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Relational Reflexivity: External Individuals Engaging with Community-Based Entrepreneurship in Ecuador

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, a growing body of research has highlighted the increasing importance of entrepreneurial teams and their collective dynamics (Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2024). While differing in their relational structures with communities, internal community-based (Murphy et al., 2020) and external social entrepreneurship (Chatterjee et al., 2021)

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are typically conceived as prosocial organizing driven by social change, social recognition, and improvements in well-being (Castellanza, 2022). These two forms of entrepreneurship recognize the inseparable nature of social, nature-oriented, and economic considerations for sustainable local development in historically underrepresented communities, potentially addressing the *grand challenges of our times* (Doh et al., 2019; Markman et al., 2019).

Hence, individuals enacting community-based or social entrepreneurship define their subjectivity, motivations, and practice radically differently than the conventional Western Eurocentric hero/market-opportunity-oriented archetype, which isolates the entrepreneur from their socio-cultural context (Mohapeloa, 2017; Wimalasena et al., 2021). In particular, entrepreneurship scholars have drawn on Margaret Archer's Realist Social Theory to make visible the diverse types of entrepreneurial reflexivity that explain orientation to communities (Archer, 2007). Reflexivity is the individual cognitive capability to situate their life project and ultimate concerns in their social contexts. Community-oriented entrepreneurs, therefore, define entrepreneurship as a means to address their life concerns, which take shape through communication with their communitarian context or in the pursuit of communitarian values.

This view of reflexivity as a motivational factor paradoxically creates a static picture where individuals define their life concerns, identity, and position in social orders once and for all. Community-based entrepreneurs typically define their life concerns to ensure continuity for their community, fostering similar life projects despite deprivation. This orientation toward maintaining the community's ways of being may unintentionally reinforce the social context that initially placed them in a subordinate position (Vincent et al., 2014). Conversely, a myriad of empirical studies points to the transformative powers of community-based entrepreneurship. It enables individuals to flourish (Pathak, 2021; Peredo & Anderson, 2006), configuring a type of collective action (Gupta et al., 2020) as a highly dynamic practice where internal and external actors exhibit collective reflexivity and fluid identities (Champenois et al., 2021).

This chapter argues that individual reflexivity as motivation is an insufficient lens for understanding the capacity to reimagine identities and undertake transformative collective action projects across community-based entrepreneurship and interactions with external actors.

We introduce the concept of “relational reflexivity” as the capacity of individuals to think and act with an orientation toward their relation, which functions as a third entity with its own reality, irreducible to the individuals engaged in it (Donati & Archer, 2015). The independent reality of the “relation” manifests in the relational goods or evils. Relational goods are non-instrumental but oriented toward mutual care, reciprocity, and solidarity. Relational reflexivity enables individuals and groups to assess the strength of their relationships and identify opportunities for collective transformation, as trust, reciprocity, and solidarity drive individuals to commit to action and forge new types of relationships. Relational reflexivity extends beyond static motivations and positions by opening up to the possibility of re-imagining their identities, transforming the inertia of subaltern identities, and supporting the process of collective action. Accordingly, we ask:

How does relational reflexivity enable external actors to participate in the collective process of endogenous social change in community-based entrepreneurship?

We compare the life stories of two individuals who identify as entrepreneurs and initially engage with communities as external actors, but their relational paths differ. One remains external to the community as the head of a semi-public corporation in Cuenca, which upholds the “Sumak Kawsay” principles to support local farmers by promoting social and solidarity-based economies and food sovereignty initiatives (Ecuador). The other, who initially engaged with fishing communities as a marine biologist and fishery management scientist working for an external NGO and later on for a local Ecuadorian university, became part of a community-based entrepreneurial initiative in the island of Santa Cruz, Galapagos (Ecuador).

Based on our findings, we identified two types of relational paths: “embedded transformation” and “institutional facilitation.” Relational reflexivity is evident in both cases, particularly in their focus on transparency and trust within the community. However, the nature of relational goods varies when the external entrepreneurial individual is organizationally distant from the community. In the first path, *embedded transformation*, relational reflexivity drives an external scientist to reflect on trust and mutual recognition of expertise, enabling them to transition from an outsider to an integral part of the community-entrepreneurial venture. This reflection fosters a collaborative relationship where scientific knowledge and local expertise on fishing are valued for counteracting the

prevailing opinion that these techniques should be banned due to their environmental impact. In the second path, *institutional facilitation*, relational reflexivity leads the head of a semi-public organization to reflect on public transparency and constitutional roles. This shift allows him to move from viewing community members as passive ‘beneficiaries’ to recognizing them as active ‘rights-holders’ as part of the wider political process to materialize the principle of “Sumak Kawsay.”

REFLEXIVITY IN REALIST SOCIAL THEORY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The sociological perspective on entrepreneurial action examines reflexivity within the broader context of the relationship between structure and agency. Individual reflexivity focuses on agency and human capacity that mediate structural conditioning, which either constrains or enables social mobility within the broader social change or continuity process. Reflexivity is defined as the “mental ability of all normal people to consider themselves concerning their (socio-cultural) context and vice versa” (Archer, 2007). Individuals enact these internal dialogues, which enable them to “define and clarify their beliefs, attitudes, and goals, evaluate social circumstances and define projects based on their main concerns” (Caetano, 2015, p. 62).

Reflexivity grounds entrepreneurial activity insofar as individuals articulate their entrepreneurial *projects* with varying levels of congruence (or incongruence) with prevailing cultural and structural conditions (Martin & Wilson, 2018). The emphasis on “*project*” highlights the fit personal concerns with the enabling or obstructing properties of broader social structures. Successful entrepreneurship depends on the agency of individuals or teams embracing congruent projects that they can also impact (opportunity), so their reflective motivation enables them to transform their actions and identity in response to changing cultural and structural conditions.

