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Received: 14 November 2024 | Accepted: 12 August 2025

DOI: 10.1111/ijsw.70038

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WELFARE

Latin America's grassroots approach to social innovation: Expanding the international debate

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Abstract

In a world experiencing profound environmental, technological, and demographic shifts, welfare systems are being fundamentally reshaped, highlighting social innovation (SI) as crucial for addressing emerging societal challenges. This research examines the distinctive Latin American approach to SI, exploring its role in transforming regional welfare states whilst bridging the gap between Latin American and European perspectives. The theoretical framework combines SI theory with the quintuple helix model, emphasizing interactions among public bodies, businesses, academia, civil society, and citizens in fostering local innovation. Through comparative analysis of Argentinian and Brazilian cases, contrasted with Italian and British examples, this study employs ethnographic methods, questionnaires, and interviews. The findings reveal a uniquely Latin American SI approach, characterized by robust community engagement and university partnerships, diverging from market-driven European models. The research advances the global SI discourse by highlighting the significance of grassroots, collaborative initiatives, particularly within contexts of institutional and welfare system fragility.

KEYWORDS

community development, comparative policy analysis, grassroots movements, Latin American welfare, social incubators, social innovation

INTRODUCTION

The world is undergoing a phase of major transformation characterized by three intertwined transitions—environmental, technological, and demographic—that produce a shift in the distribution of social risks and resources. This transformation subjects welfare systems to a profound phase of recalibration, which is partially addressed through social innovation (SI) policies and initiatives (Arocena & Sutz, 2021; BEPA, 2011; Unceta et al., 2016). Here, the expression SI coincides with a mix of policies, projects, and initiatives that enable target groups to address current social challenges by improving their opportunities to access resources (Moulaert et al., 2013). According to Avelino et al. (2019), SI can range from small-scale initiatives that have an impact on social relations at the "local" level (e.g., social enterprises initiatives, community initiatives, participatory budgeting, social farming, ...) to large-scale systemic transformations that affect social challenges at the systemic level (e.g., social impact bonds, fair trade movement, microfinance, technological innovations with a great social

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impact, welfare programs, time banks, digital education platforms, educational programs, ...). From this perspective, SI is a phenomenon where the historical tension between the economic and social dimensions is manifest (Logue, 2019). This approach has gathered growing interest in the scientific literature (Howaldt et al., 2018; Oosterlynck et al., 2019), with SI being addressed from different angles and viewpoints. The existing literature has progressively consolidated the concept, which was initially constructed on the basis of its ambiguity (Borelli & Busacca, 2020; Jenson, 2015) as a frontier object attracting interest and resources (Barbera, 2020), reinforcing it both theoretically and practically (Abad & Ezponda, 2022; Coscarello & Manella, 2024).

SI practices are numerous, dynamic, and locally rooted, especially in Latin America, where social inequalities and injustice are rampant (Howaldt et al., 2018). Some authors, starting from the perspective of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), have highlighted the positive relationship between the fragility of welfare systems and spaces for SI and have introduced the concept of SI regime (Unceta et al., 2022). In this sense, the presence of numerous SIs is consistent with the historical weakness of Latin American welfare systems. However, over the past 20–25 years, numerous social policy interventions have been implemented and have partially overcome these weaknesses (De Barros, 2009; Fruttero et al., 2020; Poy, 2015; Tcherneva & Wray, 2005). This makes Latin America interesting to understand what relationship there is between such policies and SI initiatives. Nevertheless, the international debate on SI is still eurocentric and English-speaking, while the contribution from Latin America—while present—remains limited and hardly influential (Coscarello, 2024a). This article moves from the idea that, given the vitality of the phenomenon, this absence risks reducing the space for the emergence of critical, reflective, and capacitating perspectives on SI, reinforcing the positioning of SI within market and neoliberal logics. This article sets out with a tripartite aim. First, it seeks to delineate and critically examine the distinctive Latin American approach to SI, exploring what precisely constitutes this unique method. Secondly, it endeavors to comprehend the evolving paths of the Latin American welfare state, viewed through the lens of its stance on SI and considering which societal shifts SI addresses. Finally, the article aims to bridge a current void by integrating the Latin American perspective on SI into the broader international discourse, assessing how this approach can enrich the global debate.

The study explores the case of Argentine and Brazilian social incubators in a comparative perspective with cases from Italy and the United Kingdom, emphasizing impacts, challenges, and lessons learned.

This approach fosters a better understanding of the point of view emerging from the Latin American context. To do so, this article is organized as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical framework, bridging research lines developed at the theoretical, policy, and local level; Section 4 presents the research methodology; Section 5 outlines the findings, which we discuss in Section 6. Section 7 summarizes the key findings and emphasizes its contribution to the existing literature.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social innovation theory in practice

A robust conceptualization of SI is a prerequisite for developing a theory where SI is more than a mere antecedent, a side effect, or a product of technological innovation (Howaldt et al., 2018). While an initial vague conceptual and theoretical definition of SI might have been advantageous (Barbera, 2020), as the discussion on SI grew and became widespread, the need for a strong theoretical foundation emerged. The current discourse on SI is crucial across many disciplinary fields: management and organizational scholars have focused on processes (Audretsch et al., 2022; Gasparin et al., 2021; Lu & Wang, 2024); urban and territorial researchers on its contribution to local development (Bragaglia, 2021; Galego et al., 2022; Moulaert & Mehmood, 2020); sociologists on the processes of institutionalization and social change (Busacca & Paladini, 2022; Coscarello, 2025; Vicari Haddock & Mingione, 2017); and geographers on the spatial distribution and effects of proximity (Coenen et al., 2015; Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007). Consequently, theoretical reflection on SI has flourished and can now draw upon a rich array of references that Howaldt et al. (2018) have traced back to three main strands: social change and institutionalization, innovation studies, and SI studies, which provide valuable insights into mission, pathways, and practices, respectively (Figure 1).

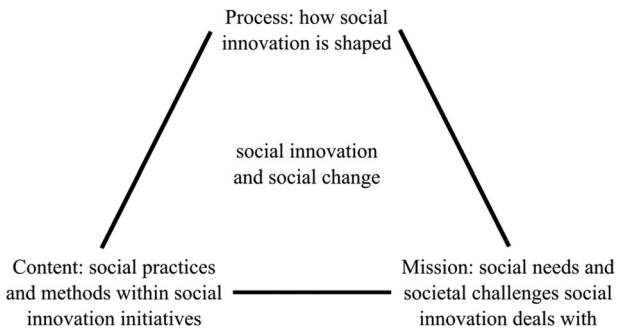

FIGURE 1 Theoretical foundation of Social Innovation. *Source*: Authors' elaboration from Howaldt et al. (2018).

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These reasons allow us to connect SI to the social changes that trigger its demand. In this framework, SI is a manifestation of the intrinsic dialectic between economy and society (Logue, 2019) and represents a way through which society seeks to reclaim control over economic phenomena that are increasingly less socially driven, to mitigate their extractive forces. By doing so, it initiates a counter-movement of re-embedding the economy into society (Polanyi, 1944; Vicari Haddock & Mingione, 2017).

