

DESPERATELY SEEKING: A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Why we need a shared understanding of how to unfold the potential of social innovation in order to better understand how social innovation leads to social change.

Jürgen Howaldt / Josef Hochgerner

The development of a theoretically sound concept is an important challenge to unfold the potential of social innovation. Defining social innovation as a new combination or figuration of social practices allows integrating the many different (and sometimes conflicting) meanings of social innovation and offers a new perspective on the multiplicity of the concept of social innovation. This also offers the opportunity for a better understanding of the relationship of social and technological innovation and lays the foundation for further scientific research.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON INNOVATION

The importance of social innovation for successfully addressing the social, economic, political and environmental challenges of the 21st century has been recognised not only within the Europe 2020 Strategy but also on a global scale. There is a growing consensus among practitioners, policy makers and the research community that technological innovations alone are not capable of overcoming the social and economic challenges modern societies are facing. The global mapping of social innovation initiatives uncovers countless approaches and successful initiatives that illustrate the strengths and potentials of social innovations in the manifold areas of social integration through education and poverty reduction, in establishing sustainable patterns of consumption, or in coping with demographic change. At the same time, social innovations are gaining in importance not only in relation to social integration and equal opportunities, but also in respect to the innovative ability and future sustainability of society as a whole (see article „Social Innovation on the Rise“)

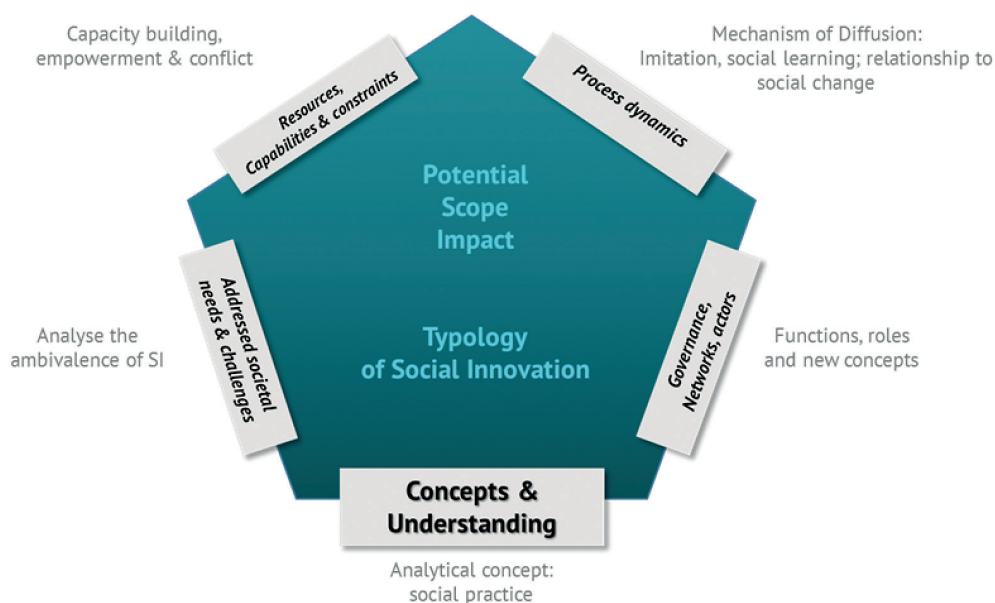
A LONG HISTORY OF DISCUSSION

The term social innovation can be traced back to the early 19th century, long before technological-economic connotations determined the common understanding of innovation. Lacking a theoretically mature definition, it was first mainly related to the socialist revolution. Later it became associated with social reforms taking place especially in the areas of education and work [1]. At the beginning of the 20th century, a new meaning of the term emerged: *Social innovation as the advent or adoption of a new behaviour or a new practice*. These practices encompass all areas of society, such as gender relations, formal and informal education, management, governance as well as everyday life, established habits and cultural customs. Recently the term served as a *universal label* for any social phenomenon and process of change.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS MEET AN UNDERDEVELOPED CONCEPT

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that the global mapping revealed an underdeveloped status of conceptualisation and institutionalisation. There is no shared understanding of social innovation (including a clear differentiation from other concepts such as social entrepreneurship or technological innovation). A plethora of vastly diverging subject matters and problem dimensions as well as expectations for resolving them are subsumed under the heading 'social innovation' without making distinctions between different social and economic meanings, the conditions governing its inception, its genesis and diffusion, and without clearly distinguishing it from other forms of innovation.

Thus, on the one hand a *broad spectrum of social innovations* is present in different policy fields. On the other hand, all policy field reports of the SI DRIVE project notify an unclear



The five key dimensions of social innovation

understanding and call for conceptual clarification of the concept. Policy field related documents of public authorities such as the European Commission, the United Nations, the OECD, the World Bank, etc. often even do not refer to social innovations (exceptions are Horizon 2020 documents as well as publications of some DGs).

