

## FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND SOCIAL INNOVATION THROUGH CSR: THE NEW ROLE OF UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract.** Sustainable development is a global objective to overcome the economic, environment and society crises worldwide. The paper aims to explore the proactive and dynamic model of the university's education system, focusing on the new role played by the School of Economics in the promotion of economic, social and environmental sustainability, and how this goes beyond, in stimulating bottom -up social entrepreneurship ideas through students engagement. The research is based on 1) an analysis of the importance of education in fostering social development and entrepreneurship; 2) descriptive analysis of innovative laboratories modules, by exploring and mapping the best project proposals initiated by the students; 3) a case study analysis on waste management (UniRecycling) project, scaling up objectives, stakeholder mapping, activities and the expected results. The findings show the new role played by School of Economics, along with other partner institutions, in stimulating the student's engagement in workshops that enable the transfer of knowledge, skills and self - development. The model is based on a dynamic bottom-up model of learning and dissemination of sustainable and entrepreneurial ideas, that aims (1) to sensitize students to be active and create project ideas for social and environmental entrepreneurship, defining a first learning experience with the profile of 'local ethical promoters'; (2) build and strengthen the local territorial networks, to contribute to the creation of a system of services attentive to responsible and sustainable entrepreneurial development.

**Keywords:** education; sustainable development; Third Mission; sustainable projects; social entrepreneurship.

## Introduction

On September 2015, the United Nations formally adopted a new sustainable development agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including a set of goals, called the Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs. These are the most significant and unprecedented global commitment to eradicate poverty, improve the quality of people's lives, ensure environmental sustainability, provide inclusively and equitable quality education opportunities for all, building sustainable partnerships and so on. The sustainability has become a priority and is increasingly playing a role in the strategic choices of all actors, which look for economic, social and environmental sustainability and shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) in order to preserve well-being for future generations.

A major instrument to develop a smart, sustainable and integrated growth (European Strategy 2020) is through quality education able to promote inclusively and equitable learning opportunities (SDG; Rio+20), specifically on sensitive issues such as social responsibility, social entrepreneurship and sustainable innovation, so that all citizens can acquire and develop competencies and professional skills needed to promote their employability, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue. Education is an essential tool for achieving awareness about the environment, ethics, and values and also strengthens the attitudes and skills needed for sustainable development and active participation in the decision-making (United Nations, Agenda 21 Ch. 36, 1992).

The research aims to develop a conceptual framework linking the idea of quality education to social entrepreneurship, stressing that a path towards a more oriented approach encompassing dialogue, shared knowledge- skills- behaviors and values among different actors, are overall conducive to fostering collaborative, entrepreneurial and innovative ideas for sustainable growth. The objective of the research is to explore the University's curricula, with topics such as CSR and SDGs. In addition, it analyses the faculty's experience on how linking education to the territory to stimulate sustainable development. In particular, the role played by the School of Economics in the promotion of economic, social and environmental sustainability, and how this goes beyond, in stimulating bottom-up social entrepreneurship ideas through student's engagement.

The research embodies:

- 1) an analysis of the role of education, supported by the international strategies, in fostering social development and entrepreneurship and as well, the rising need for stimulating cohesion on the sustainability issues, including youth, public and private businesses and third sector organizations;
- 2) a descriptive analysis of innovative training modules (education+Action), namely the *Labs of the New Economy*, by exploring and mapping the best project proposals initiated by the students;
- 3) a case project analysis on waste management (UniRecycling), scaling up objectives, stakeholder mapping, activities and the expected results. Primary data were collected by questionnaire to the university campus beneficiaries, using lime survey platform, to test and gather their real perceptions on the project.

The findings show the new role played by School of Economics, along with other partner institutions, in stimulating the student's engagement in workshops that enable

the transfer of knowledge, skills and self – development. The model is based on a dynamic bottom-up model of learning and dissemination of sustainable and entrepreneurial ideas. The labs aims (1) to sensitize students to be active and develop project ideas to promote social and environmental entrepreneurship, defining a first learning experience with the profile of ‘local ethical promoters’, (2) build and strengthen the local territorial networks, to contribute to the creation of a system of services attentive to responsible and sustainable entrepreneurial development.

*Education: Linking sustainable development to social entrepreneurship*

This research aims to map the initiatives relevant to sustainable development, entrepreneurship and social innovation at the level of higher –education. This nexus between the three fields is becoming particularly relevant and is supported by the university policies and strategies increasingly oriented to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability.

