

CASE STUDY

The Role of Joiners in Social Entrepreneurship: More Than “Simple” Employees

Jorge Navarro-Dols*PhD Candidate**Deusto Business School, University of Deusto**Mundaitz Kalea, 50, 20012 Donostia, Gipuzkoa, Spain**Email: Jorge.navarro@opendeusto.es***Dr José L. González-Pernía***Associate Professor**Deusto Business School, University of Deusto**Mundaitz Kalea, 50, 20012 Donostia, Gipuzkoa, Spain**Email: Jorge.navarro@opendeusto.es***ABSTRACT**

PURPOSE: Until recently, most of the literature on social entrepreneurship has focused on the role of the individual entrepreneur who launches a social venture. This article aims to emphasise a collective perspective by analysing the role of “joiners”, i.e., the individuals involved in social entrepreneurship as the first employees or volunteers of a social venture.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY: This study employed a qualitative approach. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven social ventures operating in the gastronomy sector in Spain.

FINDINGS: Three main ideas emerged from the analysis. First, joiners contribute to social ventures by assuming increased responsibility and participating in shared leadership roles. Second, the pursuit of financing becomes more structured over time with the participation of joiners. Finally, joiners engaged in social ventures evolve from being individuals primarily driven by a pro-social motivation to being professionals who increasingly use sophisticated working methods that help to improve the value proposition.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS: The research context is focused on the gastronomy sector and geographically limited to Spain.

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ORIGINALITY AND VALUE: This research contributes to the existing literature on social entrepreneurship by offering a novel perspective that shifts the focus from the individual entrepreneur to a broader collective view that considers the role of joiners who become part of the social ventures.

KEYWORDS: *Social Entrepreneurship; Entrepreneurs; Joiners; Sustainability; Gastronomy Sector; Spain*

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship has gained increasing interest and popularity as a global phenomenon in recent years, attracting attention from researchers, governments, and organisations (Williams *et al.*, 2023). Despite the absence of consensus on a single definition of this phenomenon (Collavo, 2018), a common view in the existing literature is the ‘founder centric’ nature of the studies on social entrepreneurship; these assume that the social entrepreneur is the sole agent of change within a social venture (Shaw and Carter, 2007). Gradually, alternative discourses have emerged, critiquing the heroic portrayal of the entrepreneur and emphasising the significance of collaborative efforts in social entrepreneurship (Olinsson, 2017).

Most entrepreneurial projects, particularly in their initial stages, face resource constraints due to their status as young and small ventures (Aldrich and Auster, 1986). Stinchcombe (1965) referred to this as liability of newness, since newly founded organisations often face difficulties in pooling the necessary resources to ensure their viability in the market. Consequently, entrepreneurs are compelled to collaborate to access resources. This liability is also experienced by social enterprises, particularly in terms of recruiting personnel and relying on subsidies and donations, which makes the process to mobilise resources critical (Desa and Basu, 2013).

In social ventures, one source of collaboration involves recruiting individuals who are willing to join the entrepreneurial project as initial employees or volunteers motivated by non-economic incentives. These individuals are referred to as “joiners”, since they become involved in an entrepreneurial venture (in this case, a social venture) by joining the founders but without being part of the founding team. The role of joiners is essential during the organisational emergence because they also exhibit unique entrepreneurial profiles (Roach and Sauermann, 2015); this helps to enhance the leadership needed to manage the complexity surrounding entrepreneurial ventures (Newth and Corner, 2009). Moreover, attracting and retaining motivated people, such as joiners, is among the most important factors in building successful companies (Baron *et al.*, 1996; Wasserman, 2013). Accordingly, recent studies have started to make a distinction between founders and joiners to analyse the motives of the latter to engage in entrepreneurship (Roach and Sauermann, 2015; Sauermann, 2018). However, there is a lack of studies investigating the specific contributions of joiners to new ventures.

Given that the survival of a social entrepreneurship project hinges on the collaboration of both internal and external stakeholders (Kovanen, 2021), examining the role and involvement of joiners in the development of social ventures is a relevant issue. Therefore, the research question of this study is: How can social entrepreneurs benefit from their joiners to develop their social ventures? A deeper understanding of these benefits holds particular significance for both researchers and policy-makers.

To address this research question, seven cases of social ventures operating in the gastronomy sector in Spain were analysed. Gastronomy increasingly demonstrates its transversality in addressing social issues, including social and labour integration of individuals at risk of exclusion, promoting rational consumption of food and waste reduction, educating on healthy eating habits, and fostering the discovery of local products to support community development (Navarro-Dols and González-Pernía, 2020). The Spanish gastronomy has a long tradition of food culture and is internationally renowned for its quality and diversity, as well as its innovation (García-Segovia *et al.*, 2014). In recent years, different social initiatives that use food production, distribution, and other related activities to empower communities and people have emerged in the country.

