

ACTORS AND ROLES IN SOCIAL INNOVATION

The article explores different actor types and roles in social innovation processes. It discovers which actors take over the role of developers, promoters, supporters and knowledge providers. A second focus is on users and the question how they are involved in the development of social innovations.

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INTRODUCTION

Actors and the social networks in which they are involved are governed by modes of interaction, dynamics of power and the social, cultural, and institutional frame they are embedded in. Modes of interaction describe how decision-making and leadership are managed in social innovations and how this relates to self-regulation, co-creation and policy-making.

Transformations in governance are an influential context factor for social innovations that are developed by different actors. The opening of political processes and participatory approaches give market and civil society actors leeway for developing their ideas for social initiatives. It is evident that social innovation initiatives engage a wide variety of actors and networks in a diversity of roles and functions, which is part of what allows the initiatives to respond to social problems. Based on SI-DRIVE's empirical findings, this article highlights actors and roles in social innovation processes.

A VARIETY OF ACTORS AND ROLES

Social innovations are initiated in and provided by all parts of society, including public sector bodies and companies, NGOs and other actors of civil society [1]. Public sector actors can act as promoters of social innovations, providing resources such as funding, increased support for networking, capacity building and digital technology, or through new legal frameworks, commissioning as well as by applying research and working alongside social innovation. Companies engage in social innovation initiatives by developing new business models, providing specialised competences, and resources such as hard infrastructure. Civil society is a source of social innovation. It includes networks of political activists who are engaged in a wide range of issues, such as human rights,

marginalized groups, sustainability, gender equality etc. Despite local roots, strength of civil society lies in cellular organisation not centrally governed or coordinated. Civil society stands for key actors and promoters of social innovation, and their mode of organisation can be considered a social innovation itself as it allows the formation of social movements and other innovative social engagements.

Actors may have more than one role in an initiative which is subject to change over time.

Terstriep et al. conceptualise different roles for actors within social innovations [2]. They offer a typology that has also been applied in the quantitative analysis of this article. It is distinguished between four major categories of actors, namely developer, promoter, supporter and knowledge provider which come from the public and private sector as well as civil society, including NGOs and NPOs. It is important to acknowledge that no clear demarcation between the categories exists, they are rather characterised by blurred boundaries. Moreover, actors may have more than one role in an initiative which is subject to change over time.

Developers are the inner core of social innovation initiatives, initiating and operating the solution. These actors are seen as being able to translate knowledge about unsatisfactory circumstances into an innovative idea in order to improve the situation. Furthermore, these actors have the ability to not only invent but also to develop and implement the idea in order to make it a social innovation. **Promoters** of social innovations are involved in social innovation processes as partners that provide infrastructural equipment, funding, and connect initiatives to superior policy programs. In addition, **supporters** refer to actors facilitating the spread and diffusion of social innovations through, for example, dissemination or lobbying activities. Accounting for the

importance of knowledge as key resource in social innovation processes, a further category is devoted to actors that provide special knowledge relevant to spur and enrich the development process (*knowledge providers*).

social innovations. Distinct from technological innovation, social innovations often originate from grass roots of civil society, and users respectively beneficiaries might replace research institutes as knowledge providers.



Actors engaged in Social Innovation Initiatives (multiple responses; % of cases)

TYPES OF ACTORS

Empirical evidence underpins the variety of actors involved in social innovation, as the analysis of the EU-funded SI-DRIVE project illustrates. A central task of SI-DRIVE was to map and analyse more than 1000 social innovation initiatives [3]. With a share of 46 % and 45 % of the mapped initiatives, NPOs/NGOs and public bodies respectively are core actors involved, followed by private companies (37%). Being involved in only about 15 % of the mapped social innovation initiatives, research institutes tend to play a subordinated role (see figure on actors engaged in social innovation initiatives). Partly, the lack of involvement by research organisations can be explained by specifics of

