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Krista Loogma, Külliki Tafel-Viia, Meril Ümarik

Social Innovation: Three Approaches

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Krista Loogma¹; Külliki Tafel-Viia²; Meril Ümarik³

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Linke Wienzeile 246

A – 1150 Vienna

Tel. +43-1-4950442 Fax. +43-1-4050442-40 e-mail: institut@zsi.at

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¹ PhD, Tallinn University, Center of Educational Research

² MSc, Tallinn University, Center of Educational Research

³ Doctoral student, Tallinn University, Center of Educational Research

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Abstract

This article is focusing on the analysis of the concept of social innovation originating from different disciplinary areas (e.g. technology, economy, sociology, organisational and management theories etc.) and having been attributed to various meanings and definitions. As a result of the extensive literature review, the three perspectives to understand the concept of social innovation have been distinguished: (1) the institutionalisation of a social need; (2) the co-development and (3) the systemic change perspectives. Furthermore, our analysis is bringing up and presenting the important aspects and characteristics of the concept of social innovation, which have so far remained rather latent, like institutional changes and legitimisation of innovations, mechanisms of social change (e.g. interaction, learning), which may support and promote the sense-making and meaning-giving as inevitable parts of the process of social innovation.

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the concept of social innovation has received gradually more attention. However, the widening use of the concept has resulted in growing variety and inconsistency of its content (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1973), characterised by little conceptualisation and empirical testing. Different understandings are contesting in different fields varying from understanding of social innovation as part of any innovation process to the understanding of social innovation as specific and more narrowly defined process.

For innovation research, the relevance of the concept of social innovation has risen for many reasons. *Firstly*, innovations generally, have become more complex and configurative/non-linear (e.g. Moulaert/Hamadouch 2006; Felsenstein 1994; Camagni 1991); in the innovation processes, reforms and top-down interventions have been intertwined with grassroots initiatives, different reasons and interactive processes are part of changes, different level actors with various interests are involved (e.g. Powel/Grodal 2005; Schienstock/Hämäläinen 2001). *Secondly*, while introducing reforms/changes, the initiators proceed from the presumption of the “automatic implementation”, i.e. little attention is paid to the implementation processes and factors of social change, which inevitably are part of any change. Therefore actors are often not regarded as agents, who may give different meanings to changes and introduce different strategies to cope with it. As a result, the planned innovations /reforms cannot bring about intended changes in social practices and actors’ behaviour, and therefore not bring about deeper and sustainable changes.

We are arguing, that opening up different understandings of the concept of social innovation, originating from different perspectives, enhances and enriches the concept and raises its analytical value. Furthermore, our analysis is bringing up and presenting the important aspects and characteristics, which have so far remained rather latent, like institutional changes and legitimisation of social innovations, mechanisms of social change (e.g. interaction, learning), which may support and promote the sense-making and meaning-giving as inevitable parts of the process of social innovation.

There are examples of how the concept has been applied for evaluating innovations and reforms, including regional innovations (e.g. Moulaert 2005; Tynjälä/Nikkanen 2007), educational changes and reforms (Tafel-Viia et al 2012; Loogma et al. 2011a, b). The territorial approach to social innovation is taken also in many research of creative regional clusters (e.g. Rutten/Boekema 2000; Camagni 1991), arguing, that territory/region can be (in certain circumstances) the context for and structuring factor of a social innovation process (Florida 2002; McGranahan/Wojan 2007; Wedemeier 2010). However, the applications for analysis of social innovation processes have remained rather rare.

This article is focusing on the question, how the concept of social innovation and its different implications can be understood and interpreted. Moreover, how can we recognise the process of social innovation and use it for analysis of innovation/change processes to understand how deep and sustainable the changes have been and whether the social innovation has happen at all.

As a result of the extensive literature review on the concept of *social innovation*, the three approaches and three understandings of the phenomena and process of social innovation are highlighted as main conclusion of the article.

