Editorial

The Transformative Power of Social Innovation in Urban Planning and Local Development

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Abstract
This issue discusses the concept of social innovation (SI) as a potentially transformative factor in urban planning and local development. SI represents an alternative to economic and technology-oriented approaches to urban development, such as that of 'smart cities', 'creative cities', etc. This is thanks to the emphasis SI puts on human agency and the empowerment of local communities and citizens to be actively involved in transforming their urban environments. Urban planning could benefit greatly from devoting more attention to SI when addressing the diverse urban problems of today, such as social exclusion, urban segregation, citizen participation and integration, or environmental protection, many of them addressed in the articles gathered in this volume.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social Innovation: Neither Buzzword nor Normative Panacea

According to Harris and Albury (2009), we are living under a social innovation (SI) imperative. The literature on SI has boomed over the last three decades. Along with a tremendous stream of empirical investigation, a continuous effort has been progressively devoted to the conceptualization of the phenomenon and the processes underlying the deployment of socially innovative actions at various spatial scales. The concept has been introduced in a diversity of contexts for many different reasons. In particular, SI has been seen as a response to the financial and economic crises facing the Western world since the 1990s, favouring greater individual responsibility, private and voluntary service provision, and community self-organisation. As a consequence, SI has become viewed as a buzzword, or even, perhaps, a "quasi-concept" (Godin, 2012; Jensson & Harrison, 2013). From a theoretical point of view, it is underdeveloped as an academic concept. Its notions and perspectives have grown up primarily through practice, and through reflections based on practice (Mulgan, 2012).

As a matter of fact, the understanding of SI as a phenomenon has become so diversified that some scholars have suggested dropping it as a scientific concept (Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, & Hamdouch, 2013), or at least questioning its usefulness (Pel & Bauler, 2015). On the one hand, we observe a mainstreaming of the social dimension of innovation in policy discourses, for instance, through EU policies, as a key tool for governance reform (Jessop, Moulaert, Hulgård, & Hamdouch,

2013). In these discourses, SI is depicted as a normative good (Osborne & Brown, 2011). On the other hand, the concept is highly contested, challenged and resisted in practice. Hence, SI has a double-sided nature: it is highly encouraged and discouraged at the same time (Bartels, 2017, p. 3790).

Despite its rather confused status, SI is nevertheless at least a useful concept for addressing important forms of change and transformation in organizations, neighbourhoods, cities and communities. SI deals with innovations that are social both in their ends and in their means. Hence, SI is not a new sector in the economy; rather, it is a way of understanding a wide range of activities and practices oriented toward addressing social problems or meeting human needs (Moulaert, Mehmood, MacCallum, & Leubolt, 2017, p. 25). Therefore, SI is "innovative because it generates alternatives to the dominant models of the provision of services and goods both by the public and the private sectors" (Blanco & Leon, 2017, p. 2174).

Following Jessop et al. (2013), what is important as an analytical starting point is the constitutive and performative role of social practices and their transformative potential when linked with new economic, political, social, cultural, environmental and other potentially encompassing social projects. Indeed, since the early 2000s, SI has been associated with diverse policy programs such as fighting poverty, overcoming social exclusion and empowering minorities (De Muro, Hamdouch, Cameron, & Moulaert, 2008; Moulaert et al., 2013).

At the same time, while much conceptual work has been done in identifying which dimensions and types of actions could be included under the umbrella of 'social innovation', it is the processes underlying the initiation and implementation of socially innovative responses to human and social needs that have concentrated the theoretical attention of researchers. Topics such as participation, democratic governance, social capital and networks, civic movements and bottom-up initiatives appear at the heart of the understanding of why and how some actors, groups or communities engage in socially creative initiatives aimed at better addressing the essential human and socioeconomic problems of the people concerned. Another dimension that has quickly become of particular interest and subject to investigation is related to collective action, multi-scalar governance and empowerment. These dimensions have been and remain crucial when we come to the theoretical side of SI research (Jessop et al., 2013).