This study emphasises three key findings regarding the contribution of joiners to social ventures. First, joiners contribute to the evolution of leadership style; in the early stages this is influenced by the founder's personality, but in later stages transitions towards a more participatory approach. Second, the access to resources increases by moving from reliance on the founder for basic resources to the establishment of a broader pool of resources expanded by the joiners who help to pursue more structured financing sources. Third, joiners also have an impact on the development of the organisation over time, as they help social entrepreneurs through a transformation of the value proposition and a professionalisation of management to approach the market.

This paper is divided into four sections. Following this introduction, the article delves into an analysis of the literature on social entrepreneurship and the joiners. Subsequently, it describes the qualitative study conducted that is based on seven case studies within the gastronomy sector in Spain. The article then presents a series of results, and ends with a discussion of the implications and suggestions for future research.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND JOINERS

Many efforts have been made to reach a consensus and provide a definition of social entrepreneurship (Ashta, 2020; Short *et al.*, 2009). In this regard, Alegre *et al.* (2017) conducted a review of 307 documents to identify and classify 140 different definitions of the term “social entrepreneurship”. They concluded that the definition with broader consensus in the literature is that proposed by Zahra *et al.* (2008):

“Social entrepreneurship encompasses the activities and processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner. Social wealth is defined broadly to include economic, societal, health, and environmental aspects of human welfare” (p.118).

Two schools of thought are identified in the literature on social entrepreneurship. First, the dominant “individual vision” school, advocated by researchers primarily from the United States, but also with influence in Europe (Austin *et al.*, 2006; Bornstein, 2007; Dees, 1998). This school of thought tends to distil the characteristics of the entrepreneur into a concise list.

However, the second school of thought, known as the “collective vision”, challenges the commonly accepted view of the social entrepreneur as an individual (Drayton, 2002; Hart and Christensen, 2002; Moreno *et al.*, 2010). This perspective recognises the importance of networks and collaborative efforts, advocating for a more collective approach rather than an individual one (Gauthier *et al.*, 2019; Kamm *et al.*, 1990; Lechler, 2001; Reynolds and White, 1997).

Not everyone interested in entrepreneurship wants to be a founder, and those who prefer to join entrepreneurial ventures as employees often possess profiles with similar characteristics to those of the founders, although of different intensity (Roach and Sauermann, 2015). Consequently, rather than categorising all the members of a new venture as entrepreneurs (Gompers *et al.*, 2005), it is important to study the founder and the joiners separately (Dobrev and Barnett, 2005). For the purpose of this research, “joiners” will be defined as a group of individuals working for a social venture at an early stage, who have little interest (at least in the short term) in launching their own ventures. They are start-up employees or volunteers involved in social entrepreneurship, but do not aspire to be founders themselves (Roach and Sauermann, 2015).

Founders and joiners become involved in the new venture during the early stages. Founders begin the venture creation process by working on a rudimentary idea, which may or may not be a worthwhile opportunity. The viability of the idea depends not only on the intrinsic merits of the founder, but also on factors such as access to financial resources, customer acceptance, complementary assets, and many other factors. However, founders are willing to assume these risks in exchange for the expected rewards in case of an idea’s success. A joiner does not share ownership, risk and rewards with the founders, yet the former are willing to join the latter, even for lower wages than other work alternatives, in exchange for the non-pecuniary benefits derived from the entrepreneurial setting around the idea (Eesley and Wang, 2017).

Due to the resource constraints of new ventures, the non-pecuniary benefits are, a priori, the primary driver for the engagement of a joiner in a founder’s idea (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Grant, 2008). In a social venture, non-pecuniary benefits can be linked to the pro-social motivation of joiners, defined as “the desire to benefit other people without financial compensation” (Grant,

2008). At the very early stage, the pro-social motivation of joiners plays a significant role in the social venture because it has been linked to increased persistence, performance, and productivity (Bing and Burroughs, 2001; Korsgaard *et al.*, 1997). However, over time, other factors become increasingly important for joiners. These include organisational factors such as compensation, relationships with supervisors, training and development opportunities, promotion prospects, performance evaluation procedures, and working conditions. Additionally, the nature of the work itself becomes crucial since it must be meaningful and enriching, offering opportunities for personal growth and making a positive impact on the lives of others (Beugré, 2016).

