Framing inclusive innovation within the discourse of development: Insights from case studies in India

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The concept of 'inclusive innovation' for development has become increasingly prominent in both academic and policy discourses, raising important questions as to how this is being framed. Results from case studies conducted in India suggest inclusive innovation to be interpretively flexible and contested. One case presents a grassroots framing emphasising social and political empowerment, rooted in community self-sufficiency, autonomy and traditional belief systems. In contrast, the other cases co-opt the language of inclusion to present a predominantly market-based framing, heavily emphasising market readiness and participation. This framing is transforming rural social practices (including the organisation of space and time, the meaning of production and the role of women), introducing the potential for market dependency.

1. Introduction

The intersection between innovation, development and poverty alleviation is attracting the interest of an increasing number of scholars in the fields of business, management and research and innovation policy. These include those interested in technology transfer and absorption aimed at the process of 'catching-up' with advanced industrial countries e.g., (Fu et al., 2011) and those focused on building up innovation systems i.e. the institutional and infrastructural environments considered necessary to make innovation flourish e.g., (Lundvall et al., 2009). Until the end of the 1990s the topic of development had gone largely under the radar of these scholars, however this has now dramatically changed. New terms such as 'frugal innovation', 'reverse innovation', 'Jugaad[1] innovation', 'Bottom of the Pyramid[2] (BOP) innovation', 'Gandhian innovation', 'pro-poor vs. from-the-poor innovation', 'long tail and long tailoring innovation', 'below-the-radar innovation' and, notably, 'inclusive innovation' have proliferated in abundance (Chataway et al., 2014; Kolk et al., 2013; Levidow and Papaioannou, 2017; Pansera, 2013; Sonne, 2012). In the context of developing countries the focus of such forms of experimentation (Fejerskov, 2017) has included the global value chain (Kaplinsky, 2000) and the potential for innovation to open up under-exploited markets e.g. by multinational corporations (MNCs) (Prahalad, 2010) or, in contrast, the emergence of indigenous, grassroots forms of innovation (Smith et al., 2014). They all consider enhancing innovation capacity to

be an important element of development, often advocating an inclusive approach (George et al., 2012; Heeks et al., 2014) that in some cases may also offer profitable opportunities for companies and entrepreneurs (London and Hart, 2011).

These perspectives are diverse, contested and often competing. One influential body of literature aligns with what we may describe as a 'market-based' approach (Pansera, 2013; Pansera and Owen, 2015). This emphasises free market dynamics and private enterprise, where innovation is aimed at co-production of profit with social goods, often mediated through MNCs (Prahalad, 2010), or alliances between them and stakeholders (Arora and Romijn, 2011). In contrast, a small but significant number of scholars challenge or directly oppose this approach, sometimes radically so. These echo long standing debates extending back at least to the seminal work of Schumacher in the 1970s on 'intermediate' or 'appropriate technology', which privilege people over markets (Schumacher, 1973). According to Schumacher, the quest for developing countries to 'catch up' by making a technological leap could, paradoxically, increase inequality and poverty. Technology was seen as being a partial and temporary solution to problems that are fundamentally social (Smith, 2005) and political (Papaioannou, 2011). Extensions to Schumacher's ideas include contemporary innovation in the developing world carried out in informal settings by grassroots movements as a reaction to social injustices and environmental problems, sometimes themselves perceived as being caused by free-market ideology (Smith et al., 2014). These contrasting perspectives, which we

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may describe as a 'grassroots approach', call for alternative patterns of innovation and development in which the voices of the poor are seriously included (Abrol, 2005; Dagnino, 2009).

What these differing innovation perspectives share is an emphasis on *inclusion*, which we suggest now presents a potentially important discursive bridge linking innovation and development (Heeks et al., 2014). But while the concept of inclusive innovation for development has become increasingly prominent in academic (Heeks et al., 2014) and research and innovation policy circles e.g. (Johnson and Andersen, 2012; OECD, 2015, 2012; Utz and Dahlman, 2007; World Bank, 2012) it remains a 'weakly defined area of enquiry [with a] lacuna of robust data to support the development of an evidence – based policy agenda' (Chataway et al., 2014, p39). How inclusion is being framed remains little explored, particularly from an empirical perspective. In this respect the politics of inclusion (and of inclusive innovation) we argue should be opened up to critical enquiry (van Oudheusden 2014, p72; Levidow and Papaioannou, 2017), supporting 'a more reflective point of departure for policy that seeks first to understand the actors, perspectives, and politics of inclusive innovation' (Heeks et al., 2014, p 183). In this regard we seek to understand how discourses of inclusive innovation for development are being constructed in the field, how these are being translated within different organisational and institutional networks, the differing normative stances that underpin them and the impacts they may be having on the ground.

The paper is structured as follows: we first introduce a critical perspective on the innovation and development discourse based on a post-development, reflexive stance, and then investigate the framing of inclusive innovation in three case studies conducted in India. We conclude with a critical discussion concerning how discourses of inclusive innovation are being constructed in the field and the impacts these may be having on rural life and ways of being.