Some changes of particular impact are to be observed:

- At the international level, Lisbon agenda with its focus on the quality of life for European citizens requires that businesses are increasingly reconciling sustainability aspects with innovation and entrepreneurs. Sustainability requires incremental change, and the role of the entrepreneur is critical to its success.

- The education plays an important economic sector, accounting 6.1% of OECD countries’ GDP (OECD, 2014). The education plays a significant role in shaping behavioral attitudes and skills– from the primary level up. It plays a central role to provide the entrepreneurial skills building, mix of experiential learning, and mindset shift. This attitude is reinforced at the university level, because the globalization and the technological development have completely changed the nature of work, and its role is not more just only focusing on ensuring students secured future jobs – but also to become entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is no longer enough to train students for a career but to give them the necessary entrepreneurial skill to increase competition and innovation in the market.

- At the micro level, the local actors as the University play a significant role. The “Third Mission” refers to a set of activities by which the University triggers processes of direct interaction with civil society and businesses, with the aim of promoting the growth of the territory. Therefore, the knowledge becomes instrumental for attaining output production (Novelli & Talamo, 2014). The universities are nowadays acquiring new responsibilities and managerial transformations: from merely being entities for knowledge creation and dissemination, they have evolved to increasingly play an entrepreneurial role, where networking and collaboration, as well as sustainability, are crucial (OECD, 2012).

- The link between the University and job market allows that businesses and civil society find in the territory the needed knowledge and skills, ensuring sufficient guidance to young people entering the workforce. In this context, the linking between “science” and “society” encourages dialogue and networks that opens much more space to innovation and sustainable development, though harmonizing inter-disciplinary skills and expertise.

In particular, there is also need to consider the advocacy and promotion of sustainable development in the phases of education, namely, the formal, and the non-formal. It would require strategies beyond a university based learning program for Corporate Social Responsibility, requesting a much wider set of stakeholders to be engaged with

and to be mobilized. Such shift is supported already by the growing relationship between university-industry-government (Etzkowitz, 1993; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995). The following relationship requires a balanced configuration of “three-helix” for the transition to a knowledge society, in which the university and other institutions collaborates with the industry and government, also by implementing joint initiatives (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), for sustainable socio-economic development. “Triple Helix” model considers that the potential for innovation and economic development, in a knowledge society is mostly based on the role played by the University and the hybridization of the elements resulting from the relationship between universities, industry and government in order to generate new formats of institutional and social production, transfer and application of knowledge (Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2013).

Therefore, the university plays a critical role in the physical space of encounter between academia, civil society, for-profit and non-profit organization and PA. The first step in creating a university of the future is to ensure that the institution establishes a relationship with the community, stimulating social empowerment from the bottom. According to the newly renewed mission (Third Mission) it has the power to form networks between institutional and private actors in the territory and creating a virtuous circle for the social and economic development. A “regional hub” that triggers engagement of students and citizens, NGOs, businesses and governments in economic, social and environmental issues.

On a general note, should be underlined the lack of strong ties between universities, institutions, businesses, and territory. However, there are increasingly present fragmented initiatives with more innovative learning approaches that enable sustainable and entrepreneurial efforts worth noting at the faculty level.

### **University of Tor Vergata: School of Economics & CSR Labs**

The new role of the University shows its managerial responsibilities of increased engagement with other local actors in creative networks of collaboration to change learning and stimulate social entrepreneurship and innovation. The new mission of the University of Tor Vergata, aside to contribute to people’s education and training, to scientific research and technological, organizational and social innovation needed to achieve the SDGs approved by the UN, it aims to be a real promoter of the territorial sustainability and to straightening the collaboration with the private and public sector, third sector organization and investors, at national and international level. From 2014, was released a Sustainability Plan, including the actions required to reduce long-term negative externalities - with particular reference to greenhouse gas emissions - generated by the University actions. More recently, in February 2016, in collaboration with the Unipolis Foundation, proposed the creation of the Italian Alliance for Development Sustainable (ASviS) with the intent to grow the awareness on the importance of the issues addressed in Agenda of Global Sustainable Development 2030.

