

The Socio-Environmental Canvas: Making Invisible Value Visible in Sustainable Ventures

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Abstract: This empirical paper introduces the "Socio-environmental Canvas," a novel strategic framework and practical instrument for policymakers, investors and socio-environmental entrepreneurs, designed to address the persistent "purpose-benefit paradox" in sustainable entrepreneurship. While traditional business design tools, such as the Business Model Canvas (BMC), are adept at maximizing direct financial returns, they frequently fail to capture the multidimensional value and systemic complexity inherent in socio-environmental ventures. These initiatives often generate significant positive impacts—including ecological restoration, social cohesion, and public health improvements—that remain "invisible" within conventional accounting frameworks, leading to structural underfunding and market marginalization. This research makes a distinct theoretical contribution by expanding current business model design theory, specifically addressing the gap in how externalized social and environmental benefits are captured. The framework explicitly integrates and quantifies "non-appropriable profitability"—the tangible economic benefits society obtains indirectly from a venture's operations—using a counterfactual cost-avoidance methodology. This approach allows ventures to demonstrate their role as strategic "cost-saving centers" for public and private stakeholders. To validate this theoretical contribution, the paper presents an empirical case study of "Abono de Mar" in Uruguay, a circular economy venture transforming monthly fish waste into high-quality compost. This case-based evidence demonstrates the tool's practical utility by quantifying an annual non-appropriable social return of USD 100,423. The methodology critically contrasts the Socio-environmental Canvas with the Triple Layered Business Model Canvas (TLBMC), identifying that while the TLBMC focuses on internal organizational sustainability layers, the Socio-environmental Canvas uniquely maps external "non-appropriable" value. By transforming diffuse social impacts into credible financial arguments, the framework provides a credible financial narrative for institutional capital that empowers entrepreneurs to secure institutional investment and provides policymakers with an empirical basis for data-driven, equitable public policies. This shift allows ventures to be re-framed as strategic 'cost-saving centers,' where governments can justify fiscal incentives and procurement preferences based on concrete avoided costs, effectively bridging the purpose-benefit paradox. Ultimately, this research offers a practical strategic instrument for investors and policymakers and a robust instrument for purpose-driven organizations to prevent common long-term strategic planning and operational blind spots, ensuring that their full contribution to public wealth is both visible and actionable.

Keywords: Socio-Environmental Entrepreneurship, Non-Appropriable Profitability, Alternative Business Models

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global landscape, socio-environmental ventures have emerged as critical actors in addressing systemic ecological and social crises. However, these initiatives operate within an environment characterized by deep-seated structural barriers that go far beyond standard business challenges. Socio-environmental entrepreneurs face an "uphill battle" from the outset: they frequently carry a "sustainability premium"—higher operational costs derived from responsible environmental sourcing and fair labor practices—which directly pressures their profit margins.

Unlike traditional innovation, these ventures encounter a double burden: they must navigate the inherent risks of pioneering new processes or products, yet they do so with tighter margins and historically more restricted access to capital (Ashoka and Schwab Foundation, 2020; GEM, 2020; Austin et al., 2006; Santos, 2012; Dacin et al., 2011; Cohen and Winn, 2007).

Furthermore, the support ecosystem often remains underdeveloped. These entrepreneurs face a lack of specific international policy frameworks to promote their growth and often contend with cultural mismatches between the dominant logic of traditional entrepreneurship and their mission-driven approach. Even when they successfully secure capital, the nature of this funding often imposes additional operational burden; unlike traditional investors who prioritize financial ROI, social investors frequently demand rigorous, additional reporting, metrics, and dissemination efforts that divert scarce resources away from core productivity.

When these entrepreneurs move to the design phase, they rely on conventional business design tools, such as Osterwalder's Business Model Canvas (BMC) (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2011). These tools were primarily conceived for maximizing direct financial profitability. Because the BMC focuses on internal financial capture, it

fails to represent the multifaceted value these ventures generate, such as avoided public costs or ecological restoration. This omission renders their "invisible value" or "non-appropriable profitability" effectively nonexistent in the eyes of investors and policymakers. This methodological gap exacerbates the "purpose-benefit paradox," systematically undervaluing high-impact ventures and hindering their long-term viability (Dees, 1998).

