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Exploring the concept of social innovation

Jelena Titko^{a*}, Svetlana Surikova^b

^aRiga Technical University, Kalnciema 6, Riga, LV-1048, Latvia

^bUniversity of Latvia, Jūrmalas gatve 74/76, Riga, LV-1083, Latvia

Abstract

Purpose of the article The purpose of the article is to reflect the results of the authors' conducted research that was aimed to contribute to understanding of the concept of social innovations.

Methodology/methods To achieve the established goal, an analysis of the textual information was performed, using software AQUAD 6.0. Information data base included 51 definitions of the term 'social innovation' proposed by individual researchers, governmental and non-governmental institutions and research agencies. Content analysis was performed, using the procedures of open-coding, theory-based coding and analysis of frequencies. Theory-based coding was conducted in collaboration with an invited expert. To measure an inter-rater agreement, Cohen's Cappa coefficient was calculated.

Scientific aim The goal of the research is to provide an insight into the concept of social innovations by studying its development and identifying its core elements and features.

Findings Deep analysis of the definitions of the investigated concept yielded five elements assigned to social innovations: 1) social goal, 2) transformative power, 3) crossdisciplinarity, 4) new relationships and collaboration forms, and 5) impact on society's capacity to act. Besides, the question about the main outcomes of the implementation of social innovations was explored. Based on the research results, the conceptual model of social innovations was created. The model involves three content blocks: inputs (drivers), core elements (features) and outputs (impact).

Conclusions The given study was conducted within the framework of the research project, which brings together scholars from several universities. Thus, it was critically important to come to the consensus on understanding of the meaning of the analysed concept. Besides, exploring the concept of social innovations provides a platform for further investigations in the field of impact measuring, evaluation of state/sector/company's potential to implement social innovations and etc.

Keywords: social innovation, conceptual model, content analysis

JEL Classification: O350

* E-mail: jelena.titko@inbox.lv

Introduction

Social innovation is a multidimensional concept that is in the focus of public attention during the last decade. Its emergent popularity becomes obvious from the growing number of the related scientific publications. The call for 'social innovation' in Google Scholar data base yielded more than 1.2 million results (papers published since 2005).

The issues in regards to social innovations are on the agenda in the European Union. This resulted in the implementation of the topic into EU and national strategic plans and programmes (European Commission, 2010, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b).

The urgency of the questions related to the development and successful implementation of social innovations is caused by external factors' influence. Social innovations respond to the global challenges faced by the society (European Commission, 2012b; Harris and Albury, 2009):

- Ageing society;
- Rise in long-term debilitating health conditions;
- Environmental problems, pollution;
- Climate change;
- High level of unemployment, in particular youth unemployment;
- Lack for cohesion;
- Educational problems, citizens' illiteracy;
- Risk of poverty or social exclusion.

The wide range of problems that probably can be resolved by means of social innovations explains the fact that the understanding of the concept of social innovations differs widely among different stakeholders. The term is defined from very different perspectives, highlighting different elements. Thus, the research question is, as follows:

What are the core elements and features of social innovations?

The goal of the current research is to construct a theoretical framework of the concept of social innovations. To achieve the established goal, an analysis of the relevant literature was performed. For the research purpose the authors collected 51 definitions of the term 'social innovation' proposed by individual researchers, governmental and non-governmental institutions and research agencies.

Data analysis and processing was conducted, using the following algorithm:

1. Theory-based coding was performed by the authors aimed to determine the most frequently used content area for definition of social innovation. To measure an inter-rater agreement, Cohen's Cappa coefficient was calculated.
2. Data analysis by means of AQUAD 6.0 software, applying the procedure of open-coding, was performed. Besides, the extracted definitions were analysed to define the main fields for implementation of social innovations and main outcomes.
3. Based on the research results, conceptual model of social innovation was created.

The current paper contributes to the body of knowledge in regards to social innovations and provides a platform to further research in the field. The study is conducted within the framework of the National Research Program "Economic Transformation, Smart Growth, Governance and Legal Framework for the State and Society for Sustainable Development – a New Approach to the Creation of a Sustainable Learning Community (EKOSOC-LV)". This, in turn, also requires an investigation of the concept to get the common viewpoint on the terminology used among the project participants.