The School of Economics is located in the VI District at outskirts of Rome. The area presents several problems, such as social deprivation, poverty, and micro-criminality, a small degree of education, unemployment, racial inclusion, and security (Fiorani,

Litardi & Mititelu, 2015). Main trends visible over the past years undertaken at the level of academia, and structural changes in the School of Economics are linked to:

- *From the edition 2009-2010 onwards*: integrated comprehensive set of CSR and social reporting courses into bachelor and master's level programs. The faculty structured the course program based on an innovative approach that combines theories, case studies and group works and business professional's testimonials. To a great extent, it aims to strengthen the contact between universities and institutions associations-companies in the territory, also in anticipation of subsequent placements of the students. Fiorani et al. (2015) noted that a primary trend on CSR programs attendance, between 2013 to 2015, shows the following interesting data: 30% of students attending the CSR exam, subsequently discussed a CSR final thesis, and some are winners of national awards for "Best thesis on sustainability". On the other hand, 25% considered that the thesis project in CSR was helpful in overcoming the job interview. Also, 63% of respondents currently are employed, and 42% found a job within six months of graduation especially in the for-profit sector (about 63%). The less enthusiastic data are those related to the job role in CSR or sustainability activities. The results show that 94% of students have a medium- high average satisfaction with the course, also confirmed by the increasing number of taken exams (40 students Erasmus out of 200 students).

- *From the edition 2014-2015 onwards*: has been integrated the CSR Labs as part of the CSR programs of activities. Therefore, in collaboration and support of the Commune of Rome/VI Municipality, Lazio Region and Next-New Economy for all, has been activated extra-training activities called "Laboratories for the New Economy - Preparing for the Future", also open to students from other campus faculties. The Labs have been designed in collaboration with the "11<sup>th</sup> edition Exhibition on CSR and Social Innovation" and the *Oscars of Sustainability*, a competition for the innovative ideas among youth. The main aim of the initiative, defined, for its characteristics, as "FormAction" (education +action), is to stimulate the student's self-entrepreneurship and the grassroots mobilization, enable meetings, and create synergies between local entrepreneurs and creative young students. The expected results are to straighten a hub of creative ideas among students, support forms of self-employment and social innovation and raise awareness among students about environmental issues and sustainability. This new approach raises student's awareness with a new kind of self-responsibility, *rethinking their role in society, rethink their needs and how they can use tools and resources to answer the needs of a more sustainable territory.*

In practice, the Labs stimulate teamwork skills to enable project ideas co-design (work groups), motivation, dedication and entrepreneurial thinking to provide social, environmental and economic development by a) starting from experiences already realized or b) identifying new needs to be answered with concrete and innovative proposals (stimulation of self- entrepreneurship). The workshop program, structured on several meetings, gives students support through training and resources and guides them towards the co-design of project proposals. The project work developed consist of a structured formularies compilation that enables students to brainstorm for creating an integrated proposal from the *initial idea* and *objectives*, defining and classifying *stakeholder*, to *activities* and *management of the resources*.

The main strategic aims of the labs, focused on three main dimensions:

- Sustainable development in the environmental and social context, to be replicable in the territory;

- Realization of video story-telling of a best practice sustainable company;
- Design and co-implementation of ethical and sustainable initiatives (e.g. Ethical Cash Mob).

Both editions of the “Labs for the New Economy” showed a significant number of participation in seminars and workshops: 120 students (I<sup>st</sup> ed.) and 200 students (II<sup>nd</sup> ed.). In the I<sup>st</sup>ed. Lab’s attended mostly by men (56%) of average age 25 years from the School of Economics, Law, and Social Sciences were produced around 21 projects. In the II<sup>nd</sup> ed of the ‘Oscars for sustainability’ exhibition, and Lab’s collected proposals, the project ideas submitted were 26, distributed as follows:

- Sustainable territorial development (22 project ideas)
- Storytelling of a sustainable business (2 projects);
- Ethical events cash mob (2 projects actively implemented).

**Table 1. First Prize Cash mob at Social Innovation Awards (I<sup>st</sup> ed. & II<sup>nd</sup> ed.)**

	<b>Title of the project</b>
<b>Ist Edition</b>	Ethical Cash Mob for MOBilitation in the territory, named “RiCompriamoci il future/ Cash Mob_ Let’s buy our future”; implemented at the outskirts of Rome, aiming to “voting with the portfolio”, for the fair trade products of Altromercato and the first sustainable supermarket of Lazio, Simply Market.
<b>IInd Edition</b>	Ethical Cash Mob for ‘World Fairtrade challenge’: purchase campaign on Fairtrade Coffee to support farmers in their struggle against the effects of climate change & the Ethical Cash Mob “Christmas Gifts” at “Le Artigiane” (“The Craft”) in Rome (to support Female Made in Italy and recycling waste materials)

The table (Table 1) shows the first prize awarded projects. The first edition awarded 2 out of 3 Oscar’s of Sustainability to the projects developed by the students of University of Tor Vergata. While, the second edition, awarded 3 out of 3 Oscar’s to the projects developed by the students of University of Tor Vergata.

