

# Knowledge, Social Responsibility and Networks in Rural Microenterprises, Factors of Equality and Community Development

## Case: Procesadora Pecanera S. de R.L. M.I.

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### *Abstract*

*At present, the response given to the need of generating employment in rural areas has been the creation of enterprises which add value to the primary-sector products. This type of endeavor is called non agricultural and it has been stated that it contributes to the economic development of communities; all this demands the study of this category of business ventures. This work describes the way in which explicit knowledge is constructed in a rural microenterprise, how it is inserted into knowledge networks that support the microenterprise's development and, at the same time, through the knowledge of the needs of the community where the business is inserted jobs are generated to contract only women older than sixty years. All this reflects the enterprise's social responsibility and the response to inclusion and equality conditions, both factors demanded in current times.*

**Key Words:** Knowledge, Social Responsibility, Knowledge Nets, Equality Factors.

## Introduction

Postmodern society is characterized by globalization and technologies, which are signs that represent it. This society is interconnected through various ways of communication to unprecedented levels; however, there are still deep gaps between groups who have access to technologies and those who do not, as well as those that separate developed countries from developing countries which is reflected by human-development indices, educational standards and health of the population, as well as productivity in various sectors, being one of them the rural sector.

It is important to indicate that microenterprises constitute an alternative for economic development and employment generation, and therefore, the creation of better living conditions for families, especially those inserted in the rural sector or those that give added value to the products generated in it.

The phenomenon *entrepreneurship* has strengthened Mexico before the economic crisis and the absence of employment opportunities that it faced, because in response to these difficulties, many of the citizens have focused on creating their own sources of income through self-management projects, which is reflected in the creation of new companies (Chavez & Vargas, 2012). In this sense, the foundation of companies is one of the options to reduce unemployment in cities and rural areas in Mexico, where one can observe marginal communities living in extreme poverty. In the reality of some Mexican towns, men migrate to the United States and women are heads of the households who are given the responsibility of caring for children and elderly people (García, Garza, Sáenz & Sepúlveda, 2003; Hernandez, Pineda & Vallejo, 2011).

This means that in order to tackle adverse conditions and the need for financial resources, there are people who opt for the creation of a company because they possess an asset: the knowledge of a process that adds value to the primary product, which enables them to generate an employment alternative and income for his/her family and for the community as a whole. In this sense, Corona and Jasso (*Apud* Arras 2010b) propose that knowledge, in any field, allows those who possess it to having the capability of acting both intellectually and physically.

In Mexico, economic censuses reveal that 98% of the enterprises are small and medium (Santa Rita, 2013), which generate more than 50% of employment on a national basis and produce 52% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Also, 42.7% of them have a lifespan of no more than 5 years (INEGI, 2014). This reveals the fact that in Mexico a large percentage of microenterprises that are constituted every year tend to disappear (Baez Reyes, Cordero Lara, Hernández Flores, Sánchez Sánchez & Carrillo Rendón, 2009).

This is related to one of the aspects of the labor market that has attracted most attention in recent years in Mexico, which has been the insufficient creation of stable full-time jobs, well-paid and protected, to meet the growing demand imposed by the participation in economic activities, particularly by young people and women, linked to the demographic dynamics experienced by the country (Castillo & Vela, 2013).

The purpose of this research is to describe how the community knowledge that an enterprise has, when combined with social responsibility, can be converted into a source of development and, in this case, an employment option for women of the third age.

In order to offer a common interpretative framework, it is necessary to define the concept of *enterprise*. It is important to state that any organization has a set of goals to be attained through its business processes, which can be seen as processes of knowledge (Sivan, 2000). Also, a firm as conceived by Prusak (2001, 1003) can best be seen as a coordinated collection of capabilities, somewhat bound by its own history, and limited in its effectiveness by its current cognitive and social skills. The main building block of these capabilities (or unit of analysis, if one prefers) is knowledge, which involves the tacit and explicit dimensions and neither is ever present without the other (Polanyi, 1966, 7).

Explicit knowledge is the one expressed in a formal and systematic way; it is objective, rational and encoded. On the contrary, tacit knowing achieves comprehension by indwelling and all knowledge is rooted in such acts of comprehension (Polanyi, 1966). At the same time, Marwick (2001, 814 – 815) considers that tacit knowledge is what the knower knows, which is derived from experience and embodies beliefs and values.