A DEFINITION BASED ON SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORY

Inspired by the increasing political and public interest in the concept, the *international scientific debate has gained momentum throughout the last years* [2]. Against the background of a largely neglected theoretical conceptual discussion and the implied conceptual weakness of the notion, aspirations to stimulate an interdisciplinary discourse are on the rise. At the same time, there is an increase in attempts to systematically differentiate between research streams, to strengthen the different perspectives theoretically, and to establish social innovation as an analytical concept with a well-defined research subject.

With the aim to develop a theoretically sound concept of social innovation the SI DRIVE project focusses on *social practices* as the central object of analysis. Taking its cue from Schumpeters basic definition of innovation, *social innovation* is seen as a *new combination of social practices* in certain areas of action or social contexts. What distinguishes social innovations from other manifestations of social change is that they are driven by certain actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices. An

innovation is therefore social to the extent that it is socially accepted and diffused in society or certain societal sub-areas and ultimately becomes institutionalized as new social practice. Just like any innovation social innovation does not necessarily provide impact that is 'good' for all or 'socially desirable' in an extensive and normative sense [3].

Based on this definition it was possible to develop *five key dimensions*, which fundamentally affect the potential of social innovations, their scope, and their impact. Starting from social practices as the central object of analysis the pentagram of the five key dimensions summarises the key dimensions. It helps to understand the complexity and ambivalence of innovation and to take a strict scientific approach of looking at and analysing social innovations throughout their life cycles, from ideation and intentions to actual implementation and impact. *Impact* may be discerned quite inconsistently (ranging from 'good' to 'bad') by different social groups, strata, or generations [4]. The pentagram structure was the basis to apply the social innovation concept in theoretical and empirical research to all sectors of society (public, private business, and civil society) as well as to European and other world regions.

The advantage of this kind of approach to elaborate a general theory is that it gives leeway to integrate main elements to describe social innovations: eco-system, diffusion and imitation, combining different policy fields, policy (top-down) and grassroots (bottom-up) driven initiatives, system related/integrated, system complimentary or subsidiary initiatives, taking advantage of technological developments, etc.

A SHARED UMBRELLA DEFINITION

Searching for “practices” allows to cover a broad spectrum of social innovations in different policy fields and world regions, including even including even initiatives which are not explicitly called social innovations. At the same time the concept helps to understand how social innovations procure new practices (e.g., policy instruments, new forms of cooperation and organization). Particular methods, processes and regulations are developed and/or adopted by citizens, users, beneficiaries, customers, entrepreneurs, politicians etc. in order to meet social demands and to resolve societal challenges better than by existing practices. From this perspective, the research focuses on analysing the process of invention, implementation (introduction to a context of use), diffusion and institutionalisation of new social practices in different areas of social action.

governance models, addressed societal needs and challenges, resources, capabilities and various constraints.

At large, social innovations aim at activating, fostering, and utilising the innovation potential of the whole society. Involving target groups and empowering beneficiaries, increasing their capacities to meet social needs and giving them ‘agency’ is an indispensable component of social innovation. Thereby various forms of user involvement emerge, such as the development or improvement of the

Taking its cue from Schumpeters basic definition of innovation, social innovation is seen as a new combination of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts.