The realist sociological approach to entrepreneurship shifts away from the simplistic assumption that economic opportunities are only the exchange of “atomistic entrepreneurs interacting with abstract markets.” On the contrary, opportunities for profitable exchange are nested with lives and experiences “subject to social conditions and conditioning, and the advantages or disadvantages that ensue” (Martinez Dy, 2020, p. 2). This approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of

the motivations behind entrepreneurial endeavors, recognizing that these motivations are deeply intertwined with broader social relations and structures (Vincent & Pagan, 2019). Accordingly, reflexivity and internal conversations take different forms, leading to four types of reflexivity that explain why some individuals, and not others, come into “collision with structures and seek to change them” and define several ways of enacting entrepreneurship (Mutch, 2019 #1867@89) (Table 14.1).

Adapted Mutch (2019)

“Autonomous reflexivity” resonates with the archetypes of successful entrepreneurs who instigate institutional change (Mutch, 2007) or individuals who thrive in the conditions of modern corporations, mastering analysis, and calculability to ascend to the corporate leader (Mutch, 2019). Ultimately, autonomous reflexivity is associated with upward social mobility, instrumental orientation, profession, and independence that embody the entrepreneurial spirit demanded by the hegemonic institutional patterns of our time (Randles & Laasch, 2016).

However, research has deepened our understanding of other types of reflexivity as scholars increasingly recognize the diversity of entrepreneurial situations. These situations do not conform to the single normative notion of entrepreneurship driven by financial growth, which universalizes the Western entrepreneurship model, prioritizing individualism and capital accumulation.

Wimalasena et al. (2021) studied individual reflexivity of individuals who identify themselves as entrepreneurs in a cross-sectional sample of the contemporary occupational landscape in Sri Lanka. They found that nearly two-thirds of their sample exhibit autonomous reflexivity, as their life goals are driven by material and opportunity-oriented concerns and materialized by entrepreneurship. On the other hand, many entrepreneurs deviate from such a single normative model by exhibiting communicative or meta-reflexivity. For communicative reflexivity, contextual continuity and preserving family and tradition drive entrepreneurial action, whereas the latter is driven by concerns centered around value ideals around community welfare. Communicative and meta-reflexibility seem to be at the basis of community-oriented entrepreneurship, which can take the form of social entrepreneurship for social impact and community-based entrepreneurship.

Table 14.1 Types of individual reflexivity

	<i>Communicative reflexivity</i>	<i>Autonomous reflexivity</i>	<i>Meta-reflexivity</i>	<i>Fractured reflexivity</i>
Contextual continuity	In the context of strong contextual continuity	In the context of low contextual continuity	In the context of low contextual continuity	In the context of strong contextual continuity
Type of internal conversation	Internal conversations need to be completed in the context of (proximal) others to monitor personal projects	Internal conversations are relatively completed in isolation to monitor personal projects	Internal conversations monitor personal projects as much as the process of monitoring/reflecting on itself	Incapacity to articulate internal conversation to debate concerns in relation to social context
How individuals resolve their internal deliberations	Resolution on how to make it through the world requires verbalizing and sharing concerns with (proximal) others	Resolutions are relatively independent of others' concerns	Resolutions are linked to reflecting on the nature of the world (its structures) and their efforts to navigate it	Resolution is not achieved; unable to articulate personal projects in a way that makes it through the world
Contribution to change or reproduction of social and cultural orders	Aim to maintain continuity between concerns and context, avoiding contact with structures to maintain stability. Generally contribute to the reproduction of society	Potential to bring concerns and context in conflict and take action to use/manipulate structures of change them. Generally contribute to the society change	Awareness of social situation constraints and enablers leading to dissatisfaction might or might not lead to action for change . Contribution to change or reproduction is indeterminate	They are victims of society, and life chances are determined by their involuntaristic position in social structures. Generally contribute to the reproduction of society

RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Donati (2011) developed the concept of relational subject to connect individual reflexivity to inter-subjectivity and collective action. Relational reflexivity is exercised on the relationships within the structural dynamics of intervening networks beyond individual internal conversations. Relational reflexivity “addresses others and it works [regulating] the Self and her relations by accounting for others’ reflexivity” (Donati, 2024, p. 71). Therefore, it potentially plays a crucial role in the “cooperative organization,” with the potential to achieve a better future and confront the inherent economic injustices of the marketplace through a cooperative approach. In this context, “organization comes into being through relational coordination, enabling a relational space external to participants, where they are co-producers of well-being.” At the outset of such dynamics, Byrne (2022) argues the need for “reinventing” the “we” relation through openness, collaboration, and the logic of co-action: how can we together generate well-being (Gergen, 2009).

The relational subject refers to “individual and collective social subjects in that they are relationality constituted, that is, *inasmuch* as they generate emergent properties and powers through their social relations” (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 58). The introduction of “collective social subject” as “We-relation” aims to explain the emergence of non-mechanical solidarity as the typical emergent power of relationality. This process can be understood by examining how the components of social relations interact and change over time.

The three components of a social relationship comprise a structural bond, intentional-symbolic reference, and an emergent relational effect (Donati, 2021). The relationship binds subjects with a structural bond or a structural link pre-existing to subject interactions (past conditioning present). These structural bonds can include family, parental, communitarian, associative, or impersonally generalized sociability in impersonal networks (i.e., networks structuring markets and states). The intentional-symbolic references the meaning attributed by subjects to enacting the relation in the present, which is predisposed by the existing bond. A relational effect can emerge from intentional-symbolic references, reinforcing or transforming the nature of the structural bond for future interactions, thereby reshaping the present to influence the future. Such a relational effect manifests in relational goods, which have the potential to

strengthen the quality of existing structural bonds and create new types of structural bonds within the broader process of social change.