2. Understanding of the Concept of Social Innovation in different disciplinary areas

Since Schumpeter, who was one of the first, emphasising the social nature of innovations, the understanding of innovations and innovation process has changed a lot:

-from “heroic inventor” to *innovation as collective creation* (Usher 1954, cit Schienstock/Hämäläinen 2001: 49). According to Schienstock and Hämäläinen (2001: 49) the innovation process (from creation to diffusion) involves a complex web of interactions among a range of different actors, organisations and institutions, and thus, generates networks’ involved into innovation process.

-from *sequential, linear to configurative, interactive innovation models*; different actors, their interaction and interactive learning has become of important factors in innovation process (Lundvall 1992, cit Morgan 1997: 493).

-from *diffusion to agency models*. This trend emphasise the active role of participants (initiators, adopters) in innovation processes (Moulaert/Hamadouch 2006: 12), but it also refers that during the implementation and adoption process, the nature and meaning of the innovation can change considerably.

- *The rise of importance of social norms and social agreements* (Morgan 1997: 493; Edquist/Hommen 1999; Powel/Grodal 2005), which emphasise the rising need for social capital (as agreed norms and rules, based on mutual trust in social groups/communities, networks), supporting coordination and cooperation, and making innovation more effective (Putnam 1993: 1-2).

The understanding of an innovation as a technology-determined process has widened and social and institutional next to technological aspects have become important and attracted scholarly attention (Lundvall 1992; Edquist 1997; Gopalakrishnan/Damanpour 1997). Instead of rational choice, based on complete information, the rising uncertainty and ever changing environment demands much more adaptation and taking the specific contextual factors into consideration (Camagni 1991; Schienstock/Hämäläinen 2001). Therefore, learning as part of innovation has become much more important/influential (Lundvall 1992; Morgan 1997; Cooke 2002; Moulaert/Hamadouch 2006: 13).

The concept of social innovation has evolved in the frame of different disciplinary areas like technology, economy, sociology, organisational and management theories and others. In the context of different disciplinary areas, to the concept has been given various meanings and definitions.

Economic theories which have predominantly focused on technical and technological innovations (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1974) have gradually adopt the understanding of innovation as a process of social character (i.e. Schumpeter 1947; Freeman 1994; Asheim and Isaksen 1996; Edquist 1997; Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour 1997). Herewith have these approaches seen social change processes mainly as accompanying processes to technological and economic innovations, ‘enablers’ (Gopalakrishnan/Damanpour 1997: 20; Linton 2009) or side-effects (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1974) or processes, that are induced by technological and business innovations (Pol/Ville 2009: 881). *Secondly*, the conceptualisation of (national) innovation systems in the framework of evolutionary economics has brought about the cooperative and interactive nature of innovations (Lundvall 1992; Felsenstein 1994). *Thirdly*, analyses of the role of social innovation in regional development (Moulaert et al. 2005:

Tynjälä/Nikkanen 2007) and in the creation of innovation clusters (e.g. clusters of creative economy) (Florida 2004) highlight regional networks as means to organise the process of innovation (Rutten/Boekema 2000: 1837). Focus of these theories range from innovation systems (Lundvall 1992) to clusters (Porter 1990) and to learning regions (Cooke 2002).

However, in the innovation research, developed in the context of economic theories and approaches, the social innovation has quite rarely examined in their own right. Even though the understanding of the innovation has widened and social aspects next to technological and economic ones have been taken into account, predominantly the attention has been on the social factors that facilitate or prevent the effective implementation of technological and/or economic innovations (Heiskala 2007).

Organisational and management theories have distinguished technological innovations and social innovations already in the 1970's. Holt (1971) has referred to sociological approach originated from M. Weber and defined 'social innovations' as applications of "new social patterns of human interaction" in the context of finding new ways for cooperation between people who interact in organizations for common objectives (Holt 1971: 236). At the same time, as organisational and technological changes are closely related and intertwined, organisational change is often seen as a requirement for technological innovation to be successful (Edquist 1997: 23-24). Organisation and management theories have recognised that the need for social innovations stems from changes in external environment imposing new requirements on management and organisation to cope with (Holt 1971: 239).

