses, promoting social assistance, etc. Therefore, the ecosystem in which these businesses operate has fostered the collaboration of social actors.

Role of the private sector

The industry has been an exciting facilitator in promoting Social Impact Businesses, contributing to the formation of cluster networks, promoting the development of accessible products and services, and stimulating societal well-being (Carayannis et al., 2021).

The entrepreneurs' accounts regarding their relationship with the private sector have shown that this actor has been an important facilitator and partner in supporting cooperatives, simplifying the construction of support networks within the ecosystem. As observed, the entrepreneurs received numerous supports promoted by financial institutions, which contributed to the development of their ecosystem:

In 2008, we received a donation from the Banco do Brasil Foundation, right! [...] We would only be here today with the access we had, [...] we got an F4000 truck and two cold storage rooms [...] it was essential for our idea because back in 2008, everything was done manually, right! It was a group of women, and in 2008, we got a 50-ton cold storage room and another 10-ton one. For those who had nothing and couldn't even imagine what we are today, this infrastructure (Banco do Brasil Foundation) made us dream big, right... So it came to innovate the team. (NIS_01)

The Banco do Nordeste sponsored the Field Day, part of it, right! Because it cost a lot

more, we managed to get it from the grant, we applied for it... and they sponsored part of Field Day and made it available for any farmer who wants to plant; they will have different financing, but none have needed it yet. The time will come when they will have to go to the bank, and the result will be for the break. I think the result will be this part of the seed because the result is everything we talked about, so it's not a small thing. (NIS_02)

They've already taken cotton from here to other countries and states. We have the companies Cataguase and Dalila from Minas Gerais and Santa Catarina. They always come here trying to encourage us, negotiating machines so we can process the cotton [...] Natural Cotton Color, which is the one that buys here, gave the seeds and made a purchase contract in advance [...] So this year, what did she do, she gave an advance when they started planting, each producer asked for so much, and she advanced for the planting [...] then she gave an advance for the harvest. (NIS_02)

Another critical point observed in the entrepreneurs' accounts was the closeness between the businesses and the private sector, resulting in extremely important partnerships for their development. For example, Natural Cotton Color, which operates in the sustainable fashion segment in Brazil, in partnership with the Texbrasil program of the Brazilian Textile and Apparel Industry Association (ABIT), promotes social businesses with an interest in the international market, selling pieces at fashion fairs in Europe, such as Paris, London, and Milan. The company's key differentiator is the added value of selling eco-friendly pieces with organic product certification, establishing itself as a reference in the social and ecological production chain. Therefore, the NIS analysed reports that strengthening relationships with the private sector has resulted in greater competitiveness for their businesses.

Although the role of the private sector in this research has demonstrated significant contributions to the cooperatives' ecosystem, it has been noted that more than financial support is needed to guarantee success for the businesses

studied. Other factors, such as training and knowledge, must also be considered. "For the project to be fully approved, a business plan had to be made, and a business plan was signed to change the machine" (NIS_02). Thus, this issue appears to be a key consideration for the development of cooperatives—relying solely on financial support can limit business growth.

According to the entrepreneurs' accounts regarding the private sector, this actor plays an important role in the ecosystem by providing incentives for creating cluster networks, facilitating collaboration among actors, stimulating the well-being of the population through access to products and services tailored to social needs, and enhancing business growth.

Role of the university

The university's role focuses on fostering and disseminating knowledge, which has significantly contributed to the evolution and incubation of Social Impact Businesses and stimulating technology commercialization (Carayannis et al., 2021).

Campina Grande stands out nationally as a university hub due to the concentration of public and private higher education institutions, making the city a recognized reference in technological innovation. Four universities are identified in the city: the Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG), mainly through its Research, Development, and Innovation Center in Information Technology, Communication, and Automation (VIRTUS), which aims to develop qualified labor; the State University of Paraíba (UEPB), noted for its Strategic Health Technology Center (NUTES); UniFacisa, a vital center promoting entrepreneurial practices; and the Federal Institute of Paraíba.