Relational goods can only be enjoyed through being engaged in a particular relationship with others and are not typically transactional in nature or services. Therefore, relational goods benefit those who participate in the relations, while simultaneously, no single subject in the relation can appropriate them for themselves. Relational goods include “trust between people, mutual reciprocity, cooperation between families who help one another, a collaborative and congenial climate in a company, the feeling of safety among residents, and the spirit of collaboration” (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 199). In short, solidarity.

Collective relational reflexivity is nothing more than a collective orientation toward the emergent relational effects of our social relations, ideally producing relational goods (and avoiding evils) within the context of structural and cultural orders. Therefore, collective relational reflexivity toward relational goods is at the basis of the process of “discernment – deliberation – dedication” that reproduces or transforms the network of relationships of a relational subject (i.e., community). Collective subjects “evaluate objectives (discernment), deliberate about realizing its common concerns (deliberation), and commit themselves to achieve them (dedication)” (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 62).

Consequently, personal concerns, defined by individual reflexivity, are articulated in terms of collective interests. At one level, reflexive collective action requires aligning individual motivational reflexivity around shared values and the desire to change the world or contribute to local development (Champenois et al., 2021). At a higher level, for local embeddedness and collective action continuity, collectives need to structure processes of discernment, deliberation, and dedication (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 62). This relational reflexivity, therefore, responds to this process, differing from individual reflexivity, which defines internal priorities. Relational reflexivity, oriented toward relational goods, guarantees that joint commitment is not mechanical solidarity. McAteer and Flannery (2025) refer to “relational governance as the capacity of a network to accept the need for change and create new management structures in the alignment of actors’ objectives for change and the collaborative application of changes” (p. 3).

Knowledge Gap: Relational Reflexivity in the Dynamics of External Actors and Community-Based Entrepreneurship

Relational reflexivity provides the conceptual grounds for understanding how individuals and groups engage in collective action by reflecting on the relational goods and evils, potentially enabling them to build collective commitment, recreate their relations and organization forms, and participate in social change. Nevertheless, the literature has not empirically considered how relational reflexivity can settle the static division between social entrepreneurs serving a community and internal community-based entrepreneurs. The first is external to a community but favors social change, and the second is internal to the community but unintentionally reproduces subaltern identities.

In this context, our research addresses the question: *How does relational reflexivity enable external actors to participate in the collective process of endogenous social change in community-based entrepreneurship?*

RESEARCH DESIGN

We compare the life stories of two individuals who identify as entrepreneurs and initially engage as external actors with communities, but their relational paths differ. One remains external to the community as the head of a semi-public corporation in Cuenca, which upholds the “Sumak Kawsay” principles to support local farmers by promoting social and solidarity-based economies and food sovereignty initiatives (Ecuador). This organization offers technical support and services that combine Indigenous knowledge with social innovation, bolstering local food systems, preserving ancestral practices, and ensuring economic gains respect cultural values and environmental limits. The other individual, who initially engaged with fishing communities as a marine biologist and fishery management scientist working for an external NGO and later on for a local Ecuadorian university, became part of a community-based entrepreneurial initiative in the island of Santa Cruz, Galapagos (Ecuador).

The process analysis combines an analysis of motivational reflexivity and a dynamic analysis of relational reflexivity. The analysis of motivational reflexivity follows the four types identified by Wimalasena et al. (2021) that studied individual reflexivity of individuals who identify themselves as entrepreneurs. The dynamic analysis of relational reflexivity is based on

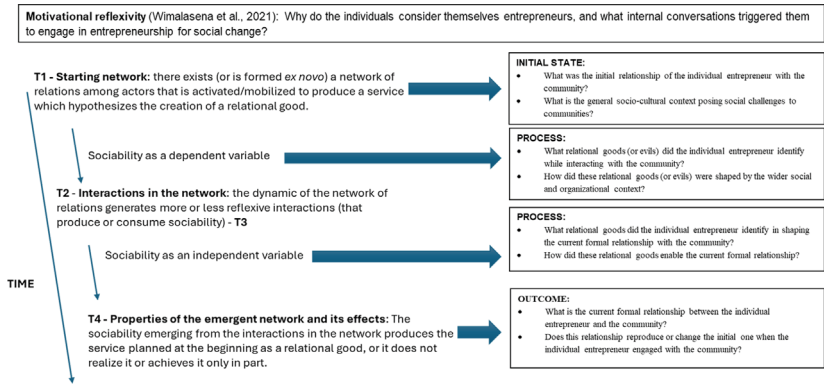


Fig. 14.1 Themes and subthemes (*Adapted* Donati and Archer [2015, p. 309])

the meta-framework known as the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995) adapted by Donati and Archer (2015). The morphogenetic cycle is a time-sensitive meta-framework for understanding how the current configuration of social relations (T4) is the emergent product of the interaction between a network of actors (T2-T3), which in turn is predisposed by the starting configuration of the network of actors (T1). The morphogenetic approach is a typical retrospective analysis where the current formal relation (T4) needs to be explained by how a previous social interaction (T3-T2) led to relational goods (or evils) that enabled actors to change or reproduce the existing formal relations (T1).

Figure 14.1 uses Donati and Archer (2015) to structure the themes and sub-questions that will be empirically explored, answering our research question. The variance in the outcomes of the relational paths enables us to examine how relational reflexivity unfolds differently in how individuals maintain external relations or engage in internal relations with the entrepreneurial community.

