

Cooperative Social Balance from a Social Accounting Perspective

Balance social cooperativo desde la perspectiva de la contabilidad social

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To provide the concept of social balance in the Mexican cooperative savings and loans sector based on the review of state-of-the-art social accounting and social balance.

Methods: This is a qualitative non-experimental study based on the review of journal articles referring to social accounting and social balance, which enabled objective and valid systematization of the main logical trends in the historical evolution of accounting, and development of social accounting depending on social balance, through observation and collection of information from different sources, as well as its interpretation and analysis.

Main results: The definition of social accounting based on the evolution of the concept since it was first stated, and the definition of social balance in the Mexican cooperative savings and loans sector, and its main features.

Conclusions: The absence of a consolidated theoretical set in this area that not only involves social accounting, but also social balance. The identification of social balance

in this context, as a stage of voluntary social accounting, and the utilization of three strategic axes for design.

Key words: evolution of accounting; social accounting; social balance; social balance methodologies.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Conceptualizar el balance social para el sector cooperativo de ahorro y préstamo mexicano a partir del estudio del estado del arte sobre contabilidad social y balance social.

Métodos: Corresponde a una investigación de tipo cualitativo, no experimental, donde se aplica el método de análisis de contenido de publicaciones sobre contabilidad social y balance social que permitió sistematizar de forma objetiva y válida las principales regularidades en la evolución histórica de la contabilidad, el desarrollo de la contabilidad social en correspondencia con el balance social, mediante la observación y recopilación de información de diferentes fuentes y la interpretación o análisis de esta.

Principales resultados: La definición de contabilidad social a partir de la evolución del concepto desde su surgimiento y la definición del balance social para el sector cooperativo de ahorro y préstamo mexicano y sus principales particularidades.

Conclusiones: La ausencia de un aparato teórico consolidado en el tema, que abarca no sólo a la contabilidad social, sino al balance social; la identificación del balance social en este contexto como un estado de la contabilidad social de carácter voluntario y la utilización de tres ejes estratégicos para su elaboración.

Palabras clave: evolución de la contabilidad; contabilidad social; balance social; metodologías balance social.

Received: 20/01/2020

Accepted: 06/03/2020

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of Savings and Loans Cooperative Societies (SOCAP) is to contribute to financial inclusion of the people in the communities where they operate, and collaborate with the federal government in the dispersion, delivery, and administration of supporting programs promoted. Given its constitutive bases, expressed in values and principles, savings and loans cooperatives play an important role in the fight for equity, inclusion, against poverty, and in favor of sustainable development.

However, in practice, only two Mexican SOCAPs have been certified by the regulating bodies as socially responsible. Additionally, very few of them provide social relevant information inside and outside organizations and stakeholders for their own management.

The above means the existence of a contradiction between the social function that _as part of the social economy_ is made by these organizations in the country, along with the almost null practice of creating social balances, despite the Mexican Institute of Standardization and Certification (2011) adopted ISO 26000, in 2011, on Social Responsibility, which in item 7 refers to the voluntary way of drafting reports on social responsibility, where the social balance with necessary and sufficient information, is a premise to draft these reports.

Some of the factors that influence this situation is the poor knowledge in the sector about corporate social responsibility, social accounting, and consequently, social balance. Hence, a conceptualization within the context of the sector features is necessary.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to provide the concept of social balance in the Mexican cooperative savings and loans sector based on the review of state-of-the-art social accounting and social balance.

This study is based on previous research done by Cobián, Ortiz, Joya, and Núñez (2016), on the design of indicators of sustainable development contribution to a Mexican savings and loans bank.

DEVELOPMENT

Methodology

The methodology applied corresponds to a non-experimental qualitative research, characterized by the analysis of the state-of-the-art of social accounting and social balance; information collection on the savings and loans cooperative sector in Mexico, in order to contextualize the ruling conceptions, based on a rational position.

In essence, this research relied on the review of journals of social accounting and social balance, using content analysis, which, according to Andréu (2018):

(...) it is based on reading (textual or visual), as an instrument to gather information, which different from common reading practice, must follow the scientific method; that is, it should be systematic, objective, replicable, and valid. (...) However, one of the distinctive features of content analysis is that it relies on intrinsic combination, which makes it complex as to observation, data production, and data analysis or interpretation. (p. 2)

Social accounting as part of accounting science development

The main role of accounting is to provide useful information for Decision-Making, and this recognition explains why this discipline has been forced to broaden its scope, in an effort to meet the surrounding demands, so new accounting branches have developed. There is no consensus among authors in terms of its evolution in time. However, the authors of this research _based on the studies of Chapman (1979), Túa (1988), and García (1997) _ consider that five stages can be established:

1. Bookkeeping. Since 1494, and to mid-nineteenth century, when the greatest concern was posed on the records of operations, the predominant technique was using books to record information through the double entry method. It was a time when accounting was being conceived only for the study and explanation of the operation of ledger accounts. In short, in this stage accounting is considered as the techniques of accounts whose object was to design the rules for such annotations.

