



Conference on ENTERprise Information Systems / International Conference on Project  
MANagement / Conference on Health and Social Care Information Systems and Technologies,  
CENTERIS / ProjMAN / HCist 2016, October 5-7, 2016

## Towards the Effective Management of Social Innovation Projects: Insights from Project Management.

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### Abstract

Recently, research on project management has widened its scope to consider social innovation-oriented projects. However, research in this domain is still in its infancy; little empirical data has been conducted in this area and there are few comprehensive or practical guides available to project managers in this sphere. Social innovation projects are poorly understood in practice and prone to failure. We find that project management processes are poorly-defined and unwieldy in this context; control systems are lax, and consequently projects are inefficient. Social innovation projects have unique characteristics and are inherently different to typical industrial-oriented projects which must be considered by project managers. The goal of our research is to better understand this important-but-neglected area. We synthesise the literature and classify social innovation projects from key perspectives; we then present a comparative analysis of social innovation projects and industry projects in order to draw insights about what aspects from project management can be applied to the social innovation domain in order to increase levels of effectiveness and efficiency. From this analysis, we identify six key issues and challenges that social innovations are currently facing. The major contribution of this research is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between social innovation and project management. For researchers, these findings contribute to theoretical development within the field of project management; for practitioners, it provides important insights to help manage such important initiatives. The insights provided by this discussion should help in understanding some of the conceptual and practical difficulties that have prevented the effective implementation of social innovation projects.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of CENTERIS 2016

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*Keywords:* Social innovation projects; project management; social entrepreneurship; project success; typology; comparative analysis.

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## 1. Introduction.

Social innovation is defined and described in many ways in literature. For example, Mehmood and Parra<sup>1</sup> adopt a process perspective and consider it to be “the generation and implementation of new ideas that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need”. Young<sup>2</sup> examines social innovation in terms of its output and suggests that the goal of social innovation is to increase the welfare of the individuals who adopt it compared with the status quo. Moulaert et al<sup>3</sup> maintain that social innovation fosters inclusion and wellbeing by improving social relations and empowerment processes. Social innovation is synonymous with social entrepreneurship and it has been examined by many different disciplines, namely, sociology, economics, geography, urban studies and philosophy<sup>3</sup>.

However, despite this, the management of social innovation projects is still “poorly understood in practice”<sup>4</sup>. It seems that organisations are failing to implement social projects effectively. There is a lack of adequate mechanisms to adopt, adapt and scale social innovations<sup>5</sup>. According to Mulgan<sup>6</sup>, “the field of social innovation has grown up primarily as a field of practice, made up of people doing things and then, sometimes, reflecting on what they do”. Researchers note that “more work needs to be done to understand the precise way in which social innovation can best be supported”<sup>5</sup>. Nisar<sup>7</sup> contends that “there is the need to implement appropriate project governance practices”. It seems that these deficits need to be addressed; social innovation-type projects must be managed appropriately in order to be more effective and efficient. However, Kanter<sup>8</sup> warns that “it isn't easy to make the new paradigm work”.

An analysis of the literature reveals that social innovation projects are inherently different from traditional industry-oriented projects in many ways. According to Murray et al<sup>9</sup>, work on social innovation is “distinctive in its outcomes and relationships”. Managing social innovation projects requires experimentation, engaging citizens as co-creators, and the ability to turn promising ideas and new service models to scale<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, it is not possible to implement traditional project management structures and processes in this context; it seems that a unique approach is needed. However, there are some similarities between the two contexts, and a comparative analysis may offer some insights about what project management practices can be applied to the social innovation space. Our research seeks to understand the key issues involved in managing social innovation initiatives or projects. In this paper, we synthesize the literature to understand the unique aspects of managing social innovation-type initiatives. From this, a typology is presented; this typology groups and classifies social innovation according to common characteristics or traits. Next, we compare and contrast typical industrial projects, and social innovation projects to identify commonalities and unique aspects. Finally, key issues relating to managing social innovation projects are identified and presented.

## 2. Theoretical Background.

According to Pol and Ville<sup>11</sup>, the term *social innovation* has swiftly entered the academic discourse, but they find that “there is no consensus regarding its relevance or specific meaning”. Lisetchi and Branca<sup>10</sup> also note that “a discussion is evolving around a number of interconnected concepts”. It seems that the area is being examined from different perspectives using many theoretical lenses. Most notably, we find that social innovation is closely linked to social entrepreneurship, both being used synonymously in the literature. In this regard, social entrepreneurship is defined as an “innovative social venture” by authors such as Dees and Anderson<sup>12</sup> and Cochran<sup>13</sup>. Also Cukier et al<sup>14</sup> refers to “entrepreneurial activities with an embedded social purpose”. Consequently, it has been concluded that “social entrepreneurship is a social innovation”<sup>10</sup>.

At present, there are a number of researchers working on management-oriented aspects of the social innovation area. For example, Saul's<sup>15</sup> work examines strategies that leverage social change as a way to drive profitable business growth; Mumford's<sup>16</sup> study explores strategies and tactics to generate and implement social innovations; Westley and Antadze's<sup>17</sup> research focuses on strategies for scaling social innovation for greater impact. Other researchers such as Vesa et al<sup>18</sup> study social innovation in terms of harnessing different capabilities; they propose a framework for studying the social aspects of economic innovations in an effort to strengthen such innovations; while

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