This perspective is corroborated in practice with the distribution of SI experiences across geography and types, as illustrated by Howaldt et al. (2018) and the project Social Innovation Monitor.[1] Countries with more robust institutional and welfare systems, such as Scandinavian or Central European countries, show limited proactivity in SI and its policies. Liberal countries with market-oriented welfare systems view SI as an opportunity to strengthen public-private partnerships. In countries with more fragile institutional and welfare systems, such as Southern European and Latin American countries, more or less organized civil society actors take the lead in SI initiatives, which are perceived as an opportunity to solve the long-standing problems of the national welfare systems. Therefore, in the field of social policies, SI is shaped by the context as a strategy to meet social challenges on the basis of the available institutional resources.

Other authors have further developed this perspective. The concept of "Social Innovation Regime," proposed by Unceta et al. (2022), offers an integrated approach to analyse and measure SI by linking the micro level of organizational dynamics with the meso–macro level of institutional and socio-economic contexts. Inspired by Esping-Andersen's theory of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the Social Innovation Regime assumes that social, economic, institutional, and environmental vulnerabilities—resulting from policy and market failures—create favorable conditions for the emergence of SI. In this perspective, SI emerges as a response to "anomalies" that are not adequately addressed by institutional systems, activating bottom-up solutions aimed at empowering vulnerable groups and challenging existing institutional frameworks. The Social Innovation Regime framework connects these bottom-up dynamics with broader systemic conditions, hypothesizing that higher levels of regional vulnerability increase the likelihood of SI emerging. This model enables a deeper understanding of the interaction between context, actors, resources, and the impacts of SI. It provides a valuable analytical tool to explore how SI practices can contribute to the transformation of welfare regimes through the institutionalization of innovative solutions, offering a new lens on the evolving role of SI in times of welfare state retrenchment or transformation.

[1]https://socialinnovationmonitor.com/

Social innovation policies in practice

If we consider the relationship between SI and public policies, though they use different cases and data, the work of Coscarello and Manella (2024) can be a useful starting point. The authors extrapolated 12 basic elements and six building blocks for SI: key features, objectives, approach, process, governance, and systemic conditions (Figure 2).

According to them, SI can be understood through six fundamental building blocks that define its structure and operation. These can also be used as analytical dimensions for reconstructing SI. The initial building block encompasses essential characteristics. SI addresses diverse societal challenges by engaging target communities and fostering social entrepreneurship ventures. Additionally, it introduces innovative elements in both its deliverables and the relationships formed during implementation. Moving to the second building block, SI's purpose revolves around two key aspects. First, it maintains an unwavering focus on social objectives. Second, it strives to generate meaningful and lasting societal benefits, necessitating robust assessment and tracking mechanisms. The third building block describes the methodological framework. This includes fostering collaborative environments that embrace diverse disciplines and expertise, challenging conventional governance structures. It also emphasizes the importance of transparent reporting and traceable outcomes. Regarding the fourth building block, SI manifests as a sequential process. Understanding the long-term consequences of implemented solutions is crucial, extending beyond the immediate outcomes. The fifth building block identifies the diverse participants in SI governance. While it encompasses public institutions, academic bodies, businesses, and community members, the cornerstone support typically stems from interconnected networks at various levels—from local to international, both structured and informal. This inherently demands a governance approach that incorporates multiple stakeholder perspectives. The final building block examines the contextual framework that enables SI to flourish. This encompasses the entire ecosystem, including tangible and intangible infrastructure, financial mechanisms, and the overarching socio-economic and regulatory environment.

The quintuple helix as a lens to explore local social innovation

To focus on the actors, the quintuple helix model (Iaione, 2016) provides a valuable framework for

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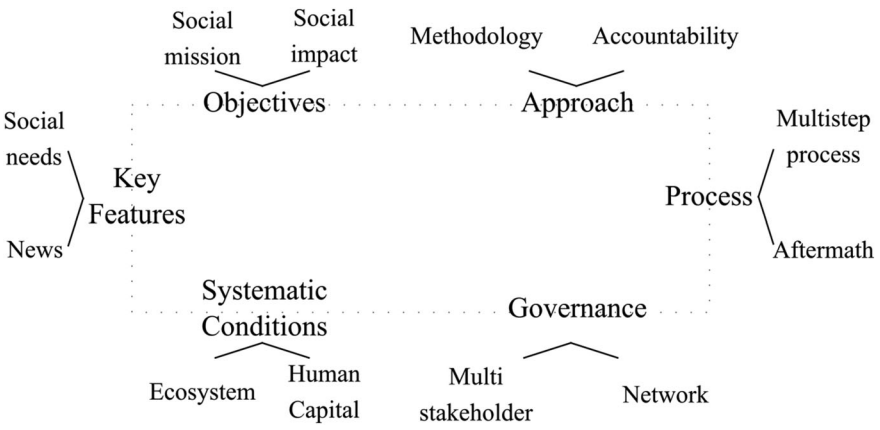

FIGURE 2 The dimensions of social innovation for public policy. *Source*: Authors' elaboration from Montanari et al. (2017).

understanding and analyzing SI processes at the local level, especially for Latin America (CEPAL, 2024). This model expands upon the traditional triple helix of university–industry–government relations by incorporating two additional helices: civil society and the environment.

At its core, the quintuple helix perspective posits that effective local governance and SI emerge from the dynamic interactions between five key actor groups: Public institutions (governments), Private sector (companies), Academic/knowledge institutions (universities), Civil society organizations, and Active citizens/social innovators. This perspective does not necessarily require all actors to collaborate directly with each other but also opens up the possibility of partnerships involving only some of the actors. In this case, some actors may also act as brokers and connect actors who would otherwise not be in a relationship. Either way, the system benefits from the activation of numerous actors with different resources, expanding the possibilities for maneuver and innovation (Figure 3).

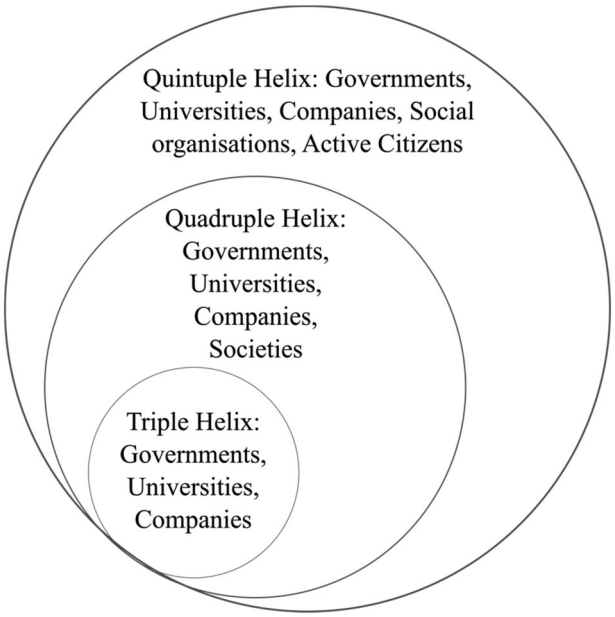

FIGURE 3 Quintuple helix model of social innovation. *Source*: Authors' elaboration.

