



## Scientific comprehension and definition of social innovation

The Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) was established 1990, many years prior to present day vibrant debates pertaining to social innovation, its promises and potential merits. It is the oldest of now numerous centres for social innovation that emerged world-wide from 2000 onwards. In the course of decades ZSI grew in size as well as in competence. By virtue of solid scientific expertise, wide ranging and approved skills in project management, and long standing experience in international multi- and trans-disciplinary research, ZSI has developed outstanding competencies in theory and practice of innovation processes in general, and of social innovation in particular.

Ever since its very foundation, ZSI's approach to social innovation is signified *not by distinction* from established innovation theory and research, *but by integration* of social dimensions in an extended innovation paradigm: *All innovations are socially relevant*, yet certain innovations primarily deliver specific societal outcomes (social value) and hence are termed social innovations. This scientific avenue to comprehend social innovation applies principles of innovation to social *demands*, societal *challenges* and social – sometimes: systemic – *change* at large (cf. objectives of social innovation in the so-called BEPA report). The prefix 'social' is neither limited to 'caring', nor is it meant normative in the sense of inherent provision of 'good for society' (even though such intentions may prevail): Any innovation, be it a new product or a new mode to prevent drug addiction, may be welcomed by parts of society and objected by others. Moreover, what is functional and beneficial in one region at a given time, may prove inoperable or even obstructive in other regions, for different communities or generations.

'The proof of the pudding is in the eating'. Applied to social innovation, the famous phrase implies the need to *differentiate between the making of social innovations and their results*: In most cases the creation and implementation of a social innovation aims at an explicit purpose to fix a social issue in a new or alternative way, promising a first ever or improved and more effective solution. Intentions and purposeful social action inevitably reflect interests and concerns of individuals, groupings or organisations. Accordingly, different societal entities adhere to a variety of distinct, partially conflicting interests that become manifest in social action as customs, rites and wide ranges of patterns of behaviour, mostly in compliance with predominating frames of reference.

This is why *defining social innovation requires analytic instead of descriptive properties* and must not pretend to provide a normative comprehension of what is good or 'social' in the sense of general benefits for society, neglecting antagonisms, conflicts of interest and potential negative impact. Similar to Schumpeter's early shortcut to determine innovation as *new combinations of production factors*, social innovation may be understood very short as *new combinations of practices in doing things*. New combinations of production factors enable the creation of new products, technological artefacts and generate economic returns on investment in first place; secondary societal impacts may be intended and beneficial to certain parts of the society, yet controversial or unacceptable to other parts. New combinations of practices in social action enable novel or better procedures to resolve societal issues and generate social return on investments in first place; they may be controversial as well in different parts of the society, and entail secondary economic effects. As a matter of principle innovations – and social innovations in particular – are requisites of change in any (business, public and civil society) sector of the society.

The mainstream concept of innovation acknowledges new products and processes as innovation only on condition that an advanced novel device or technology proves commercially successful in markets. In structural similarity, an analytical definition of social innovation requires a criterion of the same value as 'commercially successful in markets', though success of social innovations will neither be measurable by the same monetary and business terms, nor is it limited to the corporate sector. Therefore and in order to allow for comparable analysis, the following definition can be applied to further study in theory and research: ***Social innovations are novel or more effective practices that prove capable to tackle societal issues and are adopted and successfully utilised by individuals, groups and organisations concerned.***

Josef Hochgerner, 25 July 2014