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Innovation

Education in cooperative cells as a social innovation: a case study in the Brazilian semiárido

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Received 8 December 2015; accepted 14 May 2016

Abstract

Social innovation's fundamental objective is to promote life quality. Any new initiative with this purpose might be considered a social innovation. From this concept, it is perceived as social innovation the efforts of the *Programa de Educação em Células Cooperativas* (PRECE), an initiative originated in Pentecoste, a municipality in the state of Ceará, located in the Brazilian semiárido region. This program has benefitted hundreds of youngsters, enabling their access to knowledge and further approval in university entrance exams. The educational method of collaboration in cells made possible broadening the horizons of many youngsters coming from rural communities, even when lessons were ministered under a tree in the middle of a farm. The objective of this study is to identify the dimensions of social innovation, according to Tardif and Harrison (2005), existing in the PRECE's proposal. It is aimed to evidence how the initiative is composed, bringing to light the essential elements that make it social innovative. A case study of PRECE was carried out through qualitative research. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with members of the direction and coordination of the Program, and analyzed using the software NVivo 10. For reference base, the content analysis technique was used in accordance with Bardin (1977). The results highlighted how the dimensions of social innovation are composed within PRECE. This research contributes by foregrounding a social initiative that has been capable of changing individual realities in the Brazilian semiárido and showing how such initiative is constituted in the social innovative perspective.

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Keywords: Social innovation; Dimension; Semiárido; Education; Collaboration

Introduction

Social innovations emerge as a way to improve life quality of people who need means to change their realities. In the definition provided by Neumeier (2012), social innovations might be understood as transformations in attitudes, behaviours or perceptions of a group who gather in a network of interests aligned

with the group's experiences and these changes lead to new and improved alternatives of collaboration.

Bacon et al. (2008) highlight three critical factors to explain the dynamics of social innovation. First, the willingness to change, coming from the awareness about a threat, flaw or from the feeling of a new opportunity. Second, the presence of internal capacities to promote such change, which include leadership and a culture related to it. Third, the access to external resources to help transformation to occur; these resources comprise people, money, skills and networks as well as the positive feedback from the benefitted audience.

In this regard, the *Programa de Educação em Células Cooperativas* (PRECE – Program of Education in Cooperative Cells in Portuguese) was created to contribute with the education of young people from rural areas, enabling them to become

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Peer Review under the responsibility of Departamento de Administração, Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade da Universidade de São Paulo – FEA/USP.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rai.2016.06.004>

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students in the Federal University of Ceará (hereby also called by its Portuguese acronym UFC).

Using a cooperative learning methodology, PRECE became an innovative movement that has improved the life quality of hundreds of youngsters. The program was started in 1994 in a manioc mil in the rural community of Cipó, located in Pentecoste, a municipality in the state of Ceará. Over the years, the Program breached the borders of the community and, currently, its methodology is incorporated as a UFC extension project, the Program is defined in this article as a social innovation.

The objective of this study is to identify the dimensions of social innovation in the PRECE's proposal, according to Tardif and Harrisson (2005). Identifying these Dimensions in the case chosen, based on the mentioned authors, took place due to the interest in verifying the applicability of a Canadian model in a context very diverse from the ones that enabled assembling the table of reference, thus, promoting a dialogue between the developed reality and the one situated in the Brazilian semiarid. It was believed that persuasion, element evidenced by Siggelkow (2007), can be found in the specificities of the context chosen and in the impact that the educational initiative had in the region. In this sense, the initiative became, over the years, acknowledged and it was later incorporated as well as institutionalized by the state.

A qualitative methodology was employed to operationalize this research. In order to attain greater methodological rigour for the case studied, as suggested Mariotto, Zanni, and Moraes (2014), there was an effort to refine and interpret the data collected by employing the content analysis technique via the software NVivo 10. This tool permitted to reach more respectability in the process of analysis, although keeping a positivistic focus, but maintaining the importance of the case's specificities. Through this tool, eight semistructured interviews were analyzed, which had been carried out in Fortaleza and Pentecoste, with the individuals in charge for operationalizing PRECE's activities.

The findings foregrounded that the social innovation dimensions from the analytical table from Tardif and Harrisson (2005) were identified in the PRECE, confirming it as a social innovation to the context studied. Even though the case's characteristics allowed to consider it a social innovation, testing the identification of dimensions enabled to classify it as such with more rigour.

Theoretical backgrounds

Social innovation

According to Schumpeter (1985), innovation a dynamic element in the economy, which grants the entrepreneur the fundamental role of economic development promoter. Considering innovation in a general perspective, The European Commission (1995) recognized that innovation cannot be seen only as an economic mechanism or technical process. Innovation is also a social phenomenon through which individuals and societies express creativity, necessities and aspirations.

According to Hillier, Moulaert, and Nussbaumer (2004), an innovation policy implies in the capacity of regenerating several forms of capital (social, environmental and institutional) to promote development, relying on new governance relationships based not only on one kind of agent, but also in the cooperation among different sort agents.

Another central issue is that one of the basic concepts of innovation lies in its width. The Oslo Manual (OCDE, 1997) outlines, addressing to the degree of novelty, innovation as Minimum, Intermediate or Maximum. The first is linked to what is understood as new to the "company", the second highlights what is a novelty in a region or country and the third considers what is new to the world.

Regarding innovation in its social kind, Pol and Ville (2009) highlight that the concept of social innovation has been used in juxtaposed ways in different disciplines. In these discussions, it can be granted as the engine for institutional change, as an alternative with social purposes, as an innovation oriented to the common good and as addressing to needs not yet fulfilled by the market.

Comparing the two kinds of innovation previously highlighted, Lundstrom and Zhou (2011) identify some differences between business and social innovation. The former aims at capitalizing knowledge to reach commercial interests, whereas the latter has the commitment with social progress by solving problems where economic resources are scarce. Concerning actors and investors, it is stressed that business innovations are typically invested by companies, despite these organizations may also work with social issues. Furthermore, the government, non-governmental organizations, foundations and individuals can perform social innovations. Regarding the criteria for success, the performance of business innovations is measured through the participation in the market and by profit rates, whereas in social innovation is assessed by the intensity of social improvements and progress.

Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) emphasize that, in as much as bring forward the new paradigm of innovation promoted by chronological changes, transformations concerning the object of innovation have also taken place. This view opposes to the classical technical paradigm from the industrial society, which was immersed in the idea of development.

Taking into account social innovation specifically, Heiskala and Hämäläinen (2007) convey that social innovations are often created as a response to rapid technical-economic changes, which create new social problems not possible to be corrected by prior political mechanisms. This demand tend to be motivated by the search for equity.

To the *Center de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales (CRISES, 2012)*, social innovation is understood as a process started by social actors to respond to certain aspirations. These goals might be addressing to a need, supplying a solution or being benefitted by an opportunity to change social relationships; transforming a scenario or proposing new cultural guidance for improving life quality or conditions in a community.

Franz, Hochgerner, and Howald (2012) reinforce that social innovation has been ignored as an independent phenomenon,

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