

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN SOUTH ASIA: AN EMERGING ALTERNATE DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM

Can social innovation offer a pathway to guide the future of development strategies in the South Asian region? This paper attempts to unpack this question by exploring the emerging realms and types of social innovations and the potential and challenges of the same towards transforming the marginalities of poor and marginalized communities.

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THE REGION

South Asia as a region is increasingly gaining importance in the international geo-political scenario. Some of the commonly included countries in this region are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. The region is characterized by great diversity and specificities vary within each country in the region.

Within the diversities, multi-dimensional forms of poverty emerge as a crucial characteristic and a key concern in the region. Based on recent data for specific sub regions, the incidence of poverty is seen as highest in South and South-West Asia (at 36%), followed by South-East Asia (21%), East and North-East Asia (13%), and North and Central Asia (8.2%) [1].

SOCIAL INNOVATION: AN EMERGING PARADIGM

Social Innovation in the region is still an emergent field and the context of poverty and deprivations drives social innovation efforts in the region. The school of thought on 'JUGAAD INNOVATIONS' traces the historicity of social innovations in the region as emerging from immediate and survival needs of people, termed 'Jugaad' in India. In contemporary times, social innovation is slowly emerging as an important paradigm where social value creation becomes the primary objective. However, the term social innovation is variously and interchangeably used with development and development practice and is at the crossroads of various realms including society, economy and technology. Social entrepreneurship and start-ups are also key emerging innovation realms in the region.



South Asian Region

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE: STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

According to Mulgan et al. [2], social innovation is understood as new ideas and activities that address unmet social needs. Implicit within this understanding is the potential of social innovation as a process of social change especially within the context of poverty, marginalization and multiple forms of deprivation. Different countries in the South Asian region have their own social innovation landscape and have developed their specific social innovation strategies. As evident from SI-DRIVE's global mapping of various

social innovation initiatives in India and other countries in the region, tackling poverty and multiple marginalities has been the primary focus. SI-DRIVE's understanding of the key dimensions of Social Innovation including 'governance, networks, actors and their roles, process dynamics, resources, drivers and barriers' [3] along with the contextual understanding formed the basis of the mapping exercise. The key practice fields as revealed through this study and the author's grassroots engagements include among others – Financial Inclusion and Micro Enterprise Development, Equal access to Resources, Social Mobilization and Livelihoods Promotion, Alternate Education, Social Action with Marginalized Groups, Women's Collective Agency Development and Empowerment, Inclusive Health Practices, Disaster Preparedness, and Improvement of Quality of Life Initiatives. Community organisation and participation of local people in grassroots innovation has been a major process in community led strategies. There has also been a focus on technology and design innovation for improving quality of life and quality of services. From the understanding of social innovation practice fields and projects/organizations, it has also been observed that organizations which are transgressing both social and economic needs is a model that is increasingly emerging, as they are trying to address larger social challenges of poverty; inequality and simultaneously trying to organize the poor and marginalized for their rights.

One of the success stories in social innovation leading to poverty reduction and empowerment of marginalized communities in the region (with a focus on women) over the past 30 years has been the development of micro-finance

