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# Introduction: struggling with innovations. Social innovations and conflicts in urban development and planning

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## ABSTRACT

The number of publications on social innovations has significantly increased over the past decades. Meanwhile even policy-makers build their hopes on socially innovative solutions and their ‘transformative power’. However, what is still needed is a better understanding of the processes and mechanisms of social innovations. This Special Issue focuses in particular on the genesis of social innovations in the context of urban development and planning. It addresses a research gap by systematically drawing the attention to the fact that innovative ideas often meet resistance or conflict and that the implementation of novel practices is hindered. The article gives a short introduction to the current state of research in the field. It explains the many-facetted concept of social innovation, defines how socially innovative urban development and planning can be understood in this context and discusses how the role of conflicts can be described. The article not least gives an overview of the contributions. The articles show that institutional friction and resistance are normal concomitants of innovation processes. This does not mean that conflicts necessarily result in the failure or delay of socially innovative developments. In cases where they are constructively processed, they rather lead to progress.

## KEYWORDS

Social innovations; urban planning; urban development; professional communities; conflicts; social process

## 1. Introduction: the horizon of the problems

In contemporary society, innovation is not only regarded as a necessity for economic and technical development, but also to find novel solutions to existing problems of societies (Howaldt, Kaletka, & Schröder, 2018; Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, & Hamdouch, 2013; Rammert, Windeler, Knoblauch, & Hutter, 2018).<sup>1</sup> As for core territories that form global society, cities and regions are also under pressure to innovate and find sustainable solutions to the multifaceted problems and sometimes even to the manifest crises they face. They have to respond, among others, to climate change, demographic change (aging, shrinking population and migration), social marginalization and polarization, neighbourhood decline and gentrification processes; and all of this in a context of shrinking financial resources and (public) budget cuts. On top of this, the fierce competition between cities and regions forces local actors to abandon well-trodden paths and to market their

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territories as ‘unique selling points’. All in all, cities need to reinvent themselves and to solve their problems by developing innovative strategies.

In this context, technological and economic innovations by themselves will not do the job, but *social* innovations are viewed as just as important (Christmann, Ibert, Jessen, & Walther, 2018; Howaldt, Schwarz, Hennig, & Hees, 2010; Jessen & Walther, 2010; Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005; Moulaert, Jessop, Hulgard, & Hamdouch, 2013). Social actors build their hopes on the ‘transformative power’ of socially innovative solutions (Harris & Albury, 2009; Jessop, Moulaert, Hulgård, & Hamdouch, 2013; Moulaert, Mehmood, MacCallum, & Leubolt, 2017; Nyseth & Hamdouch, 2019; Nyseth, Ringholm, & Agger, 2019; Osborne & Brown, 2011). Additionally, policy-makers make use of the concept of social innovation. The European Commission in particular, aims at ‘empowering people’ and ‘driving change’ through social innovations (Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2010; see also Jenson & Harrison, 2013). The member states of the European Union are moderately active in this field. In Germany, for example, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research sees the potentials of social innovations – apart from technical and economic innovations – to address the great challenges of our times. Many policy-makers consider it relevant to develop solid policies supporting the creation and spatial diffusion of socially innovative solutions to existing problems, and consider promoting research in this field to foster a better understanding of the processes and mechanisms of social innovations as a first essential step.

Accordingly, over the past decades, the number of scientific publications on social innovations has significantly increased (see for example Bartels, 2017; Gillwald, 2000; Godin, 2012; Howaldt, Kaletka, Schröder, & Zirngiebl, 2018; Jenson & Harrison, 2013; Jessop et al., 2013; Khan, Moulaert, Schreurs, & Miciukiewicz, 2014; Moulaert, 2010; Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019; Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & González, 2005; Moulaert, Jessop et al., 2013; Nyseth & Hamdouch, 2019; Zapf, 1989). Meanwhile, the first global mapping of social innovations has been carried out (funded by the EU in the project ‘SI-DRIVE’). In the ‘Atlas of Social Innovation’ (Howaldt, Kaletka, Schröder, & Zirngiebl, 2018), the rise and propagation of social innovations in the world have been carefully depicted. There, the authors provide an overview of the quite different ‘new practices for a better future’ in the fields of education and lifelong learning, employment, environment, mobility and transport, energy, health, social care and poverty (Howaldt, Kaletka, Schröder, & Zirngiebl, 2018). Earlier atlases covering social innovations at the urban and regional level were published in Spain, among other countries. The ‘Atlas for Catalonia’, for example, is very detailed (<http://leyseca.net/barrisicrisi/>) and the geography of socially innovative initiatives in Valencia is well covered in Salom-Carrasco, Pitarch-Garrido, and Sales-Ten (2017).