By explicitly recognizing the role of civil society actors and individual citizens alongside more traditional institutional stakeholders, the quintuple helix offers a more comprehensive view of how SIs develop and spread within local contexts. It emphasizes the importance of co-creation, collaboration, and polycentric governance arrangements that bring together diverse actors—and their goals, perspectives, and logics—around shared social challenges and resources (Domanski et al., 2017).

The quintuple helix lens is particularly useful for exploring local SI for several reasons that align with the theoretical and policy aspects presented in the previous sub-sections.

First, it provides a holistic framework for mapping the complex ecosystem of actors involved in local SI processes. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different stakeholders interact, collaborate, and sometimes conflict in developing new solutions to social needs. Furthermore, by highlighting the role of knowledge institutions and active citizens, the quintuple helix aligns with the paper's discussion of how SIs emerge from collaborative learning processes and the mobilization of local knowledge and resources. In doing this, it helps to recognize the institutional arrangements in which SI occurs (theory building block social change; policy building blocks systemic conditions, governance).

Secondly, the model's emphasis on co-governance and public-commons partnerships resonates strongly with the paper's focus on collaborative approaches to addressing interconnected social problems. It offers a

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conceptual bridge between top-down policy interventions and bottom-up citizen initiatives by highlighting a circular process where the two levels influence each other. This perspective makes it possible to make the interests and logics of each actor and institutional sphere consistent with those of the system (theory building block process; policy building blocks systemic process, approach).

Finally, the model's inclusion of societal considerations dovetails with the emphasis on sustainable development and the need for SIs that address complex socio-economic-ecological challenges. Since it derives from actors' ideas, cognitive frameworks and values, it considers the social needs as an output of the institutional setting in which they emerge (theory building block mission; policy building blocks objectives, key features).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research focuses on two Latin American countries, Argentina and Brazil, analyzing them from a comparative perspective with two other European countries, that is, Italy and the UK. The aims are to trace the Latin American path to SI, to understand how it fits in with the transformations of the Latin American welfare state, and to contribute to enhancing the Latin American point of view in the international debate.

On an operational level, the Latin American research material was acquired through ethnographic work (Coscarello, 2024b)[2] based on participant observation, questionnaires (91 in Argentina, with a response rate of 44%; 186 in Brazil with a response rate of 41%) and interviews (35 in Argentina, 30 in Brazil) (Coscarello, 2024a). European data come from interviews (16 in Italy, 9 in the UK) and from 2 extensive research projects, which have expanded the theoretical and empirical foundations of SI in a period spanning from 2014 to today. Social Innovation Monitor[3] is a team of researchers and professors from several universities who are interested in innovation and entrepreneurship with significant social and environmental impact. SI-DRIVE[4] is an EU-funded global research project on SI involving 25 partners from all continents, 14 partners from 11 EU Member States, and 11 partners from other parts of the world, which joined the consortium to conduct research on a topic that has evoked high expectations with regard to solving the complex societal challenges of today.

Thereafter, we conducted an inductive analysis of the collected data. Following the iterative process recommended by Corbin and Strauss (1990), we have been going back and forth between conversation notes, journal articles, direct observation notes, and existing theories. The use of multiple data collection methods allowed us to triangulate the data and thus provide a stronger analysis of our constructs (Eisenhardt, 1991). For example, we compared the conversations with existing observations and literature and found consistent evidence on the factors that favored or hindered participation and reflection in the process being implemented. Furthermore, we first read and analyzed the collected data independently to develop a holistic understanding of the case. At different times, as we continued to incorporate new data, we discussed our interpretations and emerging themes. During these discussions, we did not attempt to measure convergence between evaluators. Rather, we shared and discussed impressions and interpretations of the case until we reached a common understanding and agreement. Our interest focused on some distinctive aspects concerning the composition of the 4 different national SI contexts. Concerning the mission, substantial alignment emerged among the Latin American countries, while the UK presented different characteristics, and Italy was in an intermediate position. At the institutional level, profound differences between the three contexts emerged in terms of strategic investment in social policies. Regarding initiatives/experiences, there was a notable convergence among actors, with social enterprises and social incubators playing a leading role. However, a marked difference emerged regarding the various approaches, distinguishing between more market-oriented and grassroots initiatives. As these themes emerged, we proceeded with a microanalysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), digging into the data by categories and their characteristics.

In conducting ethnographic research with vulnerable populations and community actors, we adopted a reflexive ethical approach. Informed consent was obtained at all stages of data collection, and particular attention was given to ensuring anonymity and minimizing potential harm for participants. We also followed principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit by sharing research findings with the communities involved and integrating their feedback into the interpretation of results. The methodological stance was informed by participatory research ethics and the epistemology of the South, recognizing the agency and situated knowledge of participants as co-producers of meaning and insight. In addition, we

[2]The EU-funded ESSENTIALS project has explored the processes that contribute to the promotion of SSE. Specifically, it has focused on how social incubators can be used to encourage socio-economic development. The project has mapped and compared incubators in Latin America and the EU. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101031632.
[3]https://socialinnovationmonitor.com/
[4]https://www.si-drive.eu/

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followed what the Ethics Committees of our universities had established.

RESULTS

The theoretical perspectives outlined in Section 3—interconnected to combine the different levels of analysis of SI: micro, meso, and macro—are here adopted to organize the presentation of the results. Drawing on the work of Coscarello and Manella (2024), we delve into the objectives (dimension 2), governance (dimension 5) and the implementation processes of initiatives (dimension 4). In addition, the focus on incubators allows us to investigate the implementation methods of initiatives (dimension 3). The focus on actors and their forms of interaction is suggested by the pluralist approach of Iaione (2016). The contextualization in the process of transformation of social policies in the two Latin American countries allows us to link the initiatives to the social needs and complex systems of inequalities in the investigated countries (dimensions 1 and 6 of Coscarello & Manella, 2024). Finally, issues related to social justice and social innovation regimes (Unceta et al., 2022) are taken up both here and in the discussion of the results (Section 6).

The objectives of social innovation

In the two Latin American countries, SI is at the heart of a strategy to strengthen a young, limited, and partial social protection system in a context with high levels of inequality and social injustice. Over the last 20 years, Latin American social policies have shifted from fragmented, welfare-based approaches to more integrated conditional cash transfer programs. Key examples include Argentina's *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar* (2002), the *Asignación Universal por Hijo* (2009), and Brazil's *Bolsa Família* (2003).

Plan Jefes y Jefas responded to Argentina's 2001–2002 crisis by offering temporary public employment to unemployed household heads, helping reduce poverty and stabilize society, though concerns emerged over its long-term sustainability and job quality (Tcherneva & Wray, 2005). The *Asignación Universal por Hijo* marked a shift toward conditional welfare, targeting informal-sector families with children and linking cash transfers to school attendance and vaccination (Salvia et al., 2015). It has effectively reduced child poverty, improved education and health, and empowered women. *Bolsa Família* is a flagship program offering financial support to poor families in exchange for meeting education and health conditions. However, challenges remain regarding its fiscal sustainability and long-term integration of beneficiaries into formal labor markets (Fruttero et al., 2020). Together, these programs reflect a broader regional trend toward social policies that prioritize human capital, inclusion, and conditional support—while still grappling with structural and financial constraints (De Barros, 2009).

