

SOCIAL INNOVATION – A POWERFUL STATEMENT FROM COMPANIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Today's environmental challenges are catching the attention of many companies to seek innovative solutions to solve the roots of these problems through strong partnerships with governmental entities and other organizations. Social innovation is a topic that can leverage new ideas and practices to overcome current societal and environmental issues fostering sustainability. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of social innovation by presenting a pragmatic and comparative study case analysis of two companies which successfully implemented social innovation in their business model. Social innovation combined with open innovation are great catalysts in solving societal and environmental problems and creating shared-value and having an impact on business strategy. These two organizations strive to create change and develop a learning environment to surpass all risks and challenges with the sole purpose of solving environmental problems. The paper will provide evidence on the importance of closing partnerships in social innovation process and how collaboration helps in generating shared value.

Keywords: *social innovation, sustainability, open innovation, collaboration.*

JEL Classification: *M140, O350, O360.*

1. Introduction

Social innovation it is a phenomenon which is present in today's economic world that constitutes changes in the society structures and provide an increase and improve the collective power resources and economic performances (Potts & Hartley, 2015; Slee, 2019). The outcomes of the social innovation are various, ranging from new social practices, new structures of collaborative work, considering innovation process impact on

business strategy and culture, having great contributions to inter- and intra-organizational learning (Mumford, 2002, Moulaert et al., 2005, Martins et al., 2023).

Innovation is a main driver to promote economic growth, providing positive outputs for society and as well as the environment (Allen et al., 2019). Social innovation is perceived by practitioners and researchers as a leverage in spreading new ideas and practices to solve current societal problems into promoting a sustainable future (Fox et al., 2013, Wu et al., 2023). The concept of social innovation embraces several actions and initiatives (Ayob et al., 2016), addressing unmet societal needs (Westley et al., 2017), having a balance between economic growth and environmental protective activities (Katarzyna et al., 2018), using transformational ideas and implementation of new practices (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020; Tejedor et al., 2019).

An important aspect related to innovation is knowledge as through this, innovation impacts businesses in increasing their profit and innovation has good outcomes for society (Drucker, 2014). Moreover, social innovation is a new approach in terms of social practices undertaken by various stakeholders in collaboration to provide solutions to problems which cannot be solved using traditional approaches (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Social innovation mainstream new methods to achieve social objectives, for example discovering innovation sources and close strategic partnerships for developing and implementing social projects (Herrera, 2015).

The paper provides further insights on social innovation concept, and an innovative collaboration environment for companies with other stakeholders to have a positive impact on the environmental and societal issues. The successful stories of SC Johnson and IKEA in implementing social innovation through strategic partnerships and a comparison of their practices, will provide details on how theoretical aspects are set into practice by businesses.

In the following sections of the research paper, the concept of social innovation is explained and detailed, along with the collaboration aspects between companies and stakeholders, going forward with explaining the research methodology used, the two organizations' practices and initiatives and a comparison of their actions. The study comprises literature analysis and a practical view on the practicability of the theory in the businesses approaches in their activities.

2. Social Innovation, Sustainability and Collaboration between Stakeholders

Social Innovation was defined by Voorberg et al., (2015) as “the creation of long-lasting outcomes that aim to address societal needs fundamentally changing the relationships, positions, and rules between the involved stakeholders, through an open

process of participation, exchange and collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including end-users, thereby crossing organizational boundaries and jurisdictions”. A more recent definition was provided by Tuckerman et al., (2022) who states that social innovation comprises “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations”. Social innovation highlights the changes in relationships, social participation, business models and processes (Moulaert et al., 2017; Lopes et al., 2017).

This concept takes into account the stakeholders’ relationships as a collaborative basis so they can provide improvements to individuals’ lives through societal aspects (Cattacin & Zimmer 2016). In order for social innovation to have good outcomes, cooperation is an important factor in its success (Moulaert & MacCallum 2019). Cooperation or collaboration between partners (companies and their stakeholders) plays a significant part in the phase of identifying the opportunities for social innovation in terms of getting access to new markets, approach new stakeholders, new communities and share the risks (Phillips et al., 2019).

