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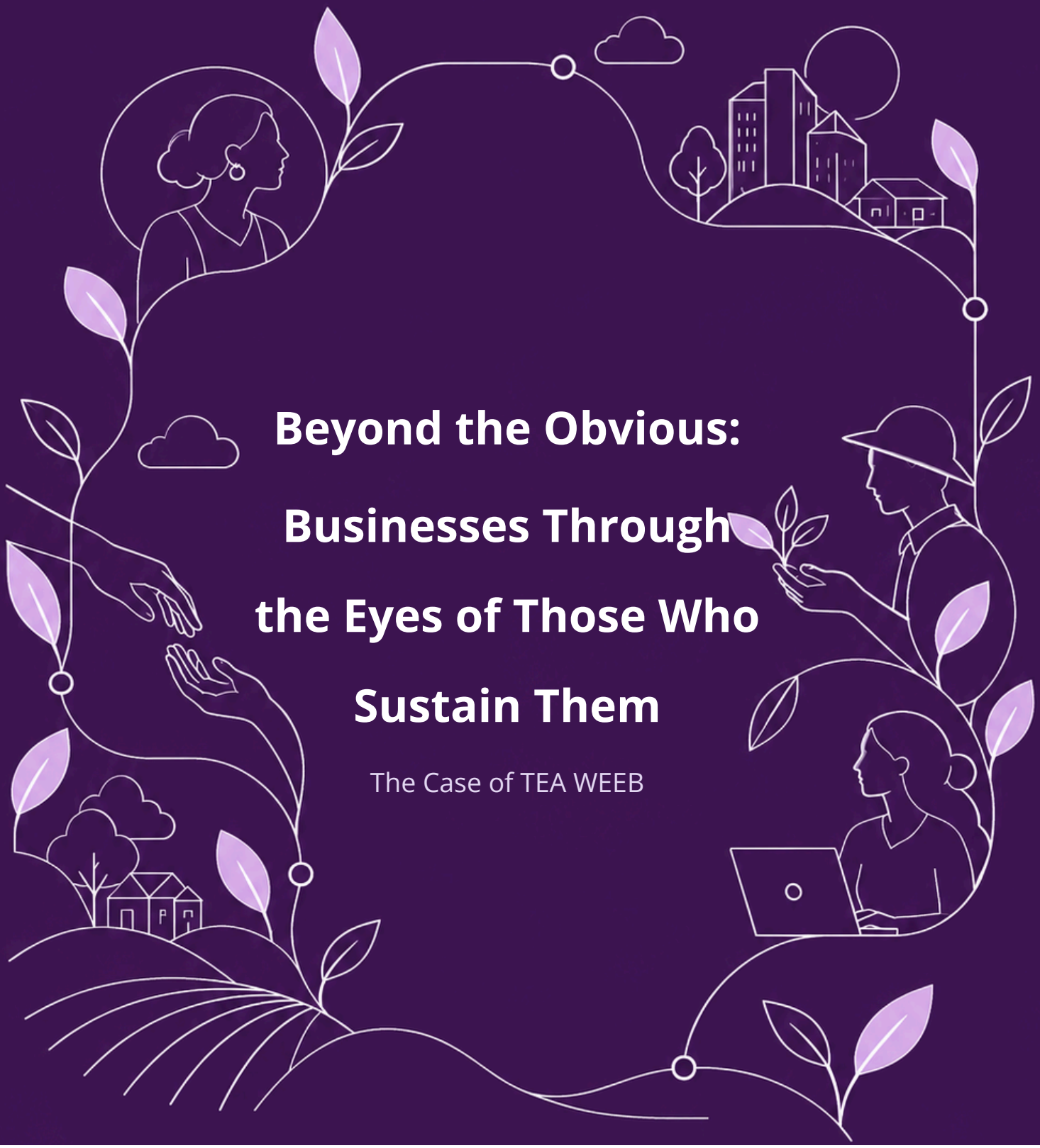

Beyond the Obvious: Businesses Through the Eyes of Those Who Sustain Them

The Case of TEA WEEB

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IES

1. About the Organization

The IES Foundation (Innovation in Social Entrepreneurship) is a Bolivian organization with more than 20 years of experience supporting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Its mission is to generate wealth through three pillars: access to financing, access to knowledge, and access to markets, with the goal of fostering the development of more and better businesses to create an economic impact in Bolivia. The foundation believes that sustained income growth in businesses leads to sustained income growth among the population, achieving shared prosperity that contributes to poverty reduction.

