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Article — Published Version

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Urban Research & Practice

Provided in Cooperation with:

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Suggested Citation: Richter, Ralph (2020) : Innovations at the edge: how local innovations are established in less favourable environments, Urban Research & Practice, ISSN 1753-5077, Routledge, London, Iss. Latest Articles, pp. 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2020.1809700>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/224997>

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Innovations at the edge: how local innovations are established in less favourable environments

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ABSTRACT

Local innovation research often focuses on big cities and creative places. However, novel developments also emerge in provincial cities and in interactions between (social) entrepreneurs and policymakers. This article shows, by way of two case studies in Greece and Poland and an interpretive policy analysis, how local innovations are established in seemingly less innovation-friendly cities. It reveals that it is not the innovative product itself that faces opposition, but the new ways of collaborative action that pave the way for the novel development. Overcoming resistance takes place in communicative negotiation processes and benefits from shared problem construction.

KEYWORDS

Local innovations; provincial cities; innovation semantics; rules of the game; city-related knowledge

1. Introduction

Local innovations appear not only in big cities with progressive political actors and a mature creative industry but also in locations without political think-tanks or creative hotspots. While hegemonic discourses welcome innovations as catalysts of economic and regional development, their destructive potential attracts less attention. Innovations irritate certainties and routines, provoke resistance and often emerge only in complicated negotiation processes. Less favourable environments are an interesting setting for exploring local innovations because they can make visible the difficulties that every innovation faces in society (Rammert 2010), and they shed light on circumstances that are often under the radar of policy and innovation research. Of particular interest are the communicative processes that accompany the establishment of local innovations at the edge. Being able to overcome resistance is a question not only of how effectively an innovative solution can solve a problem but also of how it is framed and communicated. Against this backdrop, the present article aims to disclose the patterns of communication that pave the way for generating acceptance and maybe adoption of local innovations. Among others, communicative persuasion benefits from an understanding of the conditions for innovations in a city (Heinelt and Terizakis 2020), such as problem discourses and needs, shared meanings and beliefs. This leads to the research questions: How do local innovations, introduced by social entrepreneurs, irritate

certainties and provoke resistance in provincial cities, and which communicative negotiation processes enable to overcome the resistance?

This research is realised by way of two case studies, one situated in a city in Central Greece and the other in a provincial town in Northeast Poland. Both cases have in common that local innovation is initiated and fostered by social enterprises. In general terms, social enterprises are organisations that follow a social mission with entrepreneurial means (EC 2011). Policymakers have high expectations for social enterprises because it is said that these enterprises operate where other players fail to satisfy social needs, and they develop innovative solutions that help counteract societal problems (Pless 2012; Santos 2012). In fact, we find that social enterprises innovate through their ability to systematically cross borders between economy, policy, and civil society and to adopt and transfer ideas from one sector to another (Richter 2018, 2019; Richter et al. 2020). This makes them typical drivers of local innovations on the periphery. Policymakers are important counterparts of social enterprises because establishing local innovations with a societal impact usually requires political support. By looking at the policy arena through the lens of an actor at the margins of the political system, this article aims to contribute new knowledge to the policy analysis of local innovations.

The article presents the research in seven sections. The introduction is followed by an overview of recent developments in local and urban innovation research and identifies research gaps in the communicative dimension of local innovations and in the emergence of local innovations in less favourable environments. The theory section outlines an analytical approach that combines Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) with the innovation theory of Werner Rammert (2010; Rammert et al. 2018). While the former provides an epistemological framework for the interpretative analysis of communicative negotiation processes, the latter offers a foundation for describing how local innovations change the *rules of the game*. This is followed by the methods section, the empirical results, a discussion and the conclusion. All in all, the article shows that, to gain support from policymakers and the people of provincial cities, local innovations are presented as solutions to societal problems. Identifying shared problem definitions requires an understanding of city-related meanings and beliefs. This local knowledge is also required when it comes to equipping the local innovation with references to the history of the town and values important to the local community. Different from an endogenous view on local innovations, I find that communicative negotiation processes are not limited to the local arena. Local innovations often gain persuasive power from their recognition in supra-regional arenas that makes them shine in a brighter light.