In both editions, more than a third of the projects presented in the final stage of the labs were designed proposals to be undertaken for concrete project implementation. The themes of the projects are covering a broad range of interesting areas, for the protection and management of the commons goods, cultural initiatives, social inclusion and regeneration, to activities of critical and responsible consumption and so on. The plans are related to the furniture of articles with recycled materials, commercial activity of organic products, activities of “cash-mob”, the app on “Made in Italy”, waste management at the university level (e.g. UniRecycling), Rebottle and so on. Regarding the entrepreneurial proposals probably most significant are those related to ‘sustainable development of the territory’ and dealing with recycling management (e.g. UniRecycling, ReBottle) agriculture sustainability (e.g. OrTor), transportation (Car Pooling) and so forth.

**Table 2. Mapping social entrepreneurial project proposals**

	<b>UniRecycling</b>	<b>OrTor</b>	<b>ReBottle</b>	<b>Car Pooling</b>
<b>Main objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- an innovative idea to solve the problem of plastic bottles recycling and the creation of a compactor to reduce the pollution;</li> <li>- give incentives for the behavior of recycling to students, teachers and so on;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- create a mobile platform that aims to solve the problem related to the imitation of Italian food brand 'Made in Italy.'</li> <li>- provide a service to "foreigners" that buy typical Italian products, and poorly informed on certified food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- recycling of municipal waste, such as glass and the consumption-saving of electric energy for domestic use (kwh).</li> <li>- to create a value chain that has as final result the creation of lamps made from recycled glass bottles (LED lamps)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- an innovative mobility idea that allows users to protect the environment (reduction of traffic, CO2, and costs).</li> <li>- to use one car with several people on board, to make the same journey.</li> </ul>
<b>Expected Results</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sensitize, communicate and increase awareness (user guide, social media, crowd-funding and so on)</li> <li>- purchase compactor &amp; achieve a high number of compacted bottles</li> <li>- kg of plastic sold by the university for disposal cooperatives</li> <li>- benefits for users</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reduces transaction costs for purchase, and sustainability on the long term.</li> <li>- communication and events of promotion: cuisine, food and culture, promotion of the service App Made in Italy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- design the product development and creation</li> <li>- website development</li> <li>- dissemination of information on practices adopted</li> <li>- use social platforms to sensitize the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- communication and adhesion to the service: around 400 adhesions to "I use the CAR-POOLING Tor Vergata."</li> <li>-organization of an event</li> </ul>

An ad-hoc survey findings submitted to the participants in the final stage of the Lab I ed. shows that there is a general appreciation of the path attended: the participants assessment recognized an average mark rather high, not below 3 (on a scale from 0 to 5), in achieving different project aspects (e.g. content, coordination and learning). More than 58% recognized an increased knowledge in the field of CSR and sustainability after such activities. The assessment on the techniques transfer to enable self-entrepreneurship, co-design idea evaluation and development of autonomous critical skills and choice, show rather low results.

### **Case study: UniRecycling**

The project proposal starts from the idea that today's social dynamics require increasing attention around the reuse of materials, as well as a more rational use of available resources. Among the different objectives promoted by the Sustainability Plan in 2020 of the University is the improvement of waste management - aimed at raising awareness of the academic world to the sustainable recycling collection. The project starts from the need to find solutions to eliminate or improve the status-quo of the waste management in the campus.

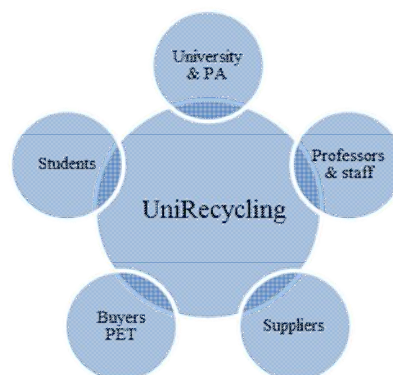
More in depth, at local context, the recycling issue is a critical point, which is worsened by the faculty's limited economic resources as well as, institution's lack of interest in recycling. Students, staff, and teachers do pay little attention to waste collection management, and such behavior may be determined by the lack of tools (no bins for recycling), which should be made available by the faculty.