2. Literature Review

Traditional business model design tools generally operate under a 'business case' logic—the assumption that social and environmental value must align with, or result from, direct financial performance (Margolis and Walsh, 2003; Hahn and Figge, 2011). However, contemporary academic literature critiques this view, noting that it often establishes a "primacy of financial outcomes" at the firm level, which systematically ignores the wider societal benefits that ventures generate (Bansal, 2002; Hahn et al., 2018).

Instead of treating social and environmental goals as trade-offs to be "resolved," a paradox perspective is gaining traction in management literature. This framework defines sustainability as the navigation of persistent, interdependent tensions between economic, social, and environmental goals (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). This paradox is particularly acute in social entrepreneurship. Here, the tension between mission and profit is not a temporary misalignment but a structural characteristic (Smith and Besharov, 2019; Cherrier et al., 2018). Unlike traditional innovation, these ventures face a heightened risk of "mission drift" if they prioritize financial viability exclusively. Conversely, they face operational failure if they fail to capture their wider socio-environmental value (Scott and Teasdale, 2012).

The persistent "sustainability implementation gap"—the discrepancy between corporate sustainability commitments and actual ecological contributions—remains a primary concern in contemporary management research. Navigating these paradoxes is often obstructed by sector-specific regulatory and institutional lock-ins, requiring systemic governance beyond the scope of individual firms.

While models like the Triple Layered Business Model Canvas (TLBMC) (Joyce and Paquin, 2016) have pioneered structural approaches to internalizing organizational sustainability, their primary focus remains firm-centric. This approach aligns economic, social, and environmental dimensions within the organizational boundary. While effective for internal impact management, it may overlook the systemic external value that socio-environmental ventures generate for the public sphere.

The Socio-environmental Canvas extends this discourse by pivoting from an internal alignment logic to an external-facing "cost-avoidance" paradigm. By explicitly quantifying "non-appropriable profitability," the framework moves beyond mere impact description. It offers an empirical mechanism that translates externalities into actionable financial narratives for institutional stakeholders.

3. The Socio-Environmental Canvas Framework

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

The Socio-environmental Canvas framework offers a strategic architecture for purpose-driven ventures to visualize and internalize both visible and invisible generated value. While traditional business models generally operate within a single commercial dimension—focused solely on addressing the needs of paying customers—socio-environmental ventures require a more sophisticated structural design.

This framework postulates that a sustainable venture's viability is fundamentally rooted in the integration of a Purpose or Vocation alongside its primary commercial engine, and also that this dimension implies a different and specific Proposal Value that requires specific key resources and activities that may be considered and visualized. While these two foundational pillars are essential for all socio-environmental ventures, the framework remains modular; entrepreneurs can activate additional strategic dimensions according to their specific impact model, operational design, and stage of maturity, to understand and better measure its generated total value.

The table below summarizes all potential dimensions identified by the Socio-environmental Canvas as drivers of value propositions, and consequently, the specific, independent key activities and metrics that should be visualized and calculated when designing, evaluating, and monitoring a socio-environmental venture in its entirety.

Table 1: Dimensions of the Socio-environmental Canvas

Dimension	Value Proposition	Key Activities	Metrics
Purpose/Vocation	Impact	Monitoring, transparency, LCAs	Footprint, waste avoided
Economic Sustainability 1st Floor	Direct utility	Production, logistics, sales	Sales volume, margins
Economic Sustainability 2nd Floor	Impact ROI	Impact reporting, materials	SROI, retention rates
Non-appropriable Benefits	Public cost-savings	Data collection, counterfactuals	Quantified public savings
Non-financial Operational Sustainability	Endogenous leverage	Community design, volunteer mgmt	Volunteer hours, monetary equiv.

Source: Own elaboration

Thus, the value proposition and the operational and economic sustainability of this type of venture are broken down into two foundational dimensions and three additional modular dimensions, which may or may not apply in each specific case depending on the profile of the socio-environmental venture being analyzed and its specific operational and financial structure.

