

NEW DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION: COLLABORATIVE
PROCESSES AND INNOVATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract

The importance of the concept of 'social innovation' and the attention it has gained seem to be ever growing. The scientific literature in the field has expanded accordingly, insisting upon the necessity of developing a specialized terminology and methodology of research. Elaborating from the categories of innovation established by the Oslo Manual, researchers have advanced another notion, that of 'public innovation' or 'innovation in the public sector', making efforts at providing a conceptual framework, finding methods of analysis and research, and at establishing its particular features.

The present paper intends to offer an analysis of the new trends of the scientific research in the field of social innovation, with a special interest in the category of public innovation. This newer topic of research is considered as necessary by many theoreticians and professionals alike, in the current context in which the public administration is confronted with a wide range of complex issues.

Keywords: *social innovation, public innovation, collaborative innovation, public administration*

1. Introduction

Social innovation has become, over the past decades, a much-debated topic, raising the interest of many researchers and professionals all over the world. Its importance and the attention it has gained seem to be ever growing. The scientific literature in the field of social innovation has made great progress accordingly, insisting upon the necessity of developing a specialized terminology and methodology of research.

Elaborating from the categories of innovation established by *The Oslo Manual* (OECD, 2005), researchers have studied the phenomenon of social innovation and its impact on the various spheres of society at large. As a result, many studies have offered in-depth analysis of the process, typology and methods of social innovation, which has been established among the fundamental notions of social sciences. In recent years, new studies have

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advanced another concept, that of 'public innovation' or 'innovation in the public sector', making efforts at providing a conceptual framework, finding methods of analysis and research, and at establishing its particular features. Explicit references to public innovation may be found in newer studies which place the emphasis on the ways in which networks, partnerships and interactive forms of governance enhance the innovation of democracy through transformative solutions targeted at changing former patterns of behaviour, mentalities, social relations and institutional models. (Saward, 2000; Bevir and Bowman, 2011; Torfing, 2016). Starting from these findings, Jacob Torfing has established and explored the theme of public innovation and the role of collaborative processes in improving the provision of public services and public policies.

The new challenges that 21st century public administration has to face are global and more intricate than ever and this phenomenon has been reflected by the scientific literature in the field by operating the necessary corresponding changes of the scientific theories on social innovation. In this sense, one can remark the numerous ways in which the approaches of social innovation have changed and the current focus on the social character of innovation processes, as well as on their impact and potential for transforming the public sector.

2. Dimensions and types of social innovation

In order to analyse the characteristics and dimensions of social innovation, it is necessary to establish a typology or several categories of social innovation, on the basis of the scientific analysis in the field. The qualitative evaluation of the studies carried out by different scholars (Richez-Battesti et al., 2012; Caulier-Grice et al., 2012; Michelini, 2012; Anderson, Curtis & Wittig, 2014; Saiz-Álvarez (ed.), 2016) have led to the classification of the various theoretical approaches of social innovation into three fundamental categories. According to this classification, the first category of theories or approaches view social innovation as a valuable tool that can be used for the improvement of public policies, a view which is sustained mainly by international organizations like OECD or the European Union. The second class of perspectives, applied by many specialists from both Europe and the United States, consider that the innovation has a strong entrepreneurial dimension, and that there is a very close connection between the social entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial activities and the phenomenon of social innovation. Finally, the third category of approaches focuses on the participatory aspects and the participative processes necessary for the innovation to take place. Great attention is paid to the transformative potential of innovation as a result of the active and responsible involvement

of all the stakeholders. This involvement and the increase of the participatory and consultation processes determine a consolidation of democracy, especially at the community level where they take place, having a strong impact, first on the local or territorial communities, and then on the entire society, as a whole.

Despite the fact that they insist on various aspects of innovation, all these theoretical frameworks have a fundamental feature in common: they highlight the social nature of innovation, opening new directions of research in this domain. In this way, the former categories of technological innovation (product innovation, process innovation, marketing innovation and organizational innovation) defined and established by The *Oslo Manual* (OECD, 2005) are expanded, due to the new focus of various researchers on the impact of innovation on the transformation of social relations, cognitive frameworks and institutions in the public space.

