

Chapter 1

Social Innovation: An Introduction

ABSTRACT

Social innovations are novel solutions to social challenges. The objective of this chapter is to identify the differences in definitions and impact of social innovation. To this end, an author-co-citation network is used to identify differences in definitions and impacts of social innovation. Social innovation research is heavily fragmented due to its multidisciplinary nature. Six knowledge clusters are identified: (1) social enterprise and entrepreneurship; (2) urban studies, territorial innovation, and governance; (3) transition management and grassroots innovation; (4) ecological resilience; (5) social policy and network; and (6) social innovation practice. Social innovations, for example, maybe in the forms of products, services, processes, legislation, social movements, business practices, or social practices emerge through cross-sectoral collaboration, co-creation efforts, or co-design arrangements involving various stakeholders. Social innovations are clearly different from other innovation types on the basis that they are aimed at conferring benefits primarily to society.

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INTRODUCTION

Social innovation is commonly embraced as a mechanism that responds to social challenges, such as income inequality, gender inequality, unemployment and climate change (Avelino et al. 2019; Oeij, van der Torre, Vaas, and Dhondt 2019; Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008). It is “the invention, development and implementation of new ideas to solve social problems faced by individuals, groups or communities” (Oeij et al. 2019, p. 244). Though there is definitional ambiguity in understanding social innovation, the extant literature uses several reflective dimensions to define the concept. Social innovation offers new solutions (Caulier-Grice, Davies, Patrick, and Norman 2012) to social problems (Sinclair and Baglioni 2014). Social innovations are “developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social” (Mulgan, Tucker, Ali, and Sanders 2007, p. 9). These novel solutions emerge through cross-sectorial collaboration of information and resource sharing, aiming to empower society to solve complex social challenges and affect social (Adams and Hess 2010) and societal change (Avelino et al. 2019). Societal challenges, such as climate change, urban mobility, poverty, income inequality and violent conflict, require novel, sustainable and socially innovative solutions (van Wijk, Zietsma, Dorado, de Bakker, and Martí 2019). Social innovation is thus also recognized as a mechanism for addressing market and policy failures (Slee 2019).

Over the past decade, social innovation has received substantial attention from academics, policy makers, businesses, non-profit organizations and philanthropic institutions (Baptista, Pereira, Moreira, and De Matos 2019; Bolz and de Bruin 2019; Vézina, Selma, and Malo 2019). This has led to the introduction of various programs of social innovation best practice. For instance, the European Union has embraced social innovation as a means of addressing deeply embedded social challenges and rebuilding resilience (Secco et al. 2019). While some researchers have viewed social innovation as a multi-level process (e.g. van Wijk et al. 2019), others see it as a “transformative” (e.g. Avelino et al. 2019) or “co-evolutionary process”. Therefore, it appears that the field of social innovation is characterized by conceptual ambiguity (Oeij et al. 2019). Theory lags behind social innovation practice (Nicholls, Simon, and Gabriel 2015) and the field is nascent, emerging (Krlev, Bund, and Mildemberger 2014; Phillips et al. 2015) and underdeveloped (Cajaiba-Santana 2014). This impedes the legitimization of the field and associated

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