Tacit knowledge sharing is connected to ideas of communities and collaboration. A typical activity in which tacit knowledge sharing can take place is a team meeting during which experiences are described and discussed. By its nature, tacit knowledge is difficult to convert into explicit knowledge. Through conceptualization, elicitation, and ultimately articulation, typically in collaboration with others, some portion of a person's tacit knowledge may be captured in explicit form. Typical activities in which the conversion takes place are in dialog among team members, in responding to questions or through the elicitation of stories. Also it is important to stress that in order to internalize explicit knowledge individuals have to understand and indwell it; this involves creating their own tacit knowledge. By reading documents, they can to some extent re-experience what others previously learned (Marwick, 2001, 814 – 815).

Another aspect to consider when referring to the microenterprise is the systemic perspective, in which political and cultural aspects are conceived, as well as its intra-organizational and inter-contextual interactions, this means, its insertion into the environment with which it is connected. Therefore, it may be said that organizations are political and cultural complex systems, whose interpretative dimensions vary in accordance with the interests, conflicts and power games implicit in the intra-organizational and inter-contextual interactions (Arras 2009).

Also endeavors form networks with suppliers, consumers, political and social actors who give meaning to their existence, allowing the optimization of resources, spaces and experiences of other members of the social structure. The theory of networks allows the description of the relationships between the actors involved in the development of new technologies, through the sectional and longitudinal crossing, for modeling the structural development and behavior of a community of actors (Podolny & Page, *apud* De Gortari, 2001).

The permanence of the subjects studied in agriculture business depends on the acquired knowledge about the activity and the social networks that are established, as well as the available material resources for the microenterprise and a favorable socio-productive context in order to be able to work and remain (López, 2009). Therefore, to the extent that a company acquires the perspective of a collectivity of capabilities, inserted in a context with which maintains a recognized symbiotic interaction that allows productivity, networks and knowledge become plausible.

## Knowledge Networks

Social networks are a set of individuals or subjects interconnected by means of communication patterns (Arras, 2010a: 190), through which they have relationships with a set of actors who have common interests; they develop and apply knowledge to a specific purpose that can be scientific for technological development or productive process improvement (Casas *apud* Arras, 2010b).

In a complex environment, networks are the result of a more or less stable and non-hierarchical cooperation between individuals or organizations that are known or recognized by themselves, exchange resources and can share standards and interests (Rousseau, *apud*, Arras, 2010b), as well as knowledge.

The perspective of networks is in total harmony with the systemic approach of the organizations, since this conceives the system as one composed by subsystems recognizing the importance of interaction and interdependence not only between its components, but with the environment - or larger subsystem - composed, in turn, by factors and elements with which the system interacts to perform its functions in the

marketing chain of goods and services; at the time that it can be supported by public and private agencies and institutions of education to obtain advice or funding that will allow it to improve its production processes and be competitive. In doing so, they are introduced into a network through which they can exchange knowledge and experience; while at the same time acquire **social capital**, which is defined by Bourdieu (1980) as "the aggregate of actual and potential resources that are linked with the possession of a permanent network of relationships more or less institutionalized of mutual acceptance and recognition". It is also made up by trust, reciprocity and cooperation (Durstun, 2002).

In this sense, one can say that networks contribute to the creation of social capital when they are supported by links through which goods and services are exchanged, developed, produced and distributed, where their relationships can be described when the analysis of the network's dynamics is analyzed. This can be done when the following attributes are considered: a) what is exchanged, b) forms of exchange, c) frequency of interaction and d) durability and intensity of the relationship (De Gortari & Vera, 2007).

### **Social Responsibility**

In addition, when inserted in a community, enterprises have to consider the impact of their processes in that arena and in the environment. This perspective is immersed or forms part of the social responsibility, which implies that enterprises and organizations have to take into account the impact of their decisions on the environment, the communities and the staff in order for these nuclei to improve, care and preserve. Social responsibility, in accordance with The Green Book (2002; 13), means going beyond the compliance with legal obligations, investing more in human capital, the environment and in relations with the partners.

In the search for a different response to the prevailing paradigms and practices, local-endogenous development emerges as an alternative perspective. Its purpose is to build a more integrated approach for development in which not only the economic growth is privileged, but at the same time, is based on knowledge of the local reality, its problems, strengths and areas of opportunity, on collective decision-making processes that promote sustainable use of natural resources in the community to generate beneficial productive activities (Linares, Briseño & Cote, 2012).

The University Nebrija (2005) states on its website the concept of corporate social responsibility as a term referring to the set of obligations and commitments, legal and ethical, national and international, which are derived from the impacts that the activities of the organizations produce in the social field, labor, environment and human rights. This concept sets, explicitly, the presence of the ethical behavior of businesses and organizations linked to the social responsibility.

