

ROMANIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

Social innovation, both as a notion and as a social practice, is increasingly attracting scholarly attention. The multiplicity of economic, social and technological situations calls for new approaches to the world and new visions of how specialists can intervene in the sphere of life. Thus social innovation has gone beyond the technological and economic field and has become an important factor in the area of social protection. All the transformations that have taken place in the social welfare system have meant that Romania has had to adopt new laws and introduce new practices and techniques for social intervention appropriate to social needs. Innovative elements and professionalised social experiences centred on innovation are present in the relationships between service providers and beneficiaries. The present study shows the concerns of Romanian researchers in analysing the phenomenon of social innovation in the public social assistance system.

Keywords: social innovation; social work; social development

Introduction

The concept of innovation was initially linked to the technical (Stănescu, 2009, p. 23; Vlăsceanu, 1993, p. 301), scientific (Vlăsceanu, 1993, p. 301) and the economic and entrepreneurial (Draker, 1993, p. 27) domains, thus speaking of technological innovation and economic innovation. Recently, there has been a growing concern about the social impact of any new elements adopted by any economic, service or production sector. Thus the concept of social innovation is gaining ground in the concerns of social science practitioners and researchers (Urse, 2009, pp. 42-44).

Under this new aspect of social life and the orientation of research on the development of the set of requirements that enable/stimulate new approaches to

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society and the identification of new methods or mechanisms to respond to social problems, social innovation extends as a necessity to sectors aimed at providing services of a social nature to society, a process that involves new approaches and adaptations through the use of new resources, oriented towards social welfare.

The theme of social innovation is topical, and in the context of multiple challenges (the experience and effects of going through a pandemic, wars in the immediate geographical proximity, the economic crisis generated by these disruptive situations, etc.) shows us the need to innovate (to find and use) new approaches and new operating tools in solving society's problems (implicitly those in the social welfare sphere).

The objective of this article is to show the status/evolution of research and/or actions aimed at social innovation in Romania over the last thirty years. The aim of my paper is to delimit the theoretical framework of social innovation in social care and to identify the existence or not of a perspective of approach, so as to facilitate the orientation of future studies dedicated to social innovation in social protection and to allow specialists concerned with innovation to identify the literature and the themes that have been the subject of research to date. The focus will be on the following items: the volume of articles on social innovation with explicit reference to the Romanian situation addressing specific areas of social protection (including institutions); the Romanian vision of social innovation (whether we can speak of a paradigm of social innovation); concepts and basic ideas of the Romanian approach; issues of legal regulations or references to them with reference to the stimulation of innovation/regulation of social innovation activities.

1. Some Elements on the History of Approaches Leading to Social Innovation in Romania

Prior to 1990 Romania paid attention to issues related to creativity as a condition for development and progress. Even though the focus was on technical creativity and work performance, the effects of creativity and inventiveness, and thus innovation, on society were recognised. Studies aimed at creativity were carried out by Ion Moraru, known for developing the heuristic model for describing the creative process (Purica, 1992, p. 9) and some works on the psychology of creativity. From a psychological approach, M. Zlate presents the human capacity to create (to invent) and to produce what he constructs through thought, anticipating the future and surpassing himself through his achievements (1988, p. 136). The result of creativity (individual or collective) consists of a new idea, method or technical product, and

the sociological perspective is focused on “identifying and analysing the social factors that facilitate or block the production and diffusion of innovation” (Vlăsceanu, 1993, p. 301).

Researchers' concern for social innovation is recent, both in European countries and in Romania (Mihalache, 2009, p. 2015). According to L. G. Stoica, since 2005 the Institute for Quality of Life Research has been running a project aimed at promoting and evaluating social development in Romania. Within this project, the first inter-university research consortium in Romania was formed by the West University of Timișoara, the University of Oradea and the “Babeș-Bolyai” University, coordinated by the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work of the University of Bucharest and the Institute for Quality of Life Research of the Romanian Academy. Subsequently, the University of Pitești, the University “Lucian Blaga” Sibiu, the University “1 December 1918” Alba Iulia, the University “Petre Andrei” Iasi and the University “Andrei Saguna” Constanta joined the project. The results of this project consisted in the elaboration of a course called “Diagnosis of social problems and management of social development programmes/projects” (introduced in the curricula by 11 universities), the publication of a collective volume appreciated as an investigation of the social development paradigm and an encyclopaedia (containing 108 significant terms), a methodological guide oriented to the process of planned development, all centred on the theme of social development. As a result of these studies, researchers at the Institute for Quality of Life Research (ICCV) continued their research with a focus on the field of social innovation. The year 2009 was an occasion to mark academically innovation, being declared by the European Commission as the Year of Creativity and Innovation in Europe (Stoica, 2009, pp. 6-7).

Several studies on social innovation have been collected in a journal of the Institute for Quality of Life Research, the Quality of Life Journal, which published an issue dedicated to social innovation, in the context of a research programme called: “Social innovation as a factor of social-economic development”.

