

SOCIAL INNOVATION ADDRESSING SOCIETAL NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Social innovation tackles social needs as they arise;
should it also aim to change the system?

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Social innovations address social needs and tackle societal challenges. However many if not all social needs can be traced back to the social, cultural and institutional contexts and systems within which they arise. This leads to debate on treating symptoms versus addressing root causes, compensating for adverse societal developments versus contributing to social progress. Considering the complexity and ‘wickedness’ of social problems and societal challenges, on the one hand, social innovators might also address these larger scale structural issues. On the other hand, this requires considerable effort and could result in complex and unforeseeable consequences. SI-DRIVE estimates only a third of social innovations aim to address systemic change. How can social innovations change the system, and how does ‘the system’ change them in the process?

To provide answers from SI-DRIVE’s evidence, there are at least two narratives about social innovation and its relation to the social system: one based on levels of intervention and one based on loops between structure and agency. In this contribution, we outline each perspective and finally integrate them in a model (see the Agency-Outcome-Structure model) that integrates agency, outcomes and structure and sketches the affinities between the elements. This model suggests a double-pronged strategy in which bottom-up approaches simultaneously solve problems and develop the agency of social innovators and beneficiaries, whilst top-down approaches create supportive political and regulatory frameworks and also mindsets and ways of living and working.

SCALING THROUGH THREE SOCIETAL LEVELS

Social innovation seeks to deliver beneficial outcomes that directly address societal challenges like climate change, inequalities and poverty, labour market and employment issues, gaps in healthcare and education systems, and demographic issues like ageing and migration. According to

BEPA [1], there are three societal levels at which social innovation may deliver such outcomes:

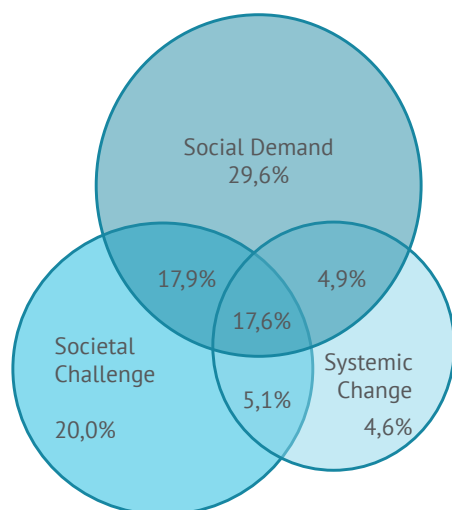
1. The social demands level, tackling specific problems faced by specific groups on the ground that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions and often impact vulnerable people much more than others. These are typically seen at the micro level.
2. The societal challenges level, tackling challenges that affect people at a larger social scale or across whole sectors, often manifest through complex mixes of social, economic, environmental and cultural factors and that require new forms of relations between social actors. These are typically seen at the meso level.
3. The systemic change level requiring some fundamental transformation of the way society, its institutions and actors operate, for example by changing governance structures, and creating more participative arenas where empowerment and learning are both the sources and outcomes of well-being. This is typically seen at the macro level.

This hierarchical notion of levels represents a useful taxonomy of the possible results and aims of social innovation, and provides a simple model of the relationship between social innovation and social change. However, it implies a somewhat linear, functionalist and perhaps overly simplistic view of society. It tends to focus on changes that are intentional and immediately valuable to the participants and beneficiaries, as well as ultimately for society at large, whilst ignoring complex and unintended consequences.

SI-DRIVE AND THE THREE LEVELS

An analysis of the stated objectives of SI-DRIVE’s social innovation cases, when mapped on the three BEPA levels, results in the following patterns (see figure on BEPA levels addressed by SI-DRIVE):

- Social demand is addressed by 70 % of cases; health and social care, as well as poverty reduction and sustainable development, are strongest at this level.
- Societal challenges are addressed by 61 % of cases; environment and energy supply are strongest here.
- Systemic change is addressed by 32 % of cases; education and environment are strongest.



BEPA levels addressed by SI-DRIVE case objectives (N=953)

Although all three levels are well represented, it is clear that most social innovations focus on the two lower levels. Almost half of all cases (45.5 %) address more than one level, and 17.6 % address all three. However, these results refer to the stated objectives of social innovations rather than their actual outcomes, as the data do not provide evidence on outcomes or how they might have been achieved.