Methods

Our empirical approach benefits from the second author's long-lasting relationship with the two individual entrepreneurs who provide challenges for entrepreneurial challenge-based education. This long-lasting relationship enables us to select the two cases and facilitate an open

conversation with the individual entrepreneurs who are familiar with the type of organization they belong to and their associated social challenges (see Table 14.2).

The sub-questions presented in Fig. 14.1 were further elaborated in a more extensive questionnaire for a semi-structured interview. The interviews with the two individuals lasted two hours and incorporated storytelling principles into semi-structured interviews (Archibald, 2008). Therefore, individuals were asked to answer the question, and they were not interrupted but were free to engage with the topic.

This approach favors reflexivity as it leverages storytelling principles such as patience, listening, empathy, compassion, and calmness to embed life experiences as a story-learning about entrepreneurship motivations, culture, nature, history, politics, entrepreneurial leadership, family relationships, and the importance on alternative knowledge systems and the recognition of community member as knowledge holders. In addition, selecting the method of research as a conversation permeates it, characterizing it as an open-ended interview with an opportunity for both sides to engage in conversation rather than only one party doing most of the talking. Interviews were held online and automatically transcribed by the software. The authors reviewed the videos and transcripts to

Table 14.2 Cases

	<i>Individual 1: Cuenca</i>	<i>Individual 2: Galapagos</i>
Organizational characteristics	A semi-public corporation that upholds the “Sumak Kawsay” principles by promoting social and solidarity-based economies and food sovereignty initiatives	Community-based entrepreneurship blends traditional and scientific knowledge
Position in the organization	Head with administrative duties	Scientific partner of local fishermen
Situation of entrepreneurship	Biocultural, agroecological, and local farming practices of 10 food systems	Fisheries (circularity and fishing technologies/ innovations and practices)
Current relation with the community	External as a supplier of services for farmers (community-based entrepreneurs)	Internal as part of a community-based entrepreneurship

ensure the transcription quality and identify the content that answers the sub-questions across the open reflections of the interviews.

The analysis process was guided by interpreting their motivational reflexivity and stories within the framework of morphogenetic analysis. Therefore, the comparison unfolds in three themes: individual motivational reflexivity and concerns for social change, the change in the initial relationship with the community (initial state vs outcome), and the dynamics of relational goods and relational reflexivity leading to the outcome (process).

RESULTS

Individual Motivational Reflexivity and Concerns for Social Change

Both individuals exhibit similar motivational reflexivity and a strong commitment to social change and entrepreneurial projects in Ecuador. They demonstrate meta-reflexive characteristics, navigating high contextual discontinuity as they follow career paths shaped by their professional training. However, the point at which they identify as entrepreneurs differs along their professional journeys.

The first individual with a mechanical engineering background initiated his career in rural development and subsequently pursued a career as an economics professional, contributing to this entity's community forestry development projects through the FAO program for Agriculture. "Individual 1" explains that his entrepreneurial identity dates back to when he needed to demonstrate, through practice, to farmers that he could apply what he preached.

I went to the community of Molleturo (Azuay Province, Ecuador), and the experience left a profound impact on me. I talked to the farmers about [...] the possibility of producing on their land in a way that would improve people's lives. Then, [...] one of them asked me, "What you're telling us—have you actually done it? Do you already have experience with this, or are you just experimenting on us?" It felt like a blow to the head...because there I was, talking and risking the farmers' limited resources, without having proven that any of this was truly viable.

After that initial experience as an entrepreneur, "Individual 1" embarked on a long professional path that included high-level positions in

the Ecuadorian government before engaging with the ongoing community, where he aims to serve as the head of a semi-public corporation in Cuenca, which upholds the “Sumak Kawsay” principles to support local farmers by promoting social and solidarity-based economies and food sovereignty initiatives. The individual frequently mentions the need to shape a new type of economy for Ecuador, which echoes the value that motivates his choices and ultimate concern.

The new Ecuadorian Constitution (2008) establish a more politically focused category called the popular and solidarity-based economy [which] recognises the public economy, the private economy, the popular and solidarity-based economy, and mixed forms. By defining this category [...] they include businesses in both rural and urban areas where ownership of the means of production and labour are not separate. In this model, one is both an owner and a worker, marking a new form of economic organization.[...]

Along this professional path, Individual 1 conceives himself as a professional oriented toward implementation and “action” to innovate ways to trigger social change. *“Bureaucracies are just paperwork and serve no real purpose. I’m the kind of person who gets things done, so don’t undermine my capacity to act. If I take on a social change project, I’ll stay and keep executing.”*

“Individual 2” is a non-national scientist who traveled to the Galapagos from Mexico and has been working in the fishing sector for twenty years for NGOs. He guided his professional choices in a context where scientists hired by NGOs leading conservation projects do not facilitate genuine social engagement with locals or informed, evidence-based decisions.

Because I’ve been working here for 20 years, and I see that nothing has changed. I mean, everything just stays on paper. And what happens now? After you finish this project, what comes next? There is a fund for [addressing] illegal fishing, climate change, or whatever. Then you go in that direction [defined by the sponsor... but] you don’t maintain commitment with the community [and that is problematic] because your responsibility is maintaining a social commitment with the people the moment you start leading any process.

“Individual 2’s entrepreneurship” began with his engagement with the fishing community. He challenged the conservation sector’s traditional approach, which often disregards the local population’s agency.

Part of the initiative’s interest is to break paradigms, right? And as we have mentioned, to change the way we work with the park, but not with NGOs, because the dynamic is usually that someone in an NGO—and I include myself at some point—has an idea for a project [...] But we regularly ignore the needs or the solutions that they themselves propose.

