

Chapter 8

Towards a New Definition of Social Innovation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on social innovation, a topic that the literature has been increasingly discussing in the last decade. The authors revise the many available (and, to some extent, too general) definitions as well as identify the main features that have been claimed as relevant for social innovation (e.g. Mumford, 2002), which concur in providing its definition. By doing so, they pursue the assessment of a less fuzzy definition of social innovation and make a first attempt to focus on the role that companies play in developing as well as scaling social innovations. The adopted approach exploits the literature review and is based on an in-depth analysis of the definitions of social innovation: the authors collected and catalogued them, so identifying the main dimensions of analysis. Clarifying what social innovation is and the role that companies play in social innovation initiatives can increase companies' awareness of what they (can) do with respect to social innovation, possibly taking advantage of this in terms of business objectives.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on innovation analyzes the features, the needed resources, the processes, the effects and the implications associated to the development of different typologies of innovation. Organizational innovation (Wolfe, 1994), technological innovation (Utterback, 1971), architectural innovation (Henderson and

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Clark, 1990), disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997) and, more lately, open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003) exemplify just some of them.

In the last years, an increasing attention has been devoted to social innovation. As observed by Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2006), the social implications of innovation have been deeply discussed in the literature since the seminal work of Schumpeter (1942). However, according to Barroso (2011), the increased attention is partly due to the financial and economic crisis, which makes creativity and innovation in general, and social innovation in particular, crucial to foster sustainable growth, secure jobs, and boost competitiveness.

Social innovation indeed plays a crucial role in several sectors, and especially in those wherein the existing models of innovation are failing or stagnant or new possibilities are not being adequately exploited (Mulgan *et al.*, 2007). Such sectors range from manufacturing to economy, from education to health, from environmental protection to finance, from public service provision to strategic planning.

The diversification of the sectors wherein social innovations develop as well as the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of the scholars that, so far, investigated social innovation lead to several different definitions and to a notion of social innovation quite vague, no more than a buzzword (Bock, 2012; Pol and Ville, 2009; Neumeier, 2012). The paucity of systematic analyses on the topic is also hindering the practice of social innovation itself (Serrat, 2012).

This paper aims at investigating the nature of social innovation. In particular, we review the existing definitions of social innovation and, by the means of a quali-quantitative approach, we identify the dimensions of analysis and the variables that the literature considers as peculiar to social innovation. Based on them we provide a new definition of social innovation. Our work expands and updates the analysis carried out by Pol and Ville (2009). In addition we use three well-known cases of social innovation, i.e. fair-trade movement, microcredit and the open source software to test our conclusions and to question about their real specificity and usefulness.

The paper is organized as follows. First a review of the literature is presented. Then, the goal of the paper and the methodology adopted to achieve it are discussed. Successively, we discuss the analysis carried out and the findings. Finally, we draw some conclusions and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last two decades, a growing number of scholars has investigated the nature of social innovation. Literature reviews as well as pamphlets and general guides have been published (e.g. Young Foundation and NESTA, 2010; SIX, 2010). Such works use different approaches and methodologies, ranging from case studies (e.g. Mumford, 2002) to action research (e.g. Trifilova *et al.*, 2012). The novelty and importance of social innovation is also revealed by the number of centres all over the world (Canada, Australia, USA, UK, Germany, Austria, France, New Zealand) which are studying it and by the proliferation of social innovation ‘hubs’, incubators, and networks (such as the Social Innovation Exchange – SIX).

The literature provides different definitions which, in turn, discuss social innovation based on diverse dimensions of analysis and variables. For example, Flew *et al.* (2008) define social innovation as “the application of a new idea, or a new application of an existing idea, that delivers lasting social value”, whereas Heiscala (2007) emphasizes its “changes in the cultural, normative or regulative structures of the society which enhance its collective power resources and improve its economic and social performance”. Tafel-Viia *et al.* (2012) stresses that the phases of implementation, adoption and adaptation

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