Despite the favourable ecosystem for knowledge development offered by the universities, the entrepreneurs' accounts regarding their relationship with higher education institutions show a moderate connection and a lack of experience in accessing the knowledge these institutions can provide: "I don't even know

how these institutions (universities) could help us" (NIS_03). Although only two of the analysed NIS received support from universities (through incubation), the lack of information among the other businesses and their desire for support from this social actor is evident:

It was our fault for not seeking it, but it's because we have so few people for all the things we need. We see the need to really seek it out. I sought support through SENAR, through a course at SENAR, right! I still remember SENAR, but from the university, honestly, I went to a meeting where they were talking about seeds because here in Paraíba, there wasn't anywhere to analyse whether the seed was pure—whether it was non-GMO—and I heard the university in Areia was setting up a lab for that, but I don't know if it's operational yet. Because for it to be organic, it can't have any contamination... so we can get certification. (NIS_02)

The Agribusiness Incubator for Cooperatives, Community Organizations, Associations, and Rural Settlements in the Semi-Arid Region of Paraíba (IACOC), linked to UFCG, and the Technological Incubator for Creative and Innovative Enterprises of Campina Grande (ITCG), associated with the Paraíba Technology Park Foundation (Fundação PaqTcPB), are essential social allies in developing the NIS ecosystem in its initial stages. These incubators aim to emancipate entrepreneurs through knowledge, skills, practices, and support across various areas, to make them self-sustainable in the long term through sound management practices:

We were incubated in 2015 [...] I often say it was very important for us, you know? As president, I can say that I live with what I learned at IACOC every day, right! When I arrived at the cooperative in 2011, I was a founder, but when I started managing the cooperative in 2014, already as president, it was with IACOC. So, all my doubts and our growth were together with IACOC. They supported us with courses, even with our company's logo and design. So, for a company that's just starting, it was essential, both in management and design. We had support in every way. (NIS_01)

The university has made all the difference in our project. When we started, we were initially incubated by IACOC, a UFCG incubator. We sold little and produced little. When the university, through Professor Mônica, started working with us, it was transformative. Today, she's the director of INSA, and when she joined our community, let's say it changed everything because, through her work, we began to see ourselves as entrepreneurs. She showed us how the whole process was supposed to be done—our brand, which is now registered, and all the operational procedures were developed together with the university. (NIS_05).

Thus, from the entrepreneurs' accounts, it is clear that higher education institutions provide valuable knowledge for improving business performance, offering information crucial for creating and developing businesses. These institutions play a significant role in the development of NIS in their early stages, acting as a fundamental piece in disseminating knowledge and providing primary conditions for business viability through practices that range from planning to the creation of the business:

We've always worked with partnerships and inter-cooperation. Our first partnership was in 2000, and it was within IACOC. It started in 2016, resulting in improved business performance, opening up new markets and expanding our sales. It guaranteed more production, and I'll give you an example: today, our cooperative is involved in family farming. We have a PNAE contract, which buys from local producers. We work with cooperatives that produce fruit but don't have processing facilities, and they bring their fruit to our cooperative for processing. (NIS_01);

Regarding relationships with higher education institutions, regional partnerships facilitated by the ecosystem result in benefits for the businesses involved, such as access to potential markets within the network and easier product commercialization. Another relevant point is the possibility of adding value to the product through innovation and knowledge enabled by exchanging connections and experiences.

The role of universities in the studied ecosystem involves providing access to education

and training, disseminating the knowledge they produce, facilitating partnerships with other businesses within the network, and stimulating the commercialization of technology through science and business incubation. Universities also contribute through research aimed at replicating knowledge in the NIS ecosystem.

Role of civil society

Civil society has the social purpose of driving Social Impact Businesses by collaborating with new ways of thinking, encouraging interaction with other network actors, and promoting social well-being in the process of entrepreneurship or supporting this type of business (Carayannis et al., 2021; Björk et al., 2014).

