

TACKLING POVERTY BY CONFRONTING SOCIETY'S POVERTY OF IMAGINATION

SOCIAL INNOVATION CAN HELP TACKLE POVERTY USING ITS CROSS-CUTTING AND COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Poverty reduction is literally the number one Sustainable Development Goal agreed by virtually all countries and the United Nations to be achieved between 2016 and 2030. Social innovation has a critical role to play because poverty, despite significant reductions between country averages from 2000 to 2015, remains the major constraint to successful sustainable development. Moreover, social innovation's cross-cutting and collaborative approach is precisely what is needed to tackle the highly complex and interrelated challenges that poverty presents.

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POVERTY IS NOT JUST ABOUT MONEY

In many developing countries, absolute poverty is measured as not having enough money and other resources to survive. In developed countries like Europe, poverty is not just having a low income but is also about being left out of mainstream society. Hence the 'poor' may not want for the basic survival needs of life, but if their income or circumstances mean they are not able to participate in society's normal activities, they become marginalised and vulnerable, which means their lives are also poor socially, culturally and economically. Poverty is thus highly complex and, especially in developing countries, is often inextricably linked to environmental stress and climate change as well as gender and power relations.

Given the multi-dimensional approaches that social innovation offers which can integrate across sectors and build collaboration between multiple actors, it is often uniquely placed to find and implement integrated solutions to poverty. Social innovations generally find a significant role for civil society, in addition to public bodies and businesses. However, those that specifically tackle poverty tend to do this even more, as well as draw on a richer ecosystem of partners with very large numbers of 'other' actors, such as foundations, social enterprises, informal groups, social partnership institutions, schools, charities, religious groups, research and university institutions, cooperatives, networks and individuals. Indeed, many of these are typically very close to the poor and vulnerable

as they have greater local and contextual knowledge and are more nimble than more mainstream actors they act, in effect, as 'trusted third parties'. This rich ecosystem characterising social innovation for tackling poverty can indeed help reduce poverty as it confronts the poverty of society's imagination when it does not draw on all society's assets and actors.

THE PREDICAMENT OF POVERTY

Basic questions need to be asked about how the social needs of the poor are articulated. On the one hand, the poor typically find themselves in a condition of overall relative powerlessness, whilst on the other hand the poor – and especially the communities in which they live – possess huge potential, resilience and latent ability to be a big part of their own solution. This means there should be less focus just on nitty-gritty 'problem solving' and more on the opportunities open to the poor in their specific context. Thus developing the agency of the poor through awareness raising, advocacy and mobilisation, as much as possible through their own efforts, is critical. However this is not enough. Most social innovations are concerned only to meet immediate needs by increasing the agency and empowerment of beneficiaries, without recognising that typically these are often the symptoms of more structural root causes, which are hardly addressed.

Some successful social innovations tackle these issues, though it takes time and patience. For example, an initiative run by an NGO in very poor areas of northern Ghana saw an opportunity to use the talents of local inhabitants possessing some basic education by training them as so-called 'barefoot' teachers to provide basic literacy and numeracy skills to children in local villages.

However, it was soon realised that one of the keys to this was to work on changing local power structures through painstaking consensus and capacity building, particularly by empowering women in village life. From this, in turn, other complementary innovations are being enabled, such as involving women in local entrepreneurship schemes and supporting local radio stations and media productions as job opportunities for some of the locally educated youth. This example also illustrates the need to address, as far as possible, some of the structural root causes, in this case local power structures and the role of women, in order to meet a range of social needs. [1]