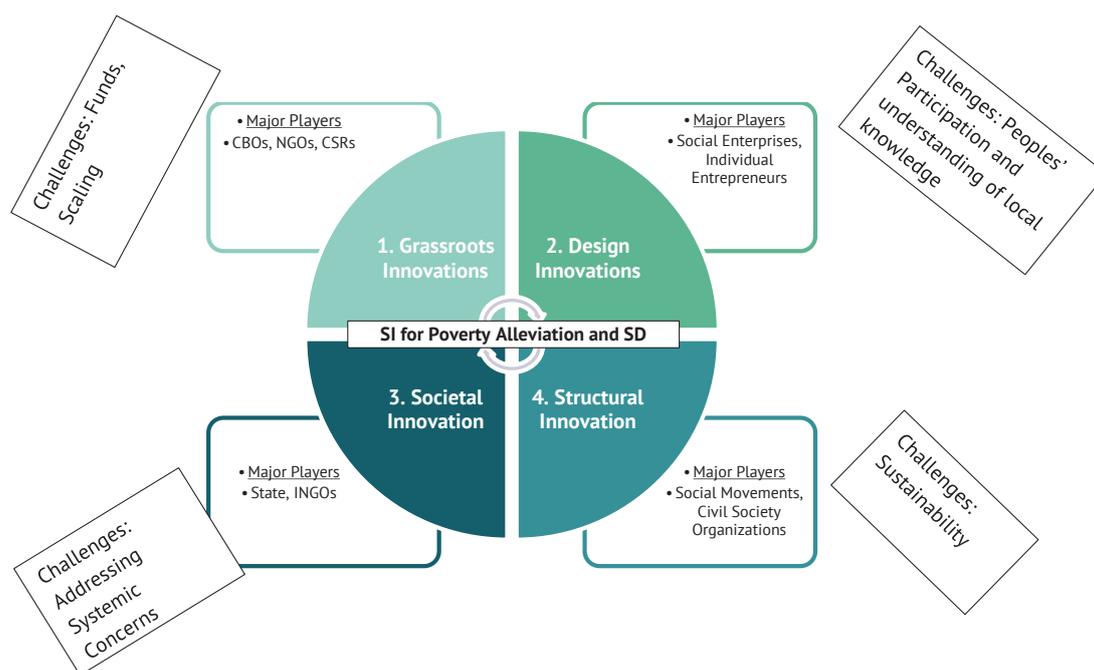
institutions (MFIs) and the formation of self-help groups (SHGs) as institutional forms of poor that facilitate financial inclusion and social empowerment. SEWA in India and Grameen Bank in Bangladesh are some of the examples of the impact from the above-mentioned innovation strategies.

EMERGING TYPES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social innovations in the region can be broadly categorized into four major types:

The emergence and types of social innovation in the region as located within the four broad types is delineated below:

- 1. Grassroots Innovation/Community led Innovation** – primarily focuses on the processes of intervention in addressing socio, economic and political problems at the local level, e.g. water unavailability in rural communities through peoples' participation and community led solutions.
- 2. Design Innovation** – focuses primarily on the outcome of an intervention through improving or designing a new product or service through new or better technology/ design, e.g. internet based solutions for marketing of farm produce. Such innovations also often follow a hybrid model combining social and business objectives.
- 3. Societal Innovations** – primarily focuses on changing both the process and product/service for tackling large and severe societal challenges like poverty, illiteracy etc.
- 4. Structural Innovation** – focuses on changing the overall innovation environment in addressing the larger structural inequities and exclusion, e.g. gender/caste/race atrocities.



Apart from the above, there are many overlapping innovations and increasingly there is a trend towards greater degree of overlapping or hybrid innovations.

CONCLUSION: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN TRANSFORMING MARGINALITIES

Since South Asian countries are highly populated having a large number of people staying below the poverty line, people centricism in innovation offers a vision for impacting lives, especially of the marginalized groups. However, there are many challenges including funding, scaling opportunities, existing societal and structural inequities. Another important roadblock is the lack of concrete South – South co-operation in the region. There is a need to not only tackle the societal problems at the level of each country but also at the regional level with renewed mutual trust and co-operation. There is also a need for greater convergence and building cross sectoral alliances. Within such specific constraints, social innovations still offer a great promise to guide and build the future of change strategies in the region. The future vision for social innovation in the region is, therefore, ‘People Centric Social Innovation’, which is transformative in its approach and aims to address societal needs by centering on the concerns of marginalized people, their context and strategies to address them. Thus, grassroots innovations that lead bottom-up solutions for sustainable development responding to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved is the other key direction for future responses within people centric social innovation.

The future vision for social innovation in the region is, therefore, ‘People Centric Social Innovation’, which is transformative in its approach and aims to address societal needs by centering the concerns of marginalized people, their context and strategies to address them.

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