As meta-reflexives, their choices motivate not to maintain continuity with their original social context but to pursue a social value. The priority on values over maintaining continuity with their initial social context is reflected in internal conversations that emphasize the need to navigate existing social structures. “Individual 1” often mentions the context of political opportunities and challenges that demand collectives to engage in political action and promote the solidarity economy in Ecuador:

It was considered necessary to establish an Institute of Popular and Solidarity-Based Economy (IEPS) [...] to provide an institutional framework for this economic model [popular and solidarity-based economy]. However, the proposal failed to gain traction under the new Minister, and the IEPS lost its institutional footing. [...] However, the popular economy itself persists because it operates outside of institutional management. In my view, it was profoundly weakened by conceptual factors, not because people did or did not have an interest in it.

“Individual 2” depicts a landscape of multiple interests colliding in the Galapagos, where critics of international NGOs are situated. His vision for a science-based and entrepreneurial activity is set within the landscape of vested interests shaped by intermittent financial flows and the primacy of NGOs’ interests over those of locals. Therefore, entrepreneurial activity is framed as a purposive effort to balance powers.

What we want is to balance these powers [...] And for many years, that power was in the hands of NGOs and the park, but not the fishers. So, that could pose a risk for NGOs because, for example, with this new fund [...] the interesting thing here is that, for the first time, the fund is not just for NGOs, universities, etc., but individual people and fishing organizations can also apply. So, if the fishers know how to take advantage of this, they

will be able to become the leaders or partners in the projects—not just the beneficiaries, meaning, not just the ones receiving the project’s leftovers [from the NGO].

*Change in the Initial Relationship with the Focal Community
in the Process of Social Change (Initial State vs Outcome)*

Both individuals engage in different relational paths with the community, considering their initial points of engagement and life contingencies. Nevertheless, both individuals maintain consistency in their ultimate concern and align their commitment to social change with their position within the entrepreneurial community. The first individual tapped into his external position as the head of the semi-public institution, innovating how the state engages with farmers within the framework of the solidarity economy vision he helped shape at the national level. The second transformed his identity from being a scientist member of conservationist NGOs external to the fishing community to becoming an internal part of the community-based entrepreneurship, aiming to demonstrate that vernacular knowledge on fishing is scientifically valid within the context of contesting the vision of environmental sustainability of fishing practices.

“Individual 1” engages with the community of farmers in Cuenca as an experienced officer who has been away from the region for a long time. When asked about the relationship with the community of Cuenca, “individual 1” clearly points to the distance.

And there is a sense of “us” with people who are actually more distant in daily life—namely, the farmers working in their lands. You feel that “us” because we are all committed to a social and solidarity-based economy [...], but it’s more of a conceptual one, I would say... it’s not experienced on a day-to-day basis like what might happen at other functional levels with company employees, colleagues, or on the emotional level, as in the case of family.

The distance from the community manifests in the clear separation of different “circles,” where it appears three levels.

There’s a plurality of “us.” In your family, there’s an “us” that is somewhat easier to understand—your children, your spouse, your grandchildren [...] Then there are more functional spaces, such as the company, which

form another “us”—the assistant, the technical colleague, the colleagues in marketing—together we make up the company “us.” It’s something we have to build; it doesn’t always just exist, so we construct it. That’s another kind of “us.” And there’s yet another “us” with people who are more distant in everyday life, namely, the producers working in the fields

The engagement with the community is grounded in the accumulated experience of implementing large-scale agricultural development programs in a context where the political orientation at the national level shifted in a direction. Therefore, the agency of “individual 1” as head of the semi-corporation is inscribed in the vision to demonstrate that the public sector in Cuenca can create the conditions for implementing the political vision of the Ecuadorian constitution regarding the solidarity economy, even when political priorities at the national level have changed. This shift entails introducing new ways of engagement between the state and farmers based on the principle of partnership, where farmers transition from being beneficiaries of services to partners:

I believe we have always engaged in the debate of avoiding the term “beneficiary,” [...] Why? Because “beneficiary” implies a “benefactor.” That kind of beneficiary-benefactor relationship does not promote equality. Why “rights-holders”? Under the constitutional framework, state institutions are guarantors of rights, and we must ensure that those rights are upheld. The individuals we work with are rights-holders—though this in no way suggests they have no obligations since rights entail obligations, and only obligations generate rights. This perspective fosters a relationship of equals, which is entirely different from one that frames us as “helpers” or “helping development”; instead, we are fulfilling a right.

Therefore, the perspective of fostering a partnership relationship is the outcome of the political vision enacted by the external actor as head of the semi-public corporation, which simultaneously defines the relational unit by sharing a perspective of well-being beyond physical exchange with communities.

I’m not fully integrated yet, although for me, integration means being part of the project we’re working on, not necessarily physical integration—being able to attend their celebrations, be part of their culture, and their daily life, which is important but not always possible. So, what I do believe is that we need to focus on the project we’re involved in, where we are

ensuring their rights—rights that are being built. In that sense, you feel a sense of unity from the perspective of this framework, of being alongside them, but perhaps not physically.

The relational path of “individual 2” differs as he transited from being an external actor to engaging with the community as part of community-based entrepreneurship in the context of the contested vision of sustainability surrounding “longline,” a controversial fishing practice often used by the community but banned in the area. Controversy arises from the high degree of bycatch associated with the “longline” technique. Such controversy arises from the widespread uneasiness of the fishing community with the conservation sector on the Galapagos Islands

There is a criticism of NGOs here, saying that conservationists only care about money. They are interested in keeping problems ongoing to justify requesting funds and continuing to do the same thing without producing results [...] fishermen believe that NGOs and the conservation sector have prioritised the creation of reserves without considering their needs and that they have been marginalised in the process

“Individual 2” worked in the Galapagos Islands as a member of the conservation sector, mediating controversies through workshops with communities to agree on better practices that align with community livelihood concerns and reduce bycatch. However, the lack of funding and continuity in the initiative by the conservation sector prompts the “individual 2” to explore entrepreneurship as a means to implement the plan.

