

Producing social innovations in the digital, creative era

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Although the concept of social innovation has origins stretching back to the 18th century (Moulaert et al., 2007), the field of study around this phenomenon only really started to carry weight after the work of Schumpeter (1909; 2013), thanks to the association with productive technological and economic dynamics inherent to economic cycles. The past two decades have given rise to new activity in this area, to understand the socio-political nature of the specific phenomenon of social innovation. The concept has since become a key object of analysis, not only in academic research, but also among socio-economic actors. On top of the increased number of initiatives producing social innovations, we can see, for example, that such initiatives are a key part of development and economic recovery policies, and may produce responses to reduce global social inequalities between North and South.

This growing interest coincides with various recent crises, which question the sustainability of the capitalist systems that dominate at present. We will discuss three. The first is the environmental crisis, which manifests in particular through global warming as well as the scarcity of natural resources¹ and pollution of various environments: air, marine, earth. The second is the economic crises of recent decades demonstrating the limits of traditional economic policies, which have contributed to increasing North/South inequalities. These policies favour seeking a competitive advantage and are above all based on resource exploitation and market-based mindsets, as well as stimulating innovation (particularly technological), while providing periodic solutions to social problems. The last is the current global Covid-19 crisis, which seems to synthesise these two kinds of crises, according to many scientists, with an environmental origin and economic consequences (e.g. questioning international value chains) as well as social impacts (e.g. unequal distribution of serious forms of illness, inequalities in vaccine access and deaths according to social environment and socio-economic and racial asymmetries, and rise in income inequality)².

These social innovations, defined by many authors as initiatives that emerge from experiments promoted by various social actors in response to social problems (Andion et al., 2017; Moulaert, 2009; Richez-Battesti et al., 2012; Roundy, 2017), can be found in a multitude of fields. One example of this is solutions aiming to meet mobility needs for people in positions of social or economic vulnerability, e.g. a transport service for the elderly or disabled between

¹ For example, Earth Overshoot Day, an indicator defined by NGO Global Footprint Network as the date from which humanity's environmental footprint exceeds the planet's biocapacity, arrives earlier and earlier each year.

² Special editions of journals such as *Revue Française de Gestion* (2020, n°293) and *Marché & Organisation* (2021, n°41) have been published on this theme.

their home and their point of care (Muller et al., forthcoming), a solidarity garage aimed to enable disadvantaged people to buy and repair a car (Dutertre et al., 2013), etc. Social innovations can also be found in projects aiming to revitalise underprivileged areas, such as the initiative to develop a circus precinct in Montréal (Tremblay and Pilati, 2013), or the creation of training facilities that meet the specific needs of the populations in question in San Carlos de Bariloche (Argentina) (Younes et al., 2019). One final example of social innovation relates to the development of local currencies (the Chiemgauer in Bavaria (Germany), the Bristol Pound in the United Kingdom, the Palmas in Fortaleza (Brazil) or the Eusko in the French Basque Country). These initiatives, usually led by citizen groups, aim to create and promote the development of value chains and social connections within a residential area (Bayon and Servet, 1999; Blanc, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2015).

The concept of social innovation differs in multiple ways from other kinds of innovation usually studied in scientific literature (technological, organisational and economic model innovations). Firstly, its main objective is not to seek economic gain in a commercial (seeking a competitive advantage) or organisational (improving the efficiency or performance of a company's functioning) sense, but rather for social improvement: reducing inequalities, more inclusive societies, promoting social connection, etc. Secondly, the production of social innovations involves many kinds of stakeholders by its very nature. In this way, users and beneficiaries participate not only during the needs analysis phase, but also, very often, in producing (designing, developing and implementing) the response to this need. These specificities raise questions regarding whether the major innovation production models can be applied, particularly the model of open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003). Faced with this conclusion, recent literature has started to look into the creative processes associated with the emergence and development of social innovations (e.g. Mumford 2002; Nussbaumer et Moulart 2004; André et al., 2009; Tremblay et Pilati 2013; Muller 2021).