1. *Purpose or Vocation*: The core mission driving strategic decisions. The Value Proposition here is the measurable socio-environmental impact. It is not merely a statement of intent; the venture must substantiate its differential contribution. Key Activities/Resources: monitoring systems, life-cycle assessments, impact transparency mechanisms. Possible metrics: Environmental footprint reduction, social KPIs, tonnes of waste avoided, etc.
2. *Economic Sustainability (1st Floor)*: The commercial engine. The Value Proposition is the product or service's direct utility to paying customers. Key Activities/Resources: Standard operational production, logistics, and sales activities required to maintain commercial margins. Possible metrics: Sales volume, profit margins, and unit economics, etc.
3. *Economic Sustainability (2nd Floor)*: The social investor layer. The Value Proposition is the 'Impact ROI' offered to benefactors or sponsors. These agents do not purchase a commodity but invest in a mission. Key Activities/Resources: Specialized impact reporting, creation of 'investor-facing' dissemination materials that are distinct from core operations, etc.. Possible metrics: Social Return on Investment (SROI), sponsor retention rates, and data compliance benchmarks, additional costs regarding this dimension, etc.
4. *Non-appropriable Benefits / Positive Externalities*: This dimension captures the systemic value provided to beneficiaries or users who do not pay for the venture service but derive direct or indirect utility from the venture's output. The Value Proposition is twofold: it is the specific benefit (solution) delivered to these free users and the broader societal cost-saving (e.g., avoided public health costs, improved air quality, or waste management savings). Key Activities/Resources: Profiling and segmenting these beneficiaries, data collection to quantify the impact of the solution on their well-being, counterfactual analysis, and strategies to articulate the venture as a 'cost-saving center' to transform beneficiaries into key allies. Possible metrics: Quantified public savings, social externalities in monetary terms, and reach within the beneficiary segment, etc.
5. *Non-financial Operational Sustainability*: This dimension addresses the mobilization of non-monetary capital, which is foundational for the sector, as nearly 75% of social projects rely on volunteer contributions, particularly during their initial execution phases (Ashoka and Schwab Foundation, 2020). This dimension fulfills a dual strategic role. First, it articulates a specific value proposition for volunteers and in-kind donors, addressing intrinsic motivations such as ethical alignment and professional growth. Second, it quantifies the venture's 'endogenous investment' capacity, effectively mapping the hidden leverage created by these contributions. By assigning economic value to volunteer time and in-kind resources—assets that would otherwise represent substantial operational costs—this dimension shifts the perspective from viewing contributions as mere data to positioning them as essential financial leverage. Key Activities/Resources: Community engagement design, volunteer management, and tracking mechanisms for in-kind contributions. Possible metrics: Volunteer hours, retention rates, and the monetary equivalent of leveraged endogenous investment.

Socio-environmental Lean Canvas

Adapted Canvas Model (De Soto C., 2024)

Key dimension	Key value proposition (VP)	Problems, needs or desires (PND)	Solution	Comparative advantage	Segmentation	Key activities & resources
 PURPOSE OR MISSION	Environmental value What socio-environmental value does the venture generate?	Socio-environmental PND	Socio-environmental solution Mechanisms proposed to address the socio-environmental problem	Main advantages of this socio-environmental approach? How does it differ from other ways of solving the problem?	Can the problem be split into sub-topics? (e.g. water pollution, logistics, information)	What activities and resources are essential to deliver this solution?
 TRADITIONAL ("FIRST FLOOR") ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY	Commercial value What value do paying customers find in the product/service?	Customer PND (paying users)	Commercial solution for paying customers/users Description of the product or service offered	What advantages do paying users see versus investing that money elsewhere?	Clear subgroups within our customers (age, location, size...) ? How does the VP change with segmentation?	What activities and resources are essential to deliver this product or service?
 "SECOND FLOOR" ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY	Value as social investment What value do sponsors or donors find?	Sponsor / donor PND (if applicable)	Solution for sponsors/donors Description of what sponsors pay for	Special advantages/value sponsors see versus investing that money elsewhere?	Distinct sponsor/donor profiles? E.g. multinational companies, government, individual donors.	What activities and resources are essential to contact and convince sponsors and donors?
 NON-APPROPRIABLE BENEFITS & POSITIVE EXTERNALITY	Non-appropriable value How do free beneficiaries/users benefit?	PND of free beneficiaries/users	Solution for free beneficiaries/users What products/services do they receive free of charge?	What advantages do free beneficiaries/users see? Why would they support the proposal?	Who benefits without paying? Traits, and how much the problem and our solution impact them?	What activities/resources make this value visible and turn beneficiaries into allies or clients?
 NON-FINANCIAL OPERATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY	Internal value What value do volunteers who give their time find?	PND of volunteers and in-kind contributors (if applicable)	Solution for volunteers Description of what is offered to volunteers	What advantages do volunteers see versus other alternatives? What motivates them?	Distinct volunteer profiles? E.g. age, location, nationality, training.	What activities and resources are essential to recruit and retain volunteer teams?
 Key metrics - Socio-environmental impact metrics - Market acceptance metrics - Sponsorship metrics - Volunteering metrics - Non-appropriable benefit metrics			 Cost structure Costs associated with key activities and resources.		 Channels - Channels to identify and sell to customers - Channels to identify and reach beneficiaries - Channels to contact and manage sponsors - Channels to recruit and retain volunteers	
 Internal venture revenue - Revenue from customers - Revenue from sponsors - Revenue from volunteering			 Non-appropriable economic revenue - Revenue generated for non-customer users - Savings or income generated for society - Other positive impacts and non-appropriable revenue			

