

A PUBLIC POLICY FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION: LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA IN A NUTSHELL

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Abstract: Social innovation has become an efficient public instrument to address the emerging social problems of contemporary societies. However, social innovation policies are still considered to be recent topics in the literature. This review article presents and describes the Public Policy of Social Innovation in Colombia and its evolution in the last decade. The article describes the policies and actors participating in social innovation processes by giving insights and concrete examples into the configuration of an ecosystem of social innovation. The paper aims to introduce elements which should be considered by innovation policy analysts when develop policies for social innovation in emerging economies that merit attention. By providing abundant examples and frameworks in the Public Policy of Social Innovation in Colombia, lessons for emerging economies are expected to benefit future governments interested in this issue. The review is concluded with suggestions and recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers.

Keywords: *Social Innovation, Innovation Policy, Colombia, Public Policy, Transformative Change, Grand Challenges*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social innovation is a contested topic in the literature that is gaining relevance in discussions for policy-makers (Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014). Defined as “a new program, policy, procedure, product, process and/or design that seeks to address a social problem and to ultimately shift resource and authority flows, social routines and cultural values of the social system that created the problems in the first place” (Westley et al., 2017), social innovation has been gazed at and by public institutions as a suitable mechanism that contributes to solving the ‘compelling and growing social challenges’ of current societies (Grimm et al., 2013). Social innovation’s allure for governments lies in its capacity to enhance new forms of collaboration (Domanski, Howaldt and Kaletka, 2020), promote resilient solutions (Westley, McGowan and Tjörnbo, 2017) and even redirect state efforts by reducing government spending on social issues (European Commission, 2017).

One of the trends that have been observed in the literature is the growing interest in implementing public policies that allow harnessing the potential of social innovation in problems of public interest. Particularly, this review article aims to contribute to this discussion by presenting and describing the Public Policy of Social Innovation in Colombia and its evolution during the last decade. The article aims to promote a richer discussion with context-sensitive observations from Colombia that could inspire other emerging economies struggling with implementing social innovation policies.

The paper is structured as follows: After this introduction, in the second part, I present an overview of the two *Public Policies for Social Innovation in Colombia to date*. In the third part, I discuss different actors and initiatives of social innovation in Colombia to understand its ecosystem better and provide examples of interest. In section four, discussion and conclusions are presented by framing three lessons from a Public Policy for Social Innovation in emerging economies.

2. A PUBLIC POLICY FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION IN COLOMBIA: AN OVERVIEW

Social innovation in Colombia and the rest of Latin America is a young notion (Domanski et al., 2016). In Colombia, social innovation emerged when the country was on the attending list to be a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Jaillier Castrillón et al., 2017). Although social innovation became a notion of public relevance at the dawn of 2007 as a tool to overcome poverty, it became the part of national public policies only until 2010 (Villa and Melo, 2015).

Social innovation was introduced for the first time in the National Development Plan '*Prosperity for all*' (2010–2014) under the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos Calderón. The plan conceived social innovation as the solution of social, economic or environmental problems through the interaction between various actors and projects that create effective, efficient and sustainable alternatives to existing problematics. Therefore, social innovation was regarded as a vehicle of social inclusion and a reconciliation strategy, looking for alternatives to accelerate the development of the country's poorest sectors (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2010).

One of the most important achievements in this institutional framework was the creation of the National Agency for the Overcoming of Extreme Poverty (ANSPE) and the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) in 2012 (Doria García, 2017). The purpose of these institutions was to connect stakeholders from different sectors, gain insights into the social innovation capability in the country, and generate innovative, sustainable and scalable solutions for improving the quality of life of the population living in extreme poverty (DNP/Colciencias/ANSPE, 2013). The next step was the configuration of a Public Policy exclusively focused on social innovation.