1 The core of social innovation

The most popular definition of the term 'social innovation' that has been used by many researchers in their works, as well as by representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations in their reports (Tucker, 2014), was proposed by Mulgan (2006):

„Social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social.”

In turn, European Commission (2013a) defines social innovations as a "development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations."

Many researchers argued that the term 'social innovation' is used in various and overlapping ways in different disciplines (Pol, Ville, 2009; Edwards-Schachter, Matti, Alcántara, 2012; Ümarik, Loogma, Tafel-Viia, 2014, etc.).

Minks (2011) identified common, core elements of social innovation as follows:

- *It is something new* – a new approach, a new idea, a new strategy, a new program – that’s not just new for the organization implementing it, but “pattern-breaking” or even “disruptive”;
- *It solves a problem* – creates social value, serves the public good, improves people’s lives in some way, leading to transformative, societal change;
- *It can be done by anyone* – nonprofits, governments, businesses, foundations, the academic community, individuals, or some combination.

Bulut, Hakan, and Duygu Seckin (2013) concluded that “there are three common traits about social innovation: *a need, an effective solution, and benefiting from the solution* in individual, organizational or societal level.”

The review developed by Edwards-Schachter, Matti, and Alcántara (2012) resulted in the identification of several dimensions in which the concept of social innovation is defined and discussed. These are: aims, purposes/objectives, drivers, sources, context, agents, sectors, process, results/outcomes, and aspects related to governance, empowerment and capacity building.

Based on the study conducted by The Young Foundation (2012), the term ‘social innovations’ has been used in the following contexts:

- *Societal transformation*. Examples of topics: the role of civil society in social change, the role of social economy and social entrepreneurs in delivering economic growth, problems of social inclusion.
- *A model of organizational management*. Examples of topics: business strategy related to changes in human, institutional and social capital to improve efficiency, organisational restructuring, improving human resource management, sustainability of non-profits.
- *Social entrepreneurship*. Examples of topics: creating new social ventures, definition of social enterprise, behaviours of social entrepreneurs, and the role of social enterprises.
- *The development of new products, services and programmes*. Examples of topics: public sector innovation, public service provision by social enterprises.
- *A model of governance, empowerment and capacity building*. Examples of topics: relationships between societal actors, skills and competences of various actors needed to implement social programmes.

The wide range of different contexts in which the term ‘social innovation’ has been used confirms the necessity for applying statistical methods for analysis of proposed definitions.

2 Research design

For the research purposes the authors collected definitions of the term ‘social innovation’, using scientific data bases Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, reports and documents provided by the European Commission and other authorities, as well as papers published by non-governmental organizations. As a result, 51 definitions and text segments were collected. Data set can be divided into three content blocks according to the information source:

1. Definitions of social innovation, which are used by national and international political and economic authorities, for instance, the European Commission (EC), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia (OECD, 2011; Noya, 2011, 2012; European Commission, 2010, 2013a; Le Mounier, 2014; Tucker, 2014; the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, 2013; Barosso, 2013).
2. Definitions of social innovation, which are used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations and research institutions (Bacon et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2010; Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills et al., 2008; Pearson, 2006; Kasper, 2008; The Young Foundation, 2012; Nilsson, 2003; Centre for Social Innovation, 2015; TEPsIE, 2013; SELUSI, 2013; SPREAD, 2013; SINNERGIAK, 2013; Harris and Albury, 2009; Urama and Acheampong, 2013; The Young Foundation, 2015; Sociālo Inovāciju Centrs, 2015; Goldenberg et al., 2009; CPRN, 2004; Westley, 2008).
3. Definitions of social innovation, which are used by individual researchers in the academic and business environment (Matsuyo, 2012; Bergman et al., 2010; Mumford, 2002; Hämäläinen and Heiskala, 2007; Neumeier, 2012; Moulart et al., 2005; Gerometta et al., 2005; Heisala, 2007; Pol and Ville, 2009; Reynolds, 2013; Saul, 2011; Hubert, 2012; Harrisson et al., 2009; Bock, 2012; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Nicholls and Murdock, 2012; Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010; Mulgan, 2006; Davis, 2014; Lapiņa, 2012; Grigus and Lešinska, 2014; Avelino et al., 2014).

