**Chapter 11**

**Social entrepreneurship and tourism development in Mexico.**

**A case study of North American social entrepreneurs in a Mexican town.**

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**Abstract**

Enacting social entrepreneurship is about individual engagement, innovative ideas and creating social change. This article challenges this proposition of the individual social entrepreneur, rather social entrepreneurship is to be understood within the facilitating roles of networks through the process of mobilising collective interaction, trust and collaborate activities within networks. This case study considers the increasing flow of North Americans settling in Mexico to be social entrepreneurs. Their tourism-related-business often has a social aim, not only generating economic growth but also addressing emerging sociocultural needs in the Mexican communities. Through their non-profit organizations these transnational social entrepreneurs gain acknowledgment to the extent that they challenge the authorities’ power and even shape the meaning and nature of development. Here network ties and trust are essential factors for the sustainability of the ideas of the social entrepreneurs. We argue that these ties are based on symbolic and concrete practices such as national identity, global imaginaries and transnational practices, which makes it necessary to position transnational social entrepreneurs in tourism within a broader economic, sociocultural and political context and not understand entrepreneurship only as individual engagement.

**Keywords**

Social entrepreneurship, tourism, transnationalism, network ties, authentic Mexico, social capital, North Americans, Mexico

**11.1. Introduction**

Tourism is one manifestation of mobility, and we need critically to address the scope and scale of tourism in the Global South to understand the meanings and implications of transnational tourism mobilities. An increasing part of North Americans settling in Mexico (Croucher 2010) set up tourism-related business and fund non-profit organizations to alleviate existing social problems in the communities. They are social entrepreneurs and so far few studies deal with the relationship between the community residents and foreign, non-tourism mediators and the impact of this relationship on tourism development. A notable exception is Zorn’s (2004) longitude ethnographic of Taquile Island in Peru that demonstrates the role of international non-tourism mediators (volunteers, scholars, philanthropists) in shaping Taquile’s particular model of communitarian tourism. In this chapter we explore in depth how social entrepreneurs from United States[[2]](#footnote-2) through non-profit social organizations seek to meet the needs of marginalized people in the municipality whereby they change considerably the livelihood conditions for the majority of the poor Mexicans in town, yet these social enterprises also have repercussions for the sociocultural and political development in the region. Even though this case study explores social practices on a micro-sociological level it has repercussions beyond this locality as similar practices can be found in the majority of the Mexican communities where this way of practising transnational social entrepreneurship triggers rural tourism development[[3]](#footnote-3).

**11.2. Transnational social entrepreneurship**

Social entrepreneurs navigate between the public and private sector and are increasingly being considered innovative drivers for bringing about social transformations in countries in the Global South (Ebrashi 2013; Engberg-Pedersen et al. 2014) such as in Mexico. Often research on social entrepreneurship is heavily focused on the individual entrepreneur. However, this view fails to appreciate the type of social entrepreneurs dealt with in this case study. We argue that their engagement and innovative ideas are facilitated and positioned within networks. Johannisson (2005; 2011) analyzes entrepreneurs from a network perspective inspired by Granovetter’s (1973) seminal research about the importance of strong and weak ties. Having a lot of weak ties demonstrates that we are well connected to the world and this kind of relations is more likely to provide and exchange important information about ideas, threats and opportunities. The modern approach to business networking is based on the principle of weak ties: having a wide range of acquaintances can be far more helpful than having strong ties which are defined as good friends or family. Johannison (2011) suggests that social entrepreneurs use and rely on personalized ties, which encompasses both social and business relationships that may change over time and space. The ties are to be seen as symbolic and concrete forms of exchange as well as loosely and tightly coupled and often asymmetrical. Repeated transactions often turn into trust relations (Lin 1999; Glick Schiller 2005) and bring a lot of other benefits, including learning opportunities, pleasure in socializing and the power to realize potentials (Lin 1999). Trust is essential and intimately linked to social capital as Bourdieu (1986: 249) defines as:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual ... or less institutionalized relations of mutual acquaintance and recognition”.