Regarding civil society's role in its relationship with cooperatives, the interviews with entrepreneurs reveal that this actor has encouraged the population voluntarily to seek mechanisms that stimulate the emergence of new businesses according to the needs of social groups.

I saw a professor one day giving training and a workshop in an association about cooperatives, and I was impressed. I thought it was beautiful! Is it really all this?! And there's even more?! Every day it's more... (NIS_02)

Collaboration between the third sector and NIS is also fundamental for these business models to achieve their goals.

There's an NGO from Germany that works specifically with resources for some entities on this path [...] many training sessions, a lot of growth in that sense, publications about our project, we grew a lot from that too... (NIS_05)

Additionally, in all the analysed cooperatives, it was found that the businesses emerged from population-driven motivations focused on social demands within their surroundings.

Civil society, therefore, plays a role in forming new NIS by considering social groups' culture, values, and aspirations. The active participation of society and engagement in social movements can be determining factors in creating

and developing projects aimed at the common good:

We always worked within union movements, and there was a lot... I think the creation of our project had a lot to do with that, right! The issue of union movements, the idea of associativism, cooperativism, a lot of it came from there, from that participation. It was precisely in these meetings and movements. And from that, we thought about creating the project; I think it came a lot from that, right, the access to these public policies, more social movements, like the MST. (NIS_05)

The collaboration of the population in developing new NIS is also recognized, as they have provided support by promoting and purchasing the products offered by the businesses, acting as consumers and active promoters. This highlights civil society's crucial role in fostering cooperatives, occupying an important position in the network, which is collectively built by its members and promotes social actions that benefit public policies for the city:

In the beginning, we needed the collaboration of other cooperatives that already existed here. We didn't know the bureaucratic part, it would have been very difficult without their help. This partnership continues to this day. There was also voluntary work from groups such as the farmers themselves and the population in general. This support is very important for the development of our cooperative. (NIS_02)

Civil society has influenced the emergence of and supported NIS within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, representing social forces motivated by the desire for social transformation, seeking to build solutions that meet regional demands through network support, mobilization, and a sense of belonging. As Sherer-Warren (2006) emphasizes, when organized, civil society can form partnerships between the public, private, and governmental spheres, leading to greater population participation in the creation of urban political movements:

The population grabbed on and bought a lot, and we turned the material we sold into machines, we bought a lot of machines for ourselves, we bought useful things, we repaired the roof, we put up a tarp because of the rain, so we achieved this through the population that has been buying, because we were in need. (NIS_03)

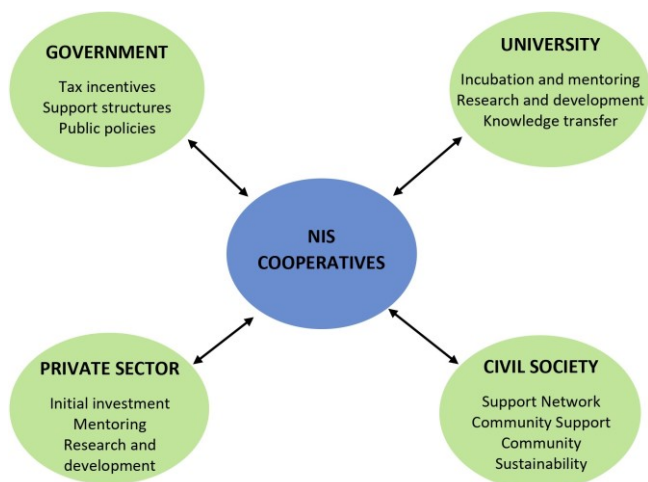
Thus, business models like those mentioned in this study arise from civil society mobilization, generating revenue and income (Young, 2008). In this sense, the population has also played a role in supporting the highlighted cooperatives, with the intention of promoting public and collective interest services to excluded social groups, positioning itself as a viable alternative in addressing social challenges within the network.