2. Innovations in cities: state of the research

Plenty of research is devoted to discussing innovative developments in cities. Innovations in cities are seen as promising solutions to urban challenges. They are treated as measures to make cities more competitive and resilient. The great number of publications parallels the plurality of conceptions. However, aiming at providing a broad overview, the existing works can be divided into two dimensions, the

government-governance dimension and the product-process dimension. For the former, studies differ regarding whether policymakers steer the innovation process (government) or whether they are only one player in a set of actors who collaboratively drive the innovation (governance). On the government end of the continuum are approaches such as *policy innovation* (Ihrke, Proctor, and Gabris 2003; Krause 2011; Timeus and Gascó. 2018; Arundel, Bloch, and Ferguson 2019) and *public service innovation* (Hambleton 2015; Bartlett 2017; Bianchi, Marin, and Zanfei 2018; Chen, Walker, and Sawhney 2019). While works on policy innovation focus on the question of how civic leaders proceed to reorganize administrative management in an innovative way (process innovation), studies of public service innovation are more interested in learning how policymakers and managers in the public sector develop and establish novel services to benefit the public (product innovation). Both conceptions must be distinguished from *innovation policy*, which is a field of political action that aims to create beneficial framework conditions for the development of social, technological and economic innovation in the respective area of authority (Edler and Fagerberg 2017).

The governance side of the continuum contains works about innovations that have been established in collaborative processes among actors from different sectors. Conceptions such as *urban innovation* (Hall 1998; Dente and Coletti 2011; Mieg 2012) and *urban innovation systems* (van Winden et al. 2014; Putra and van der Knaap 2018) refer to cities as breeding grounds for innovations rather than focusing solely on the public sector and government of a city. The idea of urban innovation systems has been further developed from older conceptions on the emergence of innovations in certain geographical areas, such as national innovation systems (Freeman 1987) and regional innovation systems (Cooke 1992, 2001; Norck 2014). It understands innovation as key to economic growth and investigates how innovative clusters emerged in a city and how innovation policy can contribute to the establishment of urban innovation systems (van Winden et al. 2014). While the conception of urban innovation systems is more focused on actor constellations and further framework conditions that enable innovations in cities (process dimension), the urban innovation approach shows more interest in the outcome of innovation policy (product dimension). For example, researchers investigate how smart city policy and initiatives for sustainable urban development enhance the possibility for urban innovations (Mieg 2012; Karvonen, Cugurullo, and Caprotti 2018; Caragliu and Del Bo 2019).

For the present work, the governance side of the research is of particular interest because it regards urban innovations as solutions for local challenges that have been developed in cross-sectoral collaborative processes. However, the conceptions are limited when it comes to communicative negotiation processes. They focus on tangible solutions but rarely on how they are communicated and enabled or limited by city-related knowledge, meanings and beliefs. Empirical work on local innovations mainly focus on big cities, thus reproducing the biased view of urban centres as breeding grounds for innovation (Florida, Adler, and Mellander 2017). Consequently, local innovations in peripheral places and less favourable environments attract little attention in innovation research (Eder 2019; Reidolf and Graffenberger 2019). For the purpose of this research an approach is required that builds on a collaborative understanding of local innovations, on communicative negotiation processes and on locally prevailing

meanings, beliefs and knowledge that might also exist in small- and medium-sized cities. The next section provides an analytical foundation for this purpose.

3. Theoretical approach

The Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) (Yanow 2000, 2014) provides an epistemological approach that helps to investigate and understand communicative interaction and underlying meanings and beliefs. IPA is concerned about how political action is communicated and how problem definitions and solutions develop in communicative negotiation processes. It is based on the assumption that our reality is a social construction, and policy making a ‘struggle over meanings’ and ideas rather than a rational strategy for problem solving (Münch 2016, pp. 2–3). Problems cannot be treated as objective realities but as constructed issues. In many cases, solutions search for problems rather than problems for solutions (Kingdon 2003). A central aim of IPA is to reconstruct the subjective meaning of actors in policy making in order to understand the reference framework that informs their beliefs, values and feelings (Münch 2016).