Here the objective of SI is the improvement of the living conditions of specific groups of vulnerable individuals who are exposed to severe social risks. In this context, the role of local communities, local authorities, solidarity economy movements, and NGOs is crucial, as they contribute to locally defining the agenda of priorities and orientations of SI. This condition encourages citizens, their organizations, and local authorities to find solutions compatible with the limited public resources available by activating social and community (i.e., local) resources, both material (money, spaces, raw material, etc.) and immaterial (knowledge, skills, social capital, etc.). Indeed, this type of SI is intended to promote social protection in a context where neither the State nor the market is able to address the social risks and needs of individuals. Local communities thus become the core of a strategy that seeks to respond to the weaknesses of the welfare state while the role of central governments is limited to a few instruments. Governments intervene by funding key economic sectors, such as agriculture or tourism, providing rewards for initiatives that incorporate SI goals and initiatives based on partnerships with local actors. Therefore, social policies become empowerment- and process-oriented, while outcomes are handed over to local communities.

On the other hand, in the UK, the strategies to promote SI are incorporated into the broader "Big Society" strategy.[5] The Big Society is a top-down strategy aiming at further empowering social enterprises and civil society in the welfare state by incentivizing them to develop SI initiatives to address social challenges affecting certain vulnerable target groups. Here, funding streams are more generous and are used to fund programs supporting SI according to well-defined intervention schemes and instruments that are thoroughly evaluated. Public resources mainly benefit intermediaries that support SI processes, while impact finance rewards social innovators by structuring a system that is strongly result- and product-oriented. Instead, the process is handed over to organizations with specialized technical expertise.

In Italy, we find an intermediate situation. The general objective is similar to that of Latin America, namely to strengthen a weak welfare system incapable of tackling all social challenges. However, the way it is pursued is more similar to the British approach, based on financial incentives for social enterprises that develop SIs. In the Italian context, the main funding streams are mainly

[5]https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/big-society-programme

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European, managed locally by local authorities and banking foundations that serve as providers through competitive calls for proposals that reward results rather than processes. In this context, an appropriate system for evaluating the impact produced is lacking, thus ending up consolidating local systems of established actors.

Actors and governance of social innovation

In the two Latin American countries, governments and international organizations provide grants, but the real players in SI are local communities and local authorities. Together, they co-design, develop, and implement solutions to tackle serious food issues, income inequality for the most vulnerable populations, and support access to education for the poorest communities. These SI solutions aimed at tackling widespread inequalities are designed through long processes based on trial and error, while also involving the target groups affected by the issues at hand. Furthermore, SI is often driven by serious crises, as in the case of the Argentinian crisis of the early 2000s, or by acute social problems that trigger the activation of local communities, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and universities. Such a configuration of actors determines that SIs are often the result of the synergy between modern and traditional knowledge, both indigenous and ancestral, embedded in local contexts and traditions. In this framework, national governments play an enabling role by funding, supporting, or regulating existing practices. As illustrated by Gordon et al. (2017), in both Argentina and Brazil, public policies have influenced SI in various ways—by enabling, supporting, and at times incorporating it into institutional frameworks. Notable examples include: (1) the *Pro-Huerta* program, a large-scale initiative promoting family farming in rural and semi-urban areas; (2) Brazil's *One Million Cisterns Program* (P1MC), which aimed to construct water cisterns across the vast semi-arid northeastern region to address water scarcity; and (3) Argentina's *National Technology and Social Innovation Program*, launched by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation to encourage the development, application, and dissemination of technologies geared toward social inclusion.

When public authorities intervene, as they are unable to adapt their bureaucratic organization to the informality and uncertainty that characterizes SI processes, they prefer to act through intermediaries[6] and indirect funding, such as incentives in the agricultural and trade sectors that give strong rewards to SI initiatives that account for local populations.[7] Among these intermediaries, incubators, often university incubators, play a key role. They are external spaces in which local communities are supported to develop SI projects and to build the conditions for creating businesses that offer jobs and income opportunities to vulnerable citizens. In this system of social actors, universities play an important role, both by providing local communities with their expertise and by training them so as to empower their members to develop and manage SI. This way, they enable vulnerable citizens to participate and lead SI processes. A collaborative governance model emerges, where social actors contribute to SI by participating in a collective and incremental process.

The situation in the UK is different, as the central government, within the framework of a precise policy strategy (the Big Society),[8] has produced numerous regulatory measures (e.g., the regulation of community interest companies and the establishment of the Financial Conduct Authority) and specific financing instruments (e.g., Big Society Capital and Social Impact Bonds) targeted at social enterprises. In the UK context, in fact, social enterprise is seen as the privileged place to develop SI and to support this, the government has set up a complex research and development system consisting of intermediaries such as incubators, private foundations, and universities. Here, intermediaries provide social enterprises with specialized tools and methods to accelerate and support SI. In this setting, a multi-level governance model emerges, where actors at different levels are in charge of different stages of the SI process, with different shares of responsibility.

Finally, Italy relies on the double track of national calls for tenders, often funded by the European Union, and the activation of local actors, who operate in the absence of a national policy framework and specialized intermediaries. In this context, all actors—social enterprises, universities, incubators, foundations—are potential social innovators, leveraging the opportunities provided by national and EU grants to fund SI. Here, the variety and richness of the third sector are important resources, as the third sector is incentivized to seek SI by both public funding and the growing difficulties in recruiting volunteers and activists. In this case, a fragmented governance model emerges, where numerous and diverse social actors compete for resources to develop

[6]INCUBAR. A national network of incubators promoted by the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation that facilitates collaboration and resource sharing among incubators in different regions of Argentina.

[7]Semilla Fund. This government program provides funding and technical support for organizations and entrepreneurial projects with a strong social impact in Argentina.

[8]https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/big-society-programme

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SI, in a welfare context characterized by decreasing public funding and increasing market-oriented solutions.

Processes and practices of social innovation

Even though the two welfare systems have been strengthened in recent years, in the two Latin American countries, SI addresses situations of high poverty, major social inequalities, and extreme social injustice. All of this manifests itself mainly in terms of limited access to food resources, reduced labor market participation, and low levels of education. It is mainly in these areas that the two countries focus their SI. This manifests itself mainly in three directions: the development of social technologies (Pozzebon et al., 2021), social business (Comini et al., 2022), and agrifood (de Souza et al., 2023) projects.

In Brazil, the experience of the network of Technological Incubators of Popular Cooperatives, now consolidated in the literature, is among the most significant examples of social and process innovation. Established since the late 1990s in some universities (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro), university incubators started their activities with the aim of responding to the most extreme social needs, particularly in large metropolitan areas. The involvement of people who often have no voice has been the basis for an innovative process model aiming at establishing social cooperatives as a means to guarantee rights and a better quality of life for those who live in conditions of distress. These experiences provided the impetus for the emergence of national policies, such as the Programa Nacional de Incubadoras de Cooperativas Populares (PRONINC), financed by the Brazilian government, which was created to support popular and social cooperatives through dedicated incubators, and which has fostered the creation of many cooperatives, contributing to improved social, and economic inclusion.