2.1. A Collaborative Approach

By April 2012, the formulation of the first Public Policy for Social Innovation in Colombia started within the framework of the Science, Technology and Innovation

Policy (STI) formulated by an inter-institutional working group made up of the National Planning Department, the Administrative Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (Colciencias) and ANSPE's Directorate of Social Innovation. This proposal was set out in August 2013 in the document entitled "*Conceptual Basis for a Social Innovation Policy*" to establish the conceptual bases of a Public Policy for Social Innovation aligned with the country's needs (DNP/Colciencias/ANSPE, 2013).

In this policy, social innovation in Colombia was conceived under four approaches: a) a *systemic-sociological approach* that seeks to achieve systemic social change; b) a *pragmatic-economic approach* whose objective is to emphasise the role of the social entrepreneur; c) a *managerial approach* that conceives social innovation as a novel solution to a social problem; and d) a *political science approach*, as an element directly linked to economic efficiency (DNP/Colciencias/ANSPE, 2013). This policy was considered a milestone, not only in Colombia but in Latin America, for utilising participatory and socially inclusive methods on its construction and implementing innovative methodologies on its design (Caicedo and Frías, 2016). Indeed, the interpretation of social innovation meant a rupture from traditional policies in innovation, based on the Oslo Manual, which integrated only four types of innovations (product, process, organisational and commercial) (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). Thus, innovation was traditionally assumed as a mechanism to increase competitiveness and economic growth.

As a supporting instrument, the Social Innovation National Node (NNIS) was created to enable the design and implementation of social innovation policies. The NNIS defined social innovation as "*a process through which value is created for society through practices, management models, and innovative products or services that satisfy a need, take advantage of an opportunity and resolve a social problem in a more efficient and effective way than the existing solutions, producing a favourable and sustainable change in the system in which they operate*" (Pulford, Hackett and Daste, 2014, p. 17). During this period, social innovation was utilised to fight against poverty and improve citizens' quality of life (Villa and Melo, 2015). Since then, social innovation has been integrating actors from different sectors, causing international organisations such as Acumen, B System or Socialab, to arrive in Colombia attracted by the favourable policies and the socio-economic context for developing social innovation projects (Villa and Melo, 2015).

Despite the implementation of a Public Policy for Social Innovation in Colombia in 2012, the topic was still considered in the National Development Plan the following year. The National Development Plan, 'All for a new country' (2014–2018), included social innovation policies that contemplated the identification and institutionalisation of novel solutions to public problems (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014). Its bases reflect a social approach to centralise public institutions around three main goals: Peace, Equity and Education (Villa and Melo, 2015). This Plan centred on using information and communication technologies to coordinate social strategies to generate solutions to extreme poverty problems. With Decree 2559 of 2016, ANSPE was merged within the Department for Social Prosperity

(DPS) (Departamento de Prosperidad Social), whose purpose is to design, coordinate and implement public policies to overcome poverty and social equity. Therefore, the DPS became the governmental institution in Colombia coordinating social innovation issues, mainly related to inequality and extreme poverty. Among the main activities carried out by the DPS, policies, programs and projects for assistance and reparation to violence victims and other excluded and vulnerable groups of individuals in Colombia can be highlighted.

2.2. The Mission of the Wise men

With the election of President Iván Duque Márquez in 2018, the National Policy for Social Innovation in Colombia suffered important mutations. The National Development Plan '*Pact for Colombia, the Pact for Equalities*' (2018–2022) focused on three axes: Legality, Entrepreneurship and Equality (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2018). This Plan describes innovation and development as pillars of economic growth and is built upon STI (2021–2030) (MINTIC/DNP, 2020). Therefore, a big change from the Public Policy for Social Innovation in Colombia of 2012 and the new Policy of 2021 was its integration into the National Innovation Policy.