For that reason, social entrepreneurs must move from the compelling narrative of a rudimentary idea to a validated business model, and from this to the management of a social company and its growth strategy (Ashta, 2020). In this process, however, social entrepreneurs need help and, therefore, it becomes crucial to understand how they can leverage the support of joiners, who are initially driven by a pro-social motivation, to facilitate the development of the social venture and meet the new additional demands of joiners over time.

The literature on the incorporation of joiners into a social project is scarce. However, drawing on the broader literature on team formation, it can be asserted that joiners are typically recruited by the lead entrepreneur or group of founders, employing either interpersonal-attraction or resource-seeking strategies. Depending on the chosen strategy and the profiles of individuals incorporated within them, the outcomes of the company may vary (Lazar *et al.*, 2020). In this study, the focus is on understanding how social entrepreneurs can benefit from joiners' contributions to social ventures.

METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH METHODS

Empirical Context: Social Gastronomy in Spain

The gastronomy value chain involves numerous stakeholders (Walker *et al.*, 2021), as illustrated in Figure 1. Within the social sphere, there exists a worldwide movement centred around social entrepreneurship projects in gastronomy that address a wide array of problems with social implications. These include initiatives such as promoting social and labour integration of a population at risk of exclusion through cooking training (Pansarella, 2018); encouraging a rational use and consumption of food to minimise waste (Mansuy, 2016); promoting healthy eating habits through educational programmes aimed at reducing fat consumption in schools (Tormo-Santamaría and Bernabeu-Mestre, 2020); rediscovering local products to support community development (Barber, 2015); and many others (Navarro-Dols and González-Pernía, 2020).

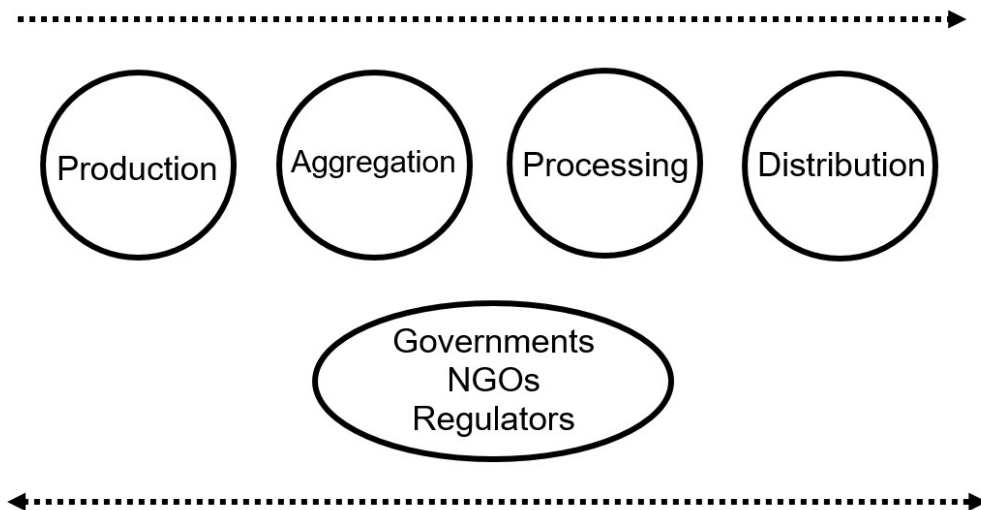


Figure 1: Gastronomic Value Chain

Source: Own elaboration adapted from Walker *et al.* (2021)

The transformative power of gastronomy has been well recognised in recent years (Morales and Coppin, 2015). In 2016, the Basque Culinary Center (BCC), in collaboration with the Basque Government and as part of the Euskadi-Basque Country Strategy, established the Basque Culinary World Prize (BCWP), often referred to as the “Nobel of Gastronomy”, offering a prize of €100,000. The objective of this award is to promote and encourage chefs from around the world to utilise their gastronomic projects to address social issues. Among the winners, there are chefs who are not widely recognised, alongside others with a greater media presence, such as the Michelin-starred chef and social entrepreneur José Andrés. The causes supported by this global award have been diverse, ranging from supporting local economies and cultures to boosting women’s entrepreneurship and even reducing restaurants’ environmental impact.

KPMG Spain (2021) reported that Spanish gastronomy, encompassing agricultural production, distribution, associated tourism and hospitality, accounts for €388bn, constituting 33% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employing 3.73 million people (18% of the total workforce). This overview of the gastronomic landscape in Spain illustrates its economic importance for the country. In addition, gastronomy in Spain has always been deeply involved in addressing social causes, with numerous examples of stakeholders across the value chain actively enhancing enterprises to generate social impact. Therefore, instead of succumbing to despair in the face of social problems, social entrepreneurs in the gastronomy sector in Spain have found new and innovative ways to support the most vulnerable members of their communities.