In Argentina, since the Cordoba reform of 1908, public universities have contributed to the creation of programs based on social inclusion experiences. Supported by the National University Extension Network (Rexuni) several public universities deliver social, solidarity, and popular economy projects (Coraggio, 2011, 2020; Pastore, 2019). The role of the University Network of Social and Solidarity Economy (RUESS) is also relevant, as its function is to connect the various experiences of more than 100 universities operating in Argentina. Among the various projects is the University Programme of Social Incubation (PUIS) of the National University of Quilmes in the province of Buenos Aires, which works at the regional and national level through eight sectoral incubators included in the Programme. This experience combines activities and projects in various sectors (tourism, agriculture, social enterprises), with a focus on process innovation through the creation of local projects and the support of social enterprises and cooperatives. In these initiatives, social incubators play a prominent role. Universities participate with dedicated facilities and personnel specialized in university extension, and in many public universities, such activities are now institutionalized and given curricular status. In this context, the role of the teacher extensionist (*Docente Extensionista* in Spanish) emerges, who performs minor research and teaching functions and is mainly assigned to support local communities in the development of medium- and long-term solutions. Indeed, local communities and local authorities, together with university staff, co-design solutions collectively, attempting to reconcile social goals with economic sustainability in the medium and long term through the creation of community social enterprises.

Social enterprises offering innovative goods and services to vulnerable target groups of citizens are prevalent in the UK, where a collaborative and user-centered approach emerges (de Souza João-Roland & Granados, 2023). Innovations are mainly developed within accelerator programs run by social incubators that technically support the development process through consultants, trainers, and business angels. Their main objective is to make the provision of social services and social interventions more effective and efficient by reducing their cost to the community and by increasing their social impact. To this end, the initiatives are mainly based on impact finance, that is, a system of remuneration for social interventions based on the evaluation of the impact that is generated. Public and philanthropic organizations assign resources to social enterprises primarily based on the social impact of their initiatives, measured through social impact metrics and evaluation systems (e.g., Social Return On Investment). The theme of economic sustainability is therefore addressed using the logic of impact finance, borrowed from the market mechanisms and adapted to the social aims of the interventions.

In Italy, the drive for SI mainly comes from public grants or calls from banking foundations, which are becoming an increasingly central actor in the national ecosystem. The initiatives adopt a system-centered approach, where SIs are attempts to address the main weaknesses of the welfare system and offer better responses to vulnerable people. Local authorities and social enterprises, often in partnership, participate in these calls for proposals and use the resources to develop SI (Bellandi et al., 2021; Calderini et al., 2023). Here, incubators and universities compete for resources

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alongside other actors, instead of assuming the role of intermediaries or supporting organizations as in other contexts. Thus, the issue of sustainability is handled through competitive mechanisms, with actors competing for scarce resources.

An in-depth look at social incubators

In Argentina and Brazil, social incubators are supported by government programs aimed at fostering inclusive entrepreneurship and SI. In Argentina, initiatives like the *Programa Insertar* offer funding, training, and networks to help entrepreneurs—especially those from vulnerable backgrounds—start and grow their businesses. The government also collaborates with organizations such as Fundación Impulsar, which supports young entrepreneurs through seed funding and mentoring, promoting youth-led social enterprises. In Brazil, public support is evident in initiatives like *Porto Digital*, a tech and innovation hub in Recife backed by the state government, which provides infrastructure and incentives for startups, including social ventures. Overall, both countries illustrate how public policies can actively support social incubators as tools for social inclusion, economic development, and bottom-up innovation.

Observing the positioning of social incubators in the 2 Latin American study contexts and then comparing them with a short description of the UK and Italian incubators is a useful lens to understand the differences outlined so far.

Brazil

In Brazil, the emergence of incubators began in the early 1980s with the support of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development and the participation of a number of agencies at the supra-national level. Studies supported by these agencies led to the establishment, in 1987, of the National Association of Promoters of Advanced Technology Enterprises (ANPROTEC), whose objective was to connect with governmental and non-governmental bodies to develop Incubators and Technology Parks in the country. In the same time frame, another movement emerged, with its main promoters being social movements and universities. They created institutional arrangements to establish the Information Technology Incubators of Popular Cooperatives (ITCPs), which were closely linked to the socio-economic and political context of the time. In fact, groups of workers got organized as a response to the ongoing crisis after the end of the dictatorship and the emergence of a democratic process, seeking to exit unemployment by alternative means. Considering its genesis and scope, the Brazilian experience of university incubators represents an exceptional contribution to the socio-technical links in innovative social processes, positioning the country's universities (mainly public ones) as a national reference in this field.

The innovative university networking practice began almost three decades ago, when the first Technological Incubator of Popular Cooperatives (ITCP) was created in 1995 at the Engineering Centre of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. It was a socio-technical response to a landscape of tens of millions of people living in poverty, precarious employment, and social exclusion. Following this initial experience, other university centers followed in its footsteps and, in 1998, the University Network of Technology Incubators of Popular Cooperatives (ITCP Network) was formed, integrating eight university programs of this kind at the time. A year later (1999), the federal government established the National Programme of Popular Cooperative Technology Incubators (PRONINC), which functioned as a pilot experience with six universities until 2001. Although, according to a study, 22 incubators already existed at that time (Cruz, 2014). Some years later, with the establishment of the Brazilian Forum for the Solidarity Economy (FBES) and with Lula Da Silva's first government in charge, the Secretariat for the Solidarity Economy was created in 2003 within the Ministry of Labour. In this framework, PRONINC was reactivated, giving new impetus to the incubators.

By 2009, there were already 65 incubators funded by this program. PRONINC was later expanded and strengthened by a federal decree in 2010. From then to 2017, when the political–institutional framework receded, it represented the main public policy of support and funding for university socio-technical linkages, articulated with a wide range of public programs of other government agencies. The solidarity economy enterprise incubation experiences developed thus far have converged into two university networks: the already mentioned ITCP Network and the Unitrabalho Network of Solidarity Enterprise Incubators, which carries out extension and transfer activities for creating and strengthening self-directed enterprises.

According to data from the ESSENTIALS research (Coscarello, 2024a), 186 active incubators were identified in Brazil (around 40 from the ITCP and Unitrabalho network, the remaining from the ANTROPEC network), with a prevalent distribution of 37.7% in the Southern regions and 32.5% in the South-East; 20.8% in the North-East; 5.2% in the Centre-West and 3.9% in the North. For what concerns the typology in Brazil, the distribution is

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as follows: 20.8% business incubators, 36.4% mixed incubators, and 42.9% social incubators. In the country, there is a significant number of university incubators, and as many as 40% are based in a university. Moreover, the university plays an important role in the local ecosystem, with 58.4% of incubators declaring that they collaborate with this institution when carrying out their activities.

