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THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Doctoral dissertation

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SUMMARY

In the dissertation, I explore the issue of shaping social change through initiatives classified as social innovations. I provide an overview of institutional mechanisms available to organizations and discuss the micro and macro perspectives of institutionalization. I answer the explorative research question:

Do the agents of social innovation shape the impact of their organization and transform reality, and if so, how?

My intention was to systematize and enrich the body of knowledge on the methods of exerting institutional pressure available for social innovation. Moreover, I noticed the need to deepen the understanding of innovative organizations that strive to achieve social goals, which in social innovation language are called "positive social impact", "causing a social change" or "transforming reality". To accomplish these tasks, I researched the local organizations that are very successful in creating and disseminating social innovations and I tried to learn their perspective. Our cooperation lasted over 1.5 years, during which time I had an opportunity to observe the ongoing change and to capture change-triggering activities.

This dissertation is an attempt to put into words and legitimize the best practices of negotiating and shaping institutional change. It is also a presentation of tools that social innovation initiatives can use to impact social reality. Moreover, it is an encouragement to organize social innovation reflectively, and to consider the risk factors accompanying this demanding challenge.

The research method was a case study conducted in 3 local, urban social innovation initiatives – Open Jazdów Settlement, Food Cooperative Dobrze and Paca 40 Action Space. The empirical data was collected by means of in-depth interviews, observations and analysis of documents and publications

belonging to the initiatives. The method turned out to be effective and allowed me to understand well the characteristics of work in social innovation ecosystem.

Social innovation is conceptualized as a “change in social relations, involving new ways of doing, organizing, framing and/or knowing” that „lead(s) to positive societal transformation” (Hexeltine et al., 2016, p. 2). According to my research, the way in which social innovations are designed and organized, is crucial to achieve such goals. I therefore propose a definition, according to which social innovation is produced in collective, reflective, and inclusive process, aimed at addressing unmet needs or social challenges, but without compromising the common interest of a society. The above definitions structure the understanding of social innovation in this dissertation.

Social innovation ecosystem is a system of connected vessels, which includes both the initiatives introducing an innovating practice, it's agents and stakeholders. The ecosystem is diverse and complex. Therefore, the concept of social innovation might be confusing. The social innovation initiatives most often appear where the systemic solutions fail or have not yet been developed. They take various forms, and address social, environmental, political, and economical issues worldwide in almost all the countries. Social needs and challenges, which are addressed by initiatives, differ significantly. The quantitative study has revealed the most common areas of practice in which social innovations perform. It is education and lifelong learning, poverty and sustainable development, employment, health and social care, transport and mobility, energy supply, environment, and climate change (Howaldt, Kaletka et al., 2016).

Social innovation plays an increasingly significant role in the transformation processes towards more sustainable models of production and consumption, and towards fair distribution of income and resources (Howaldt, Kopp & Schwarz, 2015). According to scholars (e.g., Avelino et al. (2019); Westley et al. (2016) and Howaldt et al. (2015)),

social innovation has a capacity to “challenge, alter and/or replace established (and/or dominant) institutions in a specific social-material context” (Haxeltine, Avelino, et al., 2016, p. 19). It is therefore the aim of social innovation to challenge the taken for granted institutions (whenever they cause or support a social problem), and to provide ideas about alternative patterns of doing things. Questioning enables noticing some systemic or structural failures and rising the awareness of it. The criticism opens a space for discussion and development of innovations in the field recognized as worth improving. Institutions, in the theory of social innovation, can be “altered” or “replaced” in order to meet social goals defined in a bottom-linked, participatory process of social innovating. The new patterns of doing things, the new norms and rules, are by a definition the products of social innovations.

To discuss the transformative role of social innovation, I embed the dissertation in the institutional theory, which enables analysis of the process of change. Change is a permanent element of social reality, while the concept of transformation contains an element of intentional triggering the change. Social innovation is one of such triggers that impacts the direction of change. Institutions, which function as “the rules of the game” in societies, are changing over the time in different pace and scope. Institutions that we consider obvious today, were once shaped based on principles perceived as right, described by law and engraved in the norms of behavior, habits and beliefs of people. On the other hand, those institutional elements that do not meet social needs today, or prevent individuals from developing and realizing their potential, are subjects in the processes of change. The institutional environment requires a constant work on its evolution in order to serve effectively the constantly changing societies. Social innovations are those practices and ideas that help to navigate the progress in a direction of human and ecological well-being.

The research on transition, which has so far usually taken a macro perspective and informed about transformation at the policy level, has

recently shifted its focus to the local scale - that is, to the implementation of policy in action (Köhler et al., 2021). Authors (e.g., Loorbach et al., 2020; Isaksson & Hagbert, 2020) indicate that "concrete actions that initiate and develop transitions are implemented in a local context" (Köhler et al., 2021, p. 1). Political directives and global visions of development, take a real dimension when they are introduced in a given neighborhood, community or organization. Only in action are the visions confronted with the variables of social reality and tested *in vivo*.

Social innovation may serve as a vehicle for agency in the process of change, which means that it equips individuals and communities with tools necessary to participate in the process consciously and actively. Therefore, it is a mechanism that enables the progress to become more participatory, inclusive, and meaningful.

The social innovation community thus becomes an experimental space – a laboratory (Skrzypczak, 2020). Ostrom (2000) explains that communities are self-regulating bodies, capable of acting for the common good, if they are organized according to the certain communitarian rules. Moreover, community is a buffer between private and common interest (Skrzypczak, 2016), a space in which a balance can be achieved through direct experience and through negotiations of the norms, rules, and beliefs. Community is, therefore, a valuable partner in the process of transformation towards sustainability.