This steady progress of research and scientific literature in the area of social innovation determined some scholars to promote the idea of a paradigm shift in the study of innovation. This thesis was sustained, among others, by Tanev, Knudsen, Bisgaard and Thomsen (2011) who authored an article entitled "Innovation Policy Development and the Emergence of New Innovation Paradigms". In their paper, they claim that there are at least three new paradigms of innovation, namely: user-led innovation, open innovation and the co-created value, produced together with the clients and users. Along the same lines, another scholar, Joseph Hochgerner (2011) analyses a different innovation paradigm that he calls 'post-industrial', with two main types of emerging innovation, namely user-led innovation and open innovation (2011, p.4). These researchers give reasons to support the idea that both technological and economic innovation have to be understood as integrated elements of a holistic approach of innovation that has its role to play within a larger transformation process at a global social level (Hochgerner, 2011, p.4). One reason offered by Hochgerner, for instance, is that innovation can no longer be understood and interpreted in strictly economic terms, because there are obviously new categories of innovation that have to be taken into consideration and developed in response to the ever-growing complexity of the social problems that the public institutions and agents have to solve. These new categories of innovation require the complementary development of new scientific concepts and methodology of research. At the same time, Hochgerner emphasises the fundamental role of structural categories, such as norms, values, rules and relations, within any model of social system. By introducing these structural categories in the study of social innovations, new directions of research are established and new categories of social innovation are defined. The notion of social innovation becomes more extensive and open to include new meanings

which cover social structures like roles, values, norms and relationships (Hochgerner, 2011, pp. 9-10).

These aspects and dimensions of the concept of social innovation are also discussed in similar terms by the authors Caulier-Grice, Davies, Patrick and Norman (2012), in their report 'Defining Social Innovation'. In this study, they analyze the existing typology of innovation offering various examples from practice, exploring at the same time concepts like incremental innovation and disruptive or radical innovation (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012, pp.24-25). Incremental social innovation is considered to be the process which takes on and improves the already existing processes, relations, services or norms and is based on the existing level of knowledge and resources. In contrast to it, stands another category of social innovation that is called 'disruptive', because it creates new patterns of thought and new modes of action, marking a radical change as compared to the old ways or older products and services. As a consequence, these older products, services and processes appear outdated when they are correlated with the new ones.

In close connection with radical innovation, specialists discuss another type of social innovation, defined as generative innovation, given its capacity to bring about or to generate new processes and ideas (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012, p. 25). It may be argued that radical or disruptive innovation is also generative of new ideas leading the way towards other innovations, hence the association between these two concepts. The typology of social innovation includes also the category of systemic innovation (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010, p. 13, p. 107) which is different from both product innovation and process innovation, because it causes the transformation of the entire system by which social needs are addressed and solved. According to these researchers, systemic innovation determines the changing of an entire system, understood as a set of mentalities, behaviours, power roles, relations and practices. For instance, systemic innovation would cause the entire system of services provided to citizens to be radically transformed by processes that take place across sectors: public, private, civil society. These changes or systemic changes have a profound influence on extremely important services (such as health and healthcare, education, feeding, sheltering, transportation) which are vital for the entire society.

Systemic innovation which is based on profound and extensive transformation may be considered one of the categories of innovation which brings great social value because of its capacity to solve fundamental social needs, so it ensures the public good. As such, systemic innovation could be analysed together with another category of innovation, namely institutional innovation (Nicholls, Simon and Gabriel 2015, p.3; Nicholls and Murdock, 2012). The main goal of institutional innovation is to change social and

economic structures, by reconfiguring the existent patterns, in order to create social value and new effects (Nicholls, Simon and Gabriel, 2015, p.4).

