

Kinga Szabó-Tóth

Social Innovation and Higher Education

From Theory to Practice

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**SOCIAL INNOVATION AND
HIGHER EDUCATION**

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ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Lector: György Csepe

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-1684-3

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-7684-7

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30457 Hannover
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Printed in the EU

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Foreword

Since the end of the 20th century, we have been increasingly confronted—both as researchers and as individuals—with a great number of impacts that are not local but global, worldwide. And we cannot possibly hide away from them. With a slight exaggeration, we may say that there is no shelter from them in any corner of the world (let us think of COVID-19, the world accelerating, the challenges of ageing societies and generational differences, and the fact that the world is becoming highly polarised, with the social, economic and territorial inequalities posing a major challenge for regions, countries, decision-makers—not least those who suffer the most). Modernity entails global risks that can significantly undermine our need for security. These risks or challenges are extended both spatially and temporally and are difficult to decipher. They increasingly take the form of so-called “wild problems,” which we have no mysterious formula or perfect recipe for and, quite likely, no single optimal solution to.

Accordingly, in the 21st century, social sciences, and sociology in particular, faced the challenge of having to reassess their role, that is, finding their place among these phenomena, which are often unpredictable and unforeseeable, which means taking on the task of describing, explaining, predicting or even intervening in them.

Increasing territorial and social disadvantages, lagging regions and municipalities, the drastic deterioration of the quality of life of the people living there, economic processes and sustainability issues (including environmental sustainability) are matters that frequently generate wide public debates in society and, concurrently, necessitate social collaboration. In addition, relevant research makes it increasingly clear that reducing disadvantages and overcoming deficits requires a wealth of creativity, problem-solving, design thinking and innovation.

Therefore, recent years have seen a growing focus on social innovations that can respond to these challenges in a complex way. The introduction, maintenance and management of social innovations and the processes of renewal in social sciences can converge

in the notion that the elaboration and management of innovations presuppose a certain applied social science mindset.

The above phenomena greatly impact various segments or subsystems of society. These impacts are experienced at the level of higher education institutions as well, prompting their social responsibility and building on their role as catalysts. Thus, according to some theories, the ideal university of the late 20th and early 21st century is the so-called “third generation university,” which realises a synergy of education, research and social responsibility (or third mission, as it is usually referred to).

I have been working as a researcher, sociologist, social worker, community developer and coach for years (decades), in addition to being the head of and teaching at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Miskolc (Hungary). In the past 10 years, I have been increasingly working on social innovations, in interdisciplinary and international research environments, and applying the approaches, paradigms and methods of sociology in so-called applied sociological research. In addition, and parallel to these, since I have been working in higher education for 25 years, I have also become interested in the social responsibility of higher education institutions, their so-called “third mission.”

On that account, as I am involved predominantly in social innovation projects, I participate in research on social innovation and do so in a higher education context—it is these two areas that shall be linked in this book.

The aim of the present volume is thus to fill a gap by linking the fields of social innovation and higher education, and thereby facilitate reflection for stakeholders of higher education, innovation practitioners, policymakers and the general public interested in this subject matter.

The book consists of two main parts. The five chapters of the first major unit intend to shed light on the link between social innovation and higher education. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the conceptual framework and methodology of social innovation, followed by a chapter discussing and analysing the role of applied social science in generating and managing innovation. The third

chapter focuses on possible solutions to a new type of challenge, “wild problems,” through the presentation of innovative methods. Chapter 4 examines the primary issue of the book: social innovations and the third mission role and activity of higher education institutions. The final chapter in this part explores another novel issue: the potential of community coaching for, as well as its methods and applications in innovative projects.

The second part introduces the reader to the practice of social innovation through five case studies, all of which present projects that built heavily on the social responsibility of higher education institutions, that is, all of them were implemented in a higher education setting. Thus, these case studies describe the implementation of projects that may be models for linking the two areas. Each of the five case studies offers an insight into a different field. The first presents a project that proposes an innovative solution for identifying and then transforming social conflicts in a forward-looking way. The second describes a multi-year research and innovation project in which an interdisciplinary team developed and implemented a social innovation model in a disadvantaged region to increase its visibility, reduce its disadvantages and improve the quality of life of its inhabitants.