In accordance to Ruiz de Giorgio (2004; 27), corporate social responsibility relates to the idea that companies not only have to be limited to the search for economic efficiency, but they should assume greater responsibility in the pursuit of a better and more just world, participating in the society's integral development, in collaboration with the State and civil society organizations. Social responsibility is immersed in the policies of the company or organization, and it can be traced as explicit or implicit guidelines that lead decision making and actions that are performed in the internal and external contexts.

Adela Cortina (2006) declares that social responsibility is not mere philanthropy nor carrying out charity's disinterested actions, but it refers to the design of the performances of the company in such a manner that it takes into account the interests of all those affected by it. The idea of benefit is extended to the economic, social, environmental and beneficiary's areas, to those who are affected by the activity of the company. This author believes that the reasons for businesses to be socially responsible are: justice, prudence, intelligence, efficiency and survival.

Social responsibility, according to the authors cited above involves:

- A voluntary contribution, which transcends the conventional regulatory obligations of companies and organizations to build a better society, with greater economic development and better quality of life, as well as a cleaner environment.
- An increase in the social development levels, environmental protection and respect for the human rights of the staff and members of the community.
- The sustenance for the construction of a better and more just world through ethical participation of businesses, government and civil society organizations in the integral development of the local and global community.

The concept of social responsibility involves a balance between the legitimate quest for the success of organizations through being competitive and profitable, and the attention to be given to the requirements of the workers, environment and society; it means placing the man as the axis of the social action at a level that is on the material, profitability and consumption aspects. This approach allows redefining the perspective through which one must see and appreciate the labor life in organizations, as well as their interactions with the external environment.

In this sense, competitiveness of the territory should be based on harnessing the accumulated capital within that territory: physical, human, technological, institutional, social, cultural, environmental and natural, and enhance it in accordance with the synergies that territory-society-institutions are capable of activating, both in their own context and their overall relation (Álvarez & Rendón, 2010).

The process of social demand toward the organizations, unfortunately, is slowly progressing because social values have been disrupted, and possession of property and wealth has more weight and recognition, due to the fact that in the past the collective imaginary had in mind that social responsibility of the business was to create profit for its stockholders (Blázquez, 2012). However, at present, there are more and more voices joining the social action that is guided and requires returning to the origin, to the human being as a subject who is able to transform the environment through processes and technologies that respect the environment and the community. This will allow the rescuing of the ethical acting: this is the moral values that people composing the organizations share and trust.

### **Discrimination**

Even though the recurrent themes in the speech of the local, national and international governments and world's organizations are oriented towards equality versus discrimination, as well as the quest for better living conditions for human beings, one can appreciate the dissociation of what is said and done, since in all countries, to a greater or lesser extent, acts of discrimination are carried out.

In fact, The National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED, 2011a) in Mexico states that discrimination is a daily practice, which consists in giving unfavorable treatment or undeserved contempt to a particular individual or group through a conduct that demonstrates distinction, exclusion or restriction, due to a characteristic of the person that has, as a result, to cancel or impede the exercise of a right. This Council considers the existence of human groups who are victims of discrimination every day, either for some of their physical characteristics or their way of life. The ethnic or national origin, gender, age, disability, social or economic status, health status, pregnancy, language, religion, opinions, sexual preference, marital status, and other differences can be a reason for distinction, exclusion or restriction of rights (CONAPRED, 2011a).

The effects of discrimination in the life of people are negative and this has to do with the loss of rights and the inequality to access them, which can result in isolation, to live violence and even, in extreme cases, the loss of life (CONAPRED, 2011a). Discrimination operates through a set of social and cultural mechanisms; one of them is prejudice, which is comprised of a constellation of concerns tied to beliefs, values and social



identity (Augoustinos, 2016), and it implies stereotypic thinking, while discrimination refers to the fact that people are treated differently in any circumstance (Hellman, 2015).

A stereotype is a learned association, or link, between two social concepts that are not defining features for one another (Cox & Devine, 2015, 3); it is a schema or cognition about a single person or a group of people. It connotes something that may be untrue. Stereotypes are systems of categories with which people rank their experiences. These classifications are sorted by structuring a set of assessments and attributions that are socially transferred from certain characteristics such as inferiority, negativity or passivity, in opposition to superiority, positivity and activity. These attributions have as a reference the social group that produces the stereotypes. Understanding the content, process, and structure of cognitions related to social groups is important because such cognitions form the building blocks of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression (Cox & Devine, 2015).