Based on this conviction, IES has developed interventions ranging from financing to technical assistance and capacity building. In 2020, this journey led to the creation of its own business services methodology, "Tú-Consultorio Empresarial," which places the individual—rather than the business—at the center of the support process. It distinguishes itself by not starting from ideal models, but rather from the reality in which women entrepreneurs operate. It was within the framework of this methodology that IES led the TEA WEEB project and that the research presented in this case study was born.

2. The Case Study

Project Name	Transformative Gender Ecosystem for the Economic Empowerment of Women in Bolivia (TEA WEEB)
Sector	Entrepreneurial Development / Women's Economic Empowerment
Location	La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba y Santa Cruz (Bolivia)
Duration	2022 - 2026
Partners	CECI Bolivia, Global Affairs Canada
Financial Instrument	Cooperación internacional
Mobilized Capital	CAD $3,5 million
SDG Addressed	SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)

The case study presented here is the result of work carried out during the implementation of the project "Transformative Gender Ecosystem for the Economic Empowerment of Women in Bolivia" (TEA WEEB). This project sought to strengthen micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises led by women in Bolivia, not only as businesses but as tools for autonomy, income generation, and decision-making.

Throughout the project, direct support provided to more than 500 female entrepreneurs and business owners made it possible to identify patterns, tensions, and decision-making logics that traditional consulting frameworks fail to capture. But what sets this analysis apart is the perspective from which it was documented: the experience of Paola Merlo, a consultant at Tú - Consultorio Empresarial, who worked side by side with these women for years.

Her intimate and critical observations, documented in the publication *Beyond the Obvious: Viewing Businesses Through the Eyes of Those Who Sustain Them* (IES Foundation, 2026), capture what a conventional report would leave out: personal reflections, patterns discovered in daily work, and the uncomfortable questions that drive real change.

This analysis has a clear objective: to transform the perspective of those who support business development, inviting them to stop adapting people to tools and instead begin adapting tools to people.

3. The Problem Addressed

According to Dini and Stumpo (2020), in Latin America and the Caribbean, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) account for 99.5% of the business sector and generate nearly 60% of formal productive employment. This concentration of businesses highlights the importance of working with this sector, given that any strategy aimed at strengthening MSMEs has the potential to significantly impact job creation and the regional economy.

Likewise, Luaces and Gulasan (2025) note that, within this ecosystem, 49% of women have started their own businesses, driven primarily by the need for higher income (72%), economic independence (39%), and savings for specific goals (37%). This distribution of motivations suggests that, for most women entrepreneurs, starting a business is not driven by a calling or the identification of a market opportunity, but rather by the need to address family financial gaps.

This aspect is reflected in the GEM study (2025), which indicates that 86% of women entrepreneurs in Latin America and the Caribbean do so out of necessity rather than opportunity. This pattern is concerning because it limits these businesses' capacity for innovation, growth, and sustainability; they have less room to take strategic risks, invest in technology, or expand, leaving them trapped in cycles of business subsistence.

On the other hand, according to the Women's Coordination Office (2025), Bolivia has one of the highest rates of female participation in economic activity in Latin America: more than 60% of women of working age participate in the labor market, mostly in informal conditions and with limited access to quality business support services, formal financing, or social protection.

In response to this issue, the TEA WEEB project sought to promote the economic growth of women-led micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises in Bolivia, , by strengthening their capacities so they can improve their ventures/businesses and become a driver of formal employment and stability—as they are a key component of Bolivia's economic growth.

Against this backdrop, upon completion of the TEA WEEB project, a structural problem was identified that goes beyond economic indicators: traditional business development programs have been designed based on impersonal and universal principles. They diagnose problems and apply standard solutions without considering the personal, family, and cultural context from which each female entrepreneur makes her decisions. The result is a persistent gap between the support available and the reality of those who need it, which limits the sustained impact of these interventions.

4. The Solution

To address this issue, between 2022 and 2026, the TEA WEEB project implemented a business-strengthening strategy in the cities of La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, through a consortium between the IES Foundation and CECI Bolivia, with financial support from Global Affairs Canada. The IES Foundation was responsible for business advisory services and network strengthening, while CECI Bolivia led the advocacy and participation components.

