



Embedding social innovation process into the institutional context: Voids or supports



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ABSTRACT

Social innovation (SI) is a complex construct that is lacking a unifying paradigm in social sciences. However, together with the recent attention towards social change, it requires a theoretical perspective that analyzes the construct within its institutional context (IC) without forgetting that the term is socially constructed. This current study aims to contribute to the literature by exploring and describing the inter-linkages between institutional voids (IVs)/institutional supports (ISs) perspectives and SI process by positioning the actor as the catalyzer and the change-agent. The study tries to explore if existing IVs or supports, which are embedded in social-welfare, commercial or public-sector logics, stimulate SI and result in the development of these ideas. The research setting is deliberately selected as a developing country that deals with plenty of IVs and suffers from the lack of ISs; a research setting that exhibits a high degree of heterogeneity and a low institutionalization level. The results indicate that IVs stimulate SIs mostly at the incremental and institutional level where IS is inadequate. The heterogeneity of IVs and a low degree of institutionalization result in the heterogeneity of actions undertaken for SI. Implications for practitioners and scholars are recommended at the end of the paper.

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1. Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is one of the complex terms of social sciences. This complexity arises in parallel to the development of literature and each new definition is partly responsible from it. In a broader sense, the concept is defined as a change in social structures, an action for a social purpose, a public good or a market offering that meets the unmet needs of the society (Pol and Ville 2009). Despite the lack of a consensus on a common definition, the concept can be summarized as “the development and implementation of new products, services or models to meet social needs and create new social relationships” (Murray et al. 2010: 3). Recognizing this potential to meet the new societal challenges, SI is enthusiastically embraced by the growing number of organizations over the last decades. While the companies that focus on talented employees (e.g. PricewaterhouseCoopers, Accentura), strong brands (e.g. Nike, SC Johnson, Whole Foods), and leadership transitions (e.g. Ford) have pioneered in SI (Davis and White 2015), some universities such as Stanford start specific programs to educate “the future leaders of social and environmental change” (Stanford University 2017). Referring to its founding principles, the European Commission (EC) has also undertaken diverse actions from networking to funding for “promoting social innovation as a source of growth and jobs, sharing information about social innovation in Europe,

supporting innovative entrepreneurs and mobilising investors and public organisations” (EC 2017a). On the other hand, in a recent document published by United Nations (UN), SI is also viewed as a viable solution for policy makers to stimulate sustainable economic growth, fight against inequality and instability, and increase societal welfare (Tucker 2014). Considering its critical role on the future of our global society, there is an increasing need to understand what stimulates SI.

The literature explores the concept from two main perspectives; the agent-centered perspective that focuses on the actor characteristics (e.g. Bulut et al. 2013), and the context-dependent perspective that tries to explain the structural contingencies driving SI (e.g. Hämäläinen 2007). Although both perspectives are useful to understand and predict the behavior of individual actor or the effects of structural conditions, they fall short to capture the embeddedness of actor in a contextual setting. Therefore, a third, unifying perspective emerged that considers the actor and the context in which the actor is embedded to explain how SI takes place (Cajaiba-Santana 2014). According to Moulaert (2009: 12), SI encompasses “the transformation of social relations in space, the reproduction of place-bound and spatially exchanged identities and culture, and the establishment of place-based and scale-related governance structures... social innovation is quite often either locally or regionally specific, or/and spatially negotiated between agents and institutions that have a strong territorial affiliation”. SIs are developed and implemented by people as collaborative responses to meet these social challenges in their environment (Dawson and Daniel 2010). However, under the severity and wide influence of these

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environmental contexts that might inhibit or facilitate their actions, social innovators may become stuck in the middle. In a recent article, the managing director of a consulting firm for social leaders complains about the lack of support for social entrepreneurs who want to obtain a large-scale impact by scaling their social businesses and mentions “ecosystem scaling barriers” which are lying in the areas such as industry value chain, public goods or government (Koh 2017). Weaknesses and dominance of for-profit business models and the heavy burden of recessions on public budgets have resulted in a larger support to SI (Phillips et al. 2014). For instance, EC has organized the European Social Innovation Competition for three years (EC 2017b) and spared significant amount of financial resources through its Horizon 2020 Programme [e.g. An open call for Collective Awareness Platforms for Sustainability and Social Innovation till 25 April 2017 (EC 2017c)] to support socially innovative activities among its member and associated countries. In addition to the supports of public or private initiatives, building capacity, collaboration and diversity in a social setting are also seen as highly valuable to obtain higher impacts on global problems (Fink 2017). Therefore, the concept needs to be analyzed in the nexus of actors and contextual dynamics simultaneously with considering their unique nature and structure.

The scholarly attentions to the concept manifest itself in the increasing number of publications; but the variety of theories and conceptions used in these studies (Rana et al. 2014) show that this research mainstream is still lacking a unifying paradigm. Beyond the problems at the allocation of resources and rewards on the academic ground, this lack of consensus can seriously affect the development of a scientific field (Pfeffer 1993) by “jeopardizing the creation of a stable and widely recognized body of knowledge that might presented to practitioners as a basis for their actions” (Miner 2006: 37). Additionally, the existing research on the concept is largely based on anecdotal evidence and case studies (Mulgan 2006; Murray et al. 2010). Scholarly research on the concept is nascent especially in the form of quantitative studies, extensive histories, comparative analysis (Mulgan et al. 2007).