Therefore, the foundation of this proposal idea relies on few *determinants that also define the general and specific objectives of the project*:

- Waste differentiation is a critical starting point for its effective management;
- *General objectives*: to transmit a genuine cultural orientation towards sustainable behaviour, with the help of the direct incentives; to create a system of waste management for the plastic and aluminum cans; also, to stimulate an alliance at campus level, motivated by the desire to work for progressively reducing pollution and creating a sustainable environment.
- *Specific objectives*: the need to identify a strategic point, accessible to the greatest number of people, for an incentive recycler for the plastic and aluminum cans and to generate benefits for all stakeholders. A win-win approach that enables those who enter PET bottles or aluminum cans to turn the waste into real "resource", and get a voucher to be used in commercial businesses.

The main *stakeholders* of the project are various, ranging from the professors, staff, and students to external members. It is expected that once the results are achieved, there would be the possibility of extending the initiative to all the other public and private institutions. By stakeholder are understood "those who can influence the achievement of the objectives of an organization, or those who are affected by the attainment of those goals" (Freeman & Reed, 1983). The following figure shows the primary stakeholders identified. The *partnership* involves the participation of:

- Universities (as promoters, investors, and final beneficiary)
- Students and professors (active recipients)
- Ecolife and Eurven (machinery suppliers)
- Businesses involved in the project (bars, restaurants and so on).



**Figure 1. Stakeholder mapping**

The main project *activities* require analysis, in a first initial stage, of the leading businesses dealing with the distribution of recyclers operating in the area. The companies manufacturers of compactors identified to be contacted were Life Italy Srl or Eurven Srl. In a second stage, the availability of the university leaders to promote



and support UniRecycling project is undertaken. Once the financial resources identified and recycling point has been settled, a third stage will consist in the inaugural event of the project. Finally, it is expected to sell the collected plastics periodically in a consortium, with the aim to extend the project with a future prospectus of self-financing.

The project financing methodological approach adopted is the crowd-funding. An analysis of the main best-existing platforms of crowd-funding (Kleemann, Voß & Rieder, 2008; Lawton & Marom, 2013) at national and international level was performed. The priority regarding fundraising will be supported by an initiative of crowd-funding through EPPELA platform.

Regarding the *sustainability of the project*, it is considered that is directly related to the responsible behavior of those involved and to the attainment of the objectives set regarding recycling. It is strictly linked also to the expected results of the material purchased by the Corepla consortium, and to what degree this will enable to installing other compactors.

The *main activities to promote awareness* are:

- *Straightening the network* of collaboration around the project that is critical for its sustainable success and the creation of shared value for the entire community.
- *Recycling-day*: organized in the event of the compactor installation aimed to explain the benefits of its operation.
- *Social media strategy* to sensitize the stakeholders, mainly students; created a Facebook page, followed by 500 fans in less than a week and a LinkedIn professional profile which reached a considerable number of followers; the use of traditional advertising media, such as posters and leaflets, and the word of mouth to advertising the policy: *zero impact*.



**Figure 2. Facebook page of the UniRecycling**

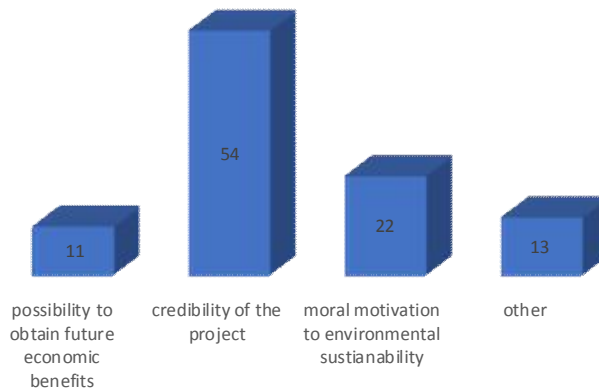
The project *expected results* are to:

- Increase the efficiency of recycling plastics, with the aim of raising awareness and actively involve about 50% of the students and university staff;
- Support a win-win gain among the parties concerned;
- Reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>; every bottle that is recycled generates a progressive improvement of the environmental conditions, extensible to the surrounding community. It is

estimated that every kg of recycled plastic (approximately 35 bottles of 0.5 L) saves 1.5 kilograms of CO2.

