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# 'Shaken, but not stirred': Sixty years of defining social innovation



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution in the conceptualization of Social Innovation (SI) with a view to elucidating the multiplication of uses of the term over the last half century. We performed a comprehensive and systematic literature review extracting 252 definitions of SI through a search of 2,339 documents comprising academic papers, books and book chapters, together research and policy reports. To guide the inductive analysis of pluri-vocal discourses we assume innovation to be a learning-based process involving actors' interactions and social practices. We apply mixed qualitative methodologies, combining content analysis based on an interpretivist ontology with cognitive mapping techniques. Our findings show that SI was introduced as an analytical concept by incipient academic communities and has spread in the last decades as a normative concept fuelled by development and innovation policies. SI is defined by a set of common core elements underpinning three different and inter-related discursive 'areas': processes of social change, sustainable development and the services sector. We point to some policy implications and a number of promising avenues for research towards the advancement of a broader socio-technical theory of innovation.

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## 1. Introduction

We are living under the Social Innovation (SI) imperative (Harris and Albury, 2009). As a kind of 'global discursive obsession'<sup>1</sup> SI has become a ubiquitous term in a variety of policy reports and practice-oriented as well as academic contributions (European Commission, EC, 2013; Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010; Mulgan et al., 2007; Mumford, 2002; Taylor, 1970). The impressive growth of SI as a concept is found in a number of institutions, networks and agencies created after pioneer initiatives in the US, Canada and Europe<sup>2</sup>. Simultaneously SI labels an increasing diversity of maker movements and societal organizational experiments across the world involving actors from government,

business and civil society (Battisti, 2014; Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012; Hassan, 2013). In the last decade, SI has been fueled by a plethora of non-profit incubators, social accelerators and hybrid platforms (BENISI, 2013; Mulgan et al., 2007; Peters et al., 2004). One recent example is the hub/platform *Social Innovation Europe* created in 2011 to scale-up SI around European countries followed by a recent project to establish a wider *Social Innovation Community* of researchers, social innovators, end users (citizens) and policy-makers<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the pervasive narratives developed, it is not easy to answer the question of what SI is. Described as a 'buzzword' or 'quasi-concept' (Godin, 2012a; Jenson and Harrisson, 2013; Pol and Ville, 2009), the term has become 'overdetermined' or, in most cases, its definition is avoided or ignored. Even the numerous interpretations of SI have 'caused some scholars to drop it as a scientific concept' (Moulaert et al., 2013, p.13) or questioning its usefulness (Pel and Bauler, 2015).

Obstacles are usually justified by a widespread assumption about its origin being rooted in practice instead of scholarship and dominance of grey and policy-oriented literature, being for long time a marginalized topic in both economic and sociological theories of innovation (Benneworth et al., 2015; Hillier et al., 2004). Moreover, SI is associated with a 'babelizing' phenomenon where the meaning of innovation moves between restrictive definitions based on technology to a vast

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, Y. (2008). New ways of doing. Social innovation is a new global obsession. It might be a nebulous idea but it has huge potential. *The Guardian*, 11/08/2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ashoka (1980), Skoll Foundation (1999) and the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University (2000) in US, the Centre Canadien de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales (1986) in Canada, the Institute for Social Inventions (1985) and The Young Foundation (2005) in UK, the Vienna Zentrum für Soziale Innovation (1990), the Foundation of Soziale Innovation GmbH in Dortmund in Germany (1994), the Centre for Social Innovation, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University (2000), the McGill-DuPont Social Innovation Think Tank, McGill University (2002), the New Zealand Centre for Social Innovation in 2006, the East Asia Social Innovation Initiative (EASII) in 2015 among others.

<sup>3</sup> ec.europa.eu/bepa/pdf/publications\_pdf/social\_innovation.pdf.

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