Another perspective which needs to be taken into consideration is the stakeholder theory. Based on Freeman (1984) perspective, companies’ objective is to generate several benefits for various stakeholders (society, customers, employees, governments, shareholders, suppliers). Parmar (2010) advice companies to focus on their environment for stakeholders’ identification to investigate their relationships between them to foresee any conflicts with the purpose of preventing them. The stakeholder theory focuses on internal and external stakeholders’ needs and demands, providing an environment for an appropriate value-creation maximization and looking forward to long-term success and sustainability (Mahajan et al., 2023).

Moreover, social innovation has an important impact on sustainability, helping in improving social flow (Tate & Bals, 2018). From this perspective, production and consumption need to be directed toward sustainability creating a place for society to improve and grow (Folke et al., 2021, Hossain et al., 2017). By incorporating economical objectives and economic goals along with social goals, will bring a great contribution to sustainability (Hossain et al., 2017). Organizations can have a high performance of social innovation through an orientation into sustainability by adopting sustainable practices and new processes (Hagedoorn et al., 2023). Moreover, sustainability is a force that challenges the existing practices and actions by the implementation of innovative processes (Neutzling et al., 2018). Murray et al. (2010) underlines the six stages of the social innovation from a pragmatic approach:

- Prompts, inspirations, and diagnoses – this phase includes all factors which influence the need for innovation (e.g., poor performance, spending cuts etc.) along with the new creative ideas. This stage is about finding and defining the problem and constructing the question, so it gets to the root cause;

- Proposals and ideas – in this phase is about the generation of the idea. This stage may involve creativity methods to extend the options;
- Prototyping and pilots – at this moment, the ideas are tested in practice through prototypes, randomized controlled trials or other formal or informal pilots. In this stage the appearance of any errors in the products will be corrected and solved;
- Sustaining – the idea is ready to be put into practice. At this stage is important to identify income streams to ensure long-term financial stability of the organization;
- Scaling and diffusion – this phase is about considering the strategies for growing and spreading innovation (organizational growth, licensing, franchising, looser diffusion). This process is called also “scaling”;
- Systematic change – the last stage combines the interaction between several factors: social movements, business models, data, new methods to get things done. In general, is about new architectures and frameworks and the conditions which make these innovations economically viable. The conditions may refer to: new technologies, supply chains, skills, regulatory and fiscal frameworks.

Since all companies want to remain competitive on the market, they agree that aspects related to the environment and society need to be integrated in their business strategies (Leal-Rodríguez et al., 2018). Collaboration is an important aspect of social innovation, encouraging companies to change their social interactions, open their accessibility to resources and power and meet social needs and demands (Kassim et al., 2022). At the same time, it is worth highlighting the importance of the stakeholders’ relationships that drive success of the social innovations and the outputs generated. This will lead to acquiring new knowledge and implementing new improvements (Ahmad & Karim 2019, Kassim et al., 2022).

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this paper is to provide details on the applicability of the social innovation concept in two companies activities through a pragmatic approach and a comparison of the actions taken by each of them. The Study Case method was used to highlight the importance of using the social innovation approach in the context of the two organizations. Based on this method, social innovation is observed and researched from a practical perspective. The study case provides answers to questions such as, “How social innovation is practiced by companies?” “What results were obtained by organizations after implementing social innovation practices?” The study adds value to the theory by providing additional information from a practice perspective and it

provides a wider understanding of the subject. In this paper, the documentation method was used to provide insights into the practices and initiatives undertaken by the two companies in terms of online documents, online platforms, news websites and companies' reports.

4. SC Johnson – results on social innovation initiatives

The market size of the global household cleaning products was valued in 2021 at 37.85 billion USD, it increased in 2022 at 40.11 billion USD and it is projected that by end of 2023 to reach 41.94 billion USD and increasing continuously each year (Global: Household Cleaners Market Value | Statista, 2023). S.C. Johnson & Son is in sixth place in terms of sales, after Procter & Gamble, Unilever, Henkel, Colgate-Palmolive and Reckitt Benckiser Group Plc, with sales of 11.1 billion USD in 2022 (Boskamp, 2023). SC Johnson is a company that produces and sales household cleaning products, which was founded in 1886. SC Johnson brands include: Glade, Kiwi, Pledge, Mr Muscle, Duck, Raid. Other brands include Ziploc, Autan, Bama, Shout, Mrs Meyers (SC Johnson: Who We Are, 2023).