At the initial stage of the analysis the procedure of theory-based coding was performed by the authors, using the classification proposed by The Young Foundation (2012). The following categories and codes were used for coding:

1. Societal transformation (code ST)
2. A model of organizational management (code OM)
3. Social entrepreneurship (code SE)

4. The development of new products, services and programmes (code NP)
5. A model of governance, empowerment and capacity building (code GEC)

To assess inter-rater reliability when coding qualitative data (definitions), Cohen's Kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960) was measured. The coefficient shows "the proportion of agreement corrected for chance". The algorithm of the calculation of the coefficient is described in details by Wood (2007). It easily can be calculated by means of SPSS software, as well as manually.

Following Landis and Koch (1977), the value of the coefficient over 0.7 was stated as a satisfactory level. The remaining definitions, which the raters did not agree on, were coded with two different codes, proposed by the authors. In the end, the coding procedure was done in AQUAD and frequency table was generated to determine the most frequently used category to define social innovation.

The further analysis of the definitions was performed by means of classical and interpretative content analysis, i.e., transformation of the textual information into the quantitative measures with further statistical processing. The software AQUAD 6.0 was used for quantitative processing of the data.

For initial data reduction the procedure of open-coding was used. Data blocks were coded with so-called "profile codes":

- For the 1st block "Definitions of social innovation, which are used by national and international political and economic authorities" – Def_gov
- For the 2nd block "Definitions of social innovation, which are used by NGOs, non-profit organizations and research institutions" – Def_NGO
- For the 3rd block "Definitions of social innovation, which are used by individual researchers" – Def_individuals

The quantification of codes yielded the frequency tables which provide the information about the frequency of appearance of the codes in the definitions analyzed.

Data processing was iterated three times resulted in three content blocks: 1) the features of social innovations, 2) the fields of implementation of social innovations, and 3) the outcomes (impact) of social innovations.

The results of the current study were used to construct the model of the concept of social innovations.

3 Research results

Analyzing the collected definitions of the term 'social innovation', proposed by different authors, it is obvious that social innovations most frequently defined as a response to social challenges. Besides, the process of the development and implementation of social innovations requires new forms of relationships between stakeholders or the new forms of collaboration can be created during the process. Frequently, social innovations are defined as new products and services, as well as new methods, models, techniques, etc.

The first stage of the analysis of the textual information, using pre-defined categories was performed by the authors independently. Each of the definitions of the term 'social innovation' was coded with the appropriate code (see chapter 2).

The only text segment, in which the categories were described, was not considered. Thus, the authors analyzed 50 definitions.

For measuring the agreement between the authors on categories assigned to the definitions, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated in SPSS. First attempt yielded the coefficient's value equal to 0.324. Due to the unsatisfactory level of the agreement the content of the definitions was discussed by the raters and the coding procedure was iterated. Second attempt yielded the coefficient's value equal to 0.730. The definitions on which the raters did not reach a consensus were coded applying two different labels.

Using the set of identified categories, the procedure of the content analysis was performed by means of AQUAD software. Frequency table generated by AQUAD is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1 Content analysis of the definitions of the term “social innovation”: results of theory-based coding

Category (code)	Def_gov	Def_individuals	Def_NGO
GEC (Governance, Empowerment, Capacity building)	3	4	4
NP (New Products)	2	6	9
OM (Organizational Management)	0	1	0
SE (Social Entrepreneurship)	0	1	1
ST (Societal Transformation)	5	12	8

Source: authors' contribution

Obviously, social innovation is most frequently defined in the context of societal transformation and as a development of new products and services. The further analysis was aimed to detect core features and elements of social innovations. Initial data processing by means of AQUAD 6.0, using open-coding procedure, yielded 72 units of meaning. The importance of certain codes was evaluated, based on the frequency of mentioning of specific units of meaning in the text. Analyzing the received results, it is possible to define main features of social innovations and to elicit the core elements:

1. *Social goal*. Social innovations are developed to achieve a socially important goal. The range can vary from dealing with global issues such as climate change, society ageing or pollution, to meeting specific social need in a particular region.
2. *Change*. Social innovation always is related with small or large-scale transformations. It could be society transformation, change in public thinking, a new approach to running a business and etc.
3. *Crossdisciplinarity*. The process of the development and implementation of social innovations usually is complemented with the crossing of disciplinary boundaries.
4. *New social relationships and collaboration forms*. It could be a new form of stakeholders' interaction, an involvement of new partners or changes in the routine tasks performed by social actors.
5. *Improving the society's capacity to act*. Social innovations are not only solutions for social needs and societal problems, but also are drivers for the society's development. Social innovations enhance society's capacity to act, thus, driving the wave of new innovations.