As part of the unifying approach, the current study tries to contribute to the literature by exploring and describing the nature and interlinkages between *institutional context* (IC) and *social innovation process* (SIP) by considering the role of actor in the interface. Grounding its theoretical framework on the structuration and institutional theories, the study aims to explore how IC, as a composition of existing institutional voids (IVs) and institutional supports (ISs), stimulates the creation of SI by considering the overwhelming impact of two field-level conditions as the degree of heterogeneity and level of institutionalization within the context. The study integrates the diverse perspectives of IVs and ISs, which are embedded in three institutional logics at the public-sector, commercial or social-welfare domains (Pache and Chowdhury 2012) with the SIP model, adopted from the study of Dawson and Daniel (2010) on achieving different types of SI as incremental, institutional, and disruptive (Nicholls and Murdock 2012). Based on this unifying research model, SIP is articulated as a function of *actor*, *challenge*, *goal*, and *process*, where actor is taken as the catalyzer that perceives the threats of voids and opportunities of supports stemming from three logics and configures them into a challenge, sets the specific goals, manages the process, and finally achieves either incremental, institutional, and disruptive SI. Therefore, the study tries to achieve its aims by responding to three main research questions:

RQ1: How does the existence or absence of IVs or ISs affect the construction of SI in a specific context?

RQ2: How do the underlying logics in the IC and its field-level conditions as heterogeneity and institutionalization (Battilana et al. 2009) describe the SIP in the context?

RQ3: How does the actor as the change-agent interact with the IC, configure it into operational steps and try to restructure it through SIP?

Considering the explorative and contingent nature of these research questions, they are attempted to be addressed by a qualitative study in a developing country context, which can be considered as another contribution of the study. Referring to social entrepreneurship (SE) as an entrepreneurial activity that aims a social change by exploiting innovation opportunities, and SI research (Phillips et al. 2014), a sample of 34 Turkish social entrepreneurs were selected from the fellowship database of Ashoka. As one of the widely used data sources for SE researchers (Chandra et al. 2016; Meyskens et al. 2010; Mair et al. 2012a, Ashoka provides the most comprehensive and reliable list of social entrepreneurs, which were selected as fellows based on the strict criteria (Ashoka 2017). The organization provides a rich and extensive information about its fellows under several standardized sections at its web site (Ashoka 2017). In the current study, this secondary and partly complied data (Kervin 1999) was collected and then analyzed by following a qualitative content analysis. This methodological approach is particularly useful when researchers aim to find out meanings expressed through words and analyze them by the use of conceptualizations (Saunders et al. 2009: 482). The overall findings of study show that Turkish IC was characterized by highly heterogeneous IVs, rather than ISs, in which a high level of uncertainty evokes low institutionalization. In addition, IVs are mostly embedded in between social-welfare and public-sector logics and they are tried to be managed by the actors in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who configure these voids into social challenges and aim to restructure the context within the social-welfare logic by targeting mostly social stakeholders. Depending on the heterogeneity of IVs, these actors attempted to bridge various actions such as training, networking, and educating simultaneously. The interaction between IC and SIP generated by the actors produced mostly incremental and institutional SI, rather than disruptive ones.

The following section reviews the literature on the concept of SI and builds a theoretical framework derived from structuration and institutional theories. The research model is developed by linking the IC with the components of SIP. After explaining the context, sample, and analysis method of content analysis, the findings were provided in details. The overall results of study are illustrated on the research model and a discussion on the inter-linkages among each component, practical implications and suggestions for future research are generated in the conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social innovation

Despite the existence of diverse approaches (Pol and Ville 2009), SI is usually described as a significant change in social structures that improve the economic and social performances of these structures, which are composed of public goods and services, regulatory framework, and organizational principles (Hämäläinen 2007). Based on Pol and Ville's (2009) classification, Nicholls and Murdock (2012) offer two broad conceptualizations to analyze the innovation in social relations and the innovation to address market failures. However, it has been very hard to study the concept in social sciences due to both the complexity of SIs that are spilled over a substantially long period of time and the difficulty in identifying the origins and implementation context of new ideas (Mumford and Moertl 2003). Mulgan (2006) states that existing efforts are focusing on individual case studies that are not able to provide widely accepted models or generalizable practical implications. Despite the difficulty of analyzing this complex concept, there are some research efforts that aim to explore and explain SI.

In the literature, the nature and drivers of SI are analyzed from three main approaches: (1) an agent-centered approach that analyzes the actions and behaviors of individual actors, (2) structural perspective defending that SI arises as a result of contextual factors, and (3) the approach that unifies both approaches and tries to configure the interaction of actor and context (Cajaiba-Santana 2014). As the first domain,

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