Although systemic change overall plays a smaller role than the lower levels, there are differences in the importance of all three levels across the seven policy fields of SI-DRIVE. For example, in healthcare (83 %) and poverty reduction and sustainable development (78 %), most social innovations aim to satisfy a social need. In both policy fields, social innovations clearly deal with the real, concrete needs and demands of individuals and small groups at local level. In contrast, environment (72 %) and energy supply (87 %) are more focused on tackling a societal challenge, which mirrors the recognition of climate and environmental issues in the UN's and EU's priorities at the meso level. Cases in education (48 %) and environment (46 %) strongly address systemic change at the macro level. This is noteworthy and may, again, reflect political programmes and stated priorities, but may also hint at current institutional and systemic failures to deliver solutions in these fields, thereby opening up space for social innovation aiming at the top level. The level of systemic change is less important for employment (19 %), transport and mobility (20 %) and energy supply

(25 %). Thus, different policy fields are more or less focused on the more systemic aims of social innovations, but this approach still does not reveal the actual relationships, if any, between the levels.

FROM SOCIETAL LEVELS TO LOOPS

Social scientists and historians argue that social and systemic change in most cases is not simply about meeting a set of social challenges. Social change is multi-dimensional, complex and results from multiple interrelated actions, modes of learning, conflicts, tensions and diverse forms of cooperation and compromise, each of which can give rise to both intended and unintended consequences [2]. Social innovations interact with their societal contexts in numerous ways. Put succinctly, elements of 'society' such as social practices, individual and collective actors, cognitive frames, and value judgments feed **into** social innovations as well as derive from them. Thus in turn, these changed or changing social practices, actors, cognitive frames, and value judgments form the **outcomes** of social innovations.

To explore the relationships and dynamics between social innovations and their societal context and between the analytical levels, social theory provides the useful distinction of agency and structure:

- Structure: the recurrent patterned arrangements of rules and resources, habits, conventions, institutions and cognitive frameworks that influence or limit the choices and opportunities available to societal actors.
- Agency: the capacity of individuals and groups to make sense of structures, to act upon them, to reason and make choices.

Structure and agency in this view are complementary forces. Structure both constrains and enables human behaviour, and humans are capable of reiterating or changing the social structures they inhabit, although this typically requires collective action on a relatively large scale and timeframe.

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Social change is therefore two-sided and multi-leveled with constant iterations and loops between the two sides. Social innovations change their institutional, social and cognitive environment, through the agency of all involved, whilst their respective environment – through its structures and institutions – changes the social innovation. This two-sidedness is an area of tension. For example, public policy

“can be understood as a product of the interrelations between institutions, social networks and cognitive frames, whilst [social innovation] seeks to change field dynamics” as the dynamics of their respective field or context [3]. This provides one possible explanation for the limited aspirations of SI-DRIVE’s cases to address systemic change: current policies are likely to select and favour social innovations that do not significantly challenge the field in which they operate, often at the cost of limiting the aspirations and potential positive impacts of social innovation.

MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: LINKING LEVELS AND LOOPS THROUGH STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The SI-DRIVE project has investigated nine specific mechanisms by which social change occurs [4]. These mechanisms have varied roots in structural-functionalist, evolutionary and conflict-based social theory, but provide useful sensitising concepts for case analysis and comparison. They can also be mapped on the three analytical levels:

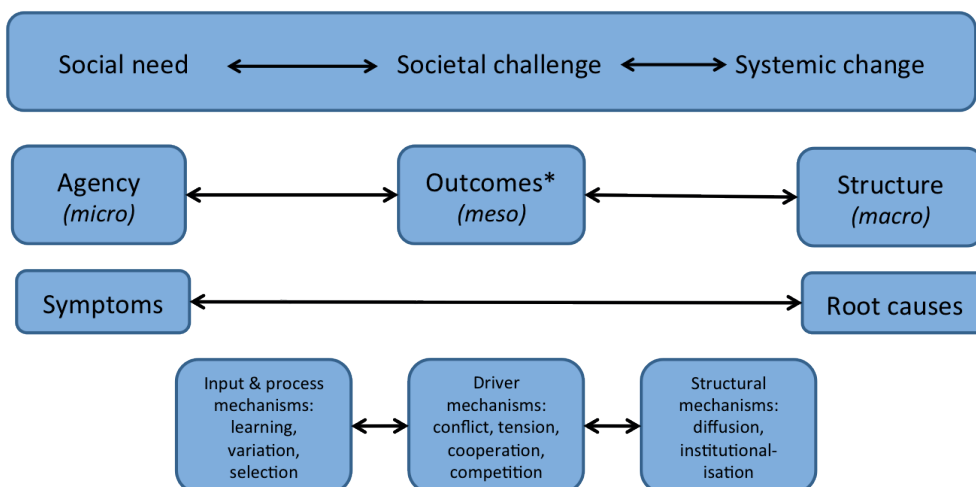
1. Input and process mechanisms: learning, variation and selection are considered input and process mechanisms and tend to focus mainly on innovators and beneficiaries, and on addressing social needs at the micro level. They contribute to the development of agency and of capable actors.
2. Driver mechanisms: conflict, tension/adaption, competition and cooperation are mechanisms that drive social innovation. They tend to address the meso level of organisations, networks and embedded practices, and the interrelations and interactions between actors.