The further analysis of the extracted text segments was performed to get the answers to the questions on: (1) the main fields for social innovations, and (2) the main outcomes of social innovations.

Performing the procedure of content analysis, attention was only paid to specific portions of information: fields for implementation of social innovations and forms of social impact provided by social innovations. Frequency tables generated by AQUAD are presented in the Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 Content analysis of the definitions of the term “social innovation”: implementation fields

Category (code)	Def_gov	Def_individuals	Def_NGO
Business	3	3	0
Culture	1	3	2
Economics	2	0	4
Education	1	0	2
Environment	1	0	5
Finance	1	1	1
Health	1	0	2
Labour market	3	0	1
Politics	1	3	0
Public policy	1	0	0
Public services	0	1	2
Regulations	0	4	1

Source: authors' contribution

The variety of fields for application the results of social innovations explains the fact that the concept of social innovation has been studied from different perspectives and different dimensions are specified. The most frequently social innovations are defined in regards to business transformation, cultural, economic and environmental issues.

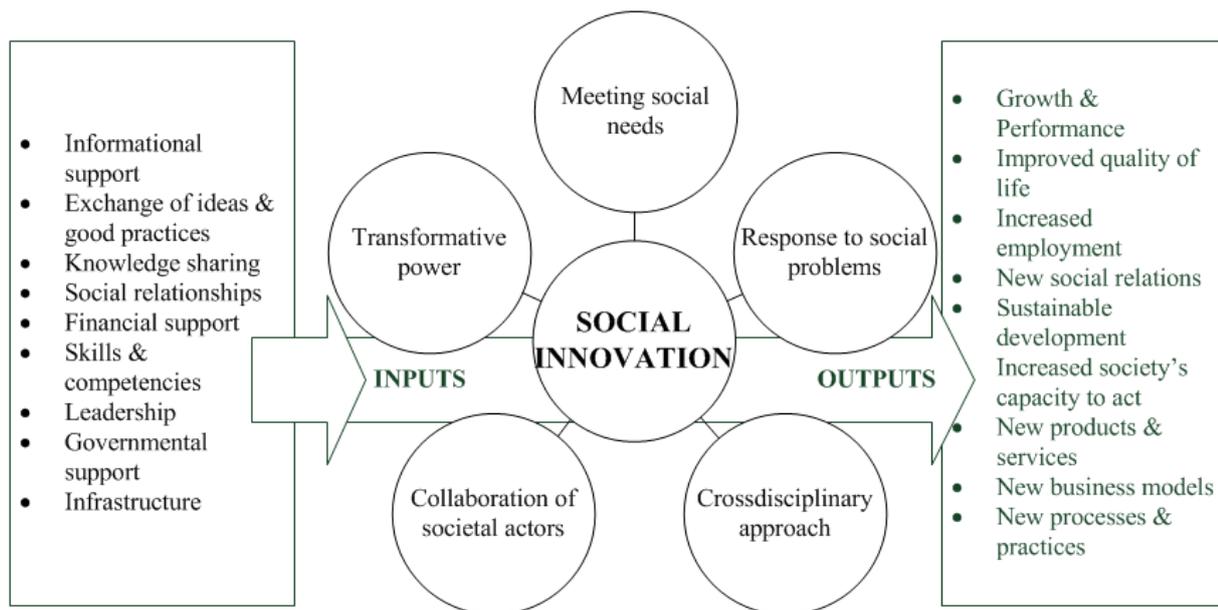
Table 3 Content analysis of the definitions of the term “social innovation”: implementation outcomes