The objective of this call for contributions is to continue in this vein, investigating the mechanisms and processes at work in producing social innovations. It is mainly concentrated on two key elements in current socio-economic systems: (i) the creativity paradigm, which modern economies joined in the early 2000s (Cohendet et al., 2017; Parmentier et al., 2017) and (ii) the use of digital tools (social media, blockchain, artificial intelligence, etc.), on which these same socio-economic systems are increasingly based. In this call for contributions, we are particularly interested in three issues: (i) the selection of the idea at the foundation of social innovations, (ii) their governance, and (iii) the business models contributing to the sustainability of these social innovations, as well as their development, dissemination and durability.

With regards to the first issue, it specifically relates to the fact that ideas generally fuse together in a relatively dense way when citizens are consulted to find solutions to problems. As proof, we can point to city square movements (*Occupy Wall Street* in the United States, *Los Indignados* in Spain, *Nuit Debout* in France), which allowed for new ways of co-existing in the economic system, creating links and doing politics to be put forward (Pleyers and Glasius, 2013). We can also cite emerging movements in countries in the South that affirm new perspectives for action, practices and "social technologies", supported by traditional knowledge, like the "good living" (buen vivir) movement that is developing in multiple countries in Latin America. In short, it is a question of referring to the connection between

solidarity and means of organising in countries in the South, which is different from those in the North, as it relates to the notion of a people's economy (Eynaud and França Filho, 2018). On the other hand, it is important to also consider the selection of ideas, and by definition, their dissemination (how, which target, how long, etc.) but also the means of selection (criteria, vote, voters, etc.). In the case of city square movements, Pleyers et Glasius (2013) demonstrate, for example, the role played by the internet to make this kind of movement converge with common ideas, and be a proactive force with a programme or, at the least, unprecedented ideas recognised to be useful for all (Mathieu, 2011).

To respond to this first issue, groups of actors are trying - and this is the second issue that we wish to raise in this call - to mobilise new forms of governance, such as those known as holacratic or (Robertson, 2015) sociocratic (Endenburg, 1998), or more generally, liberated (Carney et al., 2013; Casalegno, 2017) or agile companies (Dejoux, 2016) as well as new forms of interaction or coordination, such as networks and ecosystems of social innovation (Lévesque 2016; Kaletka et al., 2016; Andion et al., 2020). These new forms of organisation, coordination and governance question the management systems established by relationships of dominance and submission that prevail in a traditional vertical hierarchy, where only the dominant of a group have a say in selecting ideas. In particular, many works have highlighted the role played by social economic structures in governing social innovations, due to their own particular characteristics (democratic governance, limited lucrateness and pursuit of a social objective other than seeking profit, etc.) (Demoustier et Richez-Battesti 2010; Klein et al., 2010; Moulaert et Ailenei 2005; Muller et Tanguy 2019). It is therefore a question of opening governance to all actors concerned by the object of study – in our case, social innovation, by considering its organisational, but also regional dimension.

However, such a form of participative governance is not self-evident. The various actors involved in governing social innovations do not necessarily have the same expectations, timelines, means of commitment nor resources in terms of their commitment. For example, while a public actor may consider that a waste recycling organisation in an underprivileged area is the fruit of social innovation to be fully supported in the long term, this may not be the case for a private actor, who, with environmental issues in mind, has decided to invest for a short period. To understand these differences, the conceptual framework of the creative territory proves to be promising (Florida 2005; Cohendet et al. 2011). According to this model, dynamics of collective creativity within a territory depends on the capacity of actors present to develop and make different economic levels interact:

- The *underground* is the level at which new ideas emerge, which often have no economic application;
- The *upperground* is the level at which creative ideas find an economic application, either through the market or in an organisational setting;
- The *middleground* forms a transition level at which creative ideas from the *underground* are shared, tested, selected and developed in view of applying them in the *upperground*.

However, in the current state of debate, the creative territory model mainly addresses economic development problems, with only few social and political questions being tackled, such as the inclusivity of economic development trajectories, participation from local populations (and, in particular, the most vulnerable populations) and the question of the

interface between social innovations and broader transformations, in terms of public policies and public action. In this way, a recurring criticism of Florida's argument is that the creative territory is seen as elitist, or even not contributing to issues of social justice, equity and evolution in human relations (André et al., 2013; Tremblay and Pilati, 2013). Furthermore, to our knowledge, the theoretical framework of the creative territory has mainly been applied to European or North American examples (for example, the video game industry in Montreal (Cohendet et al., 2010), alternative music in Germany (Muller et al., 2020), cultural sites in Île-de-France (Cariou et al., 2018) or UNESCO cities like Saint-Étienne (Dechamp and Szostak, 2016)) and more marginally in Asia (Michel, 2021). It would now be just as interesting to check its validity in the cases of territories in other geographic zones (Africa, South America).