This Special Issue of European Planning Studies also looks at social innovations in urban development and planning. The most recent research that has been published in this field is on the ‘Transformative Power of Social Innovation in Urban Planning and Local Development’, edited by Nyseth and Hamdouch (2019). In that volume, the state of research in the field is very well documented: different forms of innovative citizen participation and urban encounters, collective learning, citizen dialogues and the involvement of children in urban planning are discussed. In this Special Issue, the focus is on the genesis of social innovations in territorial contexts, with one of the main findings being that there are no predictable triggers for their emergence. Innovative solutions emerge from complex

social processes and constellations of actors. The articles in this Special Issue show that in the complex processes of social innovation, conflicts and the search for consensus should be viewed as normal phenomena. Enhancing knowledge about the conflicts can be a starting point for developing strategies and for coping better with the demand for social innovations.

## 2. Social innovations

Social innovations are gaining ground in research, collective action and policy, but how can social innovations actually be understood and investigated? There is no unique concept of social innovations, but there are a variety of conceptual approaches. Previously, it was possible to classify them more or less into two streams of research. Meanwhile, these streams have found some common ground. Moulaert et al. (2017) even show that the differences and complementarities between the various tracks of social innovation research and the concepts that are used may turn out very fruitful for the future of the field. Above all, social innovation approaches have become more and more interdisciplinary and, also, transdisciplinary. This Special Issue bears witness to this process, as contributions were invited from authors who represent different yet complementary approaches (e.g. articles by Moulaert & Mehmood; Domanski, Howaldt & Kaletka). Most of these authors reflect on decades of research on social innovations, their rich experiences and the process of increasingly interactive research practices.

In the early period of research on social innovation, planning, local development and urban studies, political science and spatial economics held a prominent place. In these early studies, social innovations were understood as social practices, which meant addressing social problems or meeting human needs in particular socio-spatial and political-institutional contexts. At least two streams of social innovation research emerged from this early period, both of which have had an impact on the analyzes made in this Special Issue.

The first stream of social innovation studies highlights the perspective that social innovations address existing problems and needs, mainly by 'doing' innovation in the context of horizontal collaborative relations between citizens and in a more participatory governance system within urban and regional contexts (Nussbaumer & Moulaert, 2007). According to this research stream, social innovations can be characterized by the development of more cohesive social relations, the empowerment of citizens, the development of bottom-up initiatives and more democratic governance systems.

In the second stream of social innovation research, social innovations were originally regarded as novel social practices, novel ways of organization, novel regulations and/or novel approaches to solutions triggered by dissatisfaction with a specific situation – to meet existing needs and/or to offer better solutions (Howaldt et al., 2010; Zapf, 1989). Although this definition reminds us, at least partially, of the definition in the first stream, it is more rooted in general rather than urban sociology and in classical innovation research. This does not mean that in this stream social innovation is reduced to analogues of the classical types of innovation, as defined in innovation systems. In the conceptual approaches of this stream, we typically find discussions about the meaning of novelty, the processes of innovating and the relationship between social innovations and social change. Novelty is a key criterion for identifying innovations. According to Zapf (1989), something is a

novelty when it is done differently from the way it was usually done previously. It represents a deviation from, or a break with, common practice. However, there are no clear criteria to decide how much a social practice must deviate from a previous practice to qualify as a social innovation. Scholars in this field acknowledge that in most cases novelties are not ‘absolute’ innovations in the world but rather ‘relative’ ones, since they often assemble already known elements, combining them in a novel way (Gillwald, 2000, p. 10; Schumpeter, 1911, p. 145). Thus, even a rediscovery of old elements and their transfer and integration to new situations or contexts, including new spatial settings, may be considered a social innovation (Gillwald, 2000, p. 10). This means that a broad range of novel social practices can be considered socially innovative. Besides practices of strategically empowering citizens and strengthening cohesive social relations, everyday practices in social life, such as living in a marriage-like relationship, can also be regarded as a social innovation.

