SOCIAL POLICY
RESEARCH BRIEF

"Social Innovation": What Is It? Who Does It?

Highlights

- Though "social innovation" is becoming a prominent subject of public policy discourse, the lack of a common definition engenders potential confusion and misunderstanding

- There is, for example, no consensus over whether "social innovations" should be viewed as inherently system-changing or can also include incremental change whose impacts may be mostly local

- There is also a wide variety of views over what makes social innovations "social":

  ◆ some are so broad they can encompass "economic" or "business" innovation

  ◆ others limit it to innovations by "community"-based actors motivated by social objectives

  ◆ others refer to innovations arising from collaboration *among* social actors

  ◆ still others are based not on who does the innovating, but on the social nature of the benefits they generate

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Around the world, thinkers and doers concerned with how societies organize themselves are increasingly focused on questions regarding whether and how to encourage a phenomenon that has come to be known as "social innovation." Though usage of the term is relatively recent – dating back at most a decade or two[1] – many of its users would agree that it describes a phenomenon that is as old as human societies themselves.

Many of the same people would nevertheless argue that features of modern society (for example, high prevailing levels of education and new information and communications technologies, especially social networking technologies) are making social innovation a more widespread and powerful force in shaping societies than in the past.

However, there is as yet no clearly agreed-upon definition of the term in conventional use. Though one may eventually emerge, the lack of a commonly accepted definition offers fertile ground for confusion and misunderstanding. This brief aims to help clarify the range of current uses of the term and suggests potential avenues for future research on social innovation.

Practitioners and Promoters of Social Innovation use the Concept in many Different Ways

Many current practitioners and promoters of social innovation offer multiple definitions of what they themselves mean by it, stressing different properties that make a social innovation first an "innovation" and then a specifically "social" innovation.
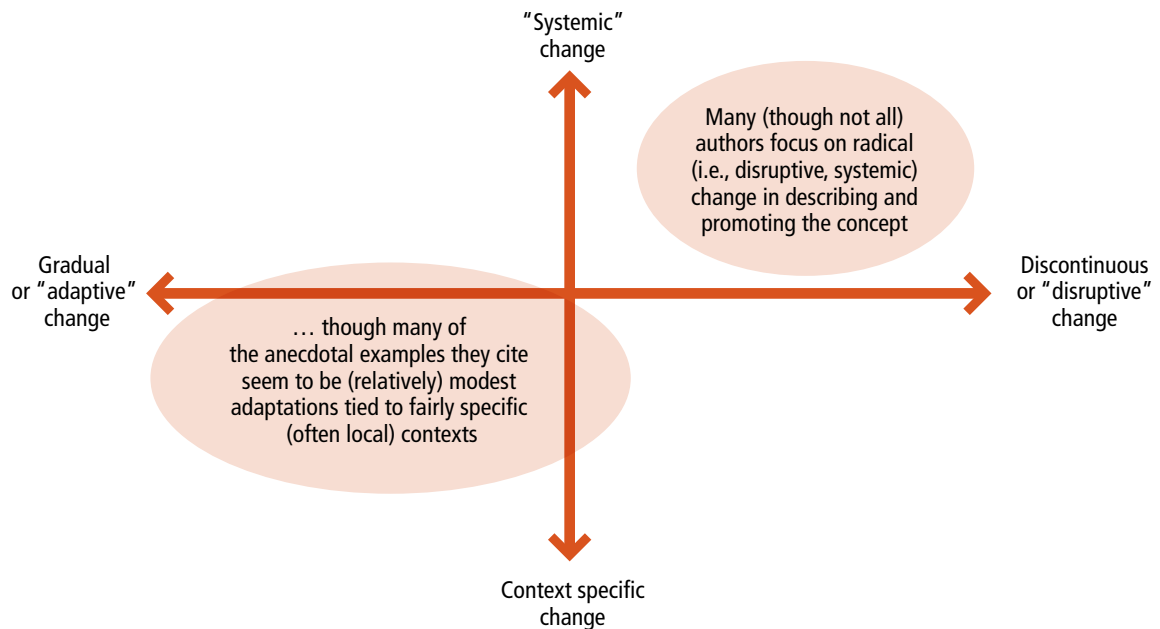
What Constitutes a Social "Innovation"?