In this context, stereotypes that allow the classification of people according to various manifestations or genetic conditions have been created, and discrimination has been classified in several ways: a) infantile; (b) race and ethnicity; c) gender and sexual preference; (d) occupational and age, as well as that, e) resulting from disability. Due to the fact that this case study is linked to two types of discrimination, namely age and gender, these two are described:

#### **Discrimination based on Gender and Sexual Preference**

- There are exclusion and discrimination factors related to gender and sexual preference. CONAPRED (2011e) associates these two types of discrimination with homophobia, since it considers that the latter has deep roots within the Mexican society and is presented in all areas of life; it begins with the rejection of anything that looks like threatening male domination. In Mexico there have been social changes that modify the classical roles of a significant segment of women and social groups. This is one of the factors that have unleashed gender-based violence, because these changes have not been accompanied by a change in the patriarchal mentality.
- It is interesting to note that the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2003), when referring to the importance of gender equality, establishes that it is: "the equal enjoyment of men and women of socially-valuable goods, prospects, resources and rewards. The purpose is not that women and men are equal, but that their opportunities in life are and remain equal" (DAC, 2003: 2). Reducing gender inequities is a key element in the fight against poverty and helps to establish a sustainable development in which women, like men, are involved in the same way in the management of public and domestic affairs (DAC, 2003).

#### **Age Discrimination**

- Poverty is the greatest threat to the well-being in general, but particularly in old age, as it is generating more dependency and a risk factor for abuse and neglect; also, it is argued that the elderly are excluded of the policies for the eradication of poverty in many countries. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) state that the Universal Declarations and the International Covenants on Human Rights do not include any specific prohibition to age discrimination. A sign that explains the discrimination produced in multiple ways: education, care, abandonment, abuse and violence. It occurs in all countries and social spheres; therefore it is necessary to create awareness among professionals and the general public, because sometimes it takes place in an unconscious way, without awareness that discrimination is being done (Ruipérez Cantera, 2002).
- There is the conception of the feminization of poverty. All this after women made an important "invisible" contribution through being the center of the family life and doing all of the activities so

other members of their family and society could be able to participate in the "visible" economic activity, in this sense, age discrimination is joined to that of gender, so women suffer double discrimination, due to gender stereotypes and age-related issues. (Ruipérez Cantera, 2002).

- In accordance with the Luis Vives Foundation (2009), another form of discrimination toward the elderly people is manifested in society when they search to get a job, because there are stereotypes that consider them as less productive, more vulnerable to diseases and injuries, as well as endowed with a less intellectual curiosity and opposed to change.

## Objective

To analyze the ways in which knowledge is built and communicated in microenterprises, the ways in which they practice social responsibility and the form in which they are inserted into networks of collaboration through links with agencies of the private sector and governmental authorities.

## Methodological Criteria

To address this research, the case-study approach was utilized, which in accordance to Yin (2003), contributes to broaden and deepen the knowledge with respect to individuals and groups, as well as organizations and related phenomena. This research is of a qualitative nature, applied, descriptive and empirical. The methods are analytic-synthetic and theoretical-deductive, with support of the hermeneutical. Data was collected by using the open-interview technique, conducted in-depth and applied to one of the persons that started the enterprise object of study. Also, bibliographical references were considered.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Case: Procesadora Pecanera S. de R.L. M.I.

This microenterprise entered the market buying and selling in-shell pecan nuts. In 2004, the company was legally constituted in order to give added value to the pecan nuts. In that year, a nut-sheller machine was bought. Pecan nuts are sorted and sold in different size categories: halves and smaller pieces. This microenterprise is 100% family-owned and was initiated in order to generate development alternatives and employment in the community and, at the same time, with the motivation to face challenges and create something new. From these incentives, this business project was formalized thanks to the knowledge of the son-in-law of Soledad Baylón Gutiérrez, head of the organization, who graduated as Bachelor in Science in the agricultural field. In addition, Procesadora Pecanera is categorized as rural enterprise due to the processes of added value that it develops and because this firm generates non-farm rural employment.

One of the most important values that stood out through the interview was *unity*, since the lady who runs the microenterprise says:

"... the important matter is that we are a family, it is elemental, because my children, husband, son-in-law and daughter-in-law we all collaborate in the microenterprise".