For the present work, IPA provides an epistemological foundation that helps to understand the struggle for innovative solutions and political support as a communicative negotiation process. Innovative solutions deviate from familiar and routinized ways of problem solving and tend to evoke resistance from others, especially if they represent the present order. As with IPA, the communicative strategies and arguments of the involved actors provide empirical access to reconstruct subjective meanings and beliefs. It must be considered whether or not these meanings and beliefs refer to a shared reference framework, i.e. to a set of common meanings, beliefs and myths. If this set of meanings is related to a city and specifically shared by people familiar with this city, we can speak of an *urban imaginary* (Lindner 2006; Berking and Schwenk 2011).

However, the focus here is not on the urban imaginary as a whole but on those parts of the urban reference framework that are related to innovations. The interest is on meanings, beliefs, and myths that are activated in innovation related negotiation processes and might form characteristic patterns of dealing with innovations in a city. This is in line with the everyday perception that some cities are regarded more open minded and innovation-friendly than other cities. I aim to find out how this is reflected in the observed communication strategies and interactions between social enterprises and policymakers.

To mark this innovation-related part of the urban reference framework I adopt the term *innovation grammar* from the sociologist Werner Rammert (2010) who understands innovation grammar as ‘the rules of the game’ in a given context (p. 37). A novel idea deviates from these rules and evokes resistance from defenders of the rules. A struggle over meanings follows that can lead to the recognition of the novelty as an improvement or to its rejection. In the first case, the novelty becomes part of the set of rules – a recognised innovation that adds something new to the *rules of the game* and changes it to some extent.

For Rammert, innovation grammar is only one out of three levels used to analyse the social dimension of innovation processes: besides innovation grammar, Rammert distinguishes the practice and the semantic level of innovations (2002, 2010; Hutter

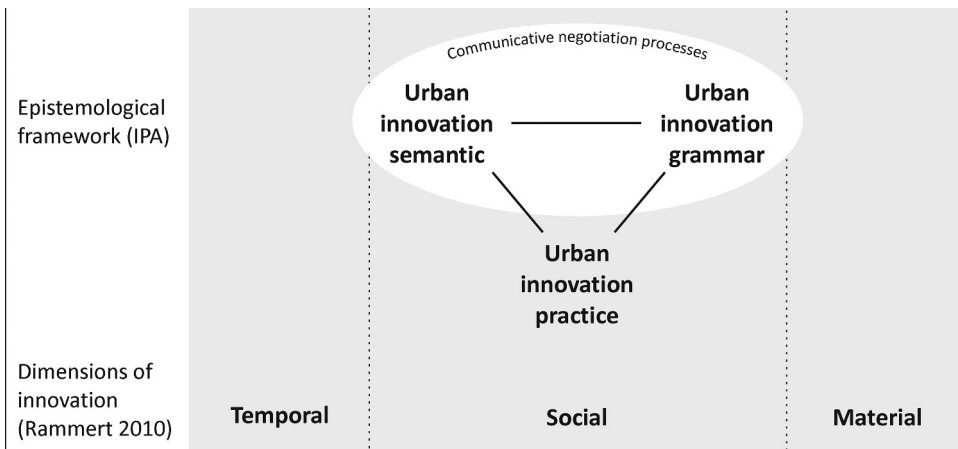


Figure 1. Analytical approach.

et al. 2018). While the former stands for the action taken to make possible the innovative object, the latter refers to the way in which the innovation is communicated and discussed. Innovation semantic (struggle over meanings) and innovation grammar (rules of the game) are the central categories in the communicative negotiation process and the focal point of our analysis (see Figure 1). Innovation practices will be part of the analysis as well, but in a descriptive rather than an interpretative way. Two further dimensions of innovation must be added: the temporal dimension (innovations are recognised to be new) and the material dimension (innovations are different to the known and conventional; Rammert 2010). In addition to the social dimension, the temporal and material dimensions will enrich the analysis in order to understand what makes the selected cases an innovation in their respective contexts. In the light of the theoretical considerations, *local innovations* can be understood as solutions for societal challenges in a place that are recognized by local people as new and deviate from prevailing ways of dealing with the problem; they are regarded as promising for improving the situation and have changed patterns of knowledge and practices.

