THE MANY FACETS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

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Abstract

Interrogations around the concept of social innovation continue to form an important stream of scientific research and bring into focus different aspects that seem to put this concept into a different perspective. Staying aware of the risk of considering social innovation a solution for every problem, but also avoiding to consider it a "buzzword", the present article intends to present yet another facet of social innovation, namely community based social innovation, or "grounded social innovation" (Daniel, Jenner, 2022). This category of social innovation is considered to be both community based and community oriented, a characteristic that differentiates it from another categories of social innovation. This approach allows also a brief analysis of the context and factors which influence social innovation either positively or negatively. The research methods used are mainly qualitative, as numerous sources of specialty literature have been evaluated and analyzed, in order to establish several forms of social innovation and discuss and establish their main features.

Keywords: social innovation; social innovation categories; grounded social innovation

1. Introduction

Social innovation is a concept that has drawn much attention and has been widely analysed generating a vast and intricate literature, mainly due to the necessity of developing the scientific theoretical frame and tools for its analysis. Given its impressive presence on the political programs of governments around the world, its

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study seems all the more important for researchers and professionals alike, because by creating a rigorous scientifical basis, the concept can be clarified and used in all its effectiveness. Various definitions and categories of social innovation have been formulated, starting with the Oslo Manual (2005, 2018 editions) and different reports of international organizations (OECD for instance) and EU institutions (European Commission, mainly).

These categories have been established, more or less, as the norm or normative view of innovation, but the study and practice of innovation, especially its social version, continued to expand and, as a consequence, explored and defined new aspects and new forms or categories. Though these "newer" categories or facets are not radically different from previous ones, being in fact based on and developed from the fundamental forms already established, they offer new insight in the concept and experience of innovation. These "fresh" views shed new light on the numerous possibilities and solutions that innovation is able to produce if used in an efficient manner. To be efficient, the mode of innovation has to be as close as possible to the "laboratory" or scientific/scientifically imagined system or process that requires the stages of innovation, from ideas, to experiment, maturation and scaling-up, to be reached and carried out. It is this process which poses the greatest challenges to all actors and stakeholders engaging with innovation. When dealing with social innovation and one of its most recently developed categories, namely "community based innovation" or "grounded innovation", several specific aspects have to be taken into consideration with much attention.

The progress of scientific literature on innovation has, nevertheless, its *caveat*. An aspect of real concern is the lack of scientific consistency and clarity caused by the proliferation of too many different ways of defining social innovation, which also have been reflected by inconsistencies in methodological approaches, a fact that may hinder accuracy and, in the end, proper scientific theory development. This fast explosion of interest in social innovation led to a multitude of studies and definitions of the concept, which have to be considered with much attention and discernment. Therefore, new branches of research are emerging aiming to clarify these issues, by considering the "*locus* of initiation" and the "locus of benefit" as characteristics that differentiate the scientific category or concept of 'social innovation' from other concepts.

2. In Search of a Definition of Social Innovation and its Many Facets

Social innovation (SI) can be seen as a process including activities, practices and approaches that help communities achieve the goal of addressing previously unmet or unfulfilled needs. Exploring the foundations of this concept, Mulgan (2012, p. 35) succinctly defines social innovation as being that form or category of innovation that is social, both in terms of its aims and means.

In addition to considering means and ends, or purposes and needs, the scientific literature (e.g. Moulaert et al., 2017) teaches us that there is, in fact, a complex panorama and complex backstory of social innovation and its meanings, each contributing to different perspectives of use and analysis, namely: academic, political, economic or normative. Other scholars like Nicholls and Murdock (2012) establish that innovation is social in terms of both process and outcomes, but they go even further and consider that the actors involved in social innovation are, in their turn, oriented towards finding social solutions, be they individuals, groups, organisations or systems (e.g. financial or agricultural systems) (Prasad, 2016). Thus, while the innovation part of the term seems to refer to means and ends, practices and objectives or processes and outcomes, the "social" aspect of innovation seems rather ambiguous because it does not clarify exactly how to understand the collective or social participation in innovation activities (Borzaga and Bodini, 2014) and (we can add) innovation ecosystems. That is why several questions arise, such as: whether that social collective is the one participating in or initiating the innovation; how few or many are needed to meet the required "social" condition; does it have to be a formal collective or an emerging social group? These only very few of the questions that have to be answered but there are probably many others.

Keeping in mind all these questions and the research carried out based on them, we emphasize the ongoing expansion of scientific research and results in the field of social innovation, over the last decades, a fact that contributed to the establishment of a wide range of methods and practices aiming to respond to specific contemporary unsolved issues of and by the local communities. This effort also resulted in the elaboration of several categories of social innovation and the study of a separate class labelled as public sector innovation. Dividing social innovation into several classes enables understanding, due to the possibility of analysing specific characteristics of various forms or categories of innovation.

The qualitative assessment of several studies elaborated by different researchers (Richez-Battesti et al., 2012; Caulier-Grice et al., 2012; Michelini, 2012; Saiz-Álvarez (ed.), 2016; Torfing, 2016; Davies, Simon, 2013; Nordberg, Mariussen, Virkkala, 2020;

Denters, 2023; Pătraşcu, 2019, 2023) leads to the establishment of several categories of social innovation. According to these sources, and using diverse criteria, social innovation may occur as incremental innovation, disruptive innovation, bottom-up and top-down innovation, open innovation or user/beneficiary-led innovation and public sector innovation. An important classification of public sector innovation is offered by the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) according to which we may differentiate between four main categories or 'facets' of innovation, namely: mission-oriented innovation, enhancement-oriented innovation, adaptive innovation and anticipatory innovation (OECD/OPSI, 2018, p. 32-34; OECD, 2022, p. 21). There are also the categories of generative innovation (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012, p. 25; Pătraşcu, 2019, p. 30) and systemic innovation (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010, p. 13, p. 107; Pătraşcu, 2019, p. 30).