Figure 1

Source: Own elaboration

4. Methodology and Case Study Validation: Abono de Mar

The case of "Abono de Mar" in La Paloma, Uruguay, serves as a primary empirical validation of the Socio-environmental Canvas framework. The venture arose following a systemic collapse of the local fishing industry, specifically the closure of three fishmeal factories due to competitive pressures from soy and obsolete technology. This created an immediate environmental crisis: the accumulation of 50 tons of fish waste monthly, leading to severe issues such as toxic leachates, disease vectors, and malodorous emissions.

The problem fell into a governance vacuum: it was a municipal responsibility by default, yet the private sector lacked an operational model to resolve it. "Abono de Mar" emerged as a strategic response, evolving from initial consultancy efforts into an operational circular economy venture. This real-world progression provided the ideal conditions to test the fourth dimension of the Canvas: "Non-appropriable Benefits / Positive Externalities."

Table 2: Overview of Stakeholder Impacts

Stakeholder Groups	Impact Description
Municipal Government	Direct optimization of the public budget through reduced waste transport logistics and tipping fees at landfill sites.
Local Community & Regional Economy	Enhancement of regional economic resilience via internal labor retention and procurement from local micro-enterprises.
Fishers managing their waste	Cost savings from waste transportation to landfills or outsourced waste management services.

Source: Own elaboration

The quantification provided in Table 3 utilizes the Cost-Avoidance Method (Simplified SROI), based on operational data from the Municipality of La Paloma (2026). Calculations leverage local market rates (exchange rate: 42 LCU/USD) for logistics, verified against municipal waste management budget reports, and local wage benchmarks for job impact. By applying the framework, we move beyond simple business analysis and utilize a 'Simplified SROI' (Social Return on Investment) approach, specifically employing a Cost-Avoidance Method. This methodology quantifies the annual economic burden that the State, the community, and other private actors would incur if the enterprise were to cease operations. The analysis aggregates logistics, disposal costs, and regional economic resilience, revealing that the venture functions not merely as a commercial entity, but as a

critical municipal 'cost-saving center.' The valuation demonstrates that the venture generates USD 100,423 in annual non-appropriable social return, with a 5-year projected avoided cost of USD 502,115.

Table 3: Detailed Annual Cost-Avoidance Matrix

Category	Annual Cost (USD)
Transport/Transfer Logistics	17,280
Landfill Management Cost	30,000
Local Job and Service Impact	53,143
Total Annual Non-Appropriable Social Return	100,423

Source: Own elaboration based on Simplified SROI framework applied to Abono de Mar (2026).

Data sources. The figures presented in Table 2 were constructed from a combination of official benchmarks and internal operational records. Transport costs are based on 2025 price references from the Uruguayan Ministry of Transport and Public Works (MTOP), while landfill management costs are informed by the economic model for small-scale operations presented in the IDB Technical Note (Roda & Pigola, 2021). These data points are complemented by primary operational information—including waste volumes, personnel salaries, and specific operational overheads—provided by the partners of 'Abono de Mar'.