Furthermore, scholars point out that the emergence of social innovations is to be analyzed in its social complexity. Social innovations occur within social processes, with complex constellations of social actors and unforeseen or unpredictable dynamics (Christmann et al., 2018; Howaldt, 2018). Another qualifier in these discussions is that – as argued by Zapf (1989, p. 177) – novel practices should be experienced, must be imitated by others and need to be institutionalized to qualify as social innovations. Other authors agree that innovations must display some degree of longevity to distinguish them from temporary, more short-lived initiatives or processes (e.g. Gillwald, 2000, p. 41). Furthermore, some authors in this research stream suggest including spatial spread and territorial mobility as elements in the conceptualization of social innovations (Christmann et al., 2018). They point out that it is exactly this longevity and mobility that guarantee that novel social practices result in social change (Howaldt, 2018, p. 90).

### 3. Social innovations in urban development and planning

As said, this Special Issue focuses on social innovations in urban development and planning, yet looks at a broader range of socially innovative practices and processes and at diverse constellations of actors. What does this mean exactly?

*Urban development* is regarded here as an overall historical, cultural, social and economic development of cities and towns driven by a heterogeneous constellations of actors, including those implementing bottom-up activities. For example, multigenerational housing can be considered an urban social innovation in the field of urban development. In this situation, urban residents of different ages (young and old people; often three generations) decide to move closer together in order to benefit from each other and share more in different ways: utilities, social encounters or – more ambitiously – co-gardening, child and elderly care, etc. Doing so, the residents of multigenerational housing may contribute to the creation of age-appropriate cities.

Temporary uses of spaces can be mentioned as an example of social innovation in the field of *urban planning*, which we consider a field where development processes are mainly driven by planning professionals. The community of planners is growing however; we consider it to consist of professional planners, members of public administrations and policy-makers. In this community not least citizen participation is gaining prominence. Whereas in former times, planners treated temporary uses of brown-field sites by creative urban pioneers as illegal, nowadays, they often exploit temporary uses as a strategic urban

planning tool. Actually, planners have recognized that creative activities by interim users may result in the revaluation of run-down urban areas. This insight has led them to encourage temporary uses as a transition strategy.

As is well known, Charles Landry (2000, 2006) and Richard Florida (2002) popularized the thesis that ‘creatives’ and their capacity to innovate are particularly important for the development of cities: it is the creatives’ innovative potential that is seen as a driving force for urban progress and prosperity. This is why for many cities the ‘creative city’ became a role model in the field of city development. In contrast to Florida and Landry, we argue here that social innovations in cities are *not only* driven by creatives. Civil society actors also demonstrate a high potential for creating innovative solutions from the bottom-up.

In particular, Frank Moulaert, Flavia Martinelli, Isabel André, Erik Swyngedouw and their colleagues have addressed the question of what innovation potentials evolve from civil society, which creative initiatives in urban areas have emerged and how civil society’s innovative ideas and practices can impact on spatial development (cf. Moulaert et al., 2005, 2010; Moulaert, MacCallum et al., 2013; Swyngedouw, 2005; Swyngedouw & Moulaert, 2010). Even people or organizations that usually are not considered to be innovative can become innovation actors. For example, so far actors from the political-administrative and urban planning sectors, which are typically organized in a hierarchical way, were not typically associated with innovation (cf. Ibert, 2003; Selle, 2004). However, in practice, mayors, planning authorities and even private planning bodies actually have shown that they can develop ground-breaking ideas and adopt an open-mindedness towards innovations, particularly when they are faced with great challenges and when particular challenging problems in urban and regional development call for creative solutions (Christmann et al., 2018; Gualini & Majoor, 2007; Jessen & Walther, 2010; Selle, 2004). Actors from the political-administrative or the planning system, even when creating novel approaches, however, often do not label these approaches as ‘novel’ or ‘innovative’ by themselves.

#### 4. Struggling with innovations – conflicts

Actors from different fields may have *competing* new ideas. In different actor configurations, competition and even conflicts can emerge: between top-down actors, but also between bottom-up actors, as well as between top-down and bottom-up actors. Innovative ideas can be fiercely contested; they may meet resistance and conflict. Moreover, the lack of support structures, communicative structures or financial means tends to hinder the implementation of novel ideas, practices and, consequently, social innovations. This is what we mean in the title of this Special Issue, when we speak of ‘struggling with innovations’: struggling between actors and within very diverse contexts.