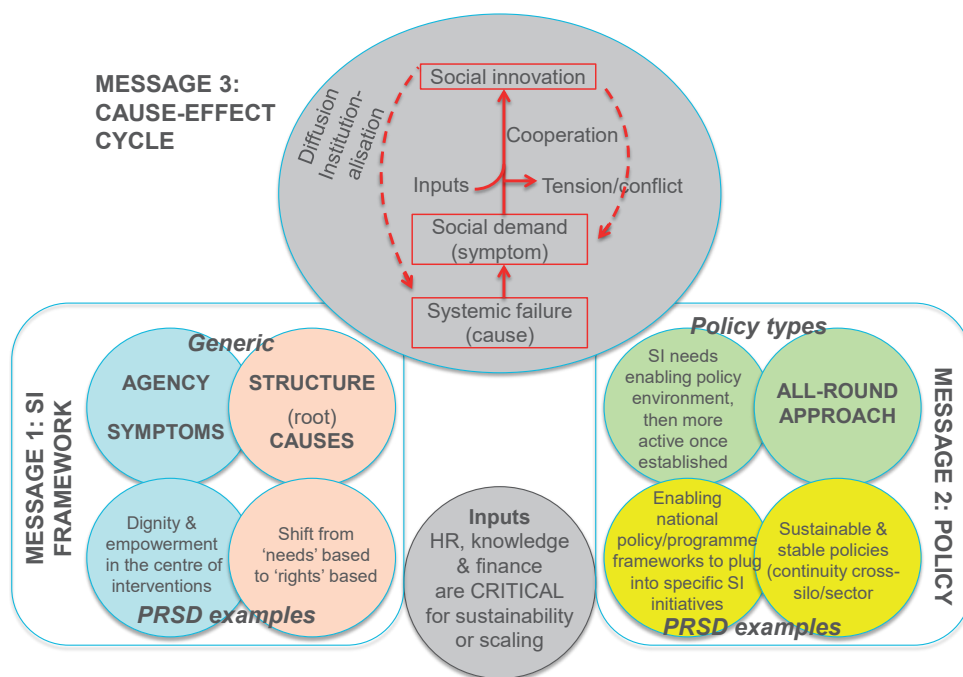
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their family's or their community's future. [2] This is not the traditional 'poverty trap', normally thought of as a self-reinforcing mechanism which sees the individual sink further into hopelessness through their own lack of effort due to laziness or low intelligence. Instead, it recognises that poor people more than others in society typically have to contend with a highly complex and unpredictable social and economic environment.

This shows the need for structural readjustments, laws, regulations, cross-agency and non-government collaborations, and similar, in addition to directly tackling the symptoms of the pressing need on the ground. The goal should be to make the poor's lives as easy and as simple as possible so they can focus on solving their own problems of scarcity rather than grappling with a complex system that is often not contextually embedded. Other examples include the early 2017 employment tribunal ruling in the UK that Uber must no longer classify drivers as self-employed but instead as employees with the right to receive the national living wage and holiday pay. This legal change considerably simplifies drivers' lives and provides them with more long-term security. An Indian example is the use of ICT to promote the financial inclusion of the poor by simplifying and linking up contextual structures and supports around them through the world's largest biometric ID system. This means that the earlier complex systems of subsidies and

WHAT ACTUALLY IS POVERTY, AND WHAT CAN BE LEARNT TO TACKLE IT?

As shown above, SI-DRIVE's work on the role of social innovation in tackling poverty has shown the importance of improving both the agency of the poor as well as addressing the wider societal structures which typically produce poverty and other social needs in the first place. This is complemented by other recent research showing that the poor in any society have precarious structures within which to live and work so that they typically expend all their effort simply surviving from day to day or week to week, and do not have sufficient time or energy to plan for and invest in their own,



Key messages for poverty reduction and sustainable development

benefits for the poor are instead provided through a one-stop shop with simple identification, both raising awareness of what the poor are entitled to and making it very easy to access their rightful benefits.

KEY MESSAGES IN TACKLING POVERTY

SI-DRIVE partners summarised these and other insights into a number of key messages for poverty reduction and sustainable development (PRSD), as sketched in the diagram.

Inputs of people, knowledge and finance are necessary but not sufficient conditions. It is also important to provide a conducive framework that develops the agency of the poor and marginalised as well as ensuring that the structures that surround them do not increase their burdens or mitigate their efforts. In this context, it is essential to ensure that the poor's dignity is respected and enhanced, and that their basic needs are recognised as 'rights' within

these structures rather than simply needs which may or may not be met. There is a general cause-effect cycle, for example of system failure leading to acute social demands. However, designing approaches to tackle this is complex and difficult due to the mix of actors involved, the conflicts and tensions that arise and the different collaborative innovations needed across the ecosystem. This means the policy framework should take an all-round cross-sector approach, that both enables the poor's and their communities' efforts to have impact, as well as actively supporting promising innovations from a variety of actor constellations.

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