The core of the initiative was the "Tú-Consultorio Empresarial" methodology: a fully personalized, one-on-one mentoring model that places the individual—not the business—at the center of the process. Each case began with a diagnostic session aimed at understanding each woman entrepreneur's vision of success, objectives, and current reality, followed by sessions scheduled according to her availability, during which tools and strategies tailored to her specific context were developed.

At the same time, more than 100 networking events were organized under the brands "Legendarias," "Más que un taller," and "Conectadas," designed with concrete and tangible objectives: to connect women entrepreneurs with other women entrepreneurs, with suppliers, and with key players in the ecosystem. Collaboration was coordinated with the Bolivian Chamber of Women Entrepreneurs (CAMEBOL), the Network of Women Entrepreneurs, and municipal governments.

Throughout the entire implementation process, the consultant maintained an active listening approach that went beyond technical indicators. Attention to family contexts, motivations, support networks, and the daily tensions between business and personal life made it possible to identify recurring patterns that conventional assessments fail to capture. This systematic observation, validated over four years, led to the publication, *Beyond the Obvious: Viewing Businesses Through the Eyes of Those Who Sustain Them* (IES Foundation, 2026).

The document proposes an analytical framework of 18 factors that influence business decision-making, grouped into four categories: structural and relational factors; personal and environmental factors; financial and autonomy factors; and psychological and identification factors. Its purpose is to transform the perspective of those who design and implement business support programs, inviting them to stop adapting people to tools and instead begin adapting tools to people.

5. Results

The implementation of the TEA WEEB project yielded significant quantitative and qualitative results:

- 507 female entrepreneurs received counseling in the cities of La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, with an average of 5 sessions per case.
- 6,538 jobs impacted by the counseling: 2,059 direct and 4,479 indirect.
- 98.03% of participants reported improvements in their business management; 96.32% noted growth in their companies; and 96.63% reported greater confidence in their management.

An independent study by 60 Decibels (2024) evaluated the effects of the Tú-Consultorio Empresarial methodology on a representative sample and revealed that 78% of the businesswomen reported an improvement in their quality of life; 85% reported improvements in their business outlook and 86% in their management; 86% noted greater self-confidence and 79% a greater sense of independence; and 90% indicated that their ability to seek guidance when needed has increased—a key indicator for business sustainability beyond direct support.

On a qualitative level, the main outcome is the systematization of the project's lessons learned in the document *Beyond the Obvious: Viewing Businesses Through the Eyes of Those Who Sustain Them* (IES Foundation, 2026), which constitutes a contribution to the field of gender-sensitive business development and is freely available to organizations, consultants, and support institutions.

6. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The TEA WEEB project offers concrete lessons for organizations that design and implement gender-sensitive business support programs:

Putting the individual at the center of the support process is not a rhetorical principle; it is a methodological decision that transforms the entire process. It involves actively listening to what women entrepreneurs need—not what the advisor assumes they need—and adapting the tools to their realities, without judging or imposing ideal profiles. One key question that proved particularly revealing is: "By choosing this, what are you giving up?" Understanding that opportunity cost means understanding each female entrepreneur's hierarchy of values.

Likewise, integrating personal life and business into a single analysis is essential: a business does not operate in a vacuum but is anchored in a home, a family, and a body. Recognizing and valuing practical learning—the "invisible curriculum" forged out of necessity—on the same level as formal education significantly broadens our understanding of women entrepreneurs' actual capabilities.

The project's key finding confirms that forcing women entrepreneurs into rigid frameworks—designed without considering their contexts, schedules, caregiving responsibilities,

and priorities—leads to mutual frustration, program dropout, and limited sustained impact. Standardized training programs that ignore women's time constraints and impose idealized entrepreneurial profiles have consistently proven ineffective.

For organizations wishing to replicate this approach, the following is recommended: (i) invest time in gaining a deep understanding of the target audience before designing any tools; (ii) promote genuine diversity in collective spaces, as innovation arises from constructive friction among different sectors, sizes, and perspectives; and (iii) broaden the perspective on financing beyond the formal banking system, recognizing the "economy of trust" as an equally legitimate and complex financial system.

The analytical framework of *Beyond the Obvious: Viewing Businesses Through the Eyes of Those Who Sustain Them* does not offer a single path, but rather a compass attuned to the traveler's position. Impact is measured when the entrepreneur, following the support process, can clearly state: "Now I see the forces at play, and now I choose."

7. References

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