2. Theoretical background

Since the Second World War and the demise of the colonial project the term 'innovation' has become progressively domesticated within the overarching discourse of progress and modernization that has become known as 'development'. Aiming to establish Western-style industrial economies (Sachs, 2010), the fostering in the 'Third World' of institutions such as the democratic nation state, programmes of education and regulatory bodies designed in part to facilitate the creation of national and international markets became a political priority for development (Escobar, 2012; Ferguson, 1990; Rist, 2011; Sachs, 2010). Within this ideological and political framework, science and technology have occupied a special place, being the means by which industrial productivity and economic growth could be increased. An interconnected system of machines, routines, experts and managers, underpinned by access to abundant natural resources and an entrepreneurial and innovative mind-set, would drive growth and development as an ameliorative and socially transformative process, mediated through the logic of scientific rationality. Wallerstein (2004 p.10) described this process of development in terms of a 'theory of stages', where 'the separate units − national societies − all developed in the same fundamental way but at distinct paces".

Since the 1970s there has been a progressive shift from a macro-economic focus based largely on state (donor) –led, institution building initiatives, often involving finance and technology transfer from North to South, to a more granular approach directly focused on local, situated interventions (Escobar, 2012; Rist, 2011). These often encompass a wider range of funding sources (such as private foundations) and stakeholders (such as NGOs, local communities and social enterprises). The rise of the Western neoliberal agenda in the 1980s was an important turning point, promoting the idea that development should be a spontaneous phenomenon that occurs best when the endogenous, productive forces of society are free to act. The so-called "Washington Consensus" imposed a policy of 'structural adjustment',

with the liberalization of trade, removal of tariff barriers and the privatization of several sectors of national economies (Rodrik, 2006). The neoliberal turn radically changed the way development interventions were framed and delivered and opened the door for business and management scholars to treat development as a legitimate object of study. Philanthrocapitalists, with 'an innate belief in societal progress through technological innovation', (Fejerskov, 2017, p 953) emerged as prominent actors. Interventions aimed at innovation and entrepreneurial dynamism paved the way for private foundations, corporations and synergies between these and the state to fight poverty, spur modernisation and development (Leal, 2007). Inspired at least in part by what Levidow and Papaioannou (2017) describe as a 'liberal-individualist' mind-set, the poor could now be positioned as consumers (Prahalad, 2010), entrepreneurs (London and Hart, 2011) and aspirational, 'successful individuals' (Yunus, 2010). Previously ignored rural backwaters became promising markets with untapped potential (Smith, 2002, p 98). An ever expanding literature from business and management scholars led to the cross-fertilisation of the language of business and innovation into the lexicon of development and discourse of practitioners in the field (Krause 2013).

The project of development, and the innovation turn within this, has been the subject of extensive critique. The instrumental view that more technology and innovation is always better was tempered by criticism that this neglected their political constitution (e.g. Winner 1980) treating them un-reflexively as a powerful but agnostic and apolitical force for good. Arguing against 'the tragic fallacy that modern technologies possess the innocence of tools' (Sachs, 1990 p.14) and increasingly the subject of a growing, critical discipline of science and technology scholarship, critics cautioned against ignoring the socially-constructed nature of technologies and their ethical and political entanglements (unintentionally or by design). Questions of power, political economy, the broader impacts of development interventions and who gains and who loses (distributive and intergenerational justice) reflected the increasingly contested nature of the development discourse and the roles of science, innovation and technological change therein (e.g. Leach et al., 2008). Critics for example have argued that the 'market-based' approach tends to frame poverty and exclusion in management terms as an engineering and delivery issue. By leveraging a depoliticised rhetoric of inclusion and market participation, critics argue, this neglects the power relations that shape the processes and impacts of technological change and innovation on the ground, whilst side lining the socio-economic causes of poverty and exclusion (Arora and Romijn, 2011; Levidow and Papaioannou, 2017; Peredo, 2012) echoing arguments made earlier by Schumacher.

A number of alternative framings have been proposed e.g. (Abrol, 2014; Dagnino, 2009; Smith et al., 2014), notably including grassroots innovations 'that are socially inclusive towards local communities in terms of the knowledge, processes and outcomes involved' (Smith et al., 2014 p. 114). Advocates such as Gupta (2012) contend that all communities, including the poor, have an innate capacity for innovation to solve the problems they themselves face (Gupta et al., 2003). According to this view, rather than tapping underserved consumers, grassroots innovators aspire to address problems that are essentially and primarily social (Smith, 2005) providing appropriate (Gupta et al., 2003), socially desirable (Srinivas and Sutz, 2008) and environmentally sustainable (Gupta, 2010) solutions. According to Gupta (2009) and Fressoli et al. (2014), including grassroots innovation within the range of policy options goes beyond the mere delivery of affordable products/services, to include the strengthening of civil society organizations, empowerment of local communities, filling of institutional voids and, as Papaioannou (2011) suggests, the promotion of more equitable patterns of development. What concretely distinguishes those approaches from the market-based framing above is their overtly political characterisation.

Proponents of grassroots innovation arguably strive to assert a new way of framing technologies and innovation towards development based on principles that include social justice, cooperation, community