Research Design

To study how social entrepreneurs can rely on their joiners to boost their venture, we adopted an inductive multi-study design, following the framework outlined by Yin (2014). Consistent with the iterative nature of inductive research, initial data collection prompted iterative refinement of our research question. Our study comprised three distinct phases: Phase 1 involved the selection of cases, Phase 2 encompassed data collection, and Phase 3 focused on data analysis.

As shown in Table 1, we used both primary and secondary sources of information.

Table 1: Phases and Sources of Information

Phase	Sources	Type	Number
1.- Selection of the cases	Secondary	Websites	14
		Media articles	52
		Radio or video interviews	8
2.- Data collection	Secondary	Websites	7
		Media articles	47
		Annual reports	9
		Radio or video interviews	15
	Primary	Semi-structured interviews	7
3.- Data analysis	Primary	Additional questions via e-mail	10

Source: Constructed by authors

Selection of the cases

This research is based on seven case studies. Many authors argue that small samples are adequate to have validity and reliability in qualitative research (Brandão *et al.*, 2021; Crouch and McKenzie, 2006; De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998; Dreher, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989; Foroudi *et al.*, 2017; Priporas *et al.*, 2012). These seven entrepreneurs and their social ventures were selected based on five main criteria:

- (1) social entrepreneurs who received media coverage at the national level for their concerns about social problems and the impact of their initiatives;
- (2) social ventures with less than 10 years since their foundation;
- (3) social ventures with a group of joiners;
- (4) social entrepreneurs covering a large part of the gastronomy value chain (from production to service, also including training); and
- (5) social entrepreneurs from different regions of Spain.

The selected social entrepreneurs and their ventures, as listed in Table 2, have been assigned initials for expedited data collection, subsequent analysis, and result reporting.

Table 2: Case Studies Selected

<i>Social entrepreneur</i>	<i>Initials</i>	<i>Case Study</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Description</i>
Edu Roselló	ER	UnInicio (pilot case)	Madrid	Cooking training for people at risk of social exclusion + catering
Luis Font	JF	Robin Good	Barcelona	Food production with people at risk of social exclusion
Armand Folch	AF	Conca Organics	Barcelona	Organic food production
Aitor Guerra	AG	De Buen Café	Madrid	Coffee distribution
Antonio Espinosa	AE	Auara	Madrid	Bottled water distribution
José Luis Baños	JLB	Winable	Jerez de la Frontera (Cádiz)	Wine tourism activities with people with Down syndrome
Juan Llorca	JLL	Juan Llorca	Valencia	Training in healthy eating habits

Source: Constructed by authors

Data collection

To secure the collaboration of each interviewed social entrepreneur, we initiated contact through an introductory email outlining the study's objectives. Subsequently, we followed up with a phone call to confirm their participation and to schedule the interview date and time.

The interviews started with a pilot test (UnInicio and its founder Edu Roselló). Thanks to this pilot test, the initial protocol for conducting the interviews was restructured and divided into two sub-stages; these can be framed within an Embryonic Stage of the company, as seen in Figure 2. First, in the Problem Validation sub-stage (referred to as A in the aforementioned figure), the social entrepreneur shares their ideas with their usual circle of contacts and tries to take the first steps to understand the nature of the problem and its relevance; and second, in the Solution Validation sub-stage (referred to as B), after having understood the problem in the closest ecosystem, the social entrepreneur devotes time to envision a solution and test it, laying the foundations of their company's vision and values.