Calculation logic:

- Transport/Transfer Logistics (USD 17,280/year): Calculated based on 50 tons/month waste transfer to a landfill, 60 km distance, 120 annual trips, and a transport cost of USD 2.4 per kilometer (based on 2025 MTOP operating references for C12-type heavy cargo vehicles).
- Landfill Management Cost (USD 30,000/year): Derived from an operational cost of USD 50/ton, calculated for an annual volume of 600 tons (based on IDB Technical Note, Roda & Pigola, 2021).
- Local Job and Service Impact (USD 53,143/year): Quantifies regional economic loss from the cessation of waste processing, including three direct local jobs and essential outsourced services, aggregated from regional average wages and typical service billings.

While Table 2 provides the conceptual scope of stakeholder impacts, Table 3 offers the empirical quantification of these externalities through the Cost-Avoidance Method.

Methodological limitations. As a simplified, single-case application, this Cost-Avoidance Method does not incorporate stakeholder deadweight, attribution, or displacement adjustments typical of full SROI protocols (Nicholls et al., 2012). Figures should therefore be interpreted as directional evidence of non-appropriable value.

The quantification of non-appropriable social return follows a Cost-Avoidance Method, a simplified variant of Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis that estimates the economic burden the local community would face in a counterfactual scenario where 'Abono de Mar' ceased operations. Unlike a full SROI analysis—which requires stakeholder-weighted valuation and deadweight/attribution adjustments—this simplified approach focuses exclusively on directly observable avoided costs.

This annual quantification provides the empirical basis to move beyond philanthropic perceptions and establish the venture as essential public infrastructure. By revealing an annual non-appropriable return of USD 100,423, the venture creates a compelling macroeconomic justification for public subsidies, procurement preferences, and preferential regional zoning.

5. Discussion and Implications

The Socio-environmental Canvas functions as a practical strategic instrument for investors and policymakers. By translating diffuse social impacts into quantifiable data, the framework provides a credible financial narrative for institutional capital. This shift allows ventures to be re-framed as strategic 'cost-saving centers,' where governments can justify fiscal incentives and procurement preferences based on concrete avoided costs, effectively bridging the purpose-benefit paradox.

Internally, the canvas improves the entrepreneur's capacity for long-term strategic planning. By explicitly mapping all key resources—including 'invisible subsidies' like volunteer work—it prevents common operational blind spots. This visibility allows organizations to plan for professionalization and financial independence as a

deliberate strategic move, while treating beneficiaries as distinct segments with unique value propositions. Ultimately, whereas the TLBMC successfully maps internal sustainability, the Socio-environmental Canvas provides the critical missing link between social impact and institutional finance, transforming ventures from fragile philanthropic entities into resilient, data-driven cost-saving infrastructure.

6. Conclusion

The Socio-environmental Canvas serves as an interesting strategic framework in business modeling for purpose-driven organizations. By integrating non-appropriable profitability and non-financial operational sustainability alongside core commercial operations, the framework provides a robust solution to the 'purpose-benefit paradox.' It empowers ventures to escape structural underfunding, turning invisible wealth into tangible institutional support, while simultaneously acting as an internal roadmap for sustainable organizational growth.

This framework effectively guides ventures through the complex evolution from an initial reliance on informal, non-monetary contributions toward a resilient, professionalized structure. By enhancing the entrepreneur's capacity for strategic planning, resource management, and narrative alignment, the Socio-environmental Canvas transforms diffuse impact into a credible asset. It is not merely a design sheet, but a comprehensive instrument to catalyze a shift toward a more equitable, efficient, and sustainable economic landscape.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study presents a foundational case study of the Socio-environmental Canvas. While the Abono de Mar case demonstrates significant non-appropriable value, its singular nature limits broad generalization. Future research should prioritize multi-case validation across diverse sectors and geographies to test the framework's scalability and its applicability in different regulatory environments.

Ethics Declaration

This research was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards; specific clearance was not required as it utilizes conceptual modeling and public case data.

AI Declaration

AI tools were used for language refinement, English syntax correction, and structural formatting to adhere to ECIE 2026 standards. All analytical content, data processing, and the theoretical framework development were performed exclusively by the author.

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