Emphasizing the transnational element in an analysis of social entrepreneurship might bring about new understandings of the dynamics of change and unequal power terrains in these specific tourism locations. The transnational lens enables us to trace what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004: 1009) define as:

“the set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed”

These constitute different forms of social fields, which sustain a collective. Moreover, the transnational approach highlights cultural- and power relationships produced within the transnational social fields as well as between the different nation-states (Glick Schiller (2005; 2009) which in this case study the home country is the United States and the receiving country is Mexico. Then transnational social entrepreneurs influence the local context as well as the local governmental and institutional structures, rules and cultures significantly impact the social entrepreneurs’ actions, ideas and life worlds.

**11.3. Methodological steps**

This chapter is based on anthropological sensitivity to studying the entrepreneurial processes to provide insights into the bridging function of the social entrepreneurs between economic growth and social change and local and global dynamics. A long-term multi sited ethnographic fieldwork (2004-2014) provides a thick description (Geertz 1973) to analyse the social entrepreneurship and tourism development in the town and consisted of repeated return visits spanning from months to weeks during these years. These fieldwork stays encompassed participant observations at several meetings between the transnational social entrepreneurs and the government at local, regional and national level as well as active participation in the community’s daily life and events, so as to reveal formal and informal structures, social distinctions and relationships between members of the community. A range of data sources has been collected, including in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in Alamos, at local, regional and national level of government and institutions. During these stays a range of secondary sources has been collected, consisting of historical documentation, official statistics, and cultural programs at the municipal, regional and national level. Furthermore a total of 54 households (both Mexicans and North Americans) were interviewed to get insights into the residents’ perceptions and rationales regarding the transnational community, their activities and the tourism development activities. These interviews were conducted in 2013-14.

**11.4. Tourism development in Alamos**

Álamos has experienced several migration flows from the United States and Europe during its glorious history due to its flourishing mining and business industry in the 16th to the 18th century. However during the Mexican revolution (1910-20) one of the first groups to move away was the owners of the mansions in the city center. The houses were shuttered, and with that, the locality lost its early splendor, and it became nothing more than a footnote in Mexican history (Clausen 2008; Love 2012). In the last thirty years Alamos has developed into an international tourist destination mainly due to North American group which seeks to reconstruct a town that corresponds to their dreams about living in an ‘authentic’ Mexican town, which corresponds to the global tourist imaginary about colonial Mexico (Clausen and Velázquez 2011). Already in the late 1950s Alamos was an emerging destination due to the visionary North American entrepreneur William Alcorn. He invested a considerable amount into reconstructing the city centre, and its colonial style houses and invited North Americans to spend their vacations in these peaceful surroundings (Love 2012). The visitors perceived the lack of nearness to, or even the isolation from, the town’s residents as a positive thing. Whereas the North Americans who settled in town in the 1980ies engaged in the Mexican community and showed a keen interest in supporting sustainable tourism development in the town itself (Clausen 2008).

North American migrants living in Alamos are represented within different areas of the tourism sector as owners or managers of local hotels, retailers, cafés, restaurants, guide, handicrafts, real estate agencies, and travel agencies (Clausen and Velázquez 2011). Álamos is considered to have a mature and highly committed local community due to the sheer amount of cultural events and activities for tourists. However, when taking a closer look at the actors developing these activities, only members of the transnational North American community stand behind (Clausen and Gyimóthy 2015). They have contributed to strengthen the image of Mexico as traditional, authentic and pre-modern, by reinventing traditions such as the *Danza del Venado* (Dance of the Reindeer), which is performed for tourists on Sundays, and *Las Estudiantinas*, and *Dia de Muertos* (Day of the Dead). Except for the Dance of the Reindeer these traditions stem from the southern part of Mexico but appeal to the global tourist imaginary of ‘authentic’ Mexico.