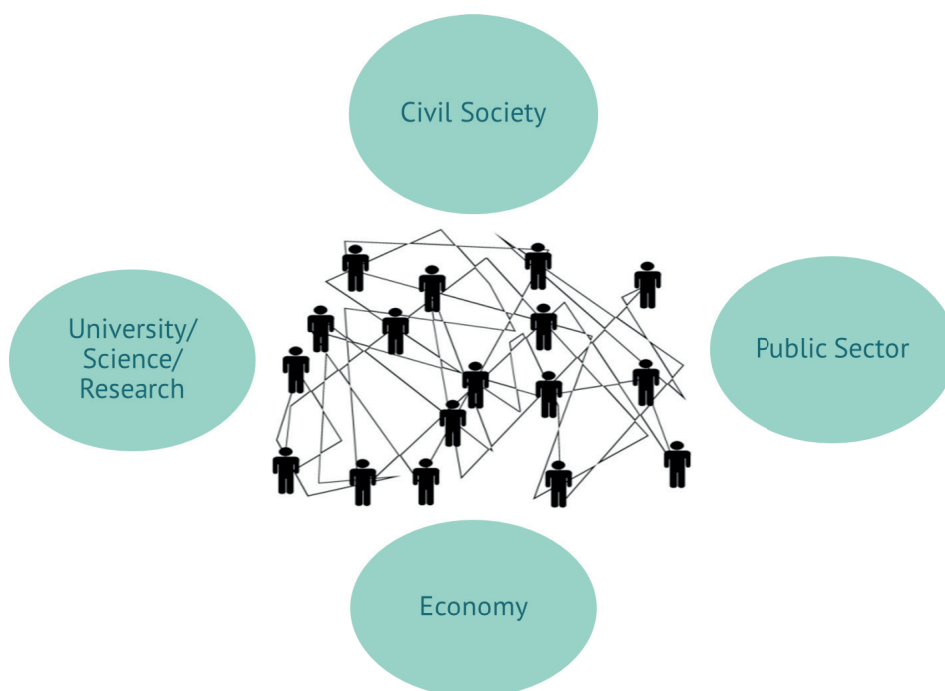
SOCIAL INNOVATION – A JOINT FORCE

Social innovations in a sense of new practices are *omnipresent* and appear in a variety of forms *changing the manner in which we live together*. Thereby, a constructive partnership between societal sectors is a very important factor in order to reap the full potential of social innovation. Social innovations are first and foremost *ensemble performances, requiring interaction between many actors*. Considering the complexity of innovation processes we need to focus on the cross-sector dynamics of social innovation and the diversity of actors and their roles and functions in the innovation process. Player often interact in networks etc.) across boundaries, yet still they are subject to limiting or conducive framework conditions such as

solution, provision of feedback, suggestions and knowledge, onto the adaptation of the social innovation idea for personalized solutions. Against this background cross-sector cooperation and empowerment appear as indispensable features of a concept of social innovation that is ready to take substantially part in a comprehensive innovation policy.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES ENABLING NEW SOCIAL PRACTICES

While in many social innovation initiatives and practice fields technologies do not play an important role (e.g. integrated care; income support, reduction of educational disadvantages) in others technology is essential (E/M



Health; Repairing, Re-using and Recycling). Even though in different practice fields and social innovation initiatives the role of technology varies greatly, the possibility to take advantage of new technologies for tackling social problems often motivates or triggers action.

Overall new – but also the re-use of old and basic – technologies may offer new opportunities for social innovation. Technology can be, an enabler, an instrument, a supporter, a form of substantiated knowledge, and a prerequisite for diffusion. Especially the potential of social

Developing a theoretically grounded concept of social innovation is key to create an integrative theory of socio-technical innovation.

media and mobile technologies happen to drive social innovations. In this regard novelties in technology can be a crucial to spark off new social practices. Yet looking at the same issue from the other side, in many cases new technologies are made viable and effective by the implementation of cooperative practices shaped by participating collectives.

This underlines the enormous relevance of social innovations concerning effective measures (including the application and utilisation of new technologies) to cope with, e.g., climate change: Policies for energy management (less energy consumption and more efficient energy supply) rely on technologies. However, their deployment will hardly be feasible and effectual if practices (behavior, norms, values) were to remain invariant. The SI-DRIVE concept of social innovation, based on social practices, helps to better comprehend the differences between social and technological innovation as well as to recognise that they are closely interlinked and support each other.

CONCLUSION

Developing a theoretically grounded concept of social innovation is key to create an *integrative theory of socio-technical innovation*. Such a new paradigm considers social innovation not only a precondition for, a concomitant phenomenon with or a mere consequence of technological innovations that should compensate for shortcomings in policy areas beyond the established RTD (Research and Technology Development) policies.

The great challenge for contemporary innovation research lies in analysing its potential in the search for new social practices enhancing a secure future evolution and allow people to live “a richer and more fulfilled human life” [5, p. 108]. SI-DRIVE made an important contribution by developing and testing a comprehensive and analytical definition which describes social innovation as a new combination or figuration of social practices.

This definition of social innovation allows integrating the many different (and sometimes conflicting) meanings of social innovation and offers a new perspective on the diversity of the concept of social innovation. Empirical research results of SI-DRIVE demonstrate that this approach integrates the manifold meanings of social innovation under a shared umbrella. Moreover, it leads to a common notion and guidance for scientific research, funding policies and practical utilisation in practice on society’s micro-, meso- and macro levels.

REFERENCES

- [1] Godin, Benoit (2012): Social Innovation: Utopias of Innovation from c.1830 to the Present. Project on the Intellectual History of Innovation. Working Paper No. 11. Internet: http://www.csiic.ca/PDF/SocialInnovation_2012.pdf [Last accessed 08.07.2015].
- [2] Ayob, Noor-seha/ Teasdale, Simon/ Fagan, Kylie (2016): How Social Innovation ‘Came to Be’: Tracing the Evolution of a Contested Concept. In: *Journal of Social Policy*, 45 (4), pp. 635–653.
- [3] Howaldt, Jürgen/ Schwarz, Michael (2010): Social Innovation: Concepts, research fields and international trends. IMO international monitoring. Internet: http://www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/Medienpool/small_publications/Doc_1289_IMO_Trendstudie_Howaldt_Schwarz_englische_Version.pdf [Last accessed 05.09.2017].
- [4] Hochgerner, Josef (2013). Social innovation and the advancement of the general concept of innovation. In: Ruiz-Viñals, Carmen/ Parra-Rodríguez, Carmen (Eds.): *Social innovation*. Routledge: Oxford and New York, pp. 12–28.
- [5] Rorty, Richard (2007): *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Philosophical Papers. Volume 4. University of Cambridge.