3. Structural mechanisms consist of how innovations (including technological) diffuse, the role of other innovations complementary to social innovation, as well as planning and institutional change. They tend to focus largely on underlying structures and root causes, and are thus at the macro level of systemic change.

Successful, scaling social innovations are characterised by their compability and connectivity with their institutional and also cultural and normative environments.

INTEGRATING LEVELS AND LOOPS

Analysing the more detailed SI-DRIVE cases of social innovations, there is “a pattern that can be generalised: successful, scaling social innovations are characterised by their compatibility and connectivity (in a non-technical sense) with their institutional and also cultural and normative environments. This implies a certain incrementalism. As social innovators ensure support, engage stakeholders and create networks, they may shed the more disruptive or transformative aspects of their social innovation. (...) There appears to be a trade-off between the possibilities of local, specific and targeted social innovations and institutional compatibility, unless top-down policies deliberately open and support spaces for creating and sustaining variety” [5].



* Outcomes, for example, as expressed in the SDGs and in EU policies

Agency-outcomes-structure model and possible alignments: the model integrates agency, out-comes and structure and sketches the affinities between the elements.

Drawing on these insights, the BEPA micro, meso and macro level model might be integrated with the social theory of structure and agency, and with the mechanisms of social change through SI-DRIVE's empirical evidence.

The graphic on Agency-Outcomes-Structure shows a model that integrates agency, outcomes and structure, and sketches the affinities between the elements.

BEPA's trilogy of social demand, societal challenges, and systemic change corresponds with the micro, meso, and macro level of social analysis that address individuals and social groups, organisations and institutions, and societies, or societal systems at large. On each level and between levels, social structure and agency interact – and indeed, this is the way in which social demands, societal challenges and systemic change come about. Nevertheless, agency appears more prominent on the micro and meso levels, whereas the level of systemic change appears to be shaped by more inert, or at least more durable, social structures. An interpretation with more focus on agency is that incumbent and self-interested institutional or policy actors lock social innovations in on the levels of meeting needs and addressing challenges but avoid addressing the systemic root causes of needs and challenges [3].

A MODEL OF AGENCY-OUTCOMES-STRUCTURE

Whether these effects are system- or power-related, exploring relationships between levels and mechanisms of social change yields a set of possible strategies for social innovation:

1. A micro-level strategy to build agency, which tackles the on-the-ground symptoms of societal needs and challenges largely from a bottom-up perspective, and directly engages the beneficiaries in meeting their own needs.

2. A meso level strategy between agency (micro level) and institutional structure (macro level) through the building of adequate organisations, networks or modes of collaboration, that consciously connect agency and structure, through a focus on pursuing the objectives of the social innovation to produce real, desirable outcomes.
3. A macro level strategy to change institutional or systemic structures by tackling the (root) causes of societal needs and challenges largely from a top-down perspective, and changing the underlying framework structures which often cause the need in the first place.

Social innovations are primarily devised and implemented to meet social needs, solve problems and address societal challenges. To foster and utilise the full innovation potential of and for the whole of society, these strategies can complement one another. A two-pronged strategy develops firstly, largely from the top, conducive or supportive societal structures that range from more formal policy and regulatory frameworks and appropriate funding to softer governance issues and systems of thinking, belief and ways of living/working. Secondly, largely from the bottom, new forms of participation and collaboration, co-creation and user involvement, empowerment and human resources are developed. This reflexive complementarity picks up on the distinction of agency and structure, albeit in a more processual way: social innovations need to develop both agency and structures conducive to their development, which in the process may reproduce or change the social innovations themselves. While currently social innovations mostly focus on the micro level of meeting social demands and solving local problems and complementary multi-level strategies may in the long run circumvent institutional blockades and bring about systemic changes indirectly [6].

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