We even argue that in structural terms, (social) innovations often develop into a conflict; yet conflicts do not necessarily result in the failure or delay of socially innovative developments. Conflict is, hence, not simply an unpleasant peripheral phenomenon that accompanies innovation processes, but a feature of potential innovation when different rationalities, patterns of interpretation and rival approaches and interests come into conflict or dissent. Conflict must, in fact, be perceived as a factor of innovation in the first place (cf. Martens, 2010, p. 374) since it can disrupt routines and cause cracks in established patterns, where the lever of change can be brought to bear, as shown by

Neuloh (1977) and conflict researchers following Coser, Simmel and Dahrendorf (e.g. Dubiel, 1999). This should not blind us to the risk that social innovations may have ambivalent, sometimes even negative impacts for particular groups (Schwarz, Birke, & Beerheide, 2010, pp. 174–175). To use the words of Lindhult, social innovations do not necessarily have positive effects per se, since ‘there is no inherent goodness in social innovation’ (Lindhult, 2008, p. 44). At least, they might not always provide solutions with which to master crises and challenges, they might even cause new problems. As we know, for example from Schumpeter (1975), innovations can irritate those actors who see their known and often beloved structures and achievements threatened by the process of ‘creative destruction’ – the other side of the innovation coin. What he meant by this, is that the emergence of novel practices and the way they spread across space are invariably accompanied by the decline of previous structures and practices. For this reason, institutional friction and resistance motivated by vested interests are concomitants of innovation processes that are always to be reckoned with (Bartels, 2017; Ibert, 2003). Conflict must, thus, be perceived as a dimension that pervades the entire innovation process and often leads to progress.

## 5. The articles in this Special Issue

In light of the multiple challenges that cities have to face and the high hopes that are placed in socially innovative initiatives, and taking into account the complex actor configurations, conflicts and consensus potentials, as well as positive and negative factor impacts that are typical in processes of ‘doing’ social innovation, this Special Issue focuses on the topic of ‘struggling with innovations’. It, thus, aims at a finer understanding of the complexity of social innovations. It consists of contributions by internationally recognized authors representing disciplines such as planning, community development, political science, geography and sociology. There are two groups of articles. The first one consists of two articles on ‘Epistemological and Theoretical Concepts’. There, the question of how the conceptualization of social innovation has developed over recent decades will be addressed – epistemologically, as well as theoretically. The four contributions in the second group on ‘Struggling with Innovations in the Field of Urban Development and Planning’ focus on the complexities of ‘doing’ innovation – particularly the complexities of actor constellations – with special attention on the tensions and conflicts that occur in urban development and planning when social innovations emerge and spread.

The first article (in group 1), ‘Towards a Social Innovation (SI) Based Epistemology in Local Development Analysis: Lessons from Twenty Years of EU Research’, Moulaert and Mehmood discuss epistemological and theoretical concepts. It provides a concise overview of the research concepts developed through seven international projects investigating the relations between social innovation and (supra-)local development, particularly making use of the theory and practice of integrated area development. The authors look back at the research trajectory of the projects on integrated area development and its scalar dynamics, covering more than twenty years of research. They reflect on how the epistemology has changed, i.e. how the research questions, the theoretical frameworks and the methodologies have evolved over time. Moulaert and Mehmood explain how the projects have laid the foundation for an increased understanding of social innovation as a practice and a process, by considering both changes in social relations and in governance

dynamics. They discuss how the research designs became more and more interdisciplinary by synergising different methodological and theoretical approaches but also transdisciplinary, not least by conducting action research in collaboration with a wide and evolving set of actors. The authors also point out how they increasingly addressed space–time dynamics and socio-cultural dynamics of social innovations (bypassing the market logic) and how they made progress in understanding the complex, multi-scalar and highly contradictory world of social innovations and socially innovative governance in local development.

The second article in this group by Domanski, Howaldt and Kaletka, ‘A Comprehensive Concept of Social Innovation and its Implications for the Local Context – On the Growing Importance of Social Innovation Ecosystems and Infrastructures’, also contributes to a theoretical conceptualization of social innovation. Referring to Tarde’s social theory on social practices and imitation, these authors suggest a comprehensive approach in which social innovation is understood as the result of multiple imitation streams that emerge on the basis of novel social practices. Social practices are, thereby, seen as a constitutive element for transformative social change. Crucial in the approach of Domanski, Howaldt and Kaletka is also the concept of social innovation ecosystems which – as they suggest – can serve as a heuristic model for better describing and understanding the specific urban conditions – the challenges, but also the support structures – particularly the complex infrastructures and interfaces of cross-sector collaborations in the context of socially innovative processes. The model of social innovation ecosystems seems to share several features with the integrated area development model covered in the article by Moulaert and Mehmood.