The idea of entrepreneurship allowed me to give continuity to a process that began in 2017 in collaboration with a group of fishers who have this vocation, who have this interest. That is, I want to apply science and, based on science, implement regulations to improve the sustainability of [the fishing] activity

Here, community-based entrepreneurial activity is an instance of endogenous social change, as it integrates science and traditional knowledge in response to policies that overlook the negative social impacts of the environmental conservation regime. Notably, the process by which

“Individual 2,” as an initially external actor, turns part of the community-based entrepreneurial activity is the result of the mobilization by the fishing community rather than the external individual.

After 3 or 4 days, a leader from the fishing community contacted me again and said, “Look, we have something for you. We want to talk to you because we have a proposal.” So we met, and they told me, “Hey, we’d like to form a company with you for tuna commercialisation. We want you to be a partner so that you can advise us scientifically on how to do it sustainably.”

The process by which “individual 2” as an external actor becomes involved in entrepreneurship shapes a new individual identity, which the individual aims to articulate to their primary life concern as a scientist committed to environmental and social responsibility.

“I used to say, ‘You who want to use longlines,’ referring to them. But they would correct me: ‘No, we.’ So for me, it was also a process of letting go of that idea of being an “outsider” and becoming part of the venture. Now, I can tell you that when I say ‘we,’ I’m talking about this venture, about this vision of wanting to change the system of fisheries management and commercialisation through science, technology, and innovation. So, when I talk about this topic, I say ‘we.’”

Dynamics of Relational Goods Leading to the Final Relational Outcome

In the first case, the orientation toward relational goods (and the avoidance of evils) is mediated by the desire to change the type of relationship between the semi-public corporation and community-based entrepreneurs from a “sponsor-beneficiary” to a “partnership” relationship. Relational goods are typically defined as transparency, cooperation, safety, solidarity, and trust in consulting processes with farmers, which helps maintain the external “relationship” between the organization and farmers, as mandated by the social and solidarity-based economy. The relationship involves maintaining a certain distance within the framework of administrative duties, which require transparency and rule-oriented decision-making at the operational level while creating a space for consultation at the strategic level.

The company, in its administrative and management decisions, has a legal regulatory framework, which means you cannot consult that. I have a procedure, but it is not consultative [...] However, when it comes to the company's activities in its strategic modality, yes, you can

So, even when “Individual 1” explains that the idea of “we” remains conceptual, he also points to the relevance of mutual respect, foregrounding relational goods as the cornerstone of more equitable and sustainable outcomes within the state-community relationship.

“We met with the producers and worked together to determine what needed to be done in the field, concluding that the primary task is to organize the land by promoting ten productive systems capable of meeting people's nutritional needs while also increasing their income. This was a collective decision. Then, during the decision-making process—in which we adopt a lower hierarchy and allow the producer to take the lead—we provide them with the tools to make decisions on their own plots. At that point, our role shifts to a different level. I see this facilitative role as enabling the process to unfold. We use a method to organise dialogue—saying, for instance, ‘Given this community's conditions, how can we proceed?’ That is how it should be, though it does not always happen that way.”

By engaging farmers and local actors in a collaborative process—rather than positioning them as passive recipients of external expertise—co-creation fosters trust, shared decision-making, and a deeper sense of ownership over the processes and outcomes. Mutual respect emerges when each stakeholder recognizes the knowledge, experiences, and needs of all participants, cultivating a reciprocal exchange of insights and a greater likelihood that the agreed-upon measures will be successfully adopted.

“Ultimately, it depends on where we work, but it also involves discarding the attitude that we possess absolute knowledge—acting as though we are the experts. In relation to the producer, we are merely peers. Our daily struggle is to acknowledge that there is already knowledge within them.”

In the second case, the orientation toward relational goods is a foundational part of the process by which one external individual to the community redefines his identity and creates a “relational subject” in

community-based entrepreneurship. Mainly, there is a process by which the community of fishermen deliberates on the legitimacy of integrating the external actor, considering the conflict between the local fishermen and the conservation sector on the island.

The local community leader also spoke with the other fishermen to invite me to join the venture. It wasn't something they had unanimously decided; they also had doubts: "Individual 2 is a conservationist, works for an NGO, and is against longlining, etc." So the leader also told them—well, I suppose he said—"He has a different perspective." So, there was also an agreement among them to invite me to be part of this venture.

The relationship unfolds by fostering mutual trust based on Individual 2's role as a scientist and their shared commitment to a common vision. At the same time, this vision requires maintaining the quality of their relationship. Throughout, the relationship simultaneously recognizes the leadership of the fishing community as political actors with the agency to shape the direction of their context.

"For me, trust has been strengthened, maintained, and grown over time thanks to loyalty, transparency, and honesty [...] This collaboration exists because we shared a common vision of trying to change the entire management system in a way that is more sustainable and beneficial, not only for nature but also for the fishermen [however] I didn't come with the idea of saving Galápagos, I came with the idea of providing information so that the residents can decide whether to save it or not."

The individual's identity, concern for science, and engagement with the local community serve as the foundation for nurturing relational good. This "feeding" of relational good enables "individual 2" to reshape their identity to facilitate their involvement in community-based entrepreneurship. By respecting the new dynamics of this relationship, where "individual 2" does not jeopardize their scientific identity while recognizing the political agency of the community, entrepreneurial activity is made possible.