The third case study presents a method developed and tested in practice to measure local innovation potential. The fourth one discusses an innovative community development project for active ageing, which responds to the challenges of an ageing society, as mentioned above. Finally, the last chapter introduces an innovative international project using the methods of community coaching to develop and implement an expandable model of integrated service provision in deprived neighbourhoods, providing targeted coordination of social and employment services for disadvantaged residents.

I wish you fruitful collective thinking!

Miskolc, November, 2024
Kinga Szabó-Tóth

Chapter 1

The Concept, Models and Measurement of Social Innovation

Results of scientific research into territorial and social processes have demonstrated that disadvantages may only be reduced through the development and dissemination of innovations, particularly social ones. Unlike technical and technological innovations, social innovations characteristically focus on renewing human potential, are not created in specific research laboratories but in everyday workshops, their theory is formulated based on practical experience and they require large-scale social cooperation. In the 21st century, social sciences, and sociology in particular—both in constant need of renewal—face the challenge of their necessary involvement in developing social innovations.

But what is social innovation? Schumpeter's classic theory (1934) links innovation to economic development and the preservation of economic competitiveness. The theory deals with various forms of innovation, such as introducing a new product or a new quality of a product, using a new production technology and opening up a new market, as well as the emergence of new sources of supply, and the introduction of a new organisational form in an industry. These are all designed to describe economic innovations but are mostly applicable to social innovations as well.

The issue of social innovation has been a central theme for social researchers since the early 2000s. This is largely due to the emergence of new social and economic challenges, such as ageing societies, the digital divide, regional disparities, the deteriorating quality of life, climate change, environmental issues and inadequate responses to the needs of socially vulnerable populations, which cannot be overcome by traditional thinking and solutions (ECDG, 2006). The issue of reducing regional disparities and facilitating the catching-up process of so-called convergence regions was a critical issue during the enlargement of the EU. It also became increasingly clear that, in addition to state and local government intervention,

supporting and encouraging grassroots initiatives are vital elements of the catching-up process and improving the quality of life of the inhabitants of disadvantaged areas.

Returning to the question posed above, broadly speaking social innovation can be linked to efforts to improve a community's well-being and quality of life. Other important elements of the definition include emphasis on community solutions and participation, and the novelty of the innovation itself, based on the interconnection and interaction of different sectors (public, non-profit, church).

Social innovation is often aimed at changing the status quo, which requires an innovative and problem-solving mindset. An innovative initiative or product may come in various ways and forms. Yet, identifying the problem and its causes, then critiquing existing solutions and ways of thinking, finding areas where intervention is needed, then taking action and finally evaluating are always integral parts of the process. Social innovation can take many forms: it can be a strategy, a concept, an idea or some kind of know-how, an organisational structure, a form of collaboration or a project-based initiative.

The present chapter outlines the concepts and models developed for social innovation and the methods for assessing the innovation potential of a territorial unit (region, country, municipality or part of a municipality).

Concepts and models

Although, as mentioned in the introduction, social innovation has been a very popular research topic in the past 20 years, there is still no single definition to rely on. The term was first used by two social scientists at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who believed that social innovations played a major role in bringing about social and technological change (Baturina-Bezovan, 2015).

Following Schumpeter's theory discussed above, the issue of social innovation was relegated to the background until the late 1990s. In fact, it is from this point on that this issue becomes highly

important, as signalled by the emergence of the idea that technological and social innovation cannot be separated, as the former requires the latter to be created.

The first decade of the 2000s saw the emergence of various theories and questions, such as the relationship between design thinking (discussed in more detail in this book) and social innovation and the difference between technical, technological, economic and social innovation (Bogdány et al, 2023).

According to the OECD, social innovation does not aim to create new forms of production or to open up new markets but to provide new opportunities for meeting social needs and integrating the population into production (OECD, 2016). Social innovation brings a new practice or approach to explaining social processes and contributes to solving societal challenges.

Research on social enterprises started in 2008, due to an increasing emphasis on creating alternative forms of entrepreneurship that are sustainable, based on local products and services, and involve local people (Phillips et al., 2015). The design, development and operation of social enterprises require innovative thinking; thus, they may be considered social innovations themselves. Concepts approaching sustainable development, social policy, public services and economic well-being from the perspective of social innovation also emerged in the late 2000s (Weerakoon et al., 2016).

