



An empirical investigation of social innovation initiatives for sustainable urban development



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ABSTRACT

Recent literature on social innovation highlights its conceptual ambiguity and emphasizes how technology has contributed to the renovation of this 200 year old practice, calling for more sector-specific research. Addressing this call, this paper examines how social innovation fits in the urban sustainability discourse and in what way it empowers urban citizens and their communities towards serving their interests. The findings with respect to 29 cases of social innovation initiatives for environmental sustainability across 9 domains suggest that a large spectrum of sustainability challenges and topics are addressed by existing initiatives, which in turn can refer to different urban spatialities. For each initiative we examine the social innovation process, focusing on the types of involved organizations, the underlying innovation mechanisms as well as the use of technology. In terms of citizen empowerment, we examine the empowerment mode, the main beneficiaries of the innovation, as well as the specific outcome of the initiative. Following this analysis, we arrive to the identification and description of four primary citizen profiles in social innovation for sustainable urban development. We close by calling for further research into the perception, behavior and needs that are associated with the identified citizen profiles and their communities.

1. Introduction

In recent years, social innovation has been increasingly practiced by individuals and their communities, as well as the civil, public and private sector. Although it has practically existed for two hundred years now,¹ the pressing social, economic and environmental challenges that cities have recently come to face, together with proliferating advancements in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) have brought social innovation to the forefront of urban development practice and policy. Social innovations are literally everywhere. They happen across and in-between sectors (public, private, civil), they span an extremely large variety of areas (economy, environment, social inclusion, integrated development and others), and they transform urban life in unexpected ways.

Social innovations are widely understood as new ideas that aim at meeting social goals (Manzini, 2014; Mulgan, 2006a, 2006b). They are so widespread and game-changing nowadays, that it is impossible to ignore them. The ‘smartest’ and most innovative governments and policy making authorities capitalize on this old but renovated concept

by incorporating it in public policy agendas and providing funding, training and networking opportunities for social innovators and their communities. Social innovation has a central role in the European Union (EU)’s Europe2020 strategy towards smart, sustainable and inclusive growth,² which includes the flagship initiative ‘Innovation Union’, whereby innovation is regarded not as merely industrial, but rather as a means to actualize society’s capacity to organize, act and respond on the persisting challenges of growth, and capitalize on the knowledge generation and transfer opportunities provided by new technology. The European Commission (EC) has in operation a host of different policy instruments to foster social innovation, ranging from networking platforms to financing tools for social innovation initiatives (European Commission – Directorate-General for Internal Market, 2016). Next to the institutional interest on social innovation, leading researchers on sustainability have underlined its importance in contemporary societies due to the new and extraordinary possibilities it opens (Bawens, 2007; Manzini, 2014; Murray, 2009; Tapscott and Williams, 2007).

Nevertheless, the all-encompassing idea of social innovation has

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¹ For a historical perspective of social innovation, see Godin (2012). Social Innovation: Utopias of Innovation from c.1830 to the Present. *Project on the Intellectual History of Innovation, Working Paper No. 11*.

² European Commission (2016), *Europe 2020 in a nutshell*. Available: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/index_en.htm (Access 10/03/2017).

created conceptual ambiguity as to what it means and how it is practiced. Recent literature calls for more sector-specific research, in order to reach more detailed understanding of its content and particular characteristics (Grimm, Fox, Baines, & Albertson, 2013; Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2011). Addressing this research gap, in this paper we focus on social innovation for sustainable urban development. Our main purpose is to examine how social innovation fits in the urban sustainability discourse and in what way it empowers urban citizens and their communities towards serving their interests.

In the following section (Section 2), we explore the recent literature on social innovation. We offer an introduction to the social innovation notion, highlighting its conceptual ambiguity, its specificities and emphasizing how technology has contributed to a reconfiguration of this 200 year old practice. We proceed to describe the role of social innovation for local (urban) sustainable development, exploring the relationship among social innovation, sustainability and the urban environment. In the next section (Section 3), we describe the methodological roadmap followed in order to execute our research, which comes down to systematically comparing a series of existing social innovation initiatives related to urban sustainability across domains that emerged through a critical processing of the social innovation literature. The following section (Section 4) presents our social innovation for sustainability case studies, as well as the results of the comparative analysis among them. This section is supplemented by Annex A, which offers the detailed findings of our research as per each case. The final section, (Section 5) is the one of the conclusions, where we critically discuss our research findings, and also present further directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction to contemporary social innovation and its basic characteristics

Social innovations emerge through new ways of thinking and acting in the face of pressing challenges, rather than academic discourse (The Young Foundation, 2012). Social innovation is practiced through many different methodological angles (Jenson and Harrison, 2013) and its mechanisms, in the sense of interactions and events leading to the realization of social innovation, depend on the specific time and context (Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). Furthermore, it means different things across disciplines, countries and cultures (Rüede and Lurtz, 2012; The Young Foundation, 2012; Borzaga and Bodini, 2012; Grimm et al., 2013; Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2014, 2011). All of these facts make it difficult to understand and analyze social innovation systematically within a clearly defined framework.

