

## Chapter 13

# Alternatives to Capitalism: Learning From Pro-Social Collective Business Models

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The seriousness of current social and environmental problems implies that a real transition towards sustainable development is only possible through collaborative actions between actors and organizations. However, most of the research continues to focus on the actions of individual sustainable entrepreneurs with little evidence on business models triggered by collective entrepreneurship. This chapter aims to analyze the role of emerging pro-social collective organizations that aim to offer alternatives to capitalism, that is, an alternative to organizations that only seek to maximize economic revenues at the expense of social and environmental deterioration. Specifically, the chapter analyzes the business models of three sustainable cooperatives in Spain that have initiated a movement that promotes social well-being and environmental concern through collective business models that rely heavily on social media to gain exposure and attract followers to their cause in different strategic sectors. The cooperatives subject of this study are Som Energia, Som Conexió, and Som Mobilitat.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The exacerbation of social and environmental problems at a global level, such as climate change, the melting of the Arctic Circle, natural disasters, poverty and water scarcity has highlighted the need to radically change the way in which societies produce and consume resources. The magnitude of these social and environmental problems has grown to such a degree that many of them have been classified as major sustainability grand challenges (Howard-Grenville et al., 2014). The term grand challenge has recently been coined by academics and professionals to refer to multifaceted and global problems

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that often span several sectors, whose solution is urgent and whose complexity and dimension requires innovation and scientific research on a large scale (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; George et al., 2016). The United Nations has also recognized the magnitude of these environmental and social challenges and in 2015 translated them into seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) that require urgent action<sup>1</sup>. The SDGs address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, etc. and provide specific actions that need to be tackled by 2030 to achieve a more sustainable future for all. The SDGs also highlight the importance of collaboration and partnerships between different actors and organizations to mitigate some of the grand challenges related to sustainability.

Business organizations play a fundamental role in society, since they are the main agents of production and consumption and are therefore considered to be essential actors for solving the social and environmental challenges mentioned above. As a result, companies face increasing pressure from different stakeholders that demand responsibility and proactivity in their actions. Thus, in recent years companies have carried out a wide variety of practices to act as more socially and environmentally responsible agents. However, the exacerbation of social and environmental problems has shown that their attempts and actions have been insufficient (Branzei et al., 2018), since, in global terms, little progress has been made to stop a growing tendency towards unsustainable development and lack of responsibility (Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

Therefore, new business organizational approaches are needed that can contribute to the fight against climate change and tackle major sustainability challenges (e.g., Doh et al., in press, Howard-Grenville et al., 2014, Wright & Nyberg, 2017). It is necessary to radically change traditional capitalism practices and conventional production and commercialization approaches in favor of new organizational approaches to create, design, direct and lead businesses (George et al., 2016) that help to restore the balance between nature, society and economic activity (Antolin-Lopez & Montiel, 2018).

Given this scenario, entrepreneurial efforts around the creation and leadership of new sustainable enterprises have gained notable academic attention in recent decades (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2019; York et al., 2016), since sustainable entrepreneurship has been proposed as the solution to the pressing social and environmental challenges that we face today and to those that will arise in the future (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Hall et al., 2010).

Scholars have also recognized the importance of collective entrepreneurship in this process (e.g., Cato et al., 2008; Dean & McMullen, 2007; Gallo et al., 2018; Doh et al., in press). Although the actions of individual companies and entrepreneurs are useful and necessary to lead change, the seriousness of current social and environmental problems implies that a real transition towards sustainable development is only possible through collaborative actions between actors and organizations (Montgomery et al., 2012). However, most of the research continues to focus on the individual actions of sustainable entrepreneurs (Antolin-Lopez & Montiel, 2018; Pacheco et al., 2010), with little evidence on business models of collective entrepreneurship (e.g. Doh et al., in press; Gallo et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2012). Consequently, little is understood about the emergence of sustainable collective entrepreneurship (Hall et al., 2010), its processes (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018) and its real impact on the sectors and economies where they appear (Antolin-Lopez et al., 2013; Muñoz et al., 2018).

This chapter aims to analyze the role of emerging pro-social collective organizations that aim to offer alternatives to capitalism, that is, an alternative to organizations that only seek to maximize economic revenues at the expense of social and environmental deterioration. The chapter analyzes the business models of three sustainable cooperatives in Spain that have initiated a movement that promotes social well-being and environmental concern through collective business models that rely heavily on social

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