Let us now take a look at possible definitions of the concept itself.

According to Éva G. Fekete, a prominent researcher on the subject in Northern Hungary, since the regime change, micro-regional co-operations emerging as grassroots initiatives and involved in the implementation of regional innovations (G. Fekete, 2001) may also be considered social innovations. G. Fekete believes that one of the most important prerequisites for social innovations is being generated at a local, micro-level.

Howaldt et al. view social innovation as a new combination of social practices that can lead to a higher level of meeting social needs (Howaldt–Kopp–Schwarz, 2014). Terstriep and Rehfeld (2022) likewise highlight that social innovation is a novel combination of ideas and, as a new element, they also stress the importance

of cooperation in generating these ideas among various social groups, that is, they describe it as a higher level of cooperation. Terstiep and Rehfeld add owing to interactions between groups, social innovations can contribute to reducing social inequalities and meet needs that cannot be met by the market. Similarly, Mulgan (2007) emphasises that social innovations provide solutions to unmet social needs.

Nemes and Varga offer an all-encompassing definition of social innovation: a process that may result in a new attitude, approach, paradigm, product, practice, process or network that deviates from previous practice and aims to solve problems and meet needs in society. Nemes and Varga point out that in the process, new attitudes, values, social relations and possibly new structures emerge (Nemes – Varga, 2015). Another vital element they highlight is that social innovations do not come from research institutions but are the result of the active role played by social and civil actors. Furthermore, they emphasise that social innovations are created in line with social norms and values, thus bearing in mind the reduction of environmental and social risks.

The European Commission defines social innovation as “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations” (2013:39). In doing so, they can provide solutions to problems affecting social processes and ultimately improve the well-being of a region.

To summarise the above definitions, I shall discuss two ideas below. First, reviewing these theories, Hubert (2012) concludes that the concept of social innovation can be interpreted at three broad levels:

- Community level: the nature of innovation is described from the aspect of a grassroots initiative and as something that responds to unmet needs in the market and especially to the needs of vulnerable populations.
- Social level: innovation has an impact on the entire society, through the blurring of social and economic boundaries.

- Systemic level: involves changes in structures, strategies, policies and processes, through changes in attitudes and values.

Second, according to the Oslo Manual (2018), innovation emerges in knowledge, novelty, application and value creation.

Wigboldus (2016) describes 10 types of social innovation, based on the areas of emergence or application:

- legal innovation: innovation in legal frameworks
- cultural: innovation of non-formal institutions
- political: governmental, political innovations
- ideological: efforts to reform ideological frameworks
- ethical: a change in ethical and moral principles and the renewal of CSR activities of companies and firms
- economic: renewal and innovation in foreign trade and business
- organisational: potential for renewal in organisations
- technical: human and technological innovation, including social media
- ecological: interactions between people and the environment
- analytical: innovation of analytical and interpretative frameworks

During the implementation of social innovations several difficulties and obstacles may be encountered (Bogdány et al, 2023). Some of these derive from the fact that innovations fundamentally change the status quo, the usual way things are done, the widely used and often rigid patterns of action and thinking, and the way people relate to each other. Resistance to change is frequently experienced. Therefore, implementing innovations requires considering change management as a challenge.

On the other hand, often the necessary expertise is not available. A considerable proportion of social innovations is implemented in disadvantaged regions, among disadvantaged people. In such regions, it is often difficult to find suitably qualified and motivated people.

Thirdly, adequate financial conditions are often lacking, partly because of the circumstances mentioned above. If an innovation is implemented with grant funding, there is a common risk that it may not be sustained in the longer term after the project ends, precisely due to financial difficulties.

If these risks are not taken into account, we may run the risk of failure. Therefore, Bogdány et al. (2023) believe that social innovations can only be successfully implemented under the following boundary conditions:

- adequate human resources: support professionals who can initiate and facilitate processes, build a community and then equip the people involved with the knowledge necessary to ensure long-term sustainability
- a supportive business environment: a local community whose members can guarantee the success of the innovation by finding the right market for their own products and services, that is, by having sufficient demand
- innovation investments: external investors, creators and implementers of innovation
- collaborative networks, institutions: these provide the framework for successful innovation

Summarising this section, Figures 1 and 2 both offer a conclusion of and complement the above.