In addition, when inquired about the number of people working in the enterprise, she replied that there are five permanent full-time employees, and continued saying:

"... but the most important thing is that we give employment to elderly people who are unable to be here in the company, so we take them the job to their homes. Mostly, they are old women who clean pecan nuts at their own homes".

The interviewer continued to inquire: So, to achieve the purpose of your business, the marketing of shelled pecan nuts, you acquired machinery to shell the nuts and then decided not to purchase another artifact that peels the nut in order to provide jobs to women over sixty years. Could you comment on that?

"Look, of course there are machines that make this work and there is no need to hire people. These machines have an electronic eye, but here in our community there is a great need for employment then, instead of hiring two persons, we are giving work to thirty two".

When asked about the way in which she met the people and formed a network, she replied:

"I started to knowing them when I gave them work for the first time. You know, not everything in life is sweetness. Today's price of shelled pecan nuts is \$170 pesos per kilogram (\$10 USD/kg). And for instance, the pecan nuts were weighted before handing them out to people; then, when I went to pick them up the shells and meats were weighted once again. When there was some weight missing I would say: look madam you took some of the pecan nuts, so I cannot bring you anymore, you cannot work for me. It is that simple. That way I got to know the people and now, when the time comes to collect the shelled nuts from their homes I do not need to weight them again, because I know the people and they are honest".

This comment gives account of awareness and social responsibility that the owners of this endeavor have in relation to the development of the community and the importance of giving jobs to women, particularly to those of the third age. Action that coincides with the perspective of Ruiz de Giorgio (2004) about corporate social responsibility, which relates to the idea that the companies not only have to be limited to the search for economic efficiency, but that should assume greater responsibility in the pursuit of a better and more just world, participating in the integral development of the society. All of which can be seen in the decision-making that have had the people who run this microenterprise.

Also, there is a bond of trust constructed between the owners of the enterprise and the women working for them, based on their honesty and because they recognize the opportunity they get from the decision made by people that look after their community and, in this sense, social capital is gained. This capital is composed by trust and social relations that allow individuals to access resources and the quality of these services (Bourdieu, 1980), which is also made up on reciprocity and cooperation (Durstun, 2002).

At the same time, this includes an action to vulnerable groups who are socially marginalized, in this case, by age and gender. And also through their work and honesty, a bond of trust was constructed. In relation to this matter, Mrs. Soledad Baylon said:

"Sure, I trust my employees. Also, if we have an urgent purchase order I tell them and they answer: *when do you need the shelled nuts? We will get to work right now and do nothing else but shelling*. Or when I let them know the hour I am picking up the products they hurry with their home duties and then only work for me to have the nuts shelled on time".

Around the trust that has been established between the owner and women who are responsible for shelling the pecan nuts, it can be said that social capital has been generated, which is defined by Bourdie (1980) as "the aggregate of actual and potential resources that are linked with the possession of a permanent network of relationships more or less institutionalized of mutual acceptance and recognition". This capital, expresses the author, is composed with the confidence and social relations that allow individuals to access resources and the quality of them.

In terms of the knowledge network that has emerged, the relationships between the actors involved in its development can be observed. These relations include the channels through which knowledge is transmitted. Firstly, it is how to produce the pecan nuts and the production process which means the internal knowledge of the organization, where it incorporates the know how in an individual form and in a