Final considerations

The objective of this research was to understand how the main actors involved in the Social Impact Business ecosystem interact with cooperatives located in the interior of Paraíba—namely, the government, university, private sector, and civil society—which results in the emergence of new enterprises, such as cooperatives that can be classified as Social Impact Businesses (NIS). Upon analysing the results, it is evident that the businesses investigated received support from social actors for their development (Figure 2). However, there was a varying degree of interaction between the cooperatives and the actors, depending on the NIS's development stage.

Understanding the interactions between cooperatives and social actors within the Social Impact Business ecosystem allows us to reflect on the importance of social innovation in addressing complex socio-environmental challenges. Social impact business cooperatives, for example, demonstrate how collective organizations can promote inclusion and sustainability in vulnerable communities. Therefore, these initiatives must be supported by public policies that recognize the sector's importance and offer favourable conditions for their growth.

Figure 2
Main interactions identified in cooperatives with social actors



Source: own elaboration.

In this regard, it is recommended that policymakers create and implement regulatory frameworks that facilitate the operation of Social Impact Businesses, ensuring legal security and encouraging the formalization of these initiatives; establish tax incentives and specific subsidies for NIS to reduce financial barriers and stimulate the emergence of new initiatives; invest in training and education programs for social entrepreneurs, strengthening their management and innovation skills; promote access to different sources of financing, such as public funds, partnerships with financial institutions, and social investment platforms, to ensure that these businesses can grow and consolidate; and encourage cooperation and partnerships between different actors in the ecosystem, including private companies, non-governmental organizations, and government entities, to create synergies and maximize social impact.

The results obtained from the interviews demonstrate that the NIS studied value and recognized the importance and efforts of the actors. These are considered factors of positive impact on the advancement of their respective businesses. Notably, the government plays a crucial role in supporting these enterprises. The government has emerged as the main element in creating new cooperatives recognized in the interior of Paraíba, providing support structures through various agencies and promoting the

growth and promotion of businesses within the ecosystem.

In light of the theoretical concepts discussed, although collaboration between cooperatives and social actors to develop their businesses has been observed, the NIS show a strong tendency to become sustainable in the medium and long term. As they develop over time, there is a strong possibility that they will not rely on these actors for their operations but will still maintain collaborative relationships.

According to the interviews, the cooperatives in the early stages do not feel close to or guided to seek out universities, even though these institutions offer knowledge and contribute significantly to the ecosystem through incubation and other support. This highlights the need to develop effective strategies to ensure that the knowledge promoted by universities reaches new NIS.

A future research agenda is suggested to deepen the understanding and expansion of this business model. First, it would be beneficial to investigate the financial sustainability strategies adopted by these cooperatives and how they balance social and economic objectives. Additionally, comparative studies between cooperatives in different regions of Brazil may reveal innovative and replicable practices. Finally, it is recommended that the long-term social and economic impact of cooperatives on the communities where they are located be analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods to measure changes in local development, quality of life for members, and social cohesion.

In this perspective, the cooperatives analysed are classified as Social Impact Businesses, as they align with the logic of sustainable development as defended by Carvalho (2019). This goes beyond ecological and environmental aspects, broadening the definition. It becomes evident that the challenges of contemporary society demand collective actions to mitigate the negative consequences of our productive system. It is necessary to include other dimensions, such as the social environment and its economic, cultural, political, and historical aspects, which could correspond to social equality in all its facets and

the conscious use of natural resources.

Thus, this study achieved its objective. During the interviews, it was clear that the actors were interacting harmoniously, creating connections that contributed to the development of the NIS ecosystem. According to Dias, Cremonuzzi, and Cavalari (2013), there is a new possibility for addressing social problems, with various social actors reconfiguring their roles, which can be found in state organizations and private initiatives. This networked relationship creates a conducive environment for developing social businesses inherent to our social and environmental challenges.

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