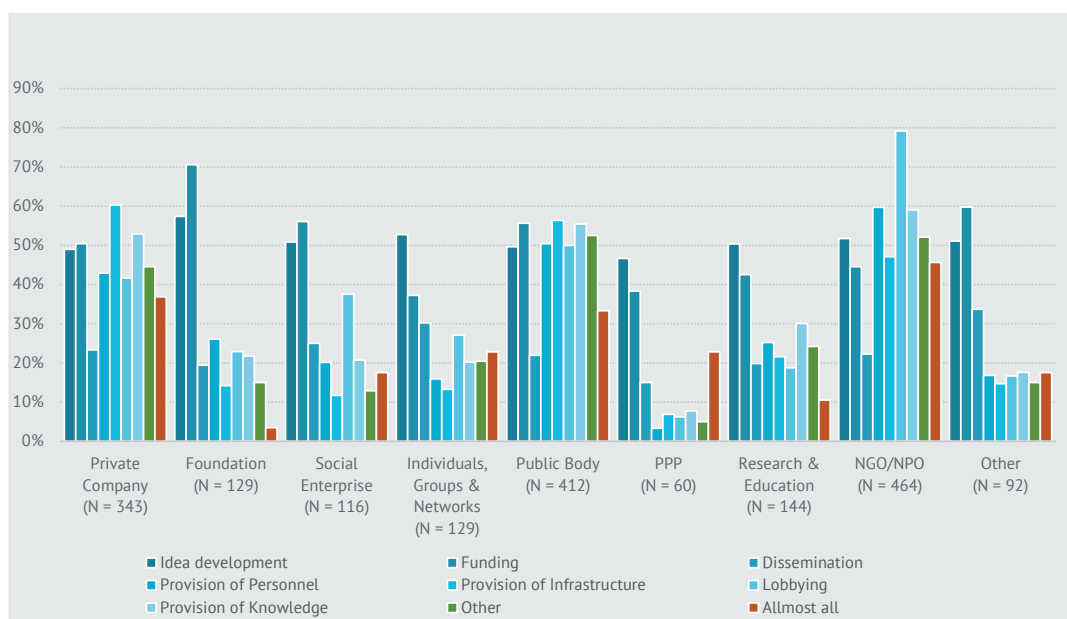
FUNCTIONS OF ACTORS

Detailing the different functions according to the actors allows for the identification of specialisation patterns (see figure on Actors' functions by type of actor). Results indicate that private companies' function as provider of infrastructures (60%) clearly exceeds their other support activities. Although on a slightly lower level, likewise, this applies to public bodies (56%), whose function as funder (56%) and knowledge provider (55%) is equally marked. Foundations' primary function is associated to funding social innovation

initiatives (71%) and to idea development (57%). Individuals, groups and networks' support is on idea development (53%), as is the case for research organisations (50%). NGOs/NPOs have taken up the function of lobbying, which exceeds their other activities with a share of 80%. Social enterprises' focus is on idea development (56%) and funding (51%).

ROLES OF ACTORS

The role as a central developer is foremost assigned to NGOs/NPOs (60%). Public bodies (45%) and private companies (38%) rank second and third as central developers. All other actors can be ascribed a less central role as initiators and operators of social innovation initiatives. Public bodies take

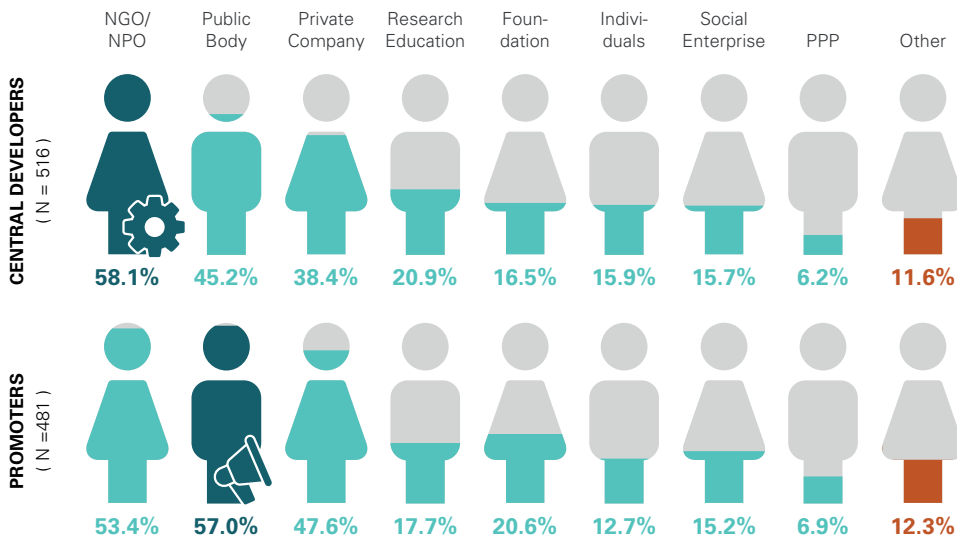


Actors' functions by type of actor

the lead as promoter of social innovations (57%), followed by NGOs/NPOs (53%), and private companies (47%). Research organisations, foundations, individuals, groups and networks as well as social enterprises and public-private-partnerships are less influential (see figure on central developers and promoters).

success of the solution strongly depends on users' acceptance and active participation. On the contrary, the category "users as co-creators" refers to users' direct involvement in the development and/or improvement of the social innovation as one partner of many stakeholders. This category is clearly to differentiate from *users as innovators*, where the users

are the initiators and core developers of the solution, while in later phases of the innovation process the social innovation may have been adopted by other organisations to advance its implementation. The share of users as innovators (13%) supports the insight that individuals are involved in initiating social innovations. Users as adapters, i.e. personalisation of readily available solutions, have been identified in 10% of the cases. Users as funders are only of minor relevance.



