

# Social Innovation

Subjects: Sociology | Others

Contributor: André Guerreiro, Hugo Pinto

This entry briefly recounts the history of social innovation and how it went from a descriptive term to a practice-based notion and, finally, to a scientific concept, while highlighting the major transformations it experienced. The text mentions some current debates, before presenting our own definition of social innovation. This definition incorporates contributions from other commonly used definitions while maintaining its operative potential. It also allows to clearly pinpoint what distinguishes social innovation from other types of innovation. The entry ends up with criteria for identifying social innovations.

Keywords: Social innovation ; innovation ; social invention

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## 1. The roots of a controversial concept

Social innovation is a term that attained a high level of popularity in the last decade, competing with globalization, interdisciplinarity or resilience for the title of breakout scientific concepts of our time. Its roots go back to the XIX century, when innovation meant progress, change or revolution – and seldom in a positive manner – being often associated with socialism and social reform <sup>(1)</sup>. This began to change when sociologists at the turn of the century began using innovation and social invention on the subjects of progress, development and social change, thus giving it a positive connotation <sup>(2); [3]; [4]; [5]</sup>.

In the 1930s, innovation would become strictly associated with technology, making social invention and social innovation more popular terms in the following decades, still being used synonymously with social change, social progress and social reform, as means to cope with the negative effects of technological innovation <sup>(6)</sup> and how progress requires social as much as technological innovations and inventions. This was mostly due to the Great Depression and the growing awareness that industrial production and technological development, if unchecked, could have dire social consequences <sup>(7); [8]; [9]</sup>.

Social innovation would be used sparingly in the next decades, especially in the United States <sup>(10); [11]; [12]</sup>, becoming more popular in years following the Second World War, even if its usages were still largely descriptive. At the same time, social invention began to phase out and was slowly replaced by social innovation. But in the 70s, a proto-theory of social innovation was beginning to develop <sup>(13); [14]</sup>. In the 70s, social innovation was beginning to gradually change. While up until then it was used more descriptively, some authors began developing a proto-theory of social innovation and social invention, paying more attention to what social innovation was and how it worked, which resulted in a slow transition from a mere descriptive term to a scientific notion, even if it was still a largely fragmented one <sup>(15)</sup>.

This trend kept going until the 90s, when social innovation would attain popularity, first as a scientific concept <sup>(16); [17]</sup> and then as a recurring buzzword in political discourses and public policies, especially from the mid-2000s onwards <sup>(18); [15]</sup>. From this point on, social innovation became exponentially more used in scientific articles, policy reports, political discourses, social sector debates and even business and management magazines and a formal theory began to develop.

## 2. Divisive issues in the study of social innovation

Over the last two decades, a great deal of research and countless publications contributed to a theory of social innovation that took inspiration from many fields, such as sociology, public policy, management, economics, environmental studies, regional studies, to name but a few. Many theoretical debates are still going regarding subjects like the role of the state in the promotion of social innovation <sup>(19)</sup>, social innovation as a form of caring liberalism <sup>(20)</sup>, top down vs. bottom up approaches <sup>(21)</sup>, measurement of the impact of social innovation <sup>(22); [23]</sup> and the role social innovation plays in the promotion of sustainable, inclusive societies <sup>(24)</sup>.

For all the knowledge produced, there are still two largely divisive issues pertaining social innovation (<sup>[25]</sup>): what makes social innovation fundamentally different from other forms of innovation and how can social innovation be defined in a manner that makes it clear what the “social” (in social innovation) means (<sup>[18]</sup>). These questions are important, as social innovation is still criticized for being a muddy concept that adds little to what was already known about innovation, with the added disadvantage of having been appropriated by political discourses and the subject of debate regarding to its usages, i.e. if social innovation is not merely a tool to further promote State cutbacks on public service and shift responsibility from public to private and third (or fourth) sector organizations (<sup>[26]</sup>).

While social innovation can be criticized for many of these aspects, its results and usefulness are undeniable, which by itself is reason enough for social innovation to be worthy of consideration in terms of social programmes and policies and theoretical frameworks for promoting sustainable, inclusive development.

### **3. A tentative definition**

Our definition combines elements commonly found in most definitions, while stressing what makes social innovation different from other forms of innovation: Social innovation is an idea that deliberately attempts to better satisfy explicit or latent social needs and problems, resulting in new or improved capabilities, and in the transformation of social and power relations, aiming at social change and the establishment of new social practices that positively affect the lives of individuals.

We further add that for something to be considered a social innovation has to fulfil the following three key elements:

- Social innovation must have been the result of a deliberate action and not a coincidence or by-product of something else (<sup>[27]</sup>). Social innovation loses its meaning if we can retroactively consider anything that improved the lives of individuals a social innovation, as many authors often do. Social innovation has to result from a planned action with the intent of producing socially innovative results;
- Social innovation must address a specific social need or problem and cannot exist solely for the sake of doing something different, thus stressing the idea that social innovation exists as a tool to improve society and the lives of individuals (<sup>[28]</sup>).
- The successful implementation of a social innovation must produce some degree of social change, taking on the form of new or restructure power and social relations (legislation, processes, practices, approaches, organizations, among other aspects), which lead to the capacitation or empowerment of individuals (<sup>[29]</sup>). If an action results in slightly better results, processes or procedures, that will hardly produce social change and induce a transformation of sorts. Social innovation must produce a transformative change (<sup>[30]</sup>).

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