Though there appears to be general consensus in the literature that social innovations entail novel *applications* of ideas, the ideas themselves need not necessarily be new: the process often involves novel adaptations (or recombinations) of existing ideas and/or their application to new areas.

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There also tends to be a "systems" focus among users of the concept – that is, an interest in social innovation as a mechanism for achieving *systemic* change to society as a whole – typically with a view to tackling the underlying causes of social problems rather than just alleviating their symptoms.

There is less agreement, however, on how widespread an innovation should be (or the magnitude or time frame of its impacts) for it to be properly considered a social "innovation", with some explicitly discounting adaptive changes or those with impacts limited to a particular locale or context, and others viewing distinctions between disruptive, systemic innovations and incremental, context-specific changes as inherently subjective.[2]

Moreover, even promoters of a radical or system-changing interpretation of the term often make reference to examples that, to many, may appear gradual or local in nature (Figure 1).
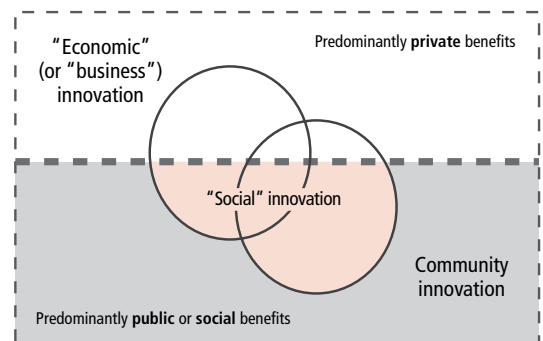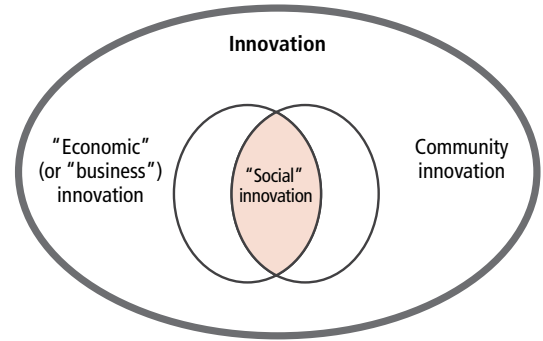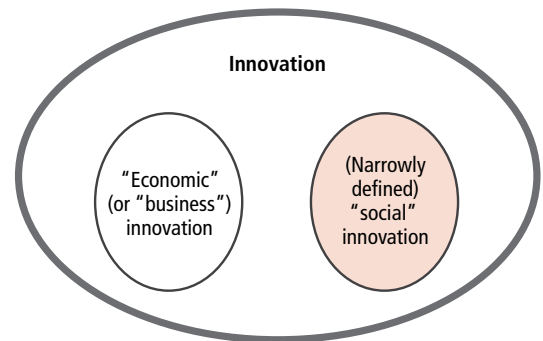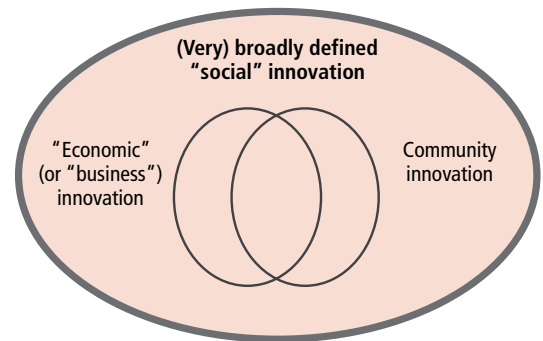
Figure 1
Social "Innovation": "Systemic and Disruptive" Versus "Context-Specific and Adaptive"

"Systemic" change

Many (though not all) authors focus on radical (i.e., disruptive, systemic) change in describing and promoting the concept

Gradual or "adaptive" change

Discontinuous or "disruptive" change

… though many of the anecdotal examples they cite seem to be (relatively) modest adaptations tied to fairly specific (often local) contexts

Context specific change

What's "Social" about Social Innovation?