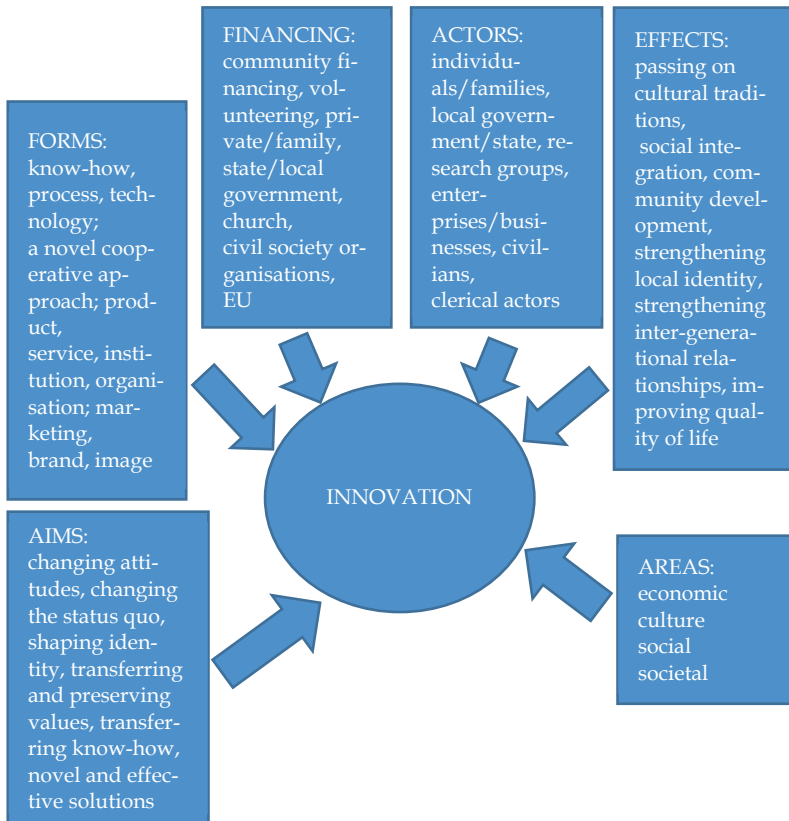


Figure 1: Summary model of social innovation

Source: own editing

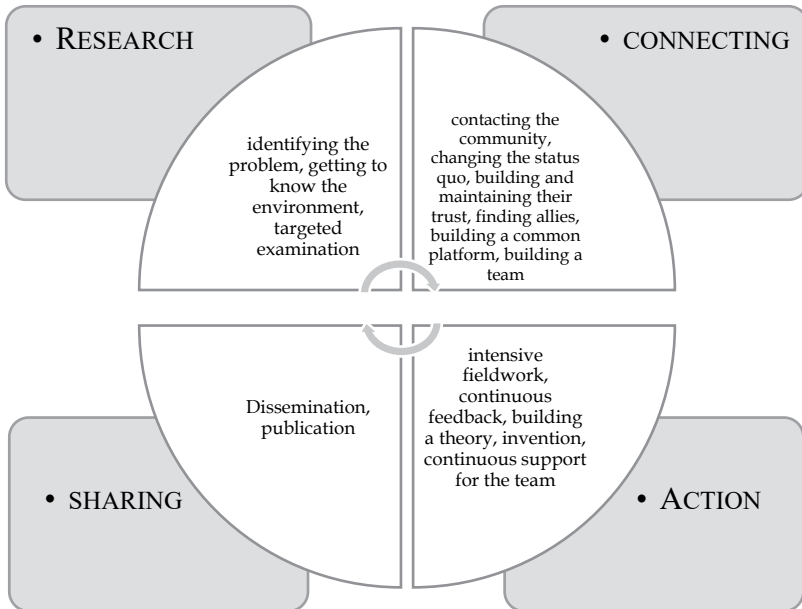
Figure 1 summarises the main characteristic features of social innovation from six aspects.

First, in terms of the area they aim at, social innovations can be economic, cultural, social or societal – or a mixture of these.