**11.4.1 The ethnographic setting - social non-profit organizations in Alamos**

Three social non-profit organizations: *Las Comadres, Amigos de Educación* and *Indigenous Cooperative* all founded by North Americans living in town focus principally on sociocultural development projects by creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for single mothers and educational opportunities for kids in poor families in the town[[4]](#footnote-4). *Amigos de Educación* (AE)has asits central objective to grant school scholarships to the poorest children in town. Driven by the increasing demand for scholarships during the last decade, a new initiative has been to hold an annual auction during which they sell clothing, furniture, and kitchen utensils, and include a dinner-dance and stage performances. It is a closed auction where you need to buy a ticket (350 US) to attend. AE has several ways of raising funds. Some donations come from organizing house tours (guided tourists tours to specific colonial houses owned by North Americans in town) and also through membership dues, and donations (mainly from tourists and business associations in the United States). The first years, this social enterprise was financed solely by donations from its members and their friends and relatives in the United States. Currently, two-third of its budget comes from the money made from the house tours and US-foundations for social investments. During 2012, AE received 436 applications for scholarships from needy families, and in 2013, that number rose to 501. The mayor in Álamos estimates that 579 households are impoverished (Interview October 2013).

The nonprofit organization, *Las Comadres* provides assistance to families in need in the municipality by distributing food hampers, to over 400 families at Christmas and Easter. Moreover the organization also provides financial help for medicine and medical treatment. The organization holds two auctions each year, during which they sell clothing, furniture, and kitchen utensils. The auction’s objects are donated by members of the North Americans either from the town or from other North American communities in the region. Every Saturday, the organization also holds a garage sale at a place near the central plaza, where they sell secondhand goods donated by North Americans. Most of the clothing is bought by tourists or the North American residents in Álamos and has become another efficient fund-raising activity. *Las Comadres* collects most of their operating funds from their networks of families, tourists, and business associates in the United States.

The *Indigenous Cooperative* was an initiative set up by a North American social entrepreneur who organized 13 indigenous women from the region to sell typical indigenous handicraft outside four different hotels (owned by North Americans) each Wednesday and Sunday. Apart from sustaining the marginalized indigenous families, the cooperative has been able to expand their business to two other villages in the municipality.

**11.5. Analysis - Transnational social entrepreneurs and their personalized ties**

The social enterprises are sustained by transnational personalized networks, which consist of weak ties within the North American group of migrants living for a longer or shorter period of time in Mexico, tourists and also transnational ties to both family, friends and business associates in the United States. The North Americans in the Mexican town trust each other due to what one North American (January 2015) explained:

“...we have the same stock….”

Rather than considering the North Americans a homogenous group it is important to contextualize the transnational social field in which they act to unfold the tensions and unequal power relations (Glick Schiller 2005; Goldring 1997) as stated in one (North American October 2014) of the interviews:

“... a lot of the other Americans living here I would never spend time with or even talk with if I still lived in the States (…) I join in for different events [in the American group] but a lot of them [North Americans] are too conservative in their way of living”.

Then living in a transnational space also implies that the North Americans navigate in relation to the Other (the Mexicans, the Mexican government, the tourists) and the North American group represents cohesiveness and homogeneity despite the internal tensions and conflicts. Towards the Other the group is significantly different due to shared norms, values and national identity and the interest in generating sustainable development in Álamos through creating an ‘authentic” Mexico (Clausen 2008; Clausen and Velázquez 2011). The power relations implicit between the two nation-states (Mexico and the United States) as suggested by Glick Schiller (2005) also play into the perception of the Other. Then these social enterprises in town represent the North American group’s social and cultural capital which the Mexicans do not form part of even though they live in the same town[[5]](#footnote-5).

As described by Johannisson (2011) the collaborative events (for instance house tours and auctions) and continuous everyday transactions (for instance in relation to tourism activities organized by the North American group) trust and cohesiveness occur. Everyday practices and continuous transactions create and maintain trust and social capital for instance the North American group celebrates each Friday, *Thank God its Friday* (TGF) where all North Americans meet in the bar in the historical center (owned by a North American) to have a drink and socialize. When North American newcomers decide to settle for at period in town they are invited to participate in these events. Moreover, the newcomer is provided with practical information such as an address-, telephone list and information about the (tourism) business. These Friday gatherings also serve to exchange information for instance about who needs a gardener, new maid or who is going to the United States if anybody needs to bring anything forth or back from the United States then they provide help within this group. These continuous transactions create trust despite not agreeing on everything as showed in the quotation above. When one of the North Americans set up a new social enterprise she rely on the support from the North American group. The personalized and weak ties become engaged and supportive by participating in the auctions, providing clothes or even for instance providing donations from their connections in the United States. The majority of the North Americans (interview January 2013) perceive these social entrepreneurial initiatives as:

“...it’s as paying back [to the community] (...) they [the Mexicans] let me live here and take part in this marvellous place...”.