4. Methodology

For the reconstruction of communicative negotiation processes, a qualitative research design and the detailed exploration of empirical cases are most suitable. Empirical case studies give room for understanding a case in-depth and provide data for the reconstruction of subjective meanings of involved actors. Instead of exploring a single case, I execute a cross-case analysis. Investigating more than one example enhances the empirical knowledge base and enables us to develop a more theoretical understanding of a phenomenon (Yin 2009). Comparing two cases allows for the identification of commonalities and differences (Ragin 1989). Commonalities can point to general patterns of dealing with local innovations in peripheral cities even though they are indications rather than generalizable results.

In this research, the criteria for the case selection were threefold. First, the local innovation to be selected should be experienced by people as new and different from

existing solutions. Second, the innovative solution should have been developed by a social enterprise and established in collaboration with local policymakers. Third, the cases should have been situated in structurally weak regions in different European countries. Choosing structurally and economically weak places was both a theoretical and programmatic decision. Theoretically, we expected that the irritations and negotiation processes that accompany the establishment of local innovations are more evident in places where people are not used to regularly dealing with novel developments. Programmatically, we intended to enhance the awareness of innovation processes in peripheral places that would benefit from more acknowledgement in research and politics. Furthermore, the comparison across two countries served to prevent the research from methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). Following these criteria, we selected four innovative projects, two of which were located in cities. This article focuses on the two urban cases while leaving out the rural cases because the research interest in the function of city-related knowledge in communicative negotiation processes requires that the selected cases are located in – at least – small cities that have accumulated specific meanings, beliefs and narratives in the course of their history. The two remaining provincial cities are both located in regions shaped by agriculture. Their population size and foundational economic sector make them typical cities in Central Greece and Northeast Poland, respectively.

The empirical subjects are innovation projects that social entrepreneurs strived to establish in a city. From this follows that the local innovations have *not* been implemented by policymakers. Thus, conducting discourse analysis by means of policy documents and media reports is less promising. Instead, we have decided to collect empirical data through the co-presence of researchers in the field by way of ethnographic field work. Ethnography stands for the exploration of an empirical subject in a specific social and cultural context through the direct involvement of the researcher on-site for a certain period of time (Breidenstein et al. 2015; Harrison 2018). Ethnographic field work builds familiarity and trust with the investigated subjects, which makes it easier to observe undisguised behaviour and to get access to events and interview partners (Richter 2019). The on-site field work lasted about eight weeks in each case, consisting of a two-week exploratory stay in spring 2016 and a six-week research stay in winter and spring 2017. The main data collection methods were participant observations and semi-structured qualitative interviews. In total, we conducted 27 qualitative interviews and produced 46 pages of field notes in both empirical cases (see Table 1).

Data processing and analysis were undertaken, roughly speaking, in three steps. The first phase of the analysis occurred during the field research. In line with the principles of Grounded Theory, we developed theoretical conceptions by means of examining first empirical data. These conceptions were tested in an iterative process with newly conducted interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Corbin and Strauss 2015). The second phase started after the return from the field and after having transcribed the interviews. We coded the interviews selectively with regard to the theoretical conceptions so that they could be further refined. Additionally, we triangulated the theoretical conceptions with the field notes, thus counterchecking and consolidating the categories (Richter et al. 2020). In a third step, a cross-case analysis was undertaken. The comparison of the categories across cases allowed for identifying commonalities and differences and deducing assumptions about communicative and knowledge-related patterns.