- The company's focus is on social innovation in closing partnerships with various governmental organisms, individuals and businesses can collaborate in creating a more sustainable world. Some of the initiatives taken by the organization in this direction comprise:
- The Blue Paradox – in order to create awareness for individuals about the negative effects of the damage produced by plastic and as a step closer into a waste-free world, SC Johnson has closed a partnership with Conservation International. The two companies worked together in providing an educational experience to individuals using 360-degrees projections of the ocean surface so that persons can walk beneath it and discover the impact of the plastic waste has on the natural environment of the oceans (Blue Paradox, 2023).
- Positive actions – are other initiatives taken by the company in terms of product packaging. SC Johnson is removing all labels which hinders the process of sorting the trash, making easier to peel off stickers from the packages. Moreover, the organization is producing less plastic packaging from recyclable products (Our Meaningful Actions, 2023).
- Don't Lose Your Bottle Challenge – this is another project developed by SC Johnson together with Liverpool Football Club in which they want to create awareness for local people through clean-ups, education programs and school competitions with the goal of reusing the bottles. A promotional

campaign was started in which Liverpool players discussed the impact of single use of plastic bottles has on the planet (Liverpool Football Club and SC Johnson Take on Plastic Waste, 2022).

- SC Johnson and the Milwaukee Brewers partnership – the fans present at the baseball games at the Milwaukee Brewers stadium have been encouraged to recycle their beverage cups into SC Johnson branded receptacles which are collected and upcycled into special production of Scrubbing Bubbles bottles (SC Johnson and the Milwaukee Brewers Team up to Take on Plastic Waste, 2022).
- The Base of the Pyramid Team – an innovative project developed by SC Johnson to help protecting families from insects and diseases, especially malaria from 26 countries from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Middle East. The team of the Base of the Pyramid has reached over 105 million people through several health initiatives, educational programs, and repellent innovations. The company has built 70 health clinics which serve more than 1 million people annually (SC Johnson Global Impact: The Base of the Pyramid Team, 2023).
- Educational programs for girls, women, and minorities in encouraging them to return to school providing all the tools for learning (Inspiring Future Generations Through Education and STEM, 2023).

SC Johnson is an organization that closes partnerships with other organizations to develop and implement social innovation projects with impact on sustainability and to meet social needs. One way is by raising awareness of the damage produced by plastic to the environment through educational programs and promotional campaigns. Another important aspect is providing repellent solutions and health facilities for families from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Middle East who drop out school due to low incomes. Through these initiatives, SC Johnson provides an example in the industry of a good organizational behavior and reach for a higher position in terms of sales.

5. Ikea – social innovation

The furniture market worldwide has known a steady growth in past years, until 2022 when it decreased with 10 billion USD reaching 694 billion USD from 704 billion USD as it was in 2021. In 2023, sales are expected to reach 766 billion USD worldwide (Statista, 2023). The leader in the industry is IKEA with revenue in 2022 of 44.6 billion USD (Statista, 2023). Ikea was founded in Sweden in 1940s, having a steady growing rate, becoming now the global furniture retailer, providing comfort and affordability to people all around the world (Our History, Values and Strategic Philanthropy, 2023).

Communities are a central point in IKEA's activity based on the initiatives implemented by IKEA Canada such as ((IKEA Canada, 2023):

- Refugee Skills for Employment initiative - with the objective to hire 150 refugees in within 3 years, providing paid work opportunities, culture and language coaching and mentorship from IKEA leaders;
- Funding organizations that help vulnerable communities – IKEA Canada funded organizations like Save the Children, National Friendship Association of Canada and Black Health Alliance;
- Children's pediatrics – IKEA donated funds and products in collaboration with Opération Enfant Soleil to help children's pediatrics in Quebec.

IKEA is working to take action on climate change by reducing global temperature rise by 2050 through zero emissions of carbon, reducing greenhouse gas emissions (enabling suppliers and IKEA markets to use 100 % renewable electricity, creating markets for second-hand products), storing and removing carbon through natural processes (forestry and agricultural management practices) (IKEA Taking Action for the Climate, 2023). Ikea promotes fairness and equality for all individuals and stakeholders across the IKEA value chain through supporting decent and meaningful work, being an inclusive business treating fairly all employees no matter the gender, ethnicity, race, religion (IKEA Our Sustainability Strategy, 2023).