The social entrepreneurial initiatives become a way to redistribute the resources from the North Americans’ tourism business and at the same time engage and include the Mexicans in sustainable livelihood opportunities. Launching the social enterprises the North Americans rely on the support from their personalized network both within the North American group and the ties spanning borders. They are able to mobilize the social and cultural resources to secure fundraising and volunteers for instance working as house tour guides in the social enterprise, *Amigos de Educación* or as volunteer on Saturdays in the garage sale held by the social enterprise *Las Comadres*. The social entrepreneurs navigate in a transnational space and use their tacit understanding and knowledge about how to solve critical social issues facing a society by setting up social nonprofit organizations. The personalized weak ties also span borders as the social entrepreneurial enterprises are sustained not only by the weak ties in the locality in Mexico also the relations with the North American tourists and the business relations in the United States play a significant economic role in sustaining the social entrepreneurial organizations.

Elaborating on Johannison’s personalized networks as essential to launch and sustain social entrepreneurial initiatives this part of the analysis demonstrates that transnational networks cannot be seen solely in terms of networks of solidarity, transactions and generalized reciprocity (Goldring 1998; Levitt 2011). To achieve trust and a high degree of social cohesion also require the existence of imagined collective to which the social entrepreneurs belong or are members of. This collective is based on a range of symbolic and collective representations, which in this case study is a shared national identity, the transnational experience and the imaginary of an authentic Mexico (Clausen and Velázquez 2011) which play a significant role when we are to understand why the Mexican residents do not form part of the social enterprises as members nor donors.

The Mexican state’s shortcomings as lack of resources (Goldring 1997) as well as lack of market-oriented expertise in tourism provide gaps, which the North Americans quickly responded to by creating social enterprises that rely on and are sustained by transnational weak ties to solve the social issues in town.

**11.5.1 Social transformation in Álamos**

Despite still being perceived as “alien” the transnational social entrepreneurs also take vicarious leadership to create sustainable development (Moscardo 2014) in the region, owing to the social entrepreneurial initiatives represented in *Amigos de Educación* and *Las Comadres*. During the past decade these social initiatives, which entail helping low-income families (with financial support and scholarships) and single mothers with daily commodities related to childcare (second hand clothes, confectionary) have accumulated significant legitimacy for these transnational social entrepreneurs (as empathic community members and efficient organizers) and the increase in poor families that prefer to ask these enterprises for social help than going to the city administration demonstrate that the Mexicans see these social entrepreneurs and volunteers as serious and respectable people who seek, through professional means, to help the local population with concrete actions. The trust towards these social initiatives is further emphasized by the Mexicans lack of confidence in the local government due to corrupt practices as expressed by a Mexican woman (January 2015):

“The government is inefficient [. . .] and it doesn’t even make a difference if a new administration takes office because there are always relatives or friends of the mayor who will occupy the public posts [. . .] this never changes”.

These social enterprises rise to address the social needs in the municipality. They come to represent the mechanisms, which move resources toward a more just allocation of resources. In line with Goldring’s (1998; 1997) research about home town associations in Mexico financed by Mexicans living in the United States, these social entrepreneurial initiatives in Álamos become efficient mechanisms to attain political influence which aim to empower marginalized segment in society, who lack the financial means or political voice to achieve this social change on its own. This means that these social entrepreneurial initiatives become important players in the regional development (Ebrashi 2013). On the one hand, these social entrepreneurs respond to specific problems of poverty that represent some of the shortcomings of the Mexican government. On the other, these initiatives give the transnational social entrepreneurs significant legitimacy and power. Although it is not the explicit purpose of these social initiatives to intervene in defining the regional policy agenda or to win political positions—and the social entrepreneurs do not have any wish to go in that direction—the initiative’s impact has had repercussions of that type. Because of the social entrepreneurs social and cultural resources, they oblige the Mexican government to take into account these initiatives.