SI, however, is neither a panacea nor a normative recipe for solving all human and social problems in any context. Indeed, it can be instrumental and have contested and even dark sides (Brandsen, Evers, Cattacin, & Zimmer, 2016). As a highly normative concept, an answer to social needs, one may assume that SI is always linked to positive development. What is good for society, however, will always be contested. There is also a problem with its essentialist nature, which eliminates

the complexities involved in processes of transformation. Basically, all innovations are marked by a high degree of risk and uncertainty in the course of their development (Nowothny, 1997). Innovations do fail, including SIs, which may have all sorts of negative effects. Changing power structures means, for instance, that someone loses, which could lead to soured relationships in the community, if not opposition and fracturing. SI could also be linked with a diversity of political goals that change over time due to shifts in local political regimes. Political conflict might stop the implementation of a particular SI. Therefore, as we argue in the next section, the critical and political dimensions of SI in urban planning and local development relate to the very specific territorial contexts in which it is embedded and operates.

2. A Critical, Political and Territorially Embedded Phenomenon

SI is genuinely a critical and political perspective on innovation. The aim is social change. It is about empowering marginalized citizens and changing power relationships. It is a perspective that opposes neoliberalism and its devastating effects on urban development. It is even critical of the concept of social cohesion when promoting social cohesion runs in tandem with neoliberal policies stressing competitiveness (Eizaguirre, Pradel, Terrones, Martinez-Celorrio, & Garcia, 2012).

In the EU's Urban Agenda, social cohesion has been substituted for citizenship principles such as social justice and political participation. In a time of sharp welfare rescaling, reduced public sector, migration crises and increased urban competition, discourse on social cohesion often ignores power relations, territorial fragmentation and social rights. In contrast to what Paidakaki, Moulaert and van den Broeck (2018, p. 1) name the "caring neoliberalism view of social innovation", the authors put forward a post-political critique of a techno-managerial and consensus-oriented elitist governance arrangement paradigm that sharpens inequality in urban society. Instead, they put more stress on the political dimension and the notions of dissent, contestation and empowerment. In particular, in urban studies and planning, social innovation has been seen as a trigger for renovating and reinventing the political in planning (Metzger, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2014; Moulaert et al., 2013, 2017; Smith, Fressoli, & Thomas, 2014).

Therefore, SI and the initiatives and actions it encompasses cannot be understood in general terms, but should be approached in the very specific institutional and socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts in which they operate. In other words, SI has profound socioterritorial roots that frame the way it can feed or influence territorial development in given places and at certain times (MacCallum, Moulaert, Hillier, & Vicari Haddock, 2009; Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2008). As such, SI is strongly related both to spatial planning and local development approaches.

The aim of this thematic issue is precisely to investigate the potential of SI for transforming these approaches and the practices they induce. The focus, therefore, is to explore how socially creative initiatives and strategies that local actors are engaged in for facing/solving various socioeconomic problems within the urban space can also be levers for transforming both traditional planning approaches and practices and local development trajectories. This focus is in line with several researchers who have highlighted the role of 'field actors' and their initiatives for spurring horizontal collaboration, social involvement and networking, participation and collective action, creativity and collective learning in spatial planning and local development approaches and practices in differentiated territorial contexts (see, among others, Albrechts, 2010, 2018; Christmann, Ibert, Jessen, & Walther, 2017; Evans, Karvonen, & Raven, 2016; Hamdouch et al., 2017; Healey, 1997, 2010; Moulaert, 2000).

The articles in this thematic issue identify what impact the concept of SI has had on planning and local development approaches and practices, understanding "the role of SI in developing alternative socio-political discourses and its potential for social change in particular contexts" (Moulaert et al., 2013, p. 18). More precisely, the idea is to explore the relations between local transformation, urban planning and SI. Do we find evidence of the 'promises' of SI, such as changing power relations or solving various socioeconomic problems? Under what conditions can these promises be filled? Can SI open windows for more democratic dialogue, collective cross-learning and shared visions with citizens and civic associations in order to imagine socially innovative solutions addressing the needs of traditionally excluded people?

3. Perspectives on the Transformative Potential of SI in Urban Planning and Local Development

This issue consists of eight specially-written articles. All of them deal with SI in urban planning and development settings. Geographically, the articles address issues in cities and towns from Northern Europe to Canada and Central America.