Table 1. Overview of the case studies and the collected empirical data.

Case study	Local innovation	City	No. of semi-structured interviews	Pages of field notes
CS 1	Cultivation, processing and marketing of a new field crop; this made the city one of the first centres in this business in Europe	City with about 52,000 residents in Central Greece	11	16
CS 2	Theme village that serves for cultural education, work integration and as a tourist attraction; role model for similar developments in the whole country	Regional town with about 14,000 residents in Northeast Poland	16	30
Total:			27	46

5. Results

This sections aims to build an understanding of the local innovations, the specific societal context in which they appeared, and the role of innovation semantic and innovation grammar in the interaction between social entrepreneurs and policymakers. This will be realised on the basis of the analytical approach in three steps. First, I will show what makes the observed case an innovation in terms of newness (temporal dimension) and otherness (material dimension). Experiencing a phenomenon as an innovation always depends on the societal environment in which it appears. That is why the description of the innovation will be complemented by an innovation-related characterization of the city. At the second stage, I will describe the social process that drives the establishment of the innovation by focusing on the practical and communicative action of the social entrepreneur. The interplay of innovation semantic and innovation grammar in the negotiation process between social entrepreneurs and policymakers is centre stage in the third analytical part. This analytical succession will be presented separately for each case.

5.1 Local innovation in the Greek city

5.1.1 Temporal and material perspectives

The innovation in question is a new field crop that has the potential to make the Greek city one of Europe's leading places for the processing and marketing of the new crop. The innovation offers new perspectives to overcome the income crisis of small family farms as well as aversions against collaborative work amongst the farmers. The new field crop is the raw product for a sugar substitute with no calories, which makes it

a healthy option, especially for people with diabetes and obesity. In the past, the field crop has been cultivated mainly in South America and Asia but not in Europe. For years, the Greek social enterprise together with research institutes developed new cultivation methods which paved the way for growing the plants in Greece. Since the sugar substitute has been certified by the European Union in 2011, the Greek social enterprise is among the few producers in Europe. The field crop is not an invention in itself but has been adopted from abroad, and the cultivation methods have been adjusted according to the specific natural conditions in Central Greece. Like the product, the production process and organisational form are different from other agricultural companies in Greece because the social enterprise – having the legal status of a cooperative – not only produces raw products but covers the whole value chain ‘from the field to the shelf’ (G-CD).¹

A staff member of the social enterprise describes the people of the city as initially reserved towards the new product: ‘The difficulties that we had to overcome [...] were the mistrust of the people in trying something new and innovative’ (G-CD). Another interviewee refers to the role of the city as a regional centre of agriculture. Many families run small farms in the surrounding environment. Farmers, the interviewee explains, ‘don’t think that change is something good. [...] Because of that mentality, they don’t want to change and produce something new’ (G-Gov1). This belief, prevalent in this foundational economic sector, seems to shape the city as a whole. Several interview partners refer to a reservation towards new developments prevalent in the local population and maybe in the urban imaginary of the Greek city alike.

5.1.2 Practical and communicative action of the social entrepreneur

For understanding the innovation in practical terms, it is worth going back to the 2000s when the farmers were forced to stop the profitable cultivation of tobacco plants as a result of European economic policy. To make up for the loss of revenues, a number of farmers in Central Greece began to develop ideas for a field crop that could serve as a substitute for tobacco. An alternative sugar plant from Latin America seemed to be a good alternative because it shares some characteristics with tobacco. When the legal and technical hurdles for the cultivation were overcome, the social enterprise came into being. The initiators decided to found a cooperative in which small family farmers would be members and producers of the raw material. Additionally, the organisation established a business unit in which a CEO and a management team organized the processing and marketing of the product. However, attracting farmers for cultivating the new field crop and joining the cooperative turned out to be challenging: ‘When we started to gather around these people and to talk about the cooperative, farmers had enough money. So they didn’t hear what we were saying. That was a big issue for us, trying to persuade them’ (G-SE1). The situation changed when the Greek debt crisis also affected the agriculture sector. In line with the old adage ‘necessity is the mother of invention’, the farmers began to see the new field crop as an opportunity. Finally, more than 80 farmers joined the new cooperative.