Several types of innovation are also established in a recent study that offers a synthesis of research and methodology in the field of social innovation. According to this study, the themes of innovation, which represent one of the widest exploration fields, may be classified into categories such as: digital innovation, corporatist innovation, public social innovation and community-led innovation (Domanski and Kaletka, 2017, p.8). These categories are newer concepts as compared to those that are defined by the *Oslo Manual*, and these newer trends prove the existence of a growing and relevant scientific community of researchers. Among these newer concepts, analysts of social innovation define also the concept of public innovation and the innovation of services in the public sector. In this line of thought, innovation is viewed as a strategy of reform in the public sector, which determines the replacement of the old conception of the government as unique provider of social services and solver of social problems and causes its replacement with new managers as agents of change (Bekkers and Noordegraaf, 2016, p.139). The emphasis on the innovation in services has grown lately due to the complexities faced by public administrations worldwide in providing them. It is important to remark that the innovation in services is situated at the intersection between several categories of innovation, for instance innovation of product and that of process, and that the distinction between social and technological innovation is not of primary importance in this case, since the use of a new technology may lead to the improvement of a service and thus to the solution of a social need.

Another observation in reference to the innovation in services is the constant pressure exerted on the public services by the increasing social needs of citizens at a global level, pressure that appears as a consequence of important social and economic changes everywhere in the world. This global trend is often described and explained within the broader context of the passage from an industrial society to the society of services.

New, more challenging social problems, together with the effects of the global economic crisis and the changing demographic structure of the population (manifested as an increase of the aging population as compared to the working population) exert a major and long-term pressure on public services and on budgets. This evolution of the public sector requires innovative problem-solving in the management and governance of this sector, given the fact that the welfare state is no longer able to cope with contemporary challenges. In this context, innovation in the public sector and collaborative processes are considered by many scholars to be the needed and appropriate answer.

3. Innovation in the public sector

Recent research on social innovation has explored and defined the concept of public innovation or innovation in the public sector, also referred to as collaborative innovation or collaborative innovation in the public sector. Jacob Torfing, a well-known scholar in the field of innovation, suggested that collaborative innovation has to be established as a new domain of interdisciplinary research. The author claims that the collaborative innovation in the public sector can contribute to the transformation or systemic change in the public sector (Torfing, 2016, p. 5).

Other studies on public innovation (Van de Ven et al., 2008; Ansell and Torfing, 2014) underscored the role of collaboration processes in the public sector and as a result they considered that the definition of a new category of innovation is a sign of a new trend in the progress of scientific research in the field. There are also studies that focus on the ways in which new networks, partnerships and other forms of interactive and participative governance contribute to the development of democracy and as such represent public innovation through their renewal and transformative power. This transformative impact has to be felt at the level of the institutions, practices, relations and behaviours that are specific to liberal democracy (Saward, 2000; Bevir and Bowman, 2011; Torfing, 2016).

The newly established category of public collaborative innovation has been authored mainly by Jacob Torfing who paid extensive attention to the study of the importance of collaboration in all the stages of the innovation process, from creation to dissemination of public innovation. Together with Torfing (2016), other scholars (Koppenjan și Klijn, 2004, Agranoff, 2007) claimed that collaboration ensures an increase of the capacity to correctly formulate and solve problems, to settle down conflicts, to stimulate mutual learning between the partners of the collaborative networks, as well as the transfer of knowledge within these partnerships.

The interest in collaborative innovation in the public sector has been determined by the continuous demand to innovate in the public sector. As already mentioned previously, the public sector has been under increasing pressure because of the complex social needs expressed by citizens who have greater expectations and because of the proliferation of issues that cannot be solved by applying standard solutions. Another important issue is represented by the financial challenges manifested as a consequence of the economic crisis caused by the crash of the credit system (Torfing, 2016, p.11).

All these factors have convinced the governments in many countries to initiate and develop national programs and projects in order to stimulate innovation in the public services and in the domain of legislative regulation of the public sector (Ferreira, Farah and Spink, 2008; Torfing, 2016). At the same time, international organizations like UN or OECD have highlighted, in their turn, the necessity of accelerating the innovation in the public sector, recommending the elaboration of national strategies to sustain the increase of public innovation. A negative aspect is represented by the insufficient or lack of institutionalisation of innovation programs in the public sector, and by the fact that scientific debate is underdeveloped, finding itself only in a beginning stage of development.