Category (code)	Def_gov	Def_individuals	Def_NGO
Access to resources	0	1	2
Expand role of civil society	1	0	0
Growth & performance	1	2	1
Improve quality of life	3	2	0
Labour market integration	1	0	0
New business models	1	1	1
New jobs	3	0	0
New models of collaboration	2	0	1
New processes	0	1	0
New service delivery	0	2	1
New social relationships	3	3	5
New way of thinking	1	1	1
New way to do business	0	1	0
Response to social needs	5	6	9
Response to social problems	4	5	9
Social inclusion	0	1	0
Societal transformation	0	1	1
Society capacity to act	3	0	2
Sustainable development	2	0	4

Source: authors' contribution

Table 3 demonstrates that the most frequently social innovations are mentioned as a response to social needs and problems without specification of an outcome. In all three blocks of definitions social innovations are defined in regards to the new social relationships. On the one hand, the process of development and implementation of social innovations requires new ways of collaboration between stakeholders, but, on the other hand, new relationships between societal actors are generated. Besides, social innovation is frequently mentioned as a driver for sustainable development of business and society as well as a tool to enhance society's capacity to act.

Based on the presented results, the conceptual model of social innovation was created by the authors (Figure 1). The central block of the model and the block “Outputs” were built based on the current research results. In turn, the block “Inputs” was created, based on the brief literature review (TEPSIE, 2014; Hubert, 2010; European Commission, 2012a) on resources needed to develop and implement social innovations.



Source: authors' contribution

Figure 1 Conceptual model of social innovation

4 Discussion

Social innovation is a frequently debated topic in the academic and business environment. Its popularity is explained by the huge range of global challenges and social issues faced by the modern society that could be resolved by social innovation. Besides, social innovation is a driver of sustainable development for national economy and businesses. All the companies are affected by society's changing preferences and changing worldviews. All the businesses interested in achieving long-term prosperity should have sustainable development strategy that could be based on social innovations.

Considering extremely high importance of social innovations for almost all the sectors of economy and for society as a whole, it is not surprisingly that a wide range of definitions of the term 'social innovation' exists. Each of the reserachers concentrates the attention on specific elements of social innovation related to a particular field of implementation. Based on the results' of the authors' conducted research (content analysis with applying theory-based coding), the term 'social innovation' is most frequently defined in the context of social transformation, development of new products and services, and in regards to a model of governance, empowerment and capacity buiding. The aspect of business transformation is not very popular in the authors' selected definitions. Very few researchers define social innovation as a social entrepreneurship. It could be explained by the fact that social entrepreneurship is a separate comprehensive concept with its own definitions.

The current paper contributes to the body of theoretical knowledge in regards to social innovations, analysing the concept from different perspectives and combining different visions of the concept into one comprehensive model. It should be mentioned that more than 40 per cent of the analysed definitions were extracted from the sources published in 2012 and later. Thus, the present research provides up-to-date information about the meaning of the social innovations from the viepoint of different researchers and organisations.

Conclusion

The current paper reflects the results of the authors' conducted research on exploring the concept of social innovation and identifying its core elements and features. Research findings were used as abasis for construction of the conceptual model of social innovation (Figure 1) that includes three content blocks:

1. Inputs – sources and support needed to develop and implement social innovation.
2. Features – specific elements characterizing social innovation and peculiarities, which allow distinguishing social innovation from other type of innovation.
3. Outcomes – results from the implementation of social innovation; social impact provided by social innovation.

On the authors' opinion the most interesting component of the concept is the component related to the social relationships and collaboration between stakeholders in the process of development and implementation of social innovation. This component is included into the developed model twice: as an input and as an outcome. This could be a basis for in-deep investigations in various research fields.

Due to the fact that the given study was conducted within the framework of the scientific project, the proposed model has a practical value for the project participants. During the process of its development the common viewpoint on the meaning of the concept of social innovation was created. Besides, understanding the link between the components of the concept will assist in the process of the further investigation. The next comprehensive stage of the project is related to the measuring of social impact provided by social innovation. Thus, one of the important issues will be the determination of the appropriate measures. The developed conceptual model provides an insight into the potential research directions.

The current study was limited by the number of the analysed definitions of the concept of social innovations. However, the received results allow making a theoretical framework of the concept. The reliability of the developed model will be tested through the focus group interview. Latvian experts from different fields (education, business and etc.) will be invited to discuss pre-formulated questions on social innovations. It will allow defining the specifics and scale of social innovations in Latvia.

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