Social innovations can be generated, that is, initiated and implemented by individuals, civil society organisations, research groups, churches, local government and state actors and business stakeholders. They can be aimed at changing attitudes or the status quo, preserving values, shaping identities, disseminating innovative and effective solutions and transferring know-how. The nature of the funding is important: social innovations can be financially

supported by EU funds or by the state, local government, civil society organisations or churches. Funding may also be received from individuals, a community or a group, and it may come in the form of voluntary work (in addition to paid work). Medium- and long-term effects (obviously linked to the objectives) can include community development, improving quality of life, strengthening local identity, passing on cultural traditions, strengthening inter-generational relationships and achieving social inclusion more effectively.

Figure 2: Model for generating social innovation



Source: own editing

Figure 2 illustrates the process by which social innovation is generated, implemented and then re-produced. It may start with thorough exploratory research, which involves identifying the problem or challenge and getting to know the context and the actors. In the second phase, the main element of which is connecting, the focus is on creating networks between actors, building and maintaining trust, developing collective reflection, creating a common platform and building a team. The third phase is one of intensive action and

intervention, with continuous feedback, redesigning and providing support for the team. The final phase involves sharing the good experiences, risks and potential pitfalls with the wider public in order to complete the implementation of the innovation.

Measuring social innovation

A fascinating question related to social innovation is how to measure a community's or municipality's capacity to innovate, that is, all the capabilities and competencies that help generate and implement social innovations. This is generally known as innovation potential.

In this section, I present (a non-exhausting list of) models that aim to measure innovation potential. In Chapter 6.3, discussing case studies, I will also present a measurement tool we developed during an innovation project.

One of the most complex measurement methodologies was developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit at a national level in 2016. Their index measures the innovation potential of a country with a variety of indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, in the following four main dimensions:

- policy and institutional frameworks
- financing
- enterprises
- society

When developing the methodology, the researchers took into account the fact that a single system of indicators is not easy to establish. The geometric averages of the results measured along the four main dimensions are used to construct a complex social innovation index, which is standardised on a scale of 0-100. A specific process of weighing is also applied: policy and institutional frameworks (44.4%), financing (22.2%), enterprises (15%) and society (18.3%).

As mentioned earlier, a number of additional indicators are defined within each dimension. For example, the "society" pillar looks as follows:

Society:

- culture of volunteering
- political participation
- civil society activity
- trust in society
- freedom of the press

Looking at these indicators, it is clear to see that they are not easy to measure. How can one measure, for instance, a culture of volunteering or political participation? Thus, as the developers of the index claim, it is not possible to develop a single method of measurement, since the phenomenon to be measured is itself very complex and has diverse aspects.

Taking a different approach to the methodology, Castro Spila et al. (2016) do not measure innovation potential but its inverse, which they call vulnerability. The regional vulnerability index that they created is composed of four pillars: social, institutional, economic and environmental vulnerability.

The dimension of social vulnerability, for example, is measured using the following indicators:

- expenditure on health care (% of GDP)
- public expenditure on education (% of GDP)
- the total rate of “the vulnerable” employed (% of total) (e.g. unpaid family workers, self-employed)

The indicators used for measuring institutional vulnerability are the following:

- public participation in government, freedom of the press
- government efficiency (quality of public services, bureaucracy)
- quality of regulations
- legal system
- control of corruption

In the framework of the TEPSIE project, Bund et al (2013) also developed a complex index to compare the innovation capacity of countries and regions. Their index measures in 3 dimensions and uses nearly 70 indicators:

- entrepreneurial activity pillar (dimensions: investment activity, start-up and closure rates, networking)
- theme-specific results pillar (dimensions: education, health, employment, housing, social capital and networks, political participation and environment),
- framework conditions pillar (dimensions: resources; social, political and institutional frameworks)

IndiSI – Indicators of Social Innovation is an improved version of TEPSIE. The design of the indiSI index is unique as it is divided into two phases: the first phase involves developing indicators and testing them through questionnaire research, while the second one draws on these results to refine them further through case studies of innovation actors.

Innovation is examined in the following seven areas, with themes identified within each area and indicators proposed for further measurement:

- education
- healthcare and care services
- employment
- housing
- social capital and network
- political participation
- environment

After the present review of the diverse theoretical literature on social innovations, the second chapter discusses the role of applied social sciences, including applied sociology, in generating and managing innovations.

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