As a result of the above, a large number of definitions for social innovation exist, but none of them is commonly accepted (Millard and Carpenter, 2014; Jenson and Harrison, 2013; Borzaga and Bodini, 2012). During the past decade we have seen an unprecedented rise of the interest for social innovation, manifested through an exponential increase of related publications (Weerakoon, McMurray, Rametse, & Douglas, 2016; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016; Schachter, Mónica, & Wallace, 2015), which, however, has exacerbated the ‘conceptual ambiguity’ with regards to what it means and how it can be practiced. It is characteristic that Schachter et al. (2015) found 251 different definitions of social innovation. Rüede and Lurtz (2012), through a thorough review of 318 papers, books and book chapters, concluded with seven different concepts of social innovation, each one based on a different framework of understanding.³ The study of Pelka

and Terstriep (2016) about how social innovation is understood and mapped across 17 recent research projects on social innovation under the EU’s 7th Framework Programme (FP7) revealed that there is very large variability in terms of how social innovation is defined (if defined at all), how the roles of the involved actors are understood, what kind of data is collected and how it is analyzed, and on a second level which criterion they are mapped upon (spatial, sectorial, and other qualitative/quantitative). The conceptual ambiguity around social innovation is not necessarily to be regarded as negative, however, as it allows room for different interpretations and creative thinking and acting with respect to social innovation (The Young Foundation, 2012).

For comprehensive reviews of existing approaches and definitions for social innovation, we suggest the work of The Young Foundation (2012), Rüede and Lurtz (2012), van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016), Weerakoon et al. (2016) and Schachter et al. (2015). It is out of the scope of this paper to provide a definition for social innovation, but we consider crucial to provide some critical observations about it. A definition widely adopted by a large number of academic and policy documents is the one provided by the research project TEPsIE⁴ funded under EU’s FP7, as it was compiled after a very thorough and systematic review of how social innovation is understood and practiced across different frameworks. According to this research, ‘social innovations are new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act’ (The Young Foundation, 2012). The basic issue with this definition is that it could potentially include any kind of innovation, as it can be argued that all innovations transform social relations, and therefore all of them are inherently social. Based on Ogburn’s theoretical differentiation between technical and social innovations (Ogburn, 1964), we support the nonmaterial nature of social innovations, which implies that social innovations are intangible: ‘their potential material outcomes are solely a supplementary result and they focus not on needs but on asset building’ (Neumeier, 2012). Under this perspective, social innovations are manifested in changes of attitudes, behaviours or perceptions associated with intentional and coordinated actions, aiming at social change that emerges with the establishment of new social practices (Cajaliba-Santana, 2014; Hellström, 2004; Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010). Arguably, social innovation is quite a contested term and different competing definitions are vying for first place.

A definitive characteristic of social innovation is that it can come from and involve any sector, and actually in novel roles and schemes. The civil sector (non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, community groups, individuals), the public sector (government) and the private sector (businesses and entrepreneurs) are not only included to different degrees, but sometimes ‘hybrid’ and ‘intermediary’ organizations emerge from the previous, which in fact can play a major role in the social innovation process (Anania and Passani, 2014; The Young Foundation, 2012). Based on who the initial driver of an initiative is, social innovations are classified into broad categories; for example, there are top-down and bottom-up or grassroots innovations (Manzini, 2014; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Similarly, Haxeltine et al. (2013) classify social innovations as systemic, broader-level and grassroots ones. However, it frequently happens that a social innovation is initiated in one sector and transferred to another one with unexpected success (OECD Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy, 2011). Each actor brings new ideas, perspectives, capacities and capabilities in the interplay; the result is a cross-pollination of

³ Their work concluded that social innovation can be understood as 1. “...to do something good in/for society”, 2. “...to change social practices and/or structure”, 3. “...to contribute to urban and community development”, 4. “...to reorganize work processes”, 5. “...to imbue technological innovations with cultural meaning and relevance”, 6. “...to make changes in the area of social work”, 7. “...to innovate by means of digital

(footnote continued)
connectivity”

⁴ <http://www.tepsie.eu/> - TEPsIE – The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe.

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