2. Scientific accounting. Since the mid-nineteenth century, to the onset of the twentieth, it was characterized by a broad system on information based on a rational theoretical and methodological scheme, though records were still kept as a basis of accounting science. In this period, the conceptual frames of accounting and accounting methodology were designed as science.
3. Cost accounting. It took place in the first half of the twentieth century, under the influx of mass production, and the requirement to meet the needs of the business sector in setting prices and decision-making, though the elements from the previous stage were preserved. In this period, concerns still remained about the previous stage, without forgetting the records, but emphasis was placed on developing cost information that provides elements of analysis to make business decisions.
4. Corporate accounting. It started in the 1970 s, caused by the needs of executives to have access to more informational elements to make decisions. As a result, the scope of accounting was broadened from just recording events to providing relevant information for corporate decision-making.
5. Social and governmental accounting. From the 1980s on, the approach of accounting usefulness was developed, as a response to the need of communicating and reporting on the social effects of business activities, along with the growing relevance of assessing environmental impact, derived from the Earth Summit, public funding requirements for providing transparent information on government management, and use of public funds.

However, it is important to highlight that this process is implemented with the inclusion of the other informational needs traditionally covered by accounting.

As to social accounting, Túa (1988) considers:

That this accounting approach, responds to a recognition of the definition of company, of two essential notes: On one hand, the company not only manages equity capital, but also production factors which the community provides; and on the other, and as a consequence, the company is a coalition of broader interests, which must be equally satisfied. In short words, the social

responsibility of a company is originated in the fact that the company acts within and for the society, in a context in which the consequences of its activity and the practice of such partnership granted by society must be faced. (p. 40)

No doubt, the corporate social responsibility approach impacts on accounting, which is not only compels companies to provide information to stakeholders, owners, and administrators, but also to meet the informational requirements of other groups of interests. Information becomes a public asset, whereas, on the other hand, informational requirements associated to the company's social performance increase. Finally, Túa (2012), calls for the need to elaborate a definition of accounting that fits the contemporary context, and includes the following essential notes:

- a) economic association;
- b) usefulness in user decision-making;
- c) financial and social content as a consequence of social responsibility of the economic union;
- d) a formal and scientific discipline character.

This is a complex, still unsolved, endeavor.

Based on the analysis presented of the historical evolution of accounting, the authors coincide with the opinion of García (1997), who noted the existence of performance fields or areas: financial accounting, cost accounting, corporate accounting, government accounting, and social accounting.

Túa (2012, p. 96) acknowledges that some of the historical circumstances that caused a change of paradigm are the term "coined social responsibility and the transit to the paradigm of profits, in the twentieth century".

But, what does the profit paradigm of today's world say? In essence, this paradigm acknowledges that "companies must report to society about all the activities they do and affect them, to create evidence for individual users to include these companies in decision-making" (Díaz, 2003, p. 32).

As can be observed, its own development, in keeping with the existing demands, has widened their branches of performance areas, with a recognition based on the profit paradigm in place today, the existence of social accounting as part of accounting.

Toward a definition of social accounting

An important aspect to consider today is corporate social responsibility (CSR)¹, which was developed in the 1990s as a business philosophy of concern and action by groups of interest, based on a sustainable development vision, which according to the conceptual frame of CSR, “should not only focus on one of the aspects of the above defined sustainable development. Companies should act systematically on economic, social, and environmental aspects of their organizations”. (Spanish Association of Accounting and Business Management [AECA], 2004, p. 12). In recent years, the prospect of organizations has changed, they not only focus on economic benefits. To qualify an economic or financial institution, investors not only consider the financial data, but other factors including sustainable development and social responsibility. This is an ongoing phenomenon, and has become a lever for business people, managers or partners to concern and take actions in favor of sustainability.

Corporate social responsibility is a term with a relative development, which is a reference frame to place companies as the main entity, with new concerns and responsibilities to groups of interest.

Multiple definitions and arguments have developed in relation to CSR, but according to Ramirez (2007), it is a fact that regardless of the argument adopted by companies to implement it, they are aware of the benefits provided by the acceptance of such policy in the social, environmental, and economic contexts.