In the context of organisational and management theories social innovation has been predominantly seen as organisational change and/or restructuring, improvement of social capital in order to raise the effectiveness of an organisation (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1973). The processes of organisational change and/or restructuring are closely related to adaptation, changing patterns of communication and interaction (Holt 1971), creative learning and creative actions which are closely intertwined, constituting the main mechanisms, which may support and sustain an organizational change (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1975; Mumford and Moertl 2003).

In the framework of sociological theories Max Weber has introduced the term 'social inventions' already at the turn of the 19th century, affirming the possibility of introduction of a new, often deviant behaviour, which can spread and become "normal" within the established social institutions (Weber [1971] 1995: 26, cit Moulaert/Nussbaumer 2008: 259). Social innovation, as defined by M. Weber, means mainly an innovation in the relations between individuals and between groups, e.g. establishment of (new) communication channels, creation of new pattern of interaction, through grass-roots democracy (Nussbaumer/Moulaert 2004: 253).

In the framework of sociological approaches the theory of diffusion of innovations of E. Rogers (2003) has important contributions to the understanding of social innovation, emphasising on the very social nature of the adoption and adaptation of new ideas and practices. The innovation diffusion process shows that regulations, social values, and human interaction shape innovations (Rogers 2003). Two concepts introduced by Rogers are importance here: firstly, the concept of "reinvention" - as the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified according to the different circumstances, contexts and other factors of its implementation (Rogers 2003: 17). Secondly, by referring to peoples' motivation while adopting an innovation, Rogers uses the concept of "perceived attributes" - the characteristics of the innovation, as perceived by individuals - which explains the different rates of adoption of an innovation depending on how people consider variety of merits of the innovation, including Relative

Advantage; Compatibility; Complexity; Trialability; and Observability (Rogers 2003: 15). However, Rogers has considered the individual rather as a passive receiver of innovation, not an exercising agency in the process of diffusion of an innovation. Moreover, sociological institutional theories have contributed to the understanding of social innovation by emphasising the complexity of the interaction between structural factors and the role of the human agency in shaping perceptions, discourses and frames of reference within which new ideas and practices arise (Bogason 2000; Healey 1997; Innes/Booher 1999).

To summarise, sociological studies have sought to explain how innovation is socially shaped or socially constructed. The role of social structures, institutions and individual agencies and their interaction has been highlighted in the process of transforming of (patterns of) social relations as one of the central results and indicator of a social innovation.

3. The Three Approaches to Social Innovation

As the result of the analysis of the concept of social innovation and the respective literature review, the three broad approaches to social innovation can be distinguished. (see Figure 1 below).

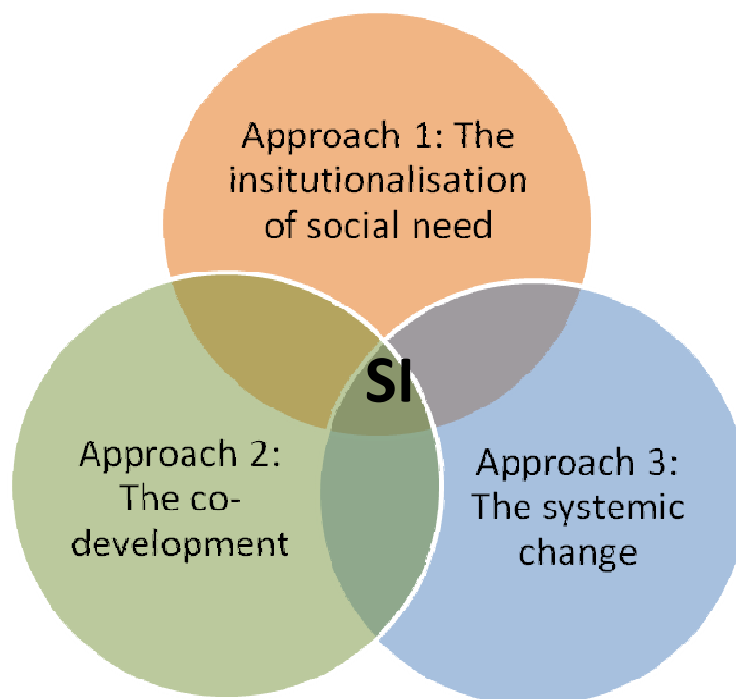


Figure 1: The Concept and Substance of Social Innovation – Three Approaches: The institutionalisation of a social need, The co-development and The systemic change