In 2008, the International Conference “Social innovation, factor of socio-economic development” was organised and various research topics were discussed. From the conference agenda, the title “Who are the innovators? Socio-demographic, value and attitudinal correlates of support for social innovation in Romania” by Prof. Sergiu Balțătescu -, that of Cristina Doboș - “Programme and project operation as social innovation”, by researcher Laureana Urse - “Innovation in social sciences and social innovation”, by Prof. dr. Ion Boboc - “The option for innovative strategies in the

strategic management of public, non-profit and political organizations in Romania”, S.G. Sebe - “Analytical Intelligence and Social Innovation”, Jouni Ponnikas, Andra Aldea-Partanen - “Social Innovation and Sustainability”, Daniel Arpinte, “Innovation in Social Services”, and Sorin Mitulescu, “Who promotes educational innovation in Romanian society?” (ICCV old site).

In 2009, issue 1-2 of the journal *Calitatea Vieții* was published, including 22 articles on social innovation in Romanian society: innovative strategies in the strategic management of public organisations, innovation in migration policies, in health systems, education, innovation among young people, innovation in rural areas, in the measurement of poverty and social inclusion, innovation as a factor of social and economic development.

As Cătălin Zamfir (2009) points out, humanity has always been active through social innovations, but concerns for sociological research in this segment are recent. The beginning of the twentieth century is the time of the emphasis on the analysis of innovation, with emphasis on social anthropology, then it penetrated sociology. C. Zamfir identifies nine social moments (contexts) in the approach to social innovation: (1) The global expansion of the West: social and cultural anthropology - the production of innovation in communities between which communication was slow and thus Zamfir speaks of the isolation of innovation in isolated communities (independent developments); for example geographical isolation: America and Australia, England (insular), Europe (global process within the continent); (2) Developed capitalist societies - which were not very interested in social innovation nor sociology; (3) Societies at the “edge of the developed West” - the concern for social innovation strategies emerged rather in underdeveloped countries, concerned with catching up with the development gap with developed countries (result: they modernized); (4) Communist revolutions - with emphasis on designing social construction (building a new type of society); social construction directed by the single party; (5) Transition - in the case of former communist countries there is talk of social reform and reforms in various sectors: political reform, education, health system, etc. (6) The “crisis of the welfare state” - the limits of the welfare state are being reached, the need for a “smaller state” (neoliberalism) is being invoked, the need for “social efficiency” and the promotion of social innovation is growing; (7) An increasingly polarised world (in recent decades); (8) Building a new society: European society - the European Union's programme to build a European society, considered by Zamfir to be an innovative, far-reaching construction (unprecedented); (9) Systemic crisis of the world - in 1972 warning of the onset of crisis (report “Limits to Growth”); 1974 - oil crisis (awareness of economic limits).

The concept of “limitless growth” is replaced by “sustainable development”. Imminent global crisis announced by Immanuel Wallerstein.

2. Social Innovation in Social Work

Against the background of the projected social development paradigm, both the concept and the practice of social innovation are socially contextual, with development also possible through the use of new processes, methods and services. In the sphere of social work (of social protection as a whole), using new practices means responding to new challenges and increasing capacity for social intervention, but also using new methods to address old needs (Hideg & Neamțu, 2019, p. 15).

We find that the themes related to the field of social work/social protection that have been analysed from the perspective of social innovation identified in the reviewed research are related to: the phasing of social innovation in social work (Arpinte, 2009, p. 93), workforce in the context of migration (project management and partnerships for youth actions (Boboc, 2009), social inclusion and social economy as practices of social innovation (Nicolăescu et al., 2011), innovative actions in social work - institutions and services (Hideg & Neamțu, 2019). Studies on the analysis of public administration (Pătrașcu, 2019) or on the role of digital technologies in the development or establishment of social innovation labs (Tîrziu, 2016) are of interest as first topics tangential to social protection.

New elements in the issue of labour migration refer to the Romanian state's approach to this problem and the measures taken (through domestic legislation) to comply with the principle of free movement of citizens wishing to work in other European countries but also those aimed at adopting the *acquis communautaire*. The measures adopted by Romania to control migration without affecting democratic rights, allowing both legal emigration for work and controlling private exit and return are considered to be new, not found in any other former communist bloc country (Șerban, 2009).

Daniel Arpinte (2009) analyses the dynamics of social assistance, a consequence of the need to solve the social problems of different social categories in difficulty, the shift from the bureaucratic-administrative system to the creation of new services and the implementation of assistance programmes. A novel element was the adoption of a new philosophy in dealing with social problems which was the basis for the reform of the social protection system. At the same time, it distinguishes three stages characterised by innovation in social assistance: (1) 1989 - 1997 with a weak

innovative representation (the need for new services is recognised); (2) 1997 - 2000 restructuring of the social assistance system (social assistance for children, social assistance for the disabled), increasing external funding and supporting the development of the non-governmental sector; (3) 2001 - ongoing - with the Law on the National Social Assistance System the focus is on the creation of sustainable social assistance services, orientation towards preventive services at local level and local empowerment. Pilot social services and new services are developed, especially in the non-governmental sector. Arpinte talks about radical innovation (specific to former states that have significantly changed the protection system), incremental innovation (social assistance systems strongly supported by the state), transformative - systemic innovation (involving major institutional and financing changes).