"The other thing that gave me confidence is this desire to do things differently, to use science. They already talk about it like, 'Hey, the scientist,' and sometimes they even boast about it to me, 'It's not that we have our

scientist.’ [Now we need to] differentiate between the role of a conservationist and the role of a scientist in the sense that a scientist is an advisor, and as an advisor, you have to follow certain rules... [you have to] try to be as objective as possible. [...] I’ve tried to remain objective, external, and not participate in certain processes where I say, ‘This is already a political issue.’”

DISCUSSION

From our results, we can identify two different relational paths. We call the first “embedded transformation,” where relational reflexivity drives an external scientist to reflect on trust and mutual recognition of expertise, enabling them to transition from an outsider to an integral part of the entrepreneurial venture. We name the second one “institutional facilitation,” where relational reflexivity leads the head of a semi-public organization to reflect on public transparency and constitutional roles, fostering a change in the policy approach toward community-based entrepreneurs. Our discussion first addresses the implications of our results for current research on reflexivity, which defines the motivations of external individuals engaging in community-based entrepreneurship actions. Building on these insights, we examine the role of relational reflexivity in the diverse ways such external individuals engage with community-based entrepreneurship.

Motivational Reflexivity of External Individuals and the Context of Community-Based Entrepreneurship as Collective Action

Previous research on reflexivity explained the motivation of internal and external actors in engaging in community-based entrepreneurship. Life concerns and entrepreneurial projects tied to a specific community identity often maintain continuity between social contexts and community concerns. As a result—often unintentionally—entrepreneurial activity within subaltern communities has been assumed to reproduce existing subaltern identities and reinforce unprivileged positions in broader socio-cultural structures (Vincent et al., 2014). In some instances, communicative reflexivity leads to the continuation of the status quo, while in others, meta-reflection on values and constraints can spark critical engagement (Martinez Dy, 2020). Therefore, the critical distance of external actors serving communities would increase the chances of social change.

Individuals with unprivileged backgrounds may still be hampered by structural legacies accumulating systematic disadvantages over time, illuminating the role of social positionality. Thus, it is crucial to avoid voluntarist notions of entrepreneurship that understate the influence of social structures. Nevertheless, our cases suggest instances of endogenous social change linked to entrepreneurial activity, with a nuanced view of what constitutes an “external position,” as the process of collective action differs across the two cases.

In the first case, the change process unfolds within the wider socio-political context, where Ecuador institutionalizes the solidarity economy, integrating community-based entrepreneurship at the systemic level with a new perspective on organizing society. Therefore, the participation of particular community-based entrepreneurs in the process of collective action (materialization of the constitutional vision) is mediated by the higher socio-political process so that the “we” remains at a conceptual level for “individual 1” as head of the semi-public corporation. Establishing new forms of participation demands a clear break from “beneficiary” discourse, instead framing people as active co-creators of their future. However, such a discursive break results from higher socio-political processes that reconfigure social and cultural constraints, enabling movement beyond the reproduction of subaltern identities.

Conversely, higher socio-political mediation does not exist in the case of the Galapagos, where the community-based entrepreneurial venture is directly linked to the social contestation of locals to the conservationist regime led by authorities and NGOs on the island. In this context, “individual 2” participates in redefining their identity in relation to the community through an entrepreneurial venture that aims to challenge the paradigm of environmental and social responsibility. In other words, Galapagos demonstrated how external actors can transform and build new types of relationships with local communities to co-create entrepreneurial initiatives that bridge scientific knowledge and vernacular practices in a context of resource constraints and social contestation. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the process of social change is endogenous to the community with a purposive intention to overcome subaltern identity by changing the paradigm of responsible fishing. As an external actor who becomes a partner in community-based entrepreneurship, the scientist supports but does not lead the political dimension of the processes.

This context of taking part in collective action within the broader process of social change defines the context of motivational reflexivity of

the two individuals as typical meta-reflexives. Reflexivity is the individual's capacity to consider themselves in relation to their (socio-cultural) context and vice versa, which, in the context of entrepreneurship, we show, entails an interplay between the life concerns within the socio-political context and the practical realm of entrepreneurial material activity: "*doing something*."

"Individual 1" in our study described how his sense of entrepreneurial identity took shape when confronted by farmers' skepticism about whether he was "experimenting" on them or implementing a genuinely tested operational approach, materializing the innovative views of understanding the economy and what would be part of the "solidarity economy vision." Therefore, motivational reflexivity has a dimension of practical critical appraisal of the practical validity of the operational approach. As meta-reflexive, articulating the practical domain to the socio-economic vision enabled a more authentic commitment to the values that orient his life concerns: the commitment to innovative ways of development. Similarly, Individual 2's experience has a practical dimension that aims to align his concern for committing to communities with promoting evidence-based approaches to environmental sustainability. His entrepreneurial initiative bridges the gap between scientific and traditional knowledge in a political context where NGOs on the island overlook the agency of the local population and the solutions they propose. For individual 2, making a case that traditional and scientific knowledge can be aligned is part of his concern for a scientific and conservation activity committed with locals and the environment alike.

Relational Reflexivity in the Participation of External Actors in Community-Based Entrepreneurship Processes

Community-based entrepreneurship is a space where multiple actors—entrepreneurs, farmers, local leaders, and others—collectively shape their entrepreneurial endeavors through shared projects and principles (Champenois et al., 2021). This practice approach accounts for entrepreneurial activity as collective endeavors that rely on "doings" and "sayings," situating diverse individuals within wider relational networks that are crucial for sustaining collaborative ventures. Our contribution goes beyond this practice approach by providing a more detailed account of the relational dimension of entrepreneurial practice. We conceptualize "relations" as an entity with an independent reality that exists beyond actions, words,

and network connections. This reality manifests in “relational goods” that enable external individuals to enhance the relationships they maintain with communities qualitatively. Therefore, relational reflexivity’s role is to monitor how the relationship can evolve into a more substantial commitment with collective projects of social change channeled through entrepreneurial ventures.