Firstly, social innovation has been treated as specific kind of innovation, an insulated process that serves to be studied in its own rights. This approach originates from sociological theorizing of social innovation and goes back to Weber's ideas, emphasising new social needs to be introduced into the social practice and thus to change the social relations between individuals, institutions and other relevant social actors.

Social innovation is a process initiated by the specific social demand (need to react to crisis or danger, recognise emerging interest groups, provide solution to social problems etc.). This approach embraces definitions of social innovation as innovation helping to improve the situation of underprivileged groups in society (Nussbaumer/Moulaert 2004: 253-254), innovative activities and services, intended to meet specific unsatisfied or new social needs and challenges (Empowering... 2010: 26), which can diffuse mainly through organisations, having aims of social character (Mulgan 2006: 146) (e.g. social entrepreneurship, social movements, open innovation, and other social, grassroots initiatives), innovative solutions, new forms of organisations and interactions to tackle social issues (Empowering... 2010; Mumford/Moertl 2003; Mulgan et al. 2007).

Mulgan (2006) has offered the model of the process of social innovation, which has been adapted for research of social innovation at the regional level (e.g. Tynjälä/Nikkanen 2007). The process evolves from emergence of a socially relevant idea (triggered by unsatisfied needs or perceived danger or crisis) to elaboration, experimentation and dissemination of the idea in wider co-operation networks, and finally into institutionalization stage, in order to take formal organizational shape (Mumford 2002; Tynjälä/Nikkanen 2007: 15). In this sense, the process of social innovation can be understood as a process of institutionalisation of socially relevant idea, bared by a social movement or some other loosely organised group of interested people. The institutionalisation happens, if dominant structures adopt the beliefs/values and goals of a social movement, transforming new pattern into the existing social structures and thus, part of normal social practices.

Secondly, social innovation has rather been treated as a complementary, accompanying or collateral process, induced by technological-economic, business and organisational innovations or being "enabler" of these innovations. This approach is emphasising, that social innovation is in one or another way co-developing or embedded into different kind of innovations. Social innovation is a process, co-developing with some kind of "basic" innovation, reform or other kind of "top down" change process. The main contribution of the approach to the understanding of the social innovation lies on emphasising the importance of mechanisms of social change in different kind of innovations. Consequently, the main problem, social innovation can address concerns: how processes and mechanisms of social innovation can "enable" and/or facilitate the process of adoption of an innovation (e.g. economic-technical, regional) thus helping to implement and adapt different kind of innovations into social practices.

However, some authors (e.g. Tuomi 2002; Edquist 1997) have criticized the understanding of the social innovation as insulated process, arguing that all innovations are social in the sense, that they have to change of and to be integrated into social practices (Tuomi 2002).

Thirdly, the systemic change perspective, where the concept of social innovation is related to the transformation of the society or some other system (Heiskala/Hämäläinen 2007; Empowering... 2010). This approach, developed by Heiskala and Hämäläinen (2007) rely on sociological neo-institutional approach that emphasise the role of changes of multilevel social institutions in the context of

societal/systemic transformation and structural changes. Social innovation can be seen as changes in multilayer institutions, leading to new social practices and changed meanings. In this sense, to be systemic, legitimate and sustainable, the changes have to embrace regulative, normative and deeper cultural-cognitive levels of social institutions.

“Institutions are social structures, that have attained a high degree of resilience, (and are) composed of cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative elements, that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott 2001:48).