Collaborative innovation in the public sector is mainly stimulated by an active involvement of social agents who purposefully act in order to solve specific social problems, by using technological and scientific innovation. The role played by these actors seems extremely important in public innovation, because only by their assuming the responsibility for solving challenging issues through elaborating, testing and implementing innovations, they can bring about the needed change. This change has to influence also the modes of organizing social relations by a constant collaboration with partners from within and outside their organization (Torfing, 2016, p.12).

Many scholars sustain the idea that public innovation is always the result of concerted efforts of numerous actors. This type of innovation is always based on the collaboration between agents in both public and private sectors, including politicians, public servants, experts of private firms, different representatives of organizations, associations and groups of beneficiaries. Collaboration is a key factor which ensures the improvement of activities, organizations and of services in the public sector.

The main categories of public innovation are considered to be collaborative innovation and user-led innovation. The scientific literature presents several categories of public innovation. According to Torfing (2016, pp. 36-37) the main types of public innovation include: *product innovation* (the use of new products or instruments in the public sector or the supply of these products that are offered by public agencies to the citizens who need them most); *service innovation* (offering educational programs for the unemployed); *process innovation* with its sub-categories of organizational innovation or governance innovation (consisting in the innovation of the ways of delivering public services or the innovation of the ways of coordinating and managing public organizations); *innovation of public policies* by inventing new ones or re-inventing the objectives, the instruments and methods already used in public policies (for instance free choice of education programs, cutting taxes for electrical cars etc.). Other

categories of public innovation discussed by Torfing are the contrasting pairs of radical and incremental innovation, top-down and bottom-up innovation and local and global innovation.

Public innovation, also referred to as collaborative public innovation, due to the fundamental importance of collaborative processes, represents a multidimensional concept whose approach can only be transdisciplinary in order to ensure an in-depth analysis and the necessary and appropriate insight. One facet of the phenomenon of public innovation, that has enticed researchers all over the world to explore it, is the value added by the process of public innovation. This value is public and serves the general interest or the public welfare having a wider impact on society, due to its social, economic and politic dimensions.

4. Conclusions

Social innovation has been studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives and presents several categories established by different scholars who have carried out an in-depth research in the field. One of the main ideas emphasized by new research is that social innovation has expanded over the last decades into a wide range of methods and practices conceived and applied with the aim to solve unmet social needs specific of the 21st century public administration.

Most recent studies focus on the social dimensions of innovation and on its impact on social relations, behaviours, mentalities, norms and values, as well as on power relations between the partners of networks, who become actively involved in solving complex problems that affect individuals or different social categories. Grouping social innovation into several classes facilitates understanding, through the analysis of specific features of innovation. The types of innovation that are most frequently mentioned are: incremental innovation, disruptive innovation, open innovation or user/beneficiary-led innovation. One of the newest categories or concepts investigated in the specialty literature is public innovation, which is often considered to be a collaborative type of innovation, hence the concept of public collaborative innovation.

Public (collaborative) innovation is characterized as a beneficiary/citizen-led innovation, because the active participation of citizens in solving difficult issues that affect them directly is a key factor. Another aspect of innovation in the public sector, is the fundamental role played by collaborative processes, which made some authors, especially Jacob Torfing, consider that public innovation is inherently a collaborative type. Research in the field sustains this opinion, by emphasizing the importance of the interaction of a multitude of actors across sectors (public,

private, tertiary sector). Finally, one of the essential features of public innovation is that it is oriented towards obtaining public value and works for the greater good or public good, also known as general interest. In this respect, public innovation is different from innovation in the private sector where individuals or private organizations act for their own profit. Public innovation seeks answers and elaborates innovative solutions to matters that affect society at large and its objectives are generous, seeking to ensure efficacy, quality, citizens' empowerment and social inclusion, and acting as a catalyst of social solidarity and democracy.

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