Unlike the first Public Policy on Social Innovation in Colombia, this policy was not developed through a bottom-up approach but was directly implemented by politicians, academics and groups with expertise in innovation and social innovation. Thus, the STI policy was created during the so-called '*International Mission of the Wise Men of 2019*', as Mission integrated by 47 national and international experts and led by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation of Colombia (Min-ciencias), focused on economic, social and environmental challenges. This Policy uses a transformative approach to innovation (Schot and Steinmueller, 2018), focuses on the developing-country capabilities method of the World Bank (Cirera and Maloney, 2017), and is framed as mission-oriented (Mazzucato, 2018). This framework means that social innovations are linked with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, which includes a particular focus on "Grand Challenges Thinking" (Mazzucato, 2016).

In this respect, the STI policy (2021–2030) defines three challenges on which Colombia shall focus: The *first challenge*, "Biodiverse Colombia", is to protect the country's biodiversity by integrating natural and cultural diversity innovations. The *second challenge*, "Colombia Productive and Sustainable", is to reach a more sustainable and productive country based on doubling the share of the manufacturing industry in GDP, promoting the participation of digital industries and doubling the GDP share of agriculture. Finally, which relates to social innovation, the *third challenge*, "Colombia Productive and Sustainable", looks for a more egalitarian and educated society. This challenge seeks to reduce social inequality and multidimensional poverty in Colombia through scientific knowledge and social innovation. *Figure 1* summarises the two Public Policies for Social Innovation in Colombia.

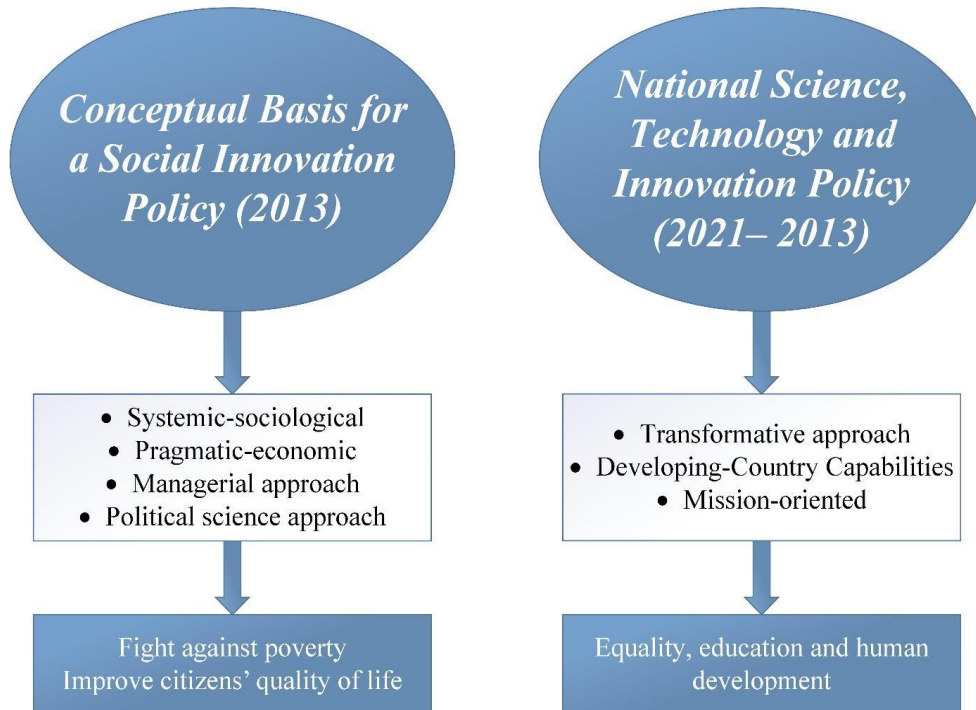


Figure 1. Axes of a Public Policy for Social Innovation in Colombia

Over time, social innovation has been gaining more relevance in Colombia, mainly used as an instrument to overcome structural social challenges. The following section explores some examples of social innovation in Colombia developed by different actors, considering an ecosystemic perspective.

