

Studying Growth as a Pursuit of Disseminating Social Impact: A Conceptual Study

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Abstract : The purpose of this study is to pave the way for more focused accumulation of knowledge on social enterprise growth. The body of research touching upon the phenomenon is somewhat fragmented. In order to make an effort to create a solid common ground, this study draws from the theoretical starting points and guidelines developed within small firm growth research. By analyzing their use in social enterprise growth literature, the study offers insights on whether the proven theories and concepts from small firm context could be more systematically applied when investigating growth of social enterprises. Towards this end, the main findings from social enterprise growth research are classified under the three research streams on growth. One of them focuses on factors of growth, another investigates growth as a process and the third is interested in outcomes of growth. During the analysis, special attention is paid on exploring how social mission of the company and the pursuit of augmenting its social impact are dealt within those lines of research. The next step is to scrutinize and discuss some of the central building blocks of growth research, namely the unit of analysis, conceptualization of a firm and operationalizing growth, in relation to social enterprise studies. It appears that the social enterprise growth literature stresses the significance of 'social' both as a main driver and principle outcome of growth. As for the growth process, this emphasis is manifested by special interest in strategies and models tailored to disseminate social impact beyond organizational limits. Consequently, this study promotes more frequent use of business activity as a unit of analysis in the social enterprise context. Most of the times, it is their products, services or programs with which social enterprises and entrepreneurs aim to create the impact. Thus the focus should be placed on activities rather than on organizations. The study also seeks to contribute back to the small firm growth research. Even though the recommendation to think of business activities as an option for unit of analysis stems from there, it is all too rarely used. Social entrepreneurship makes a good case for testing and developing the approach further.

Keywords : conceptual study, growth, scaling, social enterprise

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