With reference to this practical action, the social enterprise uses communicative measures to construct their own activities as ‘innovative’. This is apparent in interviews in which the CEO and members of the social enterprise regard the collaboration of farmers and business people and the diversity of perspectives and skills an important

innovation: ‘Each of us has different skills, and has this diversity. I think the combination of this differentiation makes the innovation in our cooperative’ (G-SE1). Having been able to overcome the tensions caused by the differences, the CEO continues to state, ‘we made a trend here in this. Because also other cooperatives around the area build in this way. Business people with farmers build a cooperative’ (G-SE1). Other references to innovation appear as a source of personal motivation: ‘We are the first cooperative in Europe cultivating [the sugar substitute], so it is something that drives you and inspires you’ (G-SE1). Besides personal communication, marketing means highlight the innovativeness and seek to strengthen the bonds between the social enterprise and the city. As a brand name for the sugar substitute, the name of the city has been chosen as well as the message, ‘we cultivate locally, we serve globally’. Both signal local roots and far-reaching economic ambitions.

5.1.3 Innovation semantics and innovation grammar between social entrepreneur and policymakers

Field research has been conducted twice in the Greek city, in 2016 and 2017. Over this period, it became obvious that the relation between the social enterprise and the local and regional government deteriorated. In an interview conducted during the first field trip, a member of the regional government praises the social enterprise for its product and organisational approach:

The most important is economies of scale. If they are in a bigger car they will be able to run faster and the wind will not take them off the road. So this is why examples like [the social enterprise] are very important because when they succeed and get a nice product in the market, it's like a flu, it passes on, the good thing passes on. (G-GOV2)

Highlighting the economy of scale must be understood against the fact that, in Central Greece, the average farmland is very small, which makes single family farms hardly competitive. Against this backdrop, the metaphor of the car serves to emphasise that collaborations of farmers would make them less vulnerable to capricious market conditions (‘the wind will not take them off the road’). The policymaker continues to praise the social enterprise for being a successful role model that has the potential to infect other farmers (‘like a flu’). Even though the metaphor of a flu appears unusual in the context of ‘good things’, the quotation makes clear that the politician supports the social enterprise, especially for its collaborative character. The favourable appraisal of the politician goes in hand with the CEO’s positive view of the regional government: ‘These people try to change a lot of things in our area. So I feel very happy and I feel that I have someone to call, that hears me if I have a problem’ (G-SE2).

About one year later, the relationship between policymakers and the social enterprise cooled down. The member of the regional government states:

For the administration to do more for [the social enterprise] that would mean that the cooperative would need to be faster. [...] As a farmer you shouldn't just sit and wait for help to come. (G-GOV1)

Likewise, the CEO of the social enterprise articulates his anger about local and regional policymakers:

We don't have any support here, unfortunately. That's why I am travelling to Athens three days a week, discussing with people and trying to gain some extra help from these people. I can't find help here, unfortunately. (G-SE3)

What happened within one year that deteriorated the public-private relationship in the context of the local innovation? The first statement documents that the policymaker experiences expectations for direct help from the farmers of the social enterprise ('wait for the help to come') that he regards as being unjustified. Instead, he insists that the farmers must first undertake their own efforts ('the cooperative would need to be faster'). The second statement shows that the CEO, who praised the good relationship only months ago, became disillusioned in the meantime. Interestingly, this is not only because of a lack of help from the regional government but also because of growing tensions between the CEO and the farmers within the social enterprise. As a person with a strong business mindset and far-reaching strategic plans, the CEO pleads for financing to spur faster growth with the help of loans while the farmers were afraid of the risks and refused. The refusal resulted in frustration that the CEO channels, however, towards regional policy in order to relieve the organisation from growing tensions. The CEO's plans reach far in temporal and geographic terms. Establishing the innovative product requires opening up markets beyond the region. This, however, exceeds the support regional policymakers can provide, which explains the turn away from regional contacts towards Athens and people with more power and broader networks.