Argentina

In Argentina as well, starting from the social and economic crisis of 2001, a number of processes were initiated that contributed to the creation of university incubators. Specifically, three factors stand out (Pastore, 2019). First, as a result of the current severe crisis, numerous social actors and local communities, mainly linked to the solidarity economies dimension, began to raise demands and voice their needs to universities. In the same timeframe, a second element concerned the emergence of initiatives generated by active units of the university community. Such groups initially coincided with isolated initiatives of lecturers or students in community education practices, university volunteering, training workshops, and so on. But as we shall see, they later reached greater academic density and functional integrity. Finally, a third element refers to the institutional and public policy context of democratization and access to higher education. In addition to what has already been mentioned, it is worth emphasizing the impact of educational policies that have promoted greater community ties between universities. To this end, national university volunteering programs, solidarity education projects, university dissemination activities, and technology links were created. Universities collaborating with the solidarity economy sector with a view to social incubation played an important role in Argentina as well, especially in terms of university extension, co-development of knowledge, and academic network creation in this sector. Relevant examples are provided by the University Network of Social and Solidarity Economy (RUESS) (https://www.ruess.com.ar/) and the Red Nacional de Extensión Universitaria (Rexuni) (http://www.rexuni.edu.ar). Both of these networks involve academic groups from a significant number of Argentinean universities. In the case of RUESS, groups from around 40 universities participate and organize the National Week of Social and Solidarity Economy and the National Congresses on Social and Solidarity Economy each year. These events, which are highly attended at the national level, are of fundamental importance for creating projects, exchanging experiences, and continuously engaging researchers and local actors in dialogue. RUESS currently includes people and national research groups from more than 50 universities from 24 provinces in Argentina. According to ESSENTIALS (Coscarello, 2024a), 91 incubators were active in Argentina, mainly distributed in the Pampeana regions for 40% and in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA) for 36.4%. Some experiences were also present in other regions with the following percentages: Cuyo and the North-West both with 6.8%; the North-East and Patagonia regions both with 4.5%. As for the typology, we find that, in Argentina, 22.7% are business incubators, 52.2% mixed incubators, and 25% social incubators. There is a substantial number of university incubators, equal to 35% of incubators. Moreover, from the ESSENTIALS research, it emerges that 70.5% of incubators in Argentina collaborate with universities (Coscarello, 2024a).

Here is a detailed comparative analysis between Argentina and Brazil presented in tabular format in Tables 1–3.

These data show a greater presence of social projects in Brazil, with a high incidence of social incubators (42.9%) compared with Argentina, where mixed incubators predominate (52.2%). It is noteworthy that in both countries there is a significant presence of informal subjects, especially in the social sector. Furthermore, the

TABLE 1 General overview.

Indicator	Argentina	Brazil
Total projects	720	1730
Social projects	591	1577
% Social projects	82%	91%

Source: Authors' elaboration on Coscarello (2024a).

TABLE 2 Incubator distribution.

Type	Argentina	Brazil
Business incubator	22.7%	20.8%
Mixed incubator	52.2%	36.4%
Social incubator	25%	42.9%

Source: Authors' elaboration on Coscarello (2024a).

TABLE 3 Legal status of incubated subjects.

	Argentina		Brazil	
Category	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
Business	129	82	153	47
Mixed	471	133	1424	189
Social	120	105	153	65

Source: Authors' elaboration on Coscarello (2024a).

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main actors hosted and supported by incubators are individuals or entrepreneurial groups with economic objectives in Argentina and urban waste collectors' cooperatives in Brazil.

The United Kingdom and Italy

The UK incubator landscape shows a vibrant ecosystem, with London as its primary hub, hosting 44.2% of all incubation activities. The sector experienced significant growth between 2010 and 2018, with 221 new incubators established, representing 81.3% of the total population of 274 incubators. The institutional framework reveals a balanced distribution between private (50.3%) and public entities (39.8%), with a smaller portion (9.9%) operating under public-private partnerships. Most incubators are relatively small operations, with 81% employing fewer than eight staff members. In 2018, these organizations collectively supported a substantial number of entrepreneurial ventures, with each incubator assisting an average of 36 startups (SIM, 2019).

A notable trend emerges in the social impact orientation, with approximately 70% of incubators supporting ventures with social or environmental missions. The sector comprises business incubators (30.3%), mixed incubators (51.5%), and social incubators (18.2%).

Revenue streams are diversified, with space rental being the primary source (35.2%), followed by business services (18.2%) and public subsidies (17.6%). The health and wellness sector, along with environmental initiatives, represents the most popular areas for social impact ventures (SIM, 2019).

The Italian incubator ecosystem shows significant growth and evolution, with 197 incubators identified in 2018, marking a 15.2% increase from the previous year. These organizations are predominantly concentrated in Northern Italy, with Lombardy leading at 26.4% of the total, followed by Emilia-Romagna at 12.69%. Over 60% have private ownership, while public incubators represent a minor share (SIM, 2019). Most incubators are relatively young, with 54.1% established since 2013, and maintain small to medium-sized operations averaging 5.6 employees. 48.1% of incubators are business oriented (39), 35.8% are mixed incubators (29), and 16.1% are social incubators (13). In terms of services, incubators prioritize networking support, managerial guidance, funding assistance, physical spaces, and entrepreneurial training. The majority (84%) support fewer than eight startups simultaneously, primarily focusing on for-profit ventures. Social impact incubators, representing a growing segment, typically support a mix of hybrid and non-profit organizations (SIM, 2019). The ecosystem demonstrates increasing effectiveness, with incubated organizations receiving significantly higher funding in 2018, showing a 179% growth in average funding compared with 2017 (SIM, 2019).

DISCUSSION

Results highlight that in Argentina, a "mixed" type of incubators predominates (52.3%), whilst in Brazil "social" incubators are more common (42.9%). Overall, 77.3% of incubators in Argentina and 79.3% in Brazil (considering both mixed and social) support organizations oriented toward SI. We see a similar outcome here to that reported in the UK. In contrast, social or mixed incubators are less widespread in Italy. Where the differences become more pronounced is in the approaches to incubation. The comparative analysis of SI approaches in Latin America (focusing on Argentina and Brazil) and Europe (examining Italy and the UK) reveals significant differences in actors, governance, processes, practices, and objectives. These distinctions stem from varied socio-economic contexts, policy frameworks, and historical trajectories of welfare systems in each region (see Table 4). The Latin American model of SI emphasizes a bottom-up, community-driven approach, deeply rooted in local knowledge and needs. This stands in stark contrast to the more top-down, policy-driven approach typically seen in the UK. This difference underscores the importance of considering cultural and socio-economic contexts when developing SI theories and frameworks. However, this does not mean that SI in Latin America compensates for the lack of social policies and government intervention. The examples presented in Section 5—covering both incubators and other local and national initiatives—show that SI operates even where social policies and government intervention are increasing. In these cases, SI acts as supportive and complementary to institutional initiatives, by enabling, financing, or absorbing innovations. One possible interpretation of this phenomenon points to past-dependency factors: the historical weakness of Latin American welfare systems fostered approaches centered on the crucial role of local communities, rather than the Central State, as seen in Europe. Following this tradition, SI also tends to adopt this familiar approach. Here, the past weakness of Latin American welfare systems seemingly transforms into a strength for promoting SI based on empowering target groups. Consistently, the scarcity of economic resources in Latin America has led to a focus on process-oriented, values-driven innovations that prioritize community resilience and empowerment. In sharp contrast, the UK model, with its more substantial funding, tends to favor resource-driven innovations targeting

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TABLE 4 A comparison of EU and Latin American approaches to SI.