The social entrepreneurs then alter and reconfigure the informal power structures, enabling them to negotiate their position in Álamos as a group vis-à-vis the Other (the local government and the Mexican community). However, this is not yet another example of ‘elite capture’, describing exploitative foreign investments. The civic engagement of the transnational social entrepreneurs resonates Zorn and Farthing’s (2007) claim, suggesting that transnational entrepreneurs may also be particularly important accelerators of local development, owing to their valuable knowledge and network resources residing both in North American and Mexican communities.

The power of the social entrepreneurs is nested both what Johannison (2011) defines as personalized networks in the local community, the transnational practices (Levitt 2001) and sustained by the North Americans weak ties. These social enterprises provide this group with legitimacy, trust and symbolic power in the Mexican communities as well as within the local and regional governments and permit the group to reposition themselves in negotiations about the sustainable development plans for the region. Yet and importantly these social entrepreneurs also have a keen interest in a certain type of development where the idea of the authentic Mexico still pertains and decides the development strategy.

**11.6. Final reflections**

Unfolding the facilitating roles of the transnational social entrepreneurs’ ties -which enable them to launch their social initiatives- it becomes clear how they mobilize resources. The ties are constructed through both exchange and reciprocity but also very important on collectivity, which is based on a shared identity and migration experience where trust is an embedded element. These are constantly confirmed through collective activities and transactions. This kind of social entrepreneurs seeks to pave an alternative way to generate social and human wellbeing and their way of navigating needs to be taken into consideration by governments and the private sector as they have come to be one of the new key actors as they seem to have the capacity to act upon global discourses, local as well as global knowledge and attract resources from transnational actors and networks.

Social entrepreneurs have largely been considered as a homogenous group with focus on the individual engagement whereas this case study emphasizes the importance of elaborating a more nuanced understanding on how different types of social entrepreneurs experience and navigate in the space between the public and private sector, and where the focus is on the facilitating roles of networks for implementing new ways to alleviate poverty and solve social issues. Governments are often encouraged to collaborate with social entrepreneurs and the private sector as it is highlighted that collaborative actions between social entrepreneurs, the public and private sector are what provides a transformative power (Dees 1998; Shockley and Frank 2011). Yet in this case study it becomes obvious that the government’s shortcomings with lack of resources and expertise in market-oriented business enables the North American social entrepreneurs to intervene in sphere of social politics as they come to define who belongs to poor segment in town and region. The analysis demonstrates that it is the social entrepreneurial initiatives (*Amigos de Educación*, *Las Comadres* and *Indigenous Cooperative*) cause essential social transformations by redistributing resources to the marginalized population in the region. This puts pressure on the government to take not only the social initiatives into consideration but certainly and more important to act upon the social and educational needs in the town and region. Undoubtedly the North Americans in town do not only craft the tourism development in creating new tourism products defining the commodification processes towards pleasant cityscapes and market-viable cultural experiences but the social entrepreneurs then also get a voice when it comes to social politics, which alter the existing power structures and enable sustainable development processes to such degree that the government’s legitimacy is challenged by lack of trust from the Mexicans. Complementing Johannisson’s idea of social entrepreneurship (2011) the transnational approach provides new understandings of the dynamics of social change and how these transnational social entrepreneurs mobilize and exchange resources and (re)produce unequal power relations in the localities they navigate.

**Questions**

1. What is the central theoretical argument about social entrepreneurship in this chapter.
2. In tourism as well as in other sectors social entrepreneurs are considered the new agents of social change. Consider how the North American social entrepreneurs contribute to development and the kind of development they promote.
3. Discuss the potentials and limitations of the new alliances between social entrepreneurs and the state.

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2. By North Americans I only refer to people coming from the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Groups of North Americans have established communities in various cities in states like Yucatán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Veracruz, Baja California, Sonora, and Sinaloa. An indirect indicator of this growing interest on the part of the North Americans for selecting Mexico as their residence is the sustained expansion of the North American real estate companies that operate in the United States but that specializes in or has a portfolio of properties located in Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is outside the scope of this article, but it is worth mentioning that my empirical material shows that there are several places in Mexico characterized by having North American immigrants with this type of social enterprises (for instance San Miguel Allende, Cuernavaca, Taxco and Todos Santos). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although interesting it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate this further. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)