The second group of articles comprises four empirically oriented contributions looking at the complexities of actor constellations, tensions and conflicts interfering with, or provoked by, social innovations in urban development and planning. The first contribution, ‘Revisiting the Arts as a Socially Innovative Urban Development Strategy’, by Strom focuses on activities of artists and creative people, mainly on arts-based redevelopment projects at the regional, municipal and neighbourhood level in the US. She examines to what extent such projects can create new ways of addressing problems and new modes of organization in urban development, living up to norms that go beyond market efficiency. Strom demonstrates that artists and creative people can serve socially innovative purposes by shedding alternative lights on, and bringing in, novel impulses for place-based redevelopment. These actors can certainly be considered social innovators. At the same, she draws attention to the fact that their projects can catalyze market processes, with harmful effects on vulnerable communities. According to her analysis, this is due to the complex relationship between arts production, consumption and market relationships. Strom argues that arts activities are not free of contradictions and often witness the ongoing ‘struggle’ with social innovations.

In their article, Christmann, Ibert, Jessen and Walther provide empirical evidence for social innovations in four distinct fields of activity in spatial planning in Germany – urban design, neighbourhood development, urban regeneration and regional planning. The contribution entitled ‘Innovations in Spatial Planning as a Social Process – Phases, Actors, Conflicts’ aims to understand the spatial–temporal dynamics of unfolding and consolidating social innovations in spatial planning and the typical (groups of) actors, networks and communities involved therein. The authors identify five phases in the



innovation trajectory – i.e. incubating, generating, formatting, stabilizing and adjusting. They show that innovative approaches in planning unfold along these phases in a complex and multidimensional social process, with recurrent patterns, however. One of the results is that the types of actors and their practices change considerably during the process of a specific socially innovative initiative. It turned out, for example, that elite networks of pioneers with fresh ideas are indispensable for promoting novel solutions in spatial planning, but that they are often of little help when it comes to formatting or stabilizing the innovative approach. Typically, the authors observed shifting lines of conflict throughout the phases and their changing constellations of actors. For instance, whereas in the phase of generating and implementing innovative approaches conflicts typically occur between the pioneers, on the one hand, and the implanting actors, on the other, in the later phases of an innovation process, conflicts may rise in the group of the pioneers.

In their article ‘Innovation in Planning: Creating and Securing Public Value’, Vigar, Cowey and Healey investigate innovations in UK planning practices. The authors introduce the idea of ‘public value’ as a criterion for evaluating innovations in planning. They develop a concept of public innovation in which the creation of public value is central. Based on case studies of innovative planning initiatives, they observed that public innovations can refer to traditional forms of innovation like product and service innovation, but also to wider or newer domains of innovation such as governance, rhetorical and strategic innovation. The authors, furthermore, found that the investigated initiatives are typically based on multi-agency collaboration and different dialogue-based formats, which are determinant in the ‘newer’ domains of public innovation. Nevertheless, significant tensions between project stakeholders occurred. Provided that conflicts were managed well, however, evidence shows that they ended in a productive way. As impediments to planning innovation, Vigar, Cowey and Healey identify the dominant role of the increasing use of performance metrics and austerity policies.

The article ‘Assembling Social Innovations in Emergent Professional Communities. The Case of Learning Region Policies in Germany’ by Füg and Ibert focuses on socially innovative regional policies. The authors explore in what way the (regional) mobility of novel ideas is part of the emergence of novel policies for regional development. The authors are able to show that, in contrast to previous assumptions, the emergence of a novel concept and its ‘traveling’ from one place to another, do not occur sequentially. The development of a novel concept and its spatial mobility (between cities or towns in a region) often occur simultaneously, as elements of a co-constitutive process in which the concepts emerge and consolidate at the same time *through* travelling. This is striking, since for a long time – due to parish-pump politics – the transfer of policies *within* a regional territory turned out to be a challenging task in Germany. Typically, urban policies are to a large extent locally situated and bound up with local history. Due to differing local backgrounds and interests, as well as competition between cities, the development of regional policies in individual urban territories often result in struggles; this is particularly true for regional policies leaving well-trodden paths.

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