	EU	Latin America
Origin	Think-tank (especially in the UK) and networks of social enterprises (technical-entrepreneurial nature of SI)	Social and solidarity economy movements, cooperativism and universities (political nature of SI)
Driving policy level	IT: EU policies poorly reflected in national policies UK: Big Society framework	National policies through indirect funding; Local authorities through the activation of local communities
Economic resources	IT: directly support social innovators UK: support intermediary bodies which foster SI; impact finance mechanisms reward social innovators based on generated impact	Scarce economic resources directed towards supporting processes of SI
Key intermediaries bridging between policies and beneficiaries	National and local authorities through calls for proposals; Incubators	Social and university incubators
University role	IT: Actor participating in the development of SI alongside other social actors, often in partnership with social enterprises UK: social impact evaluator and technical assistance to incubators	Enabling agent supporting local communities to develop and experiment with SI
Target groups	Social enterprises and start-ups with a social mission	Local communities that become social enterprises as a result of SI processes
Innovation focus	Solutions/products	Processes/empowerment
Innovation type	Incremental, driven by resources (opportunism)	Radical, driven by needs (social challenges)
Where innovations have an impact	Public or private markets (benefit)	Local communities (resilience)
Final beneficiaries	Targeted citizens	Local communities

Source: Authors' elaboration.

specific citizen groups through market mechanisms. This divergence raises questions about the sustainability and scalability of different SI models. Indeed, an approach based on empowering target groups and utilizing local material and immaterial resources tends to demonstrate greater sustainability. However, this often makes it harder to scale initiatives, which instead tend to consolidate through replication. Conversely, resource-driven innovations are typically easier to scale but less sustainable, precisely because they rely on exogenous resources rather than endogenous ones.

Another element distinguishing the two contexts is the relationship between academic institutions and SI. The pivotal role of university incubators in Latin America as enablers of SI differs from the more diverse ecosystem of intermediaries in the UK. This suggests that the nature and function of intermediary organizations in SI processes may vary significantly based on the institutional context. In Latin America, universities are seen as community actors, rich in resources, actively participating in SI processes. This contrasts with the UK, where universities are primarily viewed as providers of specialist expertise that can support innovation processes.

The locus and the focus of SI also differ between Latin America and Europe. While Latin American SI primarily aims to strengthen local communities and address fundamental social inequalities, the UK model often focuses on developing marketable solutions for specific social issues or target groups. This difference in focus—community resilience versus market-oriented solutions—has implications for how we measure the success and impact of SI. In the former, the success of initiatives hinges on their ability to generate long-term changes that empower local communities to tackle the challenges they face. In the latter, success is measured by the contingent reduction of the problematic phenomenon being addressed. In other words, impacts prevail in the first case, while outcomes are the focus in the second. Furthermore, the incremental, values-driven innovations prevalent in Latin America contrast with the more radical, resource-driven innovations often seen in the UK. The scarcity of resources (both economic and technical) and the reliance on endogenous resources mean innovation is slower and more incremental. In contrast, greater resource availability fosters faster and more radical processes. At a theoretical level, this distinction challenges the notion of a

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universal model of SI and suggests the need for a more nuanced and context-specific theory. This perspective would allow us to recognize the multiplicity of possible realities (Escobar, 2020) as a resource rather than a limitation in the conceptualization of SI. By acknowledging that many SI are possible, we can reduce the normative and prescriptive force of SI—which is based on a Western, market-driven, and entrepreneurial idea of SI—and open up to a plurality of SI visions, including the Latin American one.

Adopting this latter perspective also has policy implications. The different roles of national governments and policy frameworks in supporting SI across these contexts highlight the need for flexible and adaptive policy approaches. The Latin American experience demonstrates the potential for SI to thrive even in the absence of strong centralized support, while the UK model shows how structured policy frameworks can shape the SI landscape. The integration of traditional and modern knowledge in Latin American SI offers insights into alternative modes of knowledge production and dissemination in SI processes. This challenges the Eurocentric or Anglocentric perspectives often dominant in the SI literature. The emphasis on community empowerment and participation in Latin American SI processes contrasts with the more entrepreneurial, solution-focused approach in the UK. This difference raises important questions about the role of citizen engagement and participatory processes in SI (Table 4).

The results presented above offer valuable insights into the distinctive characteristics of SI in Latin America, particularly when compared with European contexts. These findings both complement and challenge existing theoretical frameworks, providing a better understanding of how SI manifests in different socio-economic and cultural settings.

First, the Latin American approach to SI aligns closely with the theoretical emphasis on addressing pressing social needs and mobilizing target communities, as outlined in the key features of SI policies (Logue, 2019). However, the results reveal a unique focus on tackling extreme poverty and inequality, which goes beyond the typical scope of SI in European contexts, where SI programs aim to foster social enterprise initiatives. Furthermore, the type of actors incubated is different. While in the UK and Italy it is mainly social enterprises, in Brazil and Argentina it is mainly individuals and informal groups who become collective and social enterprises as a result of incubation. Overall, this suggests that the Latin American model is more deeply rooted in addressing fundamental societal challenges by enabling vulnerable actors, rather than improving existing systems, thus triggering a process of subjectification and emancipation of vulnerable individuals. From this viewpoint, the Latin American approach limits the room for maneuver of neoliberal co-optation of SI (Barbera, 2020) fostering radical SI (Apostolopoulou et al., 2022; Moulaert et al., 2007). On the contrary, in the EU, the concept of SI has been absorbed into market-friendly narratives of "good capitalism," introducing market logic into the discourse and practices of SI (Fougère et al., 2017). These approaches are thus based on social activation in the name of the common good, but not necessarily for the sake of the common good (Barbera, 2024). This occurs when the emphasis is placed on activation and individualism (such as within the EU) rather than on the collective dimension (such as within Latin America), putting the cart before the horse, as it were. The Latin American approach, on the other hand, by investing in the collective dimension, acts as a shield against this risk for SI practices and assigns the state an enabling role.

Furthermore, the governance structures observed in Latin America demonstrate a strong alignment with the quintuple helix model (Iaione, 2016), particularly in the emphasis on the collaboration between local communities, universities, and local authorities. This collaborative approach extends the theoretical understanding of multi-stakeholder governance in SI, highlighting the importance of grassroots initiatives and indigenous knowledge in driving innovation. In Europe too, the actors of the five helices are involved in SI initiatives, but their way of participating is different. The marginal—but enabling—role of national governments in Latin America contrasts with the UK model, suggesting that the theoretical emphasis on top-down policy interventions may not be universally applicable. Nevertheless, the Latin American case is also useful in highlighting the influence of context on the forms of SI. In Italy, as in Brazil and Argentina, the role of the State is marginal and enabling. However, Italy's political legacy and the fragmentation of its national policy system mean that the Italian State acts predominantly through calls for tenders and rarely through enabling processes. This approach subjects SI to a process of depoliticization (Fougère et al., 2017), which reduces its transformative radicality. This situation stands in stark contrast to the Latin American model, where the enabling role of the state seems to give SI more room for maneuver and maintain its political spirit.