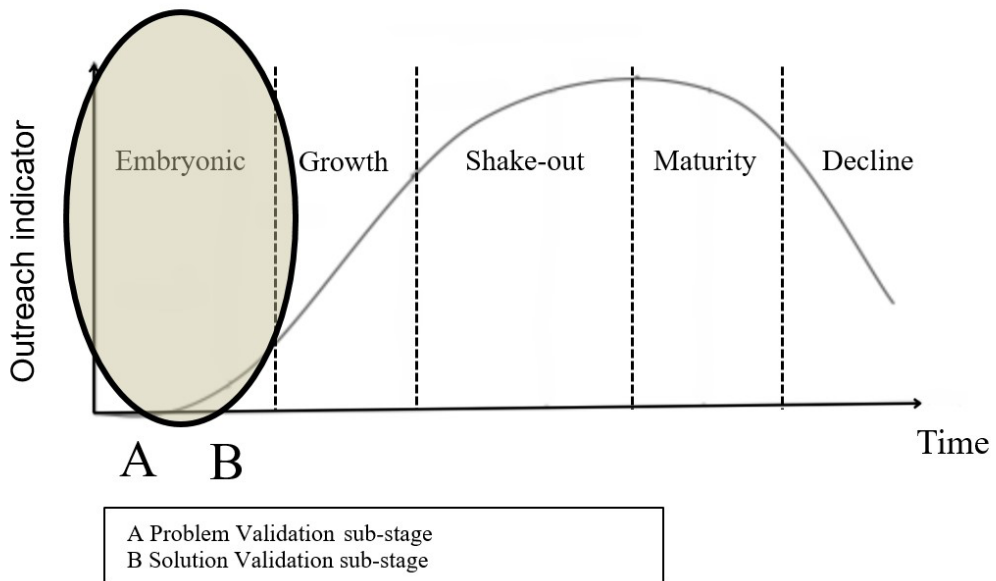


Figure 2: Life Cycle approach

Source: Own elaboration adapted from Mueller (1972)

To ensure consistency in data collection, we opted to conduct all interviews via video conference using Zoom. Prior to each interview, we obtained the interviewee's authorisation to record the session, facilitating later transcription for analysis purposes. Comprehensive notes were diligently taken during each interview session, and any additional details or clarifications from email correspondence were carefully documented. Following transcription, the interviews were shared with each participant for review, feedback, and authentication. This collaborative exchange and verification process with the interviewees was instrumental in enhancing the reliability and validity of the data interpretation, in accordance with the principles outlined by Yin (2014).

Given that interviews served as the primary method of data collection in this study, the notes from secondary sources served primarily as supplementary material for contextualisation and enhancing understanding of the insights gleaned from the interviews. After collecting and analysing all available data, it was determined that theoretical saturation had been achieved, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data analysis

A content analysis was performed through a series of steps to distil the meaning as much as possible without losing the central findings. The transcripts were broken down into units of meaning in sentences or paragraphs with related content so that the content was further condensed. Since the

process of analysis in qualitative research is not linear but rather recursive, it must be continuously evaluated. The interviews and their subsequent analysis led to the emergence of a set of themes, grouping categories with clear connections from the researcher’s perspective.

According to Bryant and Charmaz (2007), after the analysis of the data, a review of secondary sources was carried out in relation to the topics investigated, treating it as another source of data to be integrated into the analysis process with constant comparison (Glaser and Holton, 2004). This helped to provide sufficient background to locate the topic and develop new perspectives on the results obtained.

To check the credibility of the results and increase confidence in them (Bowen, 2005), it was decided to read the interviews several times, checking that they had not been misinterpreted (Martínez, 2006). The results were then triangulated between the co-authors of the research (Hammond and Wellington, 2012)

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis unveiled three distinct overarching themes that capture the areas in which the founder may benefit from the joiners’ participation to develop the social ventures: the leadership style, the search for funding support, and the company’s approach to market. The primary concepts identified within each theme are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Main Concepts Identified in the Data Analysis Stage

Embryonic Stage				Aggregate dimensions
Problem Validation sub-stage		Solution Validation sub-stage		
1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Concepts	1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Concepts	
Founder’s charisma	Founder’s profile	Team	Participatory leadership	Leadership style
Founder’s initiative		Collaboration		
Closeness to the team		Complementarity and multitasking		
Personal background		Delegation of responsibilities		
Family-friends-fools	Closest contacts of the founder	Crowdfunding	Procedural search for financial support	Funding support
Other informal contacts		Round of financing		
		Investors		
Beneficiaries	Value	Departments	‘Professional’ ways of working	Approach to the market

Embryonic Stage				Aggregate dimensions
Problem Validation sub-stage		Solution Validation sub-stage		
1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Concepts	1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Concepts	
Philosophy of the company	proposition focused on the social vision of the venture	New talent	‘Professional’ ways of working	Approach to the market
Sustainability		Route to market		
		Marketing		
		Awards and other types of recognition		

Source: Constructed by authors

Joiners and Leadership Style

Ensley *et al.* (2000) highlighted in their research that, within a team, there typically exists a leading entrepreneur who articulates the vision and subsequently attracts others who resonate with that “dream”. This pattern was present in the cases analysed and perceived when each entrepreneur was contacted for the first time. A first e-mail, which in most cases was answered almost immediately by the entrepreneur, together with a good disposition to make a subsequent call to contextualise the study, showed the determination and passion with which they present their projects.