The presence of the innovative component in the management and partnerships between public institutions and NGOs (in particular in the collaborative relationship of the County Directorates for Youth and Sport with NGOs in Buzau and the County Agricultural Consultancy Offices) is analysed by Ion Boboc. He concludes that (at least at the 2008 level) there was no concern for innovative approaches (although NGOs showed an inclination to develop "predictive" approaches. The author states that "established and monopolising collaborative forms" (of funding institutions) are blocking the innovative actions of some organisations and are seen as a threat. This author's concepts include: innovative collaborative forms (characterised by "organisational mandates" - the funding institution claims control over the funded organisations in terms of interim management), innovative partnerships. However, the concept of social innovation does not occupy a significant place in the analysis of the Romanian context, being invoked mainly in the theoretical part of the paper (2009).

After presenting the three dimensions of social innovation: the economic dimension (welfare production and governance); the political dimension (militant actions, democratization of socio-economic life, demands for change) and the social dimension (responding to human needs by creating a good or service) from the vision of Harrison et al. (2010), Hideg M. and Neamțu, N. (2019) identify innovative actions in social care in Romania (from institutions and services aimed at solving social problems, to the development of a set of values and concepts usable in the functioning of the social care system). They consider Romania to be a fertile ground for social innovation, arguing the claim with the country's placement in the middle of the ranking of countries from an innovation perspective (with an innovation index of 64.78, out of 100 maximum) and the high level of expectations for innovative

policies of Romanians. A first innovative product is the redefinition of the profession of social worker (since 1990), the establishment of programmes and services to meet the needs of children, the establishment of services for the homeless, for those addicted to psychoactive substances/alcohol, etc.

Research on innovation in public administration undertaken by C. Pătrașcu's research on innovation in public administration, even though it focuses on international approaches to innovative public administration, is noteworthy, especially as the demand for introducing innovation in the administrative system is high (both at central and local level). The author highlights the current concerns for the concept of 'public innovation' through active citizen engagement, oriented towards public value and citizen good (2019, p. 34).

Internet searches show a number of projects centred on social innovation, which have developed new social services or involved new practices in the delivery of social intervention. The results are summarised in reports or guidelines published in the online space as models of practice of the initiators (usually non-governmental organisations).

As a strategic objective in Romania, stipulated by law, the development of innovation in the field of social protection is present in the National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for the period 2022-2027, on improving administrative capacity to coordinate policies, integrating innovative initiatives into strategic planning. Concerns to identify innovative solutions for access to public services for vulnerable people, supported by investments in public services, concerns to support entrepreneurship and social economy initiatives, including innovative initiatives, as well as the integration of all social innovation initiatives to develop capacity for strategic planning and the development of a monitoring and evaluation system (promotion of innovation) are mentioned in the strategy.

Conclusions

Each stage of human history has involved finding new solutions, new ways of organising and approaching social, economic and political life. Subsequently, the socio-human disciplines have also paid attention to this process by analysing the phenomenon of social innovation, initially by identifying the elements of innovation that already exist.

From another point of view, the conclusions can be divided into two poles: one of achievements (positive points) - achievements in the area of social innovation and

one of challenges (weak points) - segments that are insufficiently analysed/developed. In the field of social innovation, especially innovation in the field of social assistance, we note that in Romania the starting point was the idea of social development, thought to be possible through a process of planned development. In Romania the practice of social innovation seems to be richer in examples (innovative projects, involvement of non-governmental organisations - see reports of organisations, social services set up and declared as innovative), compared to sociological studies and research on social innovation.

Innovative legislative regulations have concerned the sector of social intervention in child protection, disabled people and in the labour force segment, but no rigorous scientific research has been identified on innovativeness in normative acts or processes that involved innovation until the legislative regulation of social intervention.

If we make an inventory of the gaps in the sphere of academic approaches to innovation in social care, it emerges that there is insufficient research: there are far too few sociological studies exploring the mechanism of social innovation in social care, or, if they exist, they are not known to the general public. Despite the existence of some innovative practices they have not been studied by researchers.

Another issue concerns the lack of an innovation promotion network or database, so that every creator of novelty can be found at any time to provide support and help stimulate initiatives centred on social innovation. The Institute for Quality of Life Research has launched the Social Innovation Journal, but the publication's website is currently inactive. The existence of such a publication (open access) would facilitate the dissemination of theoretical and empirical research on social innovation and be a source of inspiration.

Social work as an integral part of social intervention programmes cannot be excluded when talking about social development. Any change in society, be it economic, educational, cultural, technical, production, etc., will be accompanied by the social area that will be affected by these changes (through lack of resources to acquire goods or information, lack of capacity to adapt to change or inability to get out of the disadvantaged situation in which they initially found themselves, etc.). There is no social innovation paradigm, but the social development paradigm has been invoked in several studies.

Thus, starting from the social development paradigm designed, social work has its role, which needs to be designed and approached from the perspective of social innovation (innovation in terms of intervention, in carrying out assessment, case

management or social service provision, including in social policy making - both as process and policy content).

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