IKEA closed partnerships with different social business starting with 2012, selecting 100 artisans and selling their products. The social collaboration will move forward with partnerships with businesses for snacks, coffee and tea for the health and organic food sector. The results of IKEA with social businesses were the limited collections and products sold (IKEA Social Entrepreneurship – IKEA Global, 2023).

LOKALT is a collection co-created by IKEA, social business and local designers from Sweden, India, Jordan, and Thailand. An important initiative is Social Entrepreneurship, where organizations and IKEA can connect and share knowledge and best practices, mutual exchange of competences (IKEA Social Entrepreneurship – IKEA Global, 2023). Some examples of partnerships closed by IKEA are the following (Meet Some of Our Social Entrepreneurship Partners – IKEA Global, 2023):

- Classical Handmade Products – in partnership with IKEA, the business is creating home furnishing products from sustainable and natural materials, providing job opportunities for the ones in need;
- Ahlod/Kawacom White Nile – the White Nile company cultivates Arabica coffee which is sold under the name PÅTÅR at IKEA;
- Jordan River Foundation – IKEA closed a collaboration with this company to create jobs for refugee women from Syria and local Jordanian women. Over 1200 family members were impacted by this initiative;

- Rangsutra – the partnership between IKEA and Rangsutra has created livelihoods for 1100 people, and it has resulted in several IKEA collections and global products, empowering women in rural areas;
- Saitex – the Vietnamese company focuses on environmental and social sustainability, moving to a circular business. At the same time, Saitex provides people from vulnerable backgrounds with job opportunities, equal pay, dignity and respect;
- Ramesh Flowers – a company from India which creates home and lifestyle products using natural botanicals. 81 % of the workers are from villages where women employment is rare.

IKEA is a company that focuses on sustainability and social innovation initiatives to make an impact on society and on environment.

6. Discussions and comparison of companies' practices

Both IKEA and SC Johnson are interested in implementing social innovation practices in their business strategies, comprising collaborations initiatives with different organizations related to communities and sustainability. The central point in SC Johnson is collaboration with different organizations, individuals, and businesses to create a sustainable world. In this direction, they have partnerships with a non-profit environmental organization in providing educational experiences to individuals on the impact of plastic waste. Moreover, SC Johnson is using less plastic packaging for their products. On the other hand, IKEA is committed to reduce carbon emissions and greenhouse gas emissions by using renewable electricity. SC Johnson has developed and implemented several initiatives related to plastic waste in promoting reusable bottles and recycling beverage cups through partnerships with the football club Liverpool and Milwaukee Brewers.

IKEA closed partnerships with several social businesses throughout the world (India, Vietnam, Uganda, Jordan, Bangladesh) to have a social impact by creating job opportunities for women and, vulnerable people and manufacturing products from sustainable and natural materials. Then again, SC Johnson is focusing also on a project concerning malaria disease in Africa by providing health support through more than 70 health clinics. IKEA implemented initiatives related to refugees' employment and education, funding non-profit organizations which help vulnerable communities and children's pediatrics. The furniture organization is promoting fairness and equality for all individuals and stakeholders across all IKEA value chain. Educational programs for women, girls and minorities are also important for SC Johnson as it encourages them to return to school. Even if both companies' activities are oriented into social

innovation, each of them separately has their own initiatives and projects directed in different aspects of sustainability and societal aspects.

7. Conclusions

The study focuses on the implementation of social innovation in two companies from various markets and their approach in developing initiatives related to sustainability and societal issues. IKEA and SC Johnson are examples of companies in which social innovation is adopted through different partnerships with non-profit organizations and social businesses. The research undertaken by the author regarding the initiatives and actions implemented by the two companies provide a wider perspective on adopting social innovation in two different business models which may contribute to other organizations' strategic decisions.

Social innovation is a concept of interest for all businesses in solving environmental, societal issues by searching and adopting actions and initiatives in solving these problems. Further research is needed in finding new methods which can be used by organizations in the social innovation matter.

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