Initially, the local and regional governments and the social enterprise were almost natural allies because the social enterprise perfectly represents the innovation policy to develop a modern agrifood sector with high-quality products, vertical integration and a collaborative mindset among local farmers. However, the innovation strategy of the social enterprise reaches the limits of the innovation grammar where it exceeds the focus of regional policymakers to strengthen economic circulation *in* the region. It turns out that the defenders of the *rules of the game* are not primarily the local and regional governments, but parts of the farmers' community that struggle with collaborative work and taking risks.

5.2 Local innovation in the Polish city

5.2.1 Temporal and material perspectives

In the Polish case, the innovation in question is a theme village. This is a settlement of traditional houses and workshops that has several purposes, reaching from education to work integration. The theme village has been initiated by a social enterprise in a provincial town in Northeast Poland and was the first of its kind in the nation. Once established, it became a role model for similar developments, resulting in about 50 theme villages in the whole country today.

Before the theme village appeared in Poland, similar villages existed in Austria, Ireland, Germany and other countries. The CEO of the Polish social enterprise adopted the idea and adjusted it according to the needs and opportunities in Northeast Poland.

This led to a multi-purpose development that serves to educate young people, integrate people with disabilities and low job prospects into work, provide a gathering place for the local community and generate income from tourism which is important in a poor region shaped largely by agriculture. One focus of the theme village is the artisan production of pottery. Until the end of World War II, when the town was still under German rule, the place was famous for the production of pottery and ceramic tiles. Later, this tradition was lost, and the knowledge and skills had to be newly acquired. While the theme village approach existed before, it is the specific recombination of existing elements that makes the Polish theme village an innovation in the sense of Schumpeter (2006[1939]).

Irrespective of the theme village, the field research reveals that people in the Polish town tend to be rather reserved when it comes to new developments. For the interview partners, the ‘mentality’ of the people in the town and the region is a permanent reason for concern. They are repeatedly characterised with attributes such as ‘passivity’ (P-GOV1), ‘very conservative’ (P-TH1) and ‘[being] afraid of new things’ (P-GOV2). The indifference and conservatism prevalent in the local community is often seen as a legacy of the state farms that were the biggest employers in the town until 1990. These farms provided comprehensive services for their employees, which stifled proactivity and readiness for change. After the fall of the iron curtain, the closure of the state farms caused high unemployment and made the town one of the poorest in all of Poland. Thus, over the course of the last century, the town experienced two radical changes: intensive destructions and an almost complete population exchange in World War II, and a deep structural break after the end of Socialist times. Both have left their traces in the urban imaginary.

5.2.2 *Practical and communicative action of the social entrepreneur*

Improving the development prospects of the town and the region and counteracting indifference and passivity were major motivations for the establishment of the theme village. In 2006, a call of the European EQUAL program offered the opportunity to make these objectives real. The call for proposals aimed at strengthening communities and fostering inclusion in the labour market through a public-private partnership (European Commission 2016). When the CEO of the social enterprise introduced the call to the local authority, scepticism prevailed because public-private partnerships were unusual at that time in Northeast Poland. However, the CEO convinced the public and private partners to participate. A preparatory group prepared the proposal which has been positively assessed by the European Union.

Building up the theme village was accompanied by a promotional tour across Poland. During the tour, the CEO introduced the village project to interested communities and ‘explained how important local cooperation is. Afterwards’, the CEO continued, ‘similar initiatives emerged in many places’ (P-SE1). The CEO never gets tired of emphasising the importance of the theme village as a role model. This refers not only to the adoption of the approach in other places but also to how it can inspire local people to take action, however disadvantageous the circumstances might be: ‘I think [the idea came] from the need to give an example to people who live in towns – without attractions, without lakes, woods – that it is possible to do something that will give work, something that will work economically [...] That even if you live