Among other important features, the definition emphasise, that institutions are fundamentally concerned with social stability and that three types of underlying social mechanisms of institutional order can be differentiated as they refer to different types of justification of legitimacy: regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive (Scott 2008: 428), each differing “in the basis of order, motives for compliance, logics of action, mechanisms and indicators employed” (ibid: 429). However, as suggested by Hämäläinen and Heiskala (2007) institutions change over time, depending on external, as well on internal changes and influences. Especially in times of systemic or structural transformations, radical changes can happen in basic institutional arrangement of a society. (New) rules, norms and meanings arise in interaction; they sustain, modify and also may change by the behaviour of actors/agencies (Scott 2008: 429).

More specifically, in accordance with this approach, Heiskala (2007: 59) has defined social innovations as changes in multilevel institutions (cultural, normative and regulative) of the society which enhance its collective power resources and improve its economic and social performance. He sees social innovation as transformation, which encompasses regulative, normative as well as cultural innovations:

“Regulative innovations transform explicit regulations and/or the ways they are sanctioned. *Normative* innovations challenge established value commitments and/or the way the values are specified into legitimate social norms. *Finally*, cultural innovations challenge the established ways to interpret reality by transforming mental paradigms, cognitive frames and habits of interpretation. Taken together these three classes form the sphere of *social innovations.*” (Heiskala 2007: 59)

Thus, in order a change to be sustainable, all elements of social institutions have to transform: formal regulations and sanctions, normative and cultural-cognitive structures. The contribution of this approach for understanding of the concept of social innovation is two-sided: (1) it turns attention to the importance of the multilevel legitimisation of an innovation or change to be sustainable; (2) it emphasises the socially reliable outcome of the systemic change. In order a systemic change can be consider a social innovation all three pillars of the systems’ social institutions have to undergo transformations and at the same time, the systems’ collective power (e.g. social capital, networking) has to increase.

However, in practice, the different perspectives and related processes can overlap and can be interwoven. The concept of social innovation provides a valuable tool for policymakers and practitioners for planning and analysis of change, innovation and reform processes, to understand and rise possibility to “make difference” through the social legitimation, sustainability and social consequences of changes.

4. Conclusions

We conclude that in the framework of social innovation research, at least three perspectives to understand the concept of social innovation can be distinguished:

- *the institutionalisation of a social need;*
- *the co-development;*
- *the systemic change.*

These different approaches to social innovation offer also new perspectives for understanding of the different kinds of change processes (e.g. top-down innovations and reforms, grassroots initiatives) by turning attention to:

- a) implementation processes of innovations;
- b) social outcomes (benefits, empowerment);
- c) legitimation and sustainability of changes;
- d) actors' role in the implementation process: acceptance and/or adaption to the changes, coping with new structural circumstances, attributing meanings to change;
- e) the mechanisms of social change as learning and interaction (e.g. networking);
- f) changes of social relations (incl. power relations) and social practices of involved actors.

In conclusion, we regard as social innovation those innovations, which have socially valuable outcomes (whether the innovation has specifically social goals or not) and at the same time, embedding mechanisms, means and tools of social change, which enable the legitimisation of changes and thus, the implementation of new social practices. At the same time, innovations, in order to be successful and sustainable in making differences in social practices, would need to undergo changes through the entire social institutional framework.

There are some commonalities among the different approaches. All three approaches stress the socially valuable outcomes of the process of social innovation, whether this can be in the form of improving the situation of unprivileged groups, rise of collective power of the actors in a system, empowerment of specific groups, growing social capital etc. Another feature, which is commonly emphasised by the representatives of all three approaches, is related to the change of behavioural norms and practices of the actors and/or a group. However, the changes in regulative and normative structures of social institutions may not implicitly result in the changes in deeper social institutions like cultural-cognitively determined structures of meanings and understandings. By applying different approaches to social innovation we are able to highlight that different social mechanisms are needed in order to enhance or facilitate different social change processes in the sense that these could lead not only to changes, but also to social innovations.

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