3. AN ECOSYSTEM OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN COLOMBIA

Colombia and Brazil are considered to be the most advanced Latin American countries that develop intersectoral initiatives and configure a coherent and comprehensive Policy in social innovation (Frías, Aparicio and Lozano Borda, 2013; Pulford, Hackett and Daste, 2014). This fact is due to the important number of actors implementing social innovations as an instrument for systemic changes. Ecosystems for social innovation are defined as “social networks formed by a myriad of actors and experiences that could be sources of collective intelligence and creativity and contribute to solving urban problems, creating new paths of development, and reinforcing democracy in cities” (Andion et al., 2021, p. 2). Although Colombia does not have a clear social innovation ecosystem, some actors stand out for participating in the Public Policy for Social Innovation. The following summarises the national actors that develop or have developed social innovation initiatives in Colombia.

3.1. Social Innovation from Public Actors

The national government is undoubtedly a pioneer in the development of social innovation programmes. Some of the programs that have been successful in Colombia are divided into two lines: *Participatory Social Innovation* and *Open Social Innovation*, both based on creating solutions through participatory processes and relationships with communities (Villa and Melo, 2015). The following section explores examples of both lines:

3.1.1. Participatory Social Innovation

In Colombia, the line that has been most explored is the *Participatory Social Innovation* line, which recognises the communities as strategic allies, seeking to generate spaces of trust to develop their capacities to lead their development processes and needs. Two valuable examples are worth mentioning. The first is the '*Saco Crea*', a socially-innovative oriented program developed in San José de Saco, a town in the department of Atlántico, located in the north of Colombia. According to the 2018 population census, this town has nearly 2,715 inhabitants, characterised by high levels of poverty and social inequities. The program's primary objectives were: *a*) income generation, *b*) food security, *c*) solid waste management and *d*) cultural appropriation. These purposes were sought to be achieved through the enhancement of the textile skills of the local inhabitants through strategies such as the involvement of women who made garments for principal cities in Colombia, the development of home gardens with 50 beneficiary families, or the training of a group of citizens in composting and management of local gardens (Villa and Melo, 2015).

Another program that deserves to be mentioned for its high impact at national level is the '*Water for Education, Education for Water program*' developed by Empresas Publicas de Medellín Foundation (EPM). This project's beneficiaries received technical training in the operation and maintenance of water purification, water quality monitoring and ecological education talks. Between 2011 and 2019, EPM has invested approximately 27 billion Colombian pesos in the project, benefiting around 89,554 people in rural educational communities – 93% in the municipalities of Antioquia (Fundacion EPM, 2021).

3.1.2. Open and Digital Social Innovation

One of the most active lines in social innovation is the Public Program '*ViveDigital*', which is aligned with the Colombian Technology Development Plan of the National Government. *ViveDigital* was developed by the Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications (MinTIC), seeking Colombia to take a technological leap through the massification of the internet and the development of the national digital ecosystem. The plan sought to spread the appropriation and use of technology to generate employment and reduce poverty. The '*ViveDigital*' Plan was designed for the 2014–2018 period, achieving approximately eight thousand free digital connectivity spaces in urban and rural populations, covering almost all municipalities in the

country (Villa and Melo, 2015). This Plan received great international attention. To note some facts, Mark Zuckerberg – the founder of the social network Facebook – was part of this project and committed with the National Government to provide free internet for the population (MinTIC, 2015). *ViveDigital* included social innovation initiatives such as acquiring digital accessibility software for blind people and people with hearing disabilities or creating movie theatres adapted for people with these disabilities.

3.2. Private and Third Sectors

In addition to social innovation public programs, projects developed by the private sector also stand out. One of them is '*Pioneros de la Innovación Social*' (Pioneers Alliance), a public-private alliance initiated in 2011 to finance the early stage, prototyping and validation of solutions market of extreme poverty. Another well-known example was carried out by a non-profit organisation named Corporation for Participative and Sustainable Development of Small Rural Producers, which promote participatory innovation processes with small farmers using the methodology of a) Organizational Development, b) Empowerment of Small Rural Producers, c) Participatory Rural Enterprises and d) Participatory Technological Improvement (Villa and Melo, 2015).