As outlined in the research design section, the interview process was divided into two distinct stages during the Embryonic Stage of the social enterprise (see Figure 2). With regard to the leadership style within the social venture, a series of quotes were extracted from the interviews and are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Leadership Style Evolution

Problem Validation sub-stage	Solution Validation sub-stage
Founder's profile	Participatory leadership
ER: “Every Sunday, with some co-workers, I went to a prison to play soccer. We realised that nobody spends any of their time on guys between the ages of 16 and 22, when this is a crucial moment for them. There is nothing worse at that age than not having someone to enhance your talent.” “Look, now I am going to speak to you with my heart in my hand, there are moments in which I enjoy a clairvoyance that cannot be trained.”	ER: “We have made internal decisions to speed up processes to improve at the business level and our social reach.” Letizia said, “Edu we have to do something, tomorrow we’ll get to it. And indeed, the next day Leti and Marta were already creating Homey”.
LF: “From a very young age, on summer vacations, I went for a month or two as a volunteer to Africa or Latin America. My father instilled in us many social values.” “I love generating opportunities. Where others do not see them or do not spend time, I like to ‘waste time’ on it.”	LF: “The team is essential, the trust that is generated when we all go together.” “All decisions are agreed upon with great respect.” “Sharing joys and sorrows is much better.” “We are looking for people with complementary profiles, multitasking and so they don’t need us continuously to make all kinds of decisions.”
AF: “From a very young age my task was to take care of animals. Self-sufficiency, ecology and being able to fend for yourself with what you produce are terms with which I have lived my entire life.”	AF: “The team helped us change some internal processes.” “I am lucky to dedicate myself to learning from so many colleagues and collaborators who push me to improve professionally and personally every day.”

<i>Problem Validation sub-stage</i>	<i>Solution Validation sub-stage</i>
<i>Founder's profile</i>	<i>Participatory leadership</i>
AG: "One day in the afternoon, I sat at home one day and designed what I wanted to do in my company."	AG: "The versatility of everyone is fundamental."
AE: "Before, because I didn't want to worry them, I didn't share much information."	AE: "We have adopted a horizontal structure and I have learned to delegate a lot so that the team has its own autonomy." "We are very proud of everything we have achieved together."
JLB: "I fell in love with this land and from the beginning I wanted to create a different concept of wine tourism, with its social values as its banner."	JLB: "I share with the whole team and collaborators everything we would like to do. It is important to have consensus to continue moving forward."
JLL: "Well, it's funny to read some headlines like I'm the chef who left his restaurant to take a school canteen to the top."	JLL: "I can no longer manage this alone. I need everyone's collaboration".

Source: Constructed by authors

At the beginning of the projects, during the Problem Validation sub-stage, they see themselves as "social magnets" in their companies, even being key and irreplaceable pieces. Likewise, they confess that at this sub-stage the personal level of implication in the project transcends the professional level.

As the interviews progressed, there was a noticeable shift in the conversation from an individual-centric perspective to a more collective one in which joiners gained relevance. Terms such as "we" and "team" became prevalent throughout the discussions, indicating a transition towards a collective identity and emphasising the collaborative nature of the entrepreneurial endeavour over time.

In all cases, in the absence of information, the decision-making did not fall solely on the entrepreneur. The pro-social motivation of the founders and joiners led to the emergence of shared decision-making processes in situations of uncertainty about the short-, medium- or long-term consequences, allowing an agile reaction of the companies without losing their social vision. This agility has also manifested in various actions, such as hiring talented individuals who were left without employment, launching an online store to generate short-term revenue, and offering live online training sessions on nutrition.

It can be asserted that the social entrepreneurs initially demonstrated qualities of effective leadership, including honesty and transparency, that enabled their employees to feel secure and aligned with the company's values that were communicated from the top-down. This fosters progress during the Embryonic Stage of the venture, fostering a work culture where individuals feel empowered to experiment, learn, and enjoy their work without fear of failure. Later, however, the environment facilitated bottom-up communication, allowing for the sharing of culture and values among team members (Harter and Mann, 2017). Consequently, the success of the project became less dependent on the inspiration of a single individual (i.e., the social entrepreneur).

Joiners and Funding Support

As in all entrepreneurial ventures, whether for profit or social reasons, difficulties in securing financial resources are considered to be one of the most important barriers to project development. Establishing credibility, particularly based on the founder's reputation and capabilities, is crucial when seeking resources (Nwuneli, 2016). Initially, the entrepreneur's "family, friends, and fools" often serve as the primary source of resources. However, as the company progresses in the market, its sources of financing also evolve towards more professionalised and structured ones (see Table 5).