Furthermore, whilst in Europe public authorities trigger SI initiatives through programs (UK) and funding calls (Italy), in Latin America public authorities reward initiatives started by local communities. Thus, in the first case, policies come before initiatives, with the risk that initiatives may be opportunistic and triggered by the availability of resources; in the second case, initiatives

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are more spontaneous and public authorities recognize them as important.

Overall, these considerations allow us to complement what has been proposed by Unceta et al. (2022). While it is confirmed that the weakness and fragmentation of social policy systems are positively correlated with the diffusion of SI, what emerges from this work is that in phases of transition from one situation to another, past configurations of welfare systems condition the direction taken by SI. In particular, in Europe the dualism between state and market leaves more room for maneuver for the market when state intervention is withdrawn; in Latin America, the absence of such dualism has provided space for a third, socially based solution.

LIMITATIONS

This study presents some limitations that should be considered to properly contextualize its findings and inform future research.

First, the primary data collection was based on an online survey administered to a systematically identified population of social and solidarity economy (SSE) incubators in Brazil and Argentina. Although the mapping was rigorous, the survey was conducted during the post-pandemic recovery (Nov 2022–Mar 2023), when some incubators were only partially active or temporarily suspended. This may have led to a slight underestimation of the number of incubators, affecting the full representativeness of the sample.

Second, while the research included extensive qualitative fieldwork—such as institutional analysis and 80 in-depth interviews across Argentina, Brazil, Italy, and the UK—the case studies were not part of a fully structured comparative design. The Latin American cases were analyzed in a comparative perspective with the European ones, but not through a formal comparative framework. As such, the potential of comparative analysis was only partially leveraged. Future research could build on the current dataset or collect new data to support more systematic cross-national comparisons and stronger contributions to social innovation theory.

Finally, the focus on four countries—Brazil, Argentina, Italy, and the UK—offers relevant insights but limits broader generalization. Expanding the geographical scope and exploring other institutional contexts would help test the validity and applicability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study provides significant insights into the role of universities in supporting inclusive development and contributes to bridging empirical evidence and theoretical advances in the field of SSE and social innovation.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings offer significant insights into the Latin American approach to SI, addressing the three research questions while contributing meaningfully to the international debate.

The study makes three key contributions to the international SI discourse regarding governance models, the role of intermediaries, and the process of innovation. The research identifies distinct governance patterns across regions. Latin America's collaborative model, involving local communities, universities, and social incubators, contrasts with the UK's multi-level structure and Italy's fragmented approach. This comparison enriches our understanding of how different institutional contexts shape SI processes. The analysis highlights the crucial role of university incubators in Latin America as knowledge bridges between communities and institutions. This differs from the UK's professional intermediaries and Italy's competitive model, offering new perspectives on institutional support mechanisms. The Latin American case demonstrates how SI can effectively combine social impact with economic sustainability through community engagement and local resource mobilization. This approach provides valuable insights for contexts with limited public resources.

The study also reveals a distinctive Latin American approach characterized by strong grassroots involvement and community-led initiatives. Unlike the UK's market-oriented model or Italy's competitive approach, Latin American SI emerges from direct community engagement, often in response to acute social challenges. This bottom-up approach integrates traditional and modern knowledge, creating solutions that are deeply embedded in local contexts. Here, public authorities have the role of enabling the state (Iaione, 2016), by supporting grassroots initiatives.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates how SI in Latin America addresses fundamental welfare system transformations. In Argentina and Brazil, SI emerges as a critical response to severe social inequalities, particularly in areas of food security, income disparity, and educational access. This differs significantly from the Italian's and UK's approach, where SI is strategically integrated into existing welfare structures through calls for funding and the "Big Society" initiative. Thus, in the former case, SI represents a radical alternative to existing models, while in the latter, it serves as a corrective measure. What is important to point out here is that this result has also allowed us to highlight that the absence of a strong and widespread welfare state in Latin America has created better conditions for the spread of community-based SI. The weakness of the past is now transformed into a strength.

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The findings challenge the predominantly Eurocentric view of SI by highlighting how different institutional contexts produce varying approaches to social change. The research suggests that policymakers should consider context-specific approaches rather than applying universal models. Furthermore, the success of Latin American university incubators and community-led initiatives indicates that SI policies should focus on strengthening local capacities and supporting bottom-up processes rather than imposing top-down solutions.

These findings contribute to a clearer understanding of SI, highlighting the importance of considering diverse geographical and institutional contexts in both theory and practice. The Latin American experience demonstrates that effective SI can emerge through different pathways, challenging conventional assumptions about the necessary conditions for successful SI initiatives, thereby reducing the normative power of SI's rhetoric.

Beyond the theoretical contributions, the findings offer practical implications for policymakers and international organizations. The Latin American experience suggests that effective and resilient forms of SI can emerge from community-led processes even in contexts of institutional fragility (e.g., Italy). This implies that fostering enabling environments—through flexible funding mechanisms, support for university-community partnerships, and respect for local knowledge—can be more impactful than the imposition of externally defined intervention models. Policymakers in other regions might thus consider adopting adaptive frameworks that prioritize empowerment, co-creation, and local ownership of SI initiatives.

The comparative analysis contributes significantly to the broader debate on SI by highlighting the relevance of the Latin American way to SI and the diversity of approaches and contexts in which SIs emerge and develop. The results discussed above challenge the dominance of Global North perspectives in SI discourse and underscore the importance of considering diverse models and approaches. The Latin American experience offers valuable insights into community-driven and values-oriented SI processes that could inform and enrich SI theory and practice globally. Moreover, this analysis reinforces the perspective of rural and marginal territories of the Global South as potential hotbeds of SI, demonstrating the innovative capacity of areas often overlooked in mainstream innovation discourse, where the focus tends to prevail on urban contexts.

Finally, one learning produced by this study concerns the existence of many possible pathways to SI. What the international debate has considered the main path for SI—that is, solutions produced by social actors, especially in the form of social enterprises, to overcome the weaknesses of public welfare—is shown as a possible path, but not the only one. The Latin American model, in fact, describes a SI that sees the protagonism of local communities, where public and private actors operate, according to a model that is less entrepreneurial and more rooted in localized processes of production and reproduction. This does not mean that the Latin American way is better than the European or Anglo-Saxon way, but that there are many possible ways to generate SI and that they depend on contextual, cultural, and institutional factors, and also on people's ability to see that other realities are possible (Escobar, 2020). Furthermore, it is also possible to learn from these differences and transfer them to different contexts to pursue their goals, because when we admit that many realities are possible, we open our eyes to the possibility of plural solutions. Pluralizing the viewpoints of the SI debate, therefore, is also a way of multiplying the declinations of SI recognized as such and, in this way, transforming the initial vagueness of the concept into a pluralism that gives it strength.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by Universita Ca' Foscari, as part of the Wiley - CRUI-CARE agreement.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Busacca, M., & Coscarello, M. (2025). Latin America's grassroots approach to social innovation: Expanding the international debate. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *34*(4), e70038. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.70038

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