Considering the local dimension of transformation, as well the local character of social innovation, I found reasonable to study empirically those mechanisms of norms emergence that appear between people and during interactions.

Change is, above other things, the process of learning. Individuals need to unlearn previous habits, learn new ways of doing things, and adapt to the new patterns of action, in order to go through change. I explore the opportunities for the pattern's interruption, where old habits or beliefs

might be replaced with the new, according to the needs of the fast-changing reality of today. In empirical research, I focused on “experiential immediacy” that opens a space for institutional change (Nilsson, 2015). I analyzed experience as an opportunity to learn and, therefore, to change behavioral patterns. Experience is, consequently, another channel of institutional pressure exaggeration - a way to trigger social change (Nilsson, 2013, 2016). I suggest that experiential learning in community-based social innovations, is a commonly used tool, and there are multiple organizational features and practices that support its effectiveness.

The social innovation initiatives that I have researched, are local communities addressing the needs of urban society. During my research I have noticed that live meetings, teamwork, and collaborative experiences play an important role for participants, allowing them to create shared vision of their organization and a shared understanding of the social innovation practices that they are inventing. Often, the participants have said that something is difficult to explain but they (their community) “feel” that these are the rules of the game. "Feeling" is precisely a characteristic element of experience; that is, information perceived by the senses (Kolb, 1984). According to the theory of learning, in order to gather more complete knowledge on a topic, one should combine cognitive learning with experiential, and thus learn about the implementation of transformational goals. These two sources of knowledge complement each other and improve the understanding of complex social reality.

Collective experiential learning in a community of social innovation takes the form of cyclic negotiations between individuals on how they experience the practice. It is a “ping-pong of multiple perspectives”, an exchange between different individuals, and between individuals and their environment. The model of ping-pong of perspectives explains the process in which the social innovation practice is negotiated and co-created by various participants. The experiential work (surfacing, reconciling, and aligning) is affected by multiple perspectives that add new variables to the

equation. The collective experiential work informs the new adjustments necessary to comply the needs of community participants and, simultaneously, supports proceeding towards achievement of shared goals of an organization. In an effective community, the multiple perspectives are a meaningful source of information, not only about the needs of individuals but also as different understandings of certain situations. The collective nature of successful social innovation has already been noticed by Mumford (2002), Cajaiba-Santana (2014), Yañez-Figueroa, et al. (2016) and others. Collective participation proved to be crucially important also in the initiatives I researched. However, the literature does not specify how the collectivity is manifested in practice. I therefore decoded the collaboration by attaching it the meanings explained to me by my interviewees - the practitioners, and presented it in four categories of organizational activities: co-doing, co-being, co-learning and co-deciding. The categories reflect a multidimensional character of social innovation work, that is as much about “being” in the community, as about achieving organizational goals. What is important, is the interpenetration of events and experiences. West (2012) wrote about double reflexivity aimed at achieving goals and caring for relationships in the group in the context of effective teamwork. According to his research, social and task reflexivity in balance, is the condition necessary for the team to be resilient, innovative, and effective. Co-doing is most related to action and practice. The category involves organizational practices aimed at collective doing of things and engaging community members in co-creation activities. The concept of co-creation was for example described by Skrzypczak (2016) in the context of community participation, when people co-create a service or product for themselves, by themselves. Co-being is caring for the members of a group, it involves empathy, but also bearing shared responsibility for the practice (Naumiuk, 2020). “The prefix “co-” carries a participatory, emancipatory, and creative potential, but at the same time leads to obligations and dependence” (Naumiuk, 2020, p. 58). This way of perceiving community organization of social innovations was often referred to by my interlocutors

talking about "community" as a value and a way of doing things together. As Zinker (1980) explained - the group is more than a sum of individuals, action in a group brings different results than individual action. According to the research, well-organized collective activities mean greater creativity, improved problem solving and greater job satisfaction (West, 2016). The interlocutors of this research are convinced that effective, deep collaboration is crucial for achieving organizational goals.

The dissertation contributes to the body of knowledge on transformative capacity of social innovation – the ability to challenge, alter or replace established institutions, in a process of transformation toward sustainable model of society (Haxeltine, Avelino, et al.; Haxeltine, Jørgensen, et al. 2016; Avelino, et al. 2019). It includes an overview of mechanisms of institutionalization, through which initiatives and organizations, classified as social innovations, can disseminate alternative ways of dealing with social challenges. Moreover, it explores the processes of collective negotiating and shaping the social innovation practice.

Social innovators can benefit from this research by reflecting on the proposed concepts of collaboration (co-doing, co-being, co-learning, co-deciding) and consciously decide on how to organize collectively social innovation. Moreover, the practitioners can learn about the methods of diffusion and scaling social innovation, as well about characteristics of urban communities.

What is important for social innovation to trigger the social change, is authority recognition (Avellino et al., 2017). Similarly, Ostrom (1990) claimed that collective action needs the group norms to be recognize by authorities to successfully co-manage a common good.

In line with the trends visible in Western Europe, citizens want to have a real influence on local politics. They want to co-create it. It is something more than just occasional public consultations. It is about lasting, trust-based

relationships and the resulting new opportunities for action. Moreover, in times of upcoming transformations, e.g., related to climate changes, active communities, networks and community knowledge will be particularly important for state governance.

In the future, it would be worth to further explore the dimensions of collaboration in different cultural and organizational contexts, so the categories I have proposed could be deepened and supplemented with additional information. There is also a space to further explore the organizational mechanisms that support experiential negotiating, learning, and diffusing. Moreover, it would be useful to research the inclusiveness of social innovation. Such knowledge could inform whose experience is reached by social innovation, and which social groups are excluded. In the context of politics and cooperation with authorities, there is much to discover. This participatory process is just evolving and requires the support of researchers.