Other private sector actors that support the social innovation background in Colombia are international organisations with a track record in social innovation. One of the most relevant examples was the involvement of the *Young Foundation* and the *Social Innovation Exchange (SIX)* in collaboration with ANSPE and supported by the Inter-American Development Bank and Compartamos con Colombia in 2013. Through the development of workshops and practical sessions, the project aimed to help building a community for social innovation (The Young Foundation, 2013).

Another example is Instiglio, a non-profit actor aiming to improve social services in developing countries by financing social programs in 13 developing countries, including Colombia. Other international actors are *Impact Hub* (Medellín and Bogotá) which gathers a community that connects and manages the creation of value in the entrepreneurial ecosystem that promotes social innovation; *Corporación Somos Más*, dedicated to designing innovative processes of collective construction based in Spain, Belgium and Colombia; or *Minka-dev*, an online tool that seeks to develop sustainable business models to solve social/environmental problems (Doria García, 2017).

3.3. Academic Sector

Besides the public and private implications in social innovation initiatives, the academic sector also stands out. Particularly, Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios (UNIMINUTO), a religious university corporation, created a *Social Innovation Science Park* in 2012 and created the methodology "*Route of Social Innovation*", an initiation in partnership with the Secretary of Science, Technology and Innovation

of the Government of Cundinamarca and the National Fund for Science and Technology. Its purpose is to respond to the needs of the poorest communities, focusing on social entrepreneurship, solidarity economy, traditional knowledge, productivity and community appropriation of innovation (Arias, 2016). Other universities that stand out are the Jorge Tadeo Lozano University, with a social innovation Consultancy Office; the Metropolitan Technological Institute (ITM) with the introduction of the Social Innovation Laboratory; the University of Antioquia with the Social Innovation incubator; or the National University of Colombia with the Bank of Social Innovation Projects (Villa and Melo, 2015).

3.4. International Cooperation

Colombia also has a relevant background in international cooperation reception. Outstanding international cooperation projects promoted social innovation initiatives, led by institutions such as the Swedish Agency for International Development, the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands through the Business Partners for Development (BPD) program in the period 1998–2001 (Business Partners for Development, 2002). The BPD program aimed to combine practical action with decentralised learning involving partnerships between the civil society and the public sector to reach measurable business profits in poverty. It targeted extractive and water sanitation industries.

3.5. Smart and Innovative Cities, when Technology meets Social Innovation: The Case of Medellín

Medellín, a in the department of Antioquia, is the second-largest city in Colombia, both in economic and population growth. In 2013, Medellín was awarded *'The World's Most Innovative City of the Year'* by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) of Washington above other innovative cities such as New York and Tel Aviv. The municipality of Medellín has consistently enacted Public Policies for Social Innovation, including its most recent version for the period 2020–2023 by Mayor Daniel Quintero Calle (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2020).

Since 2004, innovative policies and programs have been implemented in education, civic culture, coexistence and social urbanism of high international recognition. Interestingly, many of these innovations have been technological in nature; their purpose has been to promote the city's urban development and turn it into a 'Smart City' (Biczyńska, 2019). However, the abundant social problems embodied in the city have become the terrain for these technological innovations to be turned into opportunities for social innovation. In urban mobility two of the city's most significant milestones are worth mentioning. In December 2011 the *'Electric Stairs'* project was inaugurated, a free public transport system in Comuna 13, one of the most recognised neighbourhoods of the city for its violence rates in the past. The creation of this project attracted new social proposals such as the creation of graffiti, urban art and

remodelling of the neighbourhoods' infrastructure, generating an increase in tourism in this sector.

Similarly, in 2003 was created the '*Metro Cable*', a gondola lift system with zero gas emission integrated into the public transport system that solves problems of citizen mobility in sectors of high social vulnerability. Due to the city's mountainous topography, the '*Metro Cable*' model has expanded throughout the city, connecting various marginal points with the city centre. Consequently, the infrastructure of the neighbourhoods surrounding the '*Metro Cable*' has undergone significant architectural transformations and the receipt of significant figures for international cooperation to overcome poverty in the city.