In addition to a multiplicity of views on what constitutes an innovation, there are a number of different strands of thought on what makes social innovations specifically "social" and, in particular, which social actors (community-based organizations or informal networks, businesses, governments, etc.) are involved in the process, and how:

- Some definitions of social innovation – for example, "new ideas that work" or "[changes to] routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs in any social system"[3] – are so broad that they can encompass the more familiar concepts of "business" or "economic" innovation (and even innovations in how governments carry out their activities) since they too – like "community"-based innovators who are often the main focus of those analyzing and promoting social innovation – are social actors who are embedded in and/or overlap with broader social structures and networks.

- Other definitions – for example, "[innovations that are] predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social"[4] – gravitate toward a much narrower view based on a sharp distinction between "economic" and "social" innovations, with the latter being the preserve of non-business ("community") actors motivated by fundamentally different objectives than business (or, implicitly, governments).

- Others still – for example, "[innovations] that draw from, and appear at the intersection of, the community, business and government sectors"[5] – see innovations as social when they are produced through the collaboration of multiple different social actors, usually when community sector organizations partner with businesses (or governments) in developing new approaches to tackling unmet or emerging needs.

- Other definitions – for example, "[innovations] for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals"[6] – demarcate social innovations along an (inevitably somewhat fuzzy) dividing line between those that generate predominantly private benefits from those whose benefits are predominantly public or social. That is, the appropriate test here is not based on *who* is doing the innovating (though there is a presumption that most such innovations will involve the community sector as key players) but on the fruits they yield.

(Very) broadly defined "social" innovation

"Economic" (or "business") innovation

Community innovation

Innovation

"Economic" (or "business") innovation

(Narrowly defined) "social" innovation

Innovation

"Economic" (or "business") innovation

"Social" innovation

Community innovation

"Economic" (or "business") innovation

Predominantly **private** benefits

"Social" innovation

Community innovation

Predominantly **public** or **social** benefits

Questions for Further Research

Some authors argue[7] that a useful definition of what constitutes "social innovation" will entail making some kind of distinction between social and other (e.g., business or economic) innovations – notably in order to help policy makers distinguish between those innovations where significant market-driven incentives exist and those where different (though not necessarily less powerful) incentives are at play.

With this in mind, the following may be worthwhile policy research questions to pursue, based on the assumption that the relevant concept of social innovation for policy makers is one that encompasses innovations:

• resulting from either unilateral or collaborative actions across a range of different social actors;

• whose impacts can be expected to generally result in social benefits (that is, that accrue primarily to others); and

• whose impacts may range from context-specific and incremental changes to changes that are societal in scope and potentially disruptive (or "game-changing").

What (if anything) is changing or has changed within contemporary society that is acting to increase the appetite for – or capacity to generate – social innovations?

What (if any) are the key differences between social innovation and other kinds of innovation in relation to:

• the genesis of creative or innovative ideas that form the germ of subsequent innovations?

• the process of converting such ideas into concrete realities "on the ground"?

• the ease with which concrete innovations can be made widespread or "scaled up"?

• the ease with which they can be adapted to different contexts and/or meet different needs?

What kinds of policy interventions are most likely to be successful in facilitating specifically social innovations (and how do they differ from those that facilitate economic or business innovations)?

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[1] An early use of the term – in an explicitly economic context – was by Kuznets in 1974 (quoted in Pol et. al, 2009).

[2] Compare, for example, Mulgan and the Centre for Social Innovation, on the one hand, and Phills et al. (2008), on the other.

[3] Cf. Mulgan (2007), p.8 and Westley (2008), p.2., respectively. Other examples are those of Scott (2007), p.xiv., and Goldenberg et al. (2009), p. 3.

[4] Cf. the second definition by Mulgan (2007), p.8. Other examples are those proffered by Heiskala (2007), p.74., and by the European Union's Katarsis project (2009).

[5] Cf. Australian Social Innovation Exchange (2008), p.1.

[6] Cf. Phills et al. (2008), p.36. A variant on this definition (for example, Mulgan's second definition (op. cit.): innovations "motivated by the goal of meeting a social need") is one based on motivations, as distinct from actual benefits.

[7] Cf. Pol et al. (2009).

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