Central developers and promoters by type of actor (% of cases)

USER INVOLVEMENT

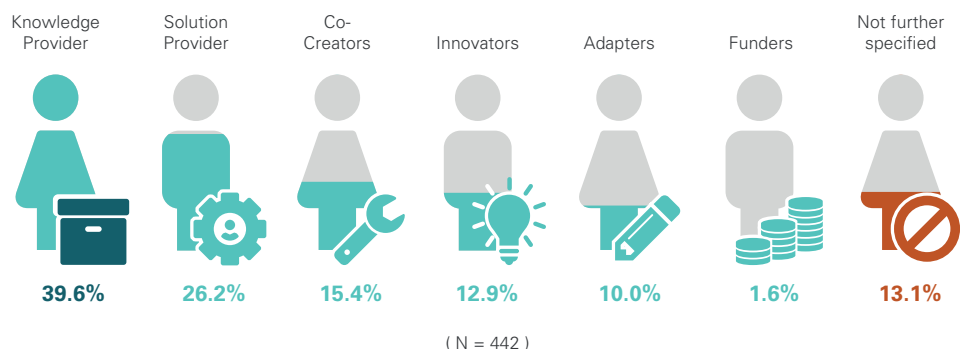
Users are involved in the development or improvement of the solution in about half of the mapped cases (N=442). *Users as knowledge providers* is the most common form of user involvement (40% of the cases involving users). More precisely, users provide knowledge throughout the social innovation process in form of dialogues, feedback, testing and experimentation, suggestions for further improvement as well as tutoring. These findings correspond with the observation that users have a substantial role in social innovation processes that goes beyond the mere utilisation of the solution provided by others. Moreover, it suggests that social innovation initiatives rely on users' specific knowledge and feedback to meet their needs properly.

This is further substantiated by the involvement of *users as solution providers*, which ranks second (26%), and *users as co-creators* which, at some distance, ranks third (15%). Concerning the former, users are not part of the solution's development process, but provide the readily available solution to other users. Forasmuch, it can be assumed that the

CONCLUSION

Social innovations are characterised by a wide range of actors involved, who may have various roles which fluctuate across different innovations and the development process of a single innovation. In fact, as social innovation research has progressed, we have seen the identification of an increasing number of actors, suggesting that social innovation emerges and develops within a complex and dynamic ecosystem. This ecosystem is comprised of both supporting and constraining factors and social innovation actors both enact existing practices and attempt to enact any new or modified ones.

Spurred by individuals, the driving force or inner core of social innovation initiatives can be labelled as a "trio" of



Form of user involvement in Social Innovation (multiple responses, % of cases)

NGOs/NPOs, public bodies and private companies. Schematised specialisations are problem identification based on socially relevant knowledge (individuals, NPO/NGO), the set-up of pilots and projects as well as the provision of resources to coordinate the social innovation processes (public body), as well as infrastructure provision (private companies). The inner core takes over tasks related to the crucial development of a social innovation initiative. A wide spectrum of actors can take over the role of promoters. Being temporarily involved, they provide specialised competences and resources to address challenges and/or problems arising in due course of the innovation process.

Cross-sector collaborations emerge as a common pattern in initiatives that are developed in alliances, while actors fulfil specialised functions that allow for taking advantage of complementarities and synergies. In this respect, it is important to note that boundaries between the functions

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can be blurred: NPOs/NGOs represent the civil society and provide problem identification and solutions based on societally relevant knowledge; public bodies are able to set up programmes and projects and have the resources to coordinate social innovation processes; private companies provide infrastructures. All of these specialisations are equally relevant for a successful social innovation initiative. Besides their primary function, NGOs/NPOs, for example, engage in lobbying and funding etc., whereas private companies also contribute to idea development and funding. In particular, the strong involvement of private companies illustrates that the progress of social innovation is not restricted solely to social enterprises, but also is relevant for the mainstream business community.

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