However, the emphasis on social innovation in Medellín is not only reduced to urban planning and mobility since the city has also developed projects with a high social component. To illustrate, one of the most recent projects led by the Medellín Mayor's Office is the creation of a project called '*Escuchaderos*' (listening centres), whose purpose is to reduce the growing need for mental health care in the city's inhabitants accelerated by the health crisis of Covid-19. Through this program, citizens will be able to access free individual psychological counselling and social support in strategic points of the city and easily accessible through public transport. The program started on April 2021 with the engagement of experts in psychology, aiming to target vulnerable populations of the city in need of psychological counselling and personal development. Many other cases of social innovation like this can be mentioned in Medellín. In particular, it is highlighted that Colombia is a country with significant social inequalities and growing poverty; therefore, a focus on social innovation allows various actors to respond to social and environmental growing challenges.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS FROM A PUBLIC POLICY FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION IN COLOMBIA

This review paper aimed to present and describe the Public Policy of Social Innovation in Colombia and its evolution during the last decade. In this paper, it was possible to identify that the Public Policy of Social Innovation in Colombia has presented two important moments in its configuration (see *Figure 1*). Some lessons from the Colombian case are mentioned that may be useful for other emerging economies with similar needs that may see social innovation as useful for policy-makers.

4.1. A Public Policy of Social Innovation is an Evolutionary Road

The first policy was developed through a process of collective participation between public institutions, private organisations and citizens. The multi-stakeholder participation reflected focus on the fight against poverty and inequalities. This dynamic, which was similar throughout Latin America, sought to use social innovation as a tool to terminate social gaps and inequalities resulting from the poverty that characterises emerging economies (Villa and Melo, 2015). This policy is closely aligned with Moulaert et al. (2013) who conceives social innovation as innovations in social

relations reflected in novel governance structures and greater collective empowerment. The second policy, which was launched in 2021, and is expected to run until 2030, was developed by expert actors, labelled as *'Wise Men'*, who were inspired by academic publications and scientific reports. This policy is aligned with Schot and Steinmueller (2018), Cirera and Maloney (2017), and Mazzucato (2018), which interprets social innovation as a transformative concept with the potential to change social structures and relations. Social innovation is a notion that cooperates and collaborates with sustainable development and their activities are intertwined with the well-known development goals.

4.2. A Public Policy of Social Innovation Needs Maturity

Although it is premature to identify which Public Policy for Social Innovation is more efficient or successful at this stage, what is possible to identify a transition of social innovation as a public mechanism to reproduce systemic changes in dialogue with global agendas. These decisions by policy-makers also reflect a degree of maturity in the understanding of social innovation, as it requires particular policies and concrete mechanisms for its implementation. Lessons from Colombia show that while the problems of society remain the same, they evolve over time as societies change and adapt to new socio-technological regimes. Therefore, learning from the mistakes of previous policies has allowed Colombia to build a more mature and concrete Public Policy on Social Innovation. A lesson for emerging countries would be to review their progress over time and interpret what each society considers as *'desired'* from a social innovation policy.

4.3. A Public Policy of Social Innovation Needs Adaptation

Colombia's problems are far different from those of other countries in Latin America and other emerging economies. Colombia, in particular, has serious problems of extreme poverty, inequality, low levels of education and insecurity due to Colombia's armed conflict and the growing number of criminal gangs (Robinson, 2016). Therefore, social innovation in the country has been interpreted as a mechanism to solve the basic problems of the Colombian society. Undoubtedly, lessons for other emerging countries consist in adapting social innovation policies to the needs of each country. It should be noted that although social innovation aims to promote change in social relations (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) and is based on a transformative concept of society (Westley, McGowan and Tjörnbo, 2017), the basis of its implementation is to solve social problems (Grimm et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2013). Therefore, taking into account the signals and messages emitted by the environment, policies should be adapted to the needs and capacities of each country.

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