Four of the articles address innovative forms of citizen participation. Nyseth, Ringholm and Agger (2019) explore new forms of participation aimed at including difficult-to-reach citizens. They argue that citizen participation has to be reconsidered in a form that is relevant to the particular context and policy problem and to the interests that are affected. Efficient participatory methods require design; they do not simply happen through, for instance, open invitations to public meetings. Førde (2019) discusses innovative forms of integration of migrants in urban settings and emphasises the role of encounter as a transformative power in integration initiatives. Hanssen (2019) looks at the involvement of children in urban planning. How can specific planning regulations stimulate a development that en-

sures active involvement of urban childhoods trigger SI? Nielsen, Woods and Lerme (2019) discuss the use of aesthetics as a tool in citizen dialogues in the Swedish town of Hamarkullen. Engaging citizens in co-design processes is even considered in relation to place reinvention in a small rural centre in northern Sweden, as in Lindberg, Johansson, Karlberg and Balogh (2019). In the struggle to remain attractive to inhabitants, tourists, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders, various creative initiatives to engage citizens and field actors in co-design processes for innovative place-renewal have simultaneously emerged. These processes may be understood in terms of SI, as they encompass new forms, areas and agendas of stakeholder involvement in societal transformation.

How urban planning could play a role in supporting SI is discussed by De Blust, Devisch and Schreurs (2019). The issue addressed here is the underlying processes of collective learning on which planning practices are based. Several articles focus on models of integrated area development at the neighbourhood level in cities such as Copenhagen and Montreal. The neighbourhood level is also important to the social housing development project in Santo Domingo, argue Hamdouch and Galvan (2019). Although the project was a success in terms of the improvement of housing and public services and had the potential to create structural change in the planning approach, it failed in terms of empowerment and participation due to the particular centralized political culture in the city and country.

Three articles in the thematic issue are more specifically interested in investigating culture-oriented urban development initiatives. Based on a study of two boroughs in Montreal, Canada, Klein, Tremblay, Sauvage, Ghaffari and Angulo (2019) argue for a culture of proximity as a part of an innovative and alternative local development strategy. To counteract the negative effects of gentrification, cultural initiatives need to be embedded within larger inclusionary strategies intended to improve both working and living conditions in local neighbourhoods. Culture is also an important aspect of the upgrading of the swimming pool in Hamarkullen, Gothenburg (Nielsen et al., 2019). Aesthetics played an important role in including local citizens—in this case, Muslim women—in the process. Art and culture as tools for immigrants' integration is a topic also addressed by Førde (2019).

Finally, experimentation is a transversal topic in several of the articles, as well as something that seems to characterize SI. One field in which experimentation is needed is in how to deal with the loss of social cohesion and failing policies of integration and inclusion of immigrants. In particular, the wicked problems of living with difference are addressed in Førde's (2019) article on two cities in northern Norway. The innovative integration initiatives involving art and cultural industries contributed to new encounters, enhanced interaction and dialogue across cultural differences. Through creative experimentation, these initiatives offered imaginative horizons for a possible future. Experiments may also func-

tion as a framework for testing out new forms of participation adapted to the particular context, its challenges, and the citizens being addressed, as argued by Nyseth et al. (2019).

4. Concluding Reflections

A cross-reading of the articles in this thematic issue suggests that the transformative power of SI, as a territorially-embedded dynamics, derives from its potential to change, locally and in specific institutional, political, socioeconomic and cultural contexts, the approach and the processes that underlie spatial plans, design, content and scope. Indeed, SI can open windows for more democratic dialogue, collective cross-learning and shared visions with citizens and civic associations in order to imagine socially innovative solutions addressing people's needs, especially those of marginalized people. Therefore, SI, in a strong sense, is not only a matter of allowing citizens to have a voice in the planning process; it also implies the right to propose (even impose) alternatives to plans and projects designed and proposed by city planners and local authorities.

However, as shown in some of the articles, socially creative initiatives and actions, whoever promotes them and even if they are genuinely oriented toward changing the order of things in people's living conditions and decision-making processes, are never guaranteed to be effective or systematically positive in their outcomes. The success of these initiatives and actions depends strongly on the willingness and ability of the actors to correct or reduce power asymmetries across social groups within planning processes, both when changing governance arrangements and when giving power to alternative development trajectories in the reinvention of places. Engaging new development perspectives relies strongly on the capacity of the local actors to change the way of doing things, i.e., to transform urban planning and governance approaches and practices. These changes in urban planning approaches require planners and city developers, but also citizens themselves, to mobilize their creativity and look at prospects for "breaking-out-of-the-box" (Albrechts, 2005, p. 263).

Acknowledgements

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