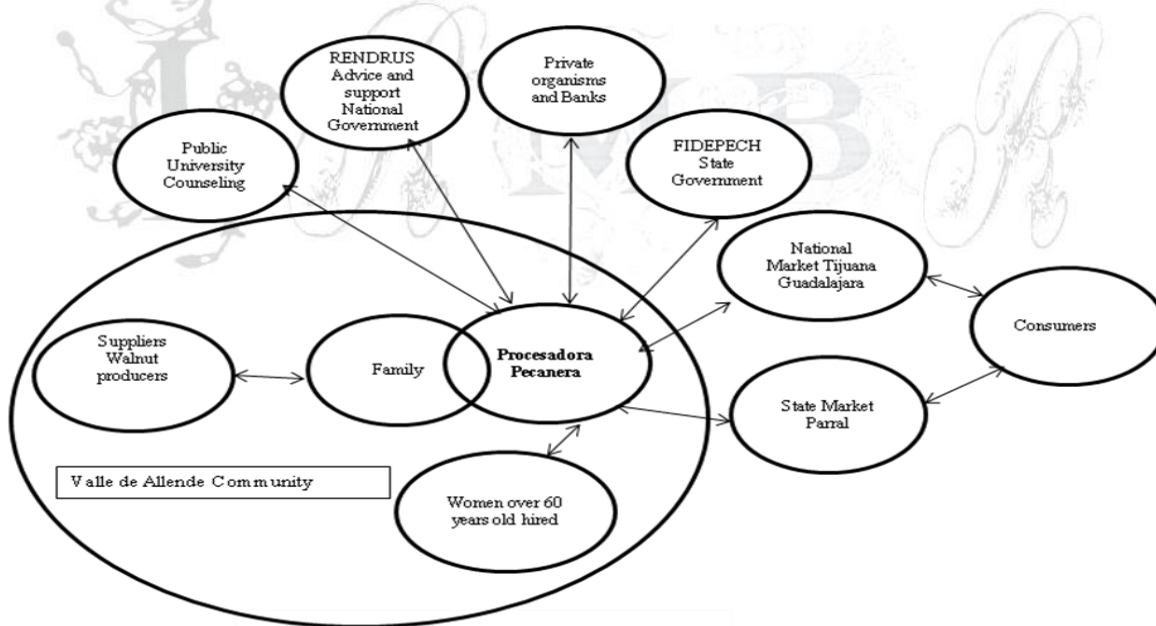


collective one. They also have documentation or explicit knowledge (Polanyi, 1943), since a member of the family has developed a business plan, they have a description of the processes, documentation on costs and finances. While some aspects of the production and marketing processes, which are only known by the members of the family, remain as tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1943). And subsequently, they interchange knowledge with public and private organizations, as well as with suppliers and consumers.

Looking at the network (figure 1), it highlights the fact that this micro-enterprise has a number of relationships through which it has received advice and funding to improve its production processes, which has made it more competitive. The designated links through which it exchanges knowledge and experience have enabled it to build social capital, as mentioned, first, with women over the age of 60 and, subsequently, with pecan nut suppliers, private and public agencies as well as regional and national markets whose consumers acquired the product as an input to make sweets that use pecan nuts as one of their ingredients.

Secondly, informal ties with groups or elements of the company can be seen in Procesadora Pecanera's network; this is the case of the nuclear family, which is placed as a dyad that overlaps within the microenterprise, since all the members being part of it have been incorporated into the endeavor's activities. Technical and managerial skills are exchanged among them.

In addition, it can be said that these relations constitute a pillar for their development and permanence, since unity is a highly appreciated value by family members. Likewise, the relations with suppliers of raw materials, intermediaries and consumers, who define their needs, can be seen. All the information generated and the exchange of knowledge results in new ways of doing things in the organization.



**Procesadora Pecanera's network**

Figure 1. Procesadora Pecanera S. de R.L M.I Network

The Procesadora Pecanera's network consists, besides the family, of employees, workers, suppliers, buyers and consumers, also by the following groups:

- a) Public bodies. SAGARPA (Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food), where they get training and RENDRUS (National Network for Sustainable Rural Development), which is part of SAGARPA.
- b) It also received support from FIDEPECH (Support for Productive Social Development Fund), organism that depends on private bodies, specifically banking, and from whom it has received financing derived by State Government funds.
- c) Institutions of higher education, where technical training was obtained.

## Conclusions

The objective of this study was to analyze the ways in which knowledge is built and communicated in microenterprises, the ways in which they practice social responsibility and the form in which they are inserted to networks of collaboration through links with agencies of the private sector and governmental authorities. It is important to note that the family and the expertise that each member brings are basis for the generation of the company and become the first link that starts the network, as a group they bet on the project with the initial investment. It is also noted that the company's development goes hand in hand with the strengthening of the network that it has, due to the fact that they receive resources and counseling, all of which can be important elements for the improvement of their production processes.

In addition, knowledge of the community and its needs, coupled with the social awareness of the members of the enterprise, allow for this micro endeavor to be an element of economic development for the families of the organization, specifically for those whose head is a woman, therefore, they respond to two factors of exclusion: age and gender. This gives account of what is possible through microenterprises when decisions are taken considering the well-being of the community.

It is worth highlighting that Procesadora Pecanera has expanded its markets thanks to its participation in RENDRUS at the State level and having won the competition at the national level. Thanks to this action they currently sell their products in Tijuana and Guadalajara. Thus, it is concluded that the expansion of formal or informal networks favors learning processes both inside and outside the company and the construction of explicit knowledge. At the time when the needs of the community are known and it is combined with a collective consciousness, microenterprises can become an element that performs its actions with social responsibility, specifically to generate opportunities for improving the quality of life of the most vulnerable groups.

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