Table 5: Funding Support Evolution

<i>Problem Validation sub-stage</i>	<i>Solution Validation sub-stage</i>
<i>Closest contacts of the founder</i>	<i>Procedural search for financial support</i>
ER: "When the project started, I had the support of Dabiz Muñoz, Xesc Reina, Javier Goya, Nacho Manzano... all good friends." "I don't have a person who is in charge of preparing all the papers to apply for financial support." "How do you get into investing in a social impact company? It is only possible by trust."	ER: "Social investment funds are beginning to support us. We currently have Q-impact investment funds."
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AF: "I guess we started as everyone starts. With some of my savings and my family."	AF: "After having our model validated and with certain clients, we looked for a partner that would support us with 'Smart Money'."
AG: "At first we were not focused on seeking financing through funds and those types of organisations. We had the principle of obtaining money through our activity: selling coffee."	AG: "We met Open Value, always very willing to help and we received a lot of support to get B Corp certification."
AE: "...the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters and the NGO OAN International..."	AE: "We have carried out different rounds of financing, synchronised with the needs we had at all times, looking for the most suitable investors in each case and advancing in the level of professionalism and financial sophistication. We are already in contact with new partners and investors for a new round of financing."
JLB: "We have always been in contact with a lot of social support (mainly individuals)."	JLB: "..., but it is true that, thanks to various awards received, we have been receiving interest from various institutions and corporate clients."
JLL: "As the first projects were small in scale, I did not need a lot of funds."	JLL: "The leap occurred with the first call from Zara Home. From there, and with social networks, the ecosystem has opened up with many companies that believe in me and in all of us who make this project grow."

Source: Constructed by authors

According to the interviews, the different cases experienced an evolution in the mix of collaborators, increasing the contributions from companies, other economic agents, and individuals

through crowdfunding campaigns. In this process, the impulse given by the joiners to the social entrepreneurs was key. Indeed, thanks to the collaboration of joiners within the social ventures, other external agents were added to the ecosystem providing funds for the ventures. For example, business angels, social venture capital, accelerators and incubators started to have more relevance. Likewise, with the participation of joiners, the evolution of the social purpose was opened to a wider audience. While family and friends continued to provide specific contributions, crowdfunding emerged as a valuable tool for sourcing funds and sharing the social purpose of the ventures.

Finally, it is worth noting that the cases did not show any shared support and synergies with other social enterprises in the search for funding. Despite explicitly asking about it in the conversation, there was hardly any mention about collaborations with other social enterprises in this regard. Each case is in its own bubble, solving a problem that is of interest to it, but without seeking synergies with other social ventures that address the same problem in order to be more efficient in their efforts. It seems that being focused on daily activity leaves no time for greater collaboration and association with other social ventures.

Joiners and Approach to the Market

A successful social venture must exhibit dual identities in both social and economic terms (Moss *et al.*, 2011), since they create value with social impact by exploiting opportunities through economically viable business models (Beugré, 2011; Yunus, 2011). However, building a viable business model is a difficult task in the Embryonic Stage for any venture, since, at that stage, growth is slow, risk is high, and profits tend to be low (Audretsch and Woolf, 1986; Smith and Miner, 1983). For social ventures in particular, the Embryonic Stage involves the entrepreneur managing chaos and working long and poorly paid hours, and even sacrificing health, family life, and social life to approach the market with a social purpose (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010).

In general, the case studies showed evidence that the Embryonic Stage and, more specifically, the Problem Validation sub-stage, was relatively chaotic, characterised by an informal management (i.e., no predefined management structure) and a lack of use of professional working methods. The pro-social motivation of social entrepreneurs was a driving force for their ventures to move forward, but also the motivation of joiners involved in the social ventures served as a “glue” at that stage to hold together the team and propel the development towards next stages through an increased professionalisation of the working methods in the approach to the market.