The CSR approach evaluates development through three particular dimensions that offer an integrated vision of the real commitments a company must actually assume eventually. The dimensions are social, economic, and environmental, known as the Triple Bottom Line.

This study coincides with Rivero (2017, p.73), in that the company “(...) is a capacity installed under continuous activity to generate added value, with the participation of all the stakeholders that make it up, either directly or indirectly”. Hence, this author’s statement about the role of information to respond to current demands is appropriate:

(...) it must explain the fulfillment and expectations of every objective, and therefore, all financial and non-financial state reports will be necessary. This

implies the presentation of magnitudes, ratios, and customized indicators and/or through a clear, attractive, and material explicative whole, with the required transparency (p.73)

In essence, the contemporary world demands the inclusion of additional information to the traditional data, such as the one related to social, ethical, and environmental aspects, which has been named social accounting.

But, how can social accounting be defined?

There is still no conceptual frame of general acceptance of social accounting, though many authors have dealt with this topic. Table 1 shows some of these definitions.

Chart 1. Definitions of social accounting

Author	Definition
Mathews and Perera (1991)	It is a broader concept of traditional accounting objectives, to new areas of information, like information about employees, products, services to the neighborhood, and prevention or reduction of pollution.
Carlos Larrinaga González(1997)	Creation of visibilities that foster certain configurations of organizations and society. Inclusion of previously excluded elements by accounting schemes that can illustrate the environmental consequences cause by companies.
<i>American Accounting Association</i> (1999)	It is the technique and/or science of measuring and interpreting essentially economic and social activities and phenomena.
Rob Gray (2000)	The preparation and publication of information about interactions and activities with a social and environmental character, associated to human resources, the community, customers, etc., from an organization, and whenever possible, the consequences of such interactions and activities.
Miguel Díaz Inchicaqui (2003)	The process of communicating social and environmental effects of economic activities of organizations on certain groups of interests in society, and society as a whole.
María del Carmen Rodríguez de Ramírez (2003)	It comprises subjects and objects, and their diverse interrelations, trying to provide useful information. It considers related aspects, not only economic impacts, but also social and ethical implications. Social accounting promotes social responsibility through structuring of accounting information systems, that permit proper follow up of resource management, which also provide several models for measurement, so the several interested sectors can proceed with controls, and make corresponding decisions.
Seidler and Seidler (2004)	It is the modification and implementation of practices, techniques, and discipline from conventional accounting to the analysis and solution of social problems.
Ramanathan (2004)	The process of selection of social performance variables at the company, the measures, and measuring procedures, the development of useful information for

	evaluation of social commitment, and the communication of such information to interested social groups.
Carmen Fernández Cuesta (2004)	It is the part of applied accounting whose object is the relations between an entity and its environment, where the entity are the legal criteria or the life cycle, whereas the environment is the natural or vital surrounding.
Paula A. D'Onofrio (2006)	It is the one that comprises information generated by the entity to show various social aspects on which its activity can impact.
Fabian Leonardo Quinche Martín (2008)	It is a professional and academic discipline that seeks organic control of the flow of social, environmental, and natural resources, organizational relationships, man, and nature.
Norma Geba, Liliana Fernández Lorenzo, and Marcela Bifaretti (2010)	It tackles the study of impacts (both cultural and natural, direct and indirect) of business activity in the social whole, and vice versa.
Inés García Fronti (2012)	It is within the accounting knowledge where the scientific method is used, and it has a domain and object of its own. It also indicates that the social content is the most important element of accounting.

Source: Moreno (2004) and Amigo (2018)

As shown, the definition of social accounting has evolved in time, depending on different contexts, but with a steady business concern and action, a responsible performance of all the participants in the value chain, and communities, on the “basis of reciprocity, which allow for the creation of higher value for either side, and back up company cost-effectiveness and sustainability in the long-term (Lisandro, 2016, p. 14).

In accordance with the aspects analyzed, the authors of this research define social accounting as the branch of this science that form a selection of variables of social performance of the company, sets measurement procedures, and prepares relevant information on socially responsible performance of the organization, as well as information for their stakeholders based on reciprocity.

In keeping with the definition provided in this study, there is a coincidence with Díaz (2003), in that the objectives of social accounting are:

- a) To identify and measure net social contribution of the company in the annual reports, based on transparent explanation of social performance by the company in the social balance.

- b) To supply information for decision-making on social policies and practices adopted by the company at the strategic level of the organization.
- c) To help determine if the strategies and social practices of the company are consistent with social priorities.
- d) To issue a collective report on the social contribution of the company, either in the area of environmental impacts and human and ethical resources.

There is author consensus in that social accounting is divided into three sub-branches:

- Environmental accounting: It is considered as the system of environmental information, both for internal company management and as a way to meet the informational demands of external social agents.
- Human capital accounting: It is defined as the process of identification and measurement of data on human performance and communication of that information to stakeholders.
- Information on ethics: This information deals with the ethical values of the company, including data related to the performance of the company, in terms of consumer and community protection, assistance or non-profit services delivered to society.

Social balance in the Mexican cooperative sector of savings and loans

An analysis of different definitions of social balance of the International Cooperative Alliance (ACI, 2019), Limited Worker Cooperative of Consumption and Housing (2017), Development of Social Responsibility (2013), Díaz and Pereyra (2011), Gil (2010), Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2016), International Labor Organization (ILO, 2001), and Ribas (2001), produced the following approach to define social balance currently:

- A diagnostic system of the position of the company facing its social surrounding.
- An instrument that enables planning, organizing, and evaluating the social performance of a company, quantitatively and qualitatively, for a certain period of time.

- An additional and voluntary financial accounting state of the company.
- A strategic instrument to evaluate and multiply social responsibility.
- A systematic tool that enables the evaluation of performance and evolution of the level of fulfillment of the principles of cooperatives, in time.
- A process assessing corporate social responsibility
- An annual report produced voluntarily by the company to identify its level of social responsibility.
- A public report on the economic, environmental, and social impacts of organizations, and therefore, its contributions (positive or negative) to sustainable development.
- An expressive memoir of social responsibility fulfillment.

Social balance has been defined from a system, an instrument, an additional accounting state, a tool, a report, and even, a memoir, always related to a socially responsible and ethical performance. However, regardless of the topic, the essential aspect is that it represents an informational system on corporate social responsibility, directed to groups of interest.

Túa (2008) argues that

(...) accounting has incorporated the concept of social responsibility. As a matter of fact, in addition to the traditional documents required, essentially financial documents, there are others with a more social perspective, such as State of Added Value or State of Productivity Excess, and the Social Balance (p.44)

The assertion that social balance is recognized as a state of social accounting is explicit.

Cooperatives rely on the values of self-assistance, responsibility for their own acts, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In keeping with the tradition of the founders, the members of cooperatives believe in a series of ethical values, like honesty, openness, and concern about others (ACI, 2013), and support their activity according to the ACI (2013) regulation in these cooperative principles: open and voluntary enrollment; democratic management of partners; economic participation of partners;

autonomy and independence; education, formation, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and interest in the community.

According to its own foundations, SOCAP is working for a more equitable, inclusive world, seeking sustainable development with social responsibility. But, how could relevant information about these aspects be transmitted to groups of interest? How to provide information to their executives and officials about managing these aspects and organizations? Surely, social balance is a valid instrument to answer these questions, with the contribution of elements for strategic management in the cooperative.

A definition of social balance was given for the savings and loans cooperative sector in Mexico, based on these conceptualizations, and the current trends of the sector as to financial inclusion and social responsibility, as part of their own identity: the state of social accounting with a voluntary character that shows the performance and evolution of the level of fulfillment of cooperative principles, contribution to sustainable development, and social responsibility depending on the goals set inside and outside cooperatives, in qualitative and quantitative terms.

The definition created establishes three strategic axes to be considered for the design of social balance.

- a) The seven cooperative principles.
- b) The objectives of sustainable development.
- c) The three dimensions of corporate social responsibility: economic-financial, social, and environmental.

Concerning the objectives of social balance, though using different semantics, express consensus over the essential aspects. Hence, according to Colina and Senior (2008), and ILO (2001), its main objectives are related to providing information to different stakeholders in the organization, which influences on the social role of the organization, and its contribution to CSR. It becomes one mean to make the social function of the organization known, not only to its personnel, but also to its environment, allowing for diagnosis of the social reality of the organization, and to present strategies, policies, programs, and plans.

According to Colina and Senior (2008), to elaborate a social balance, a set methodology should not be assumed (GRI, ILO, etc.), the trend, however, should be to develop systems of indicators that provide thorough interpretation of the organizational reality for evaluation. It must stem from different characteristics of organizations, as to the social reason, the sector they belong to, the environment where they operate, and so on.

This assertion is partially shared. Although the need of contextualization to different realities is considered, it must be done using a sectoral approach that makes comparison between entities in the same sector possible, in accordance with the establishment of common policies and strategies.

To elaborate the social balance, according to Mugarra (2009), different methodologies are applied, which are generically classified as accounting and non-accounting models, which are characterized below.

- I. The accounting models are based on accounting techniques, and their constant is the search for monetization of facts or relations that express added value accounts and excess, using financial accounting.
- II. The non-accounting models are based on the analysis of corporate events with an environmental or social classification, expressed in verbal descriptions and quantifications in physical and/or monetary terms.

The effects of the social balance in the savings and loans cooperative sector in Mexico, must have a mix approach, which presupposes the use of accounting and non-accounting models, in accordance with the variables evaluated.

Chart 2 shows a five-methodology of social balance applied in the cooperative sector, in which 60% of the models show the social balance structure depending on the cooperative principles and CSR, though 40% accounts for the combination of one or more criteria. This analysis explains a sectoral trend based on cooperative principles and CSR, with an ever-increasing mix approach in relation to the incorporation of several criteria.

Chart 2. Methodologies for social balance applied to the cooperative sector

Methodology		Based on:
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	Country	Cooperative principles	SDO	CSR
González and San Bartolomé (2008)	Argentina	X		
Cooperative of Savings and Credit (2014)	Ecuador			X
Limited Worker's Cooperative for Consumption and Housing (2017)	Uruguay	X	X	
Núñez and Cobián (2017)	México		X	X
Acosta (2017)	México	X		X

Legend SDO: sustainable development objectives; CSR: corporate social responsibility The methodologies can be located in the references section.

This study evidences that as to methodologies for social balance in the cooperatives, the prevailing trend is to adjust the already existing methodologies, not to develop methodologies contextualized to these type of organizations. The experience published and dispersed is insufficient, and indicate that the current world trend in terms of social balance methodologies is an adjustment or contextualization. The savings and loans cooperative sector in Mexico is not exempt from this problem; its development is still recent, with little participation of scholars, and few concrete systematic practical experiences with a sectoral approach.

In essence, the particularities of social balance in the savings and loans cooperative sector should be, according to the authors:

- Its consideration as a voluntary state of social accounting, in accordance with the trends in accounting regulations.
- Its elaboration based on the seven principles as a main strategic axis, since they are the basis of a business identity, in contrast to the most commonly used methodologies that use the Triple Bottom Line.
- The combination of two secondary axes in their elaboration, according to the current social demands: the goal of sustainable development in the 2030 Agenda (ONU-CEPAL, 2016) and Triple Bottom Line.
- The sectoral approach in their design allows contextualization and comparability of results, eliminating the restrictions conferred by the generality of existing methodologies, and the restricted approach with an individual character stated by some authors, which disable comparisons of management within the same sector.

- The application of a mix approach in the design leads to the utilization of the accounting and non-accounting methods.

CONCLUSIONS

The historical analysis of accounting ensures that social accounting, and consequently, social balance, are the response given by the accounting sciences to the development of corporate social responsibility, and the current demands to the business sector to communicate relevant and useful information about the ethical behavior of companies to groups of stakeholders.

The absence of a consolidated theoretical frame that embraces not only social accounting, but also social balance is evidenced in this area, a situation that the cooperative sector is not exempt from.

Based on the theoretical study done, and the diversity of opinions in this topic, social balance must be assumed in this context as a state of voluntary social accounting, which offers relevant information to stakeholders, also useful to cooperative management. It relies on the cooperative principles, social responsibility, and the objectives of sustainable development.

The particularities of the savings and loans cooperative sector expressed in the principles, as a result of the need to meet the demands of corporate social responsibility, and the compliance of sustainable development objectives in the 2030 Agenda of the UN, call for a definition of social balance for his sector that includes the three strategic axes: 1. The seven cooperative principles; 2. The objectives of sustainable, and 3. The three dimensions of corporate social responsibility: economic-financial, social, and environmental.

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Conflicts of interest and conflict of ethics statement

The authors of research article entitled Social Cooperative Balance from a Social Balance Perspective, declare that this manuscript is original, and has not been submitted to another journal for publication. The authors are responsible for the contents of this article, adding that it contains no plagiarism, conflicts of interest or conflicts of ethics. The authors whose contributions appear in the content have been cited and referenced.

Author contribution statement

Aarón Cobián Puebla: Theoretical background, analysis of results, conclusions, redaction of the manuscript's contents.

Jesús Juan Rosales Adame: Design of the manuscript, redaction of the abstract, review of the content.

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NOTAS

¹The literature shows terms corporate social responsibility (CSR, used in this paper), and company social responsibility (CpSR).