A newer stream of research (e.g.: Davies, Simon, 2013; Nordberg, Mariussen, Virkkala, 2020; Denters, 2023; Pătraşcu, 2019, 2023) explores further the bottom-up category of innovation and discusses the importance of community led or based innovation, since its role becomes more and more obvious in the development of wellbeing for citizens and communities.

3. New Developments of Social Innovation: Community based Innovation

High-risk changes in the environment or context of local communities pressure not only public administration authorities, but also the citizens to become more responsive and solution oriented to the effects of these changes. Social innovation in its community-based form may be the appropriate solution to continuously disquieting problems. The "bottom-up" approach to innovation (also known in specialty literature as "bottom-up" innovation), meaning essentially that innovation is initiated and carried out from the people or citizens towards the upper level of the community (public authorities and organisations) is really one of the forms of innovation that have to be more strongly developed.

The role of citizens in the development of their community has been acknowledged by many researchers, from various scientific domains. To offer a sole example, author Jane Jacobs stated not so long ago that urban vitality depends crucially on the ability of its residents to govern themselves effectively at street level. As Jacobs sustained, city dwellers, by constantly involving themselves in bottom-up processes of unprompted or unplanned innovation may be capable to adjust the circumstances of their daily life to the shifting events of urban environment.

Since citizens are the ones who know and understand the most of their community, their engagement plays a prominent role in the process of applying social innovation (Davies, Simon, 2012; Davies, Simon, 2013; Nordberg, Mariussen, Virrkala, 2020; Denters, 2023). As a consequence, a new concept based on social innovation has emerged and is labelled community based innovation. This type of innovation integrates a fundamental feature which is 'from the community and for the community'. This particular aspect supports its understanding as a distinctive category, with its own unique characteristics, based on the idea that urban change is an organic process in which, together with the prevailing initiatives of governments and businesses, the role of the citizens in community initiatives is also of vital importance (Denters, 2023, p. 1). Effective community initiatives have a great value for cities and other local communities since they contribute to the creation, recovery or development of urban spaces based on residents' values and needs, rather than the ideas or agendas of policy makers and urban planners (Bedi, Kansal, and Mukheibir, 2023; Denters, 2023, p.1). The present article adopts a similar perspective, arguing that community initiatives for innovation have to be articulated and promoted by the residents themselves through collective actions carried out for the wellbeing of all the community members. This approach is in the best interest of the citizens because it is them who establish and decide on their own goals and the ways and means of attaining them taking an active part in the entire process (Denters, 2016, p. 233; Denters, 2023).

The main difference from other modes of participation, is that this one starts at the bottom level, meaning that it begins with the citizens, and is not a form of political participation in which citizens are invited by political authorities (as in hearings or mini-publics, etc.). Another distinctive feature of community initiatives is that they are self-organised actions in which people do not merely make demands to governments, but instead they create and carry out planned activities to fulfill specific aims (Denters, 2023). Consequently, as Daniel and Jenner (2022) put it, these initiatives are very similar to "grounded social innovation", being connected to the community through their "roots" (origin) – collective actions of community members – and their effects (oriented towards common goals or wellbeing of the entire community).

A positive outcome of citizens' engagement and participation in solving unmet needs of their community is that it brings about an increase of 'social value', which is closely related to social innovation and 'social capital'. If social value may be considered as any or a sum of beneficial results for the development of a community and may be "societal, economic or environmental" and "go beyond the private gain

and profit" (Dayson, 2017, p. 395), "social capital" refers to "connections among individuals life – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19) and that allow citizens to work together to accomplish shared goals. Working on the positive aspects of "social capital", such as "mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness" (Putnam, 2000, p. 22) has to be at the core of the participation in collaborative innovation networks or associations established by citizens in order to maximize the added 'social value' of community based innovation. Even if general statements of the positive impact of participation have to be made with caution, because it depends on the context, the goals it pursues and the ways in which is applied, the importance of citizens' involvement in the decision making process of their communities captures the attention of a growing number of researchers and professionals.

4. Conclusions

Around the world, governments and individuals are more often using innovative approaches to include citizens in the policy-making process. Politicians, decision-makers, civil society organizations, and individuals have been forced to consider how public decision should be made collectively in the twenty-first century, due to the growing complexity of policymaking and the inability to find answers to some of the most urgent policy issues. Given the current context, gathering people from all walks of life to discuss complicated political issues and create group recommendations has grown more and more interesting. Innovative ways in which citizens become involved in solving the difficult issues of their community have been applied frequently.

The vanguard of innovative methods of public involvement of citizens is being set by cities and regions. In recent years, evidence shows that public authorities from different European regions have collaborated with the OECD to create and carry out bold projects that allow citizens to play a significant role in determining the objectives of cohesion policy and local territorial development plans. These projects offer the possibility to test the innovative application of "old" principles such as "deliberation", "representativeness" and "impact", combined in "modern" or new ways to "complement representative democratic institutions" (OECD, 2020, p. 3).

In one of its most recent reports, OECD brings evidence of how citizens' participation in deliberative processes can "lead to better policy outcomes, enable policy makers to make hard choices and enhance trust between citizens and government" (2020, p. 16). Increasing endeavors to include citizens' participation

into public decision making may be interpreted as the beginning of a period of change aimed at modifying the structure of representative democracy. Globally, democratic institutions are starting to change in ways that allow people to directly influence governmental policies and agenda-setting that impacts the quality of their lives.

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