The second case is archetypical of how relational reflexivity plays a role in how an external individual becomes part of a community-based entrepreneurship collective. Not only does his individual story transform into a collective narrative, highlighting the fishermen’s growing sense of agency as entrepreneurs, but it also reveals how they share their motivations with the scientist to implement a new paradigm of responsible fishing on the island. A shared vision is forged across several instances of interaction enacting the role of NGOs who, over time, recognize the mismatch between local fishing practices and the praxis of the conservation sector. NGOs lacked the consistent funding and long-term commitment to transform fishing practices on the Galapagos Islands, prompting him to partner directly with the community and thus build a participatory model. The relational work involved in building trust includes a process of deliberation from the fishermen to determine whether there is a mutual commitment to the vision of responsible fishing, both socially and environmentally. In other words, through this process of reflecting on the relationship quality, the relationship between the scientist and the fishermen is qualitatively transformed.

Furthermore, relational reflexivity unfolds beyond the personal disposition to trust each other and includes how their social positions (fishermen—scientists) can be reimagined. These positions are linked to the social value of diverse expertise, so their integration of diverse knowledge systems—including professional, scientific, and community-based insights—is what provides mutual trust for engaging in the entrepreneurial venture. This is particularly relevant for the “individual 2,” as a scientist, who, in redefining his identity from external to internal to the fishing community, still clearly states his role in providing evidence-based advice to build legitimacy to the traditional way of fishing. However, he expects fishermen to refrain from engaging in illegal fishing practices that jeopardize the vision for responsible fishing. Relational reflexivity defines the conditions under which teams build trust. In this case, they simultaneously commit to a shared responsibility to foster innovation by articulating a system of knowledge.

The role of relational reflexivity is nevertheless more complex in the first case, as individual 1 enacts a public position and, therefore, their activity has a horizon of action based on constitutional principles. Donati and Archer (2015) have already noted that, at the systemic level, there are lower chances of “relational subjects” due to the primacy of the market and bureaucratic logic. Nevertheless, institutional arrangements favor the nature of the relationship between the administrative authority and the citizen to a greater or lesser extent. In this regard, “Individual 1” consistently invoked constitutional principles—the “popular and solidarity-based economy”—as an institutional framework defining a relationship that transcends the older sponsor-beneficiary dynamic. By viewing farmers not as “beneficiaries” but as “rights-holders.”

What is under discussion is whether relational reflexivity plays a role in a discourse shift that comes from a top-down constitutional mandate aiming to empower local communities by recognizing that ownership of the means of production and labor are not separate. In our opinion, the materialization of the constitutional mandate provides an enabling environment for enacting relational reflexivity in terms of what rights and obligations exist within the relationship between the citizen and the state. This reframing redefines the state-community relationship and foregrounds partnerships, which nevertheless requires a further understanding of the process for feeding mutual accountability and fostering relational goods like trust, solidarity, and shared goals. The empirical account provided by “Individual 1” defines the scope of this relational space in the co-creation process, where the state plays a facilitating role by organizing dialogues. Constitutional frameworks can enable such dialogues to varying degrees.

CONCLUSION

Community-based entrepreneurship is a form of collective action that challenges the core and extends the boundaries of entrepreneurship research, as an entrepreneurial endeavor can be part of the process of social change driven by a myriad of actors pursuing communitarian goals beyond economic growth. The collective action lens highlights that entrepreneurial agency is not limited to individuals but extends to various actors—within and beyond communities—who recreate their social and organizational relations in the context of broader social processes. Our contribution reaffirms and extends the current entrepreneurship research

as a collective action. It examines how relational reflexivity enables external actors to participate in the process of endogenous change driven by community-oriented entrepreneurship in two cases in Ecuador.

Our results show that relational reflexivity operates in tandem with the motivational reflexivity of external actors in various processes of engaging with community-based entrepreneurship. Accordingly, we coined two “relational paths” where relational reflexivity takes different role: “embedded transformation” and “institutional support.”

In “embedded transformation,” the external actor becomes part of the community-based venture, and relational reflexivity grounds the process of identity change while fostering mutual trust. This occurs by aligning diverse knowledge systems to achieve a new vision of environmental responsibility. This process unfolds within a broader social contestation against a conservation regime that disregards the local agency of communities. In “institutional support,” an external leader of a semi-public institution supporting community-based entrepreneurship facilitates the creation of an institutional framework aimed at shifting the perception of community members from beneficiaries to rights-holders. The external role thus serves as a facilitator of these processes. However, further research is needed to understand how relational goods contribute to the operationalization of a state-community entrepreneurship relationship under the principle of rights-holders.

The individual entrepreneur remains, in many studies, the primary unit of analysis, which means the full potential of community-based entrepreneurship has not yet been fully explored regarding collective opportunities, effectuation, and agency. We recognize that our contribution is still constrained by methods anchored in individual-level data, calling for further research that uses collectives as the central unit of analysis. Nonetheless, introducing relational reflexivity is a critical entry point to situate entrepreneurship within broader social dynamics. By examining how emerging social relations continually transform relational subjects, we reveal how community-based entrepreneurs can collectively challenge the status quo rather than merely reproducing existing patterns of subalternity. This transformative capacity aligns with the notion that enterprises run by collectives and communities are agents of social change.

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