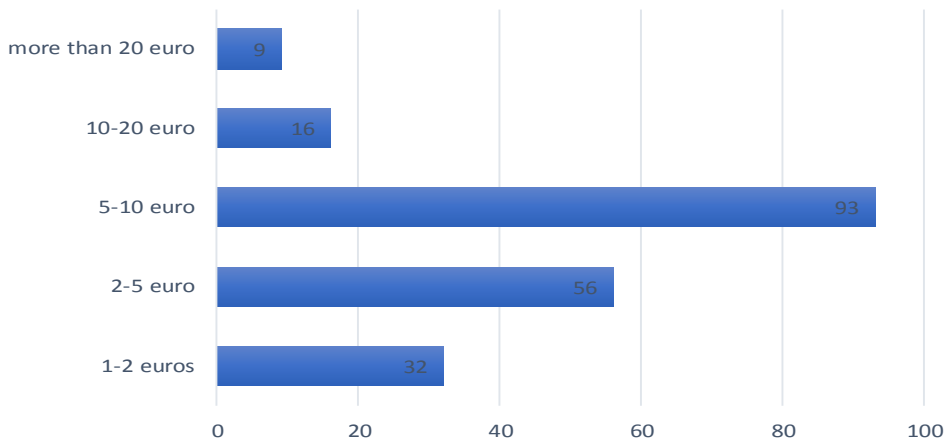
**Key findings from the survey**

The online survey checked the availability for the academic community to finance the launch of such project and the motivation related to their donation. There have been completed 201 questionnaires; about half completed by both sexes (respectively 51% males and 49% women). Approximately 79% of the academic community has shown its propensity to support the launch of the project financially, with 175 favorable responses - while only 28 responses have expressed dissent. It is surprising the approval got for the project; 54% of the responses shows that the credibility of the project is the primary motivation for donation, followed by moral rationales with 22%, and economic benefits, with just 11% of the replies.



**Figure 3. Motivation of the participants for UniRecycling**

To confirm these percentages are also the feedback received on the actual economic propensity of the donors. As shown in the next figure, the majority of respondents (93 responses, 42% of the total) would donate 5 to 10 euro to such initiative while from 2 to 5 euro was confirmed by 56 replies, equivalent to 25% of the total. At most extreme limits are those who would donate 1 or 2 euros (32 replies) and between 10 and 20 euros (16 answers). Relatively small are however donations exceeding 20 euros, with just nine donors willing to donate such sums.



**Figure 4. Economic availability for financing UniRecycling**

## Conclusions

A structured and organic CSR training course offer, aimed to provide skills for future managers and strengthen the connection between universities and institutions/organizations/businesses in the territory, according to “Third Mission” is ongoing and further efforts are needed. The CSR Labs undertaken at the School of Economics enabled the process to foster several social entrepreneurship and social innovation proposal ideas, through a *bottom-up model* of teamwork learning, training, and skills dissemination. The results, over the past two years, brought several positive implications. It raised dialogue and collaboration on several sustainability topics among students, stimulating their self-awareness on the real problems of their territory. It encouraged students to overcome the bridge to local development through entrepreneurial thinking. The innovative projects proposal created, required the engagement of group work students, sometimes along with the public and private institutions, and third sector organizations in meaningful projects of local development. It supported the dissemination of social entrepreneurial skills needed for a CSR project manager and bench learning on the territory development.

The dynamism created around the innovative changes to improving the campus are worth nothing, seeing the preliminary analysis of the project proposal UniRecycling. The idea was met with enthusiasm by potential users, as confirmed by data on the use of an incentive compactor and shows the sensitivity to environmental issues and waste management. About 66% of the students surveyed stressed its importance and about 98% confirmed their active participation in the project. The initiative is a first initial stage of testing a project proposal in the territory and opens channels to concrete debate and evaluation of the most suitable modes for inserting such project in the University campus.

The projects analyzed shows how important is the collaboration and engagement of the various stakeholders to reach the expected results, providing contexts that stimulate government, industry, university and civil society to work together, sharing ideas to co-create the future, in a perspective of shared value creation. The main challenges encountered at the University project co-design and implementation should be noted in the lack of a coordination point for sustainable activities and the need to improve the visibility and long-term strategies. Secondly, taking into consideration the limited resources, it is highly advisable the collaboration of the several faculties into the campus and the participation of their students, to stimulate a cross-fertilization of entrepreneurial ideas that answers the entire university campus needs. Last but not least, a more focused CSR program dedicated to stimulating ideas and concrete proposal of start-up and social entrepreneurial incubators to enable innovative interaction with the public and private actors could push an efficient, sustainable agenda implementation forwards.

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