All interviewees agreed that to make progress and keep their social ventures in the market, it was not enough to approach the market solely with a pro-social motivation, but it was necessary to improve competitiveness and offer truly distinctive value propositions in the market. In pursuit of this new market approach, the social ventures undergo transformations from having only a purely social purpose to having a social purpose supported by a market value proposition. This involves

the professionalisation of the different management areas encompassing general management, marketing strategy, commercial strategy, operations and human resources policies. The conclusions drawn from the interviewees on the evolution of the value proposition and the main changes made in terms of professionalisation of management in their social ventures are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Evolving the Company's Value Proposition Through Professionalisation

<i>Social entrepreneur</i>	<i>Social Venture</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Company's main change</i>	<i>Examples</i>
ER	UnInicio (pilot case)	Madrid	General Management	Implementation of a new structure and protocols Expansion to new cities
			Human Resources Policies	Greater delegation of functions in the teams
			Marketing Strategy	Hiring a communication agency for their new projects
JF	Robin Good	Barcelona	Brand building	The business model evolved from being a “social brand” distributor to creating their own brand
AF	Conca Organics	Barcelona	General Management	Time flexibility and telework
			Human Resources Policies	New people joining the team (including external collaborators)
AG	De Buen Café	Madrid	Commercial Strategy	New Route to Market, from a BtoB model to a BtoC strategy through online
AE	Auara	Madrid	Operations	Improvements in efficiencies throughout the value chain
JLB	Winable	Jerez de la Frontera (Cádiz)	Marketing Strategy	Highlighting the exclusivity and level of innovation of their service
			Human Resources Policies	New people joining the team
JLL	Juan Llorca	Valencia	Marketing Strategy	Substantial changes in brand management
			Human Resources policies	New people joining the team

Source: Constructed by authors

This transformation process was supported by the participation of joiners who initially engaged in the social ventures driven by their non-profit purpose, but who subsequently maintained their engagement thanks to the opportunity to contribute to the transformation by using new working methods, as well as to simultaneously develop a professional career.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this article hold relevant implications in different ways. First, they reinforce the collective vision of social entrepreneurship, highlighting the crucial role of joiners in social ventures. The efforts of the founder are complemented by the diverse skills and knowledge provided by the joiners, individuals who, despite not being the founders themselves, play instrumental roles

in advancing the project (Åstebro and Thompson, 2011; Roach and Sauermann, 2015). Given the imperative to attract human capital for any venture during its early stages, particularly in social ventures with limited resources and a non-profit purpose, understanding the key factors for attracting the right talent becomes a pivotal area for future studies. It becomes especially pertinent to grasp the motivations and needs of joiners, given that attracting and retaining highly skilled and motivated employees is fundamental for founders striving to build a successful business while upholding the social values of the venture.

Second, as shown in this study, social entrepreneurs start their projects by surrounding themselves with joiners who are pro-socially motivated and enthusiastic about the project. However, while having a team of joiners with a pro-social motivation is crucial, it is not sufficient. A participatory leadership style becomes particularly important, while the role of the individual entrepreneur takes a back seat. In such dynamics, joiners engage in continuous interaction with the ecosystem around the social venture, sharing and complementing their ideas, perspectives, and values, as well as shaping an evolving vision for the organisation. Determining the profiles of these individuals and understanding their complementarity within a social context would be a promising area for future research.

Lastly, the role of joiners becomes increasingly significant in enhancing the value proposition of the social enterprise during its embryonic stage, involving participative leadership, collective efforts in seeking financing, and adopting more professional practices within the organisation. However, considering that the value proposition of social ventures can evolve over time, it would be particularly compelling to investigate the roles of both founder and joiners in subsequent stages of the company's life cycle. This exploration could shed light on how their contributions and dynamics evolve as the organisation matures and navigates through different phases of growth and development.

As with any research, there are limitations in our current study that need to be considered. Care must be taken when extrapolating our results, as this research is based on only seven case studies that operate in the gastronomy sector and whose geographical scope is limited to Spain.

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BIOGRAPHY



Jorge Navarro-Dols is a PhD candidate at the Deusto Business School, University of Deusto (Spain). His doctoral thesis is developed around the study of social entrepreneurship and the various factors that influence the success of projects of this type. Some of his research works have been published in academic journals and discussed at international conferences and seminars (e.g., Research on Entrepreneurship, RENT). His main specialty is based on entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship processes, and he is also a mentor in different start-ups. For several years he has been an Associate Professor at Deusto Business School, Basque Culinary Center (Spain) and Burgundy School of Business (France).

ORCID: [0000-0002-2249-9629](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2249-9629)



Dr José L. González-Pernía is Associate Professor at Deusto Business School, University of Deusto (San Sebastián, Spain). His research interests are focused on how entrepreneurial activity emerges and generates impact. In particular, his work aims at contributing to the understanding of factors shaping the new venture formation process across different contexts, as well as the impact of entrepreneurship on the economic development at regional and country levels. His research works have been published in journals such as Small Business Economics, Entrepreneurship and Regional Development and Journal of Technology Transfer.

ORCID: [0000-0001-7621-1347](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7621-1347)