In this way, research eligible for this call for contributions may be interested in investigating processes of collaborative governance, co-construction of knowledge and democratic experimentation in territories (Ansell 2011 et 2012) in both North and South. They may also consider studying the role of active laboratories of social innovation, and how they may be vectors for promoting new abilities and skills, but also practical possibilities for actors of a given territory to produce social innovations, using new technologies or "social technologies" (Magalhaes et al., 2020; Magalhães et al., 2020; Masi, 2016). Finally, means of emergence, actors and governance processes for social innovations may vary at an international level, according to the dominant cultural, institutional and socio-economic systems at play in each country (Coraggio, 2015; Defourny and Nyssens, 2017). Consequently, potential contributions could also include this international dimension in studying the processes of governance for social innovations in order to, for example, detect certain patterns or distinctive elements. Analysis at an international level would be particularly appreciated, making it possible to compare potentially different approaches to social innovation according to dividing lines, playing on factors such as differences between socio-political environmental movements in countries, regions or territories, cultures of sociability, and asymmetries between North and South, considering the contributions of decolonial approaches in this debate.

Lastly, a final issue related to social innovations concerns economic and funding models contributing to their sustainability, development and dissemination. With public funding becoming more and more scarce, we are seeing a very large diversification of sources of funding for social innovations, with an increasing number resorting to funding from citizens (crowdfunding platforms or CIGALES in France), private parties (e.g. company foundations or sponsorship), or via the banking and financial system. For example, there are forms of funding described as solidarity-based and participative, like the platform *mymoneyhelp.fr* which funds "*projects with positive impact for humans and the environment, for a better future*". Alongside these platforms, which offer a kind of traditional financial resources, new means of funding projects are developing. Furthermore, these kinds of funding may be replaced by resource inputs (materials and personnel made available, skills sponsorship, etc.). It is also possible for social innovations to be funded through another social innovation, i.e. community banks or complementary local currencies (Blanc and Fare, 2012; Houdart, 2021; Tadjeddine, 2021). In this area, a growing number of complementary local currencies are involved (although at different levels of advancement) in a digitalisation movement, by exploiting potentialities offered by cryptocurrencies, the most well-known of which is Bitcoin. They make use of blockchain, a technology favouring transparency and the traceability of exchanges (Tichit et al., 2018).

The question to be raised here therefore concerns, on the one hand, the hybridisation of resources to fund social innovation projects, when these resources are potentially of different kinds, and, on the other, the impact of funding on the sustainability of social innovations and their dissemination.

This call is the opportunity for researchers to critically tackle themes relating to the question of producing social innovations in an environment now marked by creativity and digital technology. Furthermore, contributions could offer subjects for reflection in connection with the following perspectives, as a non-exhaustive list:

- *Theoretical perspectives:* What relevant conceptual frameworks should be mobilised to discuss and analyse the production of social innovations in the era of creativity and digital technology? What organisational characteristics and economic models are likely to help or hinder the production of social innovations? Might these organisational characteristics and economic models vary according to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the territories in question?
- *Governance, practices and processes:* Which characteristics in governance models may impact the sustainability and dissemination of social innovations? In what ways and how do mediation practices play a role in producing social innovations? What influence is the international dimension likely to have, particularly, the differences in socio-economic and cultural contexts between countries in North and South, in social innovation governance mechanisms?
- *Social innovations and territory:* How do organisations, groups of social actors and social innovation practices interact with territories? To what extent are social innovations obstacles or motors for the sustainability and resilience of territories? What roles do social innovation ecosystems play in promoting creative and innovative responses, like developing new lifestyles, new professional practices, etc. during difficult situations, disruptions, or economic, ecological, health or social emergencies? What challenges and controversies exist in co-producing social innovations in various socio-economic and territorial ecosystems?

Paper proposals should be sent by email to paul.muller@univ-lorraine.fr by June 30th 2022. They must comply with the publication standards of Management International.

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