Over the past three decades the practice of social enterprise has increased significantly in many regions of the world. Broadly defined as the use of nongovernmental, market-based approaches to address social issues, social enterprise provides a “business” source of revenue for many types of socially-oriented organizations and activities. Within these broad parameters, there is an increasing awareness that social enterprise activities and organizations often vary significantly from world region to world region though little has been done to gather and analyze information in this area. Moreover, nonprofit social origins theory suggests that different socioeconomic contexts may play an important role in explaining the variance in social enterprise across regions. Drawing on recently gathered information, this paper examines both the different regional models of social enterprise as well as their connection to contextual factors that may be shaping their emergence in six regions of the world. Indeed, preliminary findings suggest that region-specific factors may have differently shaped the regional conceptualization of social enterprise including its uses, organizational forms, legal structures, and supportive environment.

Specifically, this paper proposes that current differences in social enterprise found in various regions of the world are, in part, reflections of the regional socioeconomic contexts in which the term came to rest. To test this proposition, the author first identifies unique models for social enterprise in the different regions and then compares them with data on regional socioeconomic characteristics in four areas: market, international aid, government, and civil society. Information informing the regional social enterprise models was collected by the author from researchers and consultants in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the United States, Southern Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia. Data on regional socioeconomic contexts was drawn from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project’s Global Civil Society Index, Freedom House’s Civil Liberties Index, and Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.

On a practical level, this study provides information on the differences in social enterprise in various regions of the world. Such information works to reduce confusion and facilitate cross-regional communication and exchange on the subject of social enterprise. Additionally, the research on regional contexts suggests that the matching or adjusting of transferred social enterprise initiatives to their new environments may lead to improved sustainability. Moreover, international development efforts may do well to leverage existing regional strengths and supporting structures that have already proven effective in the development of social enterprise. Finally, theoretically, this paper builds on the work of Salamon, Sokolowski, and Anheier to further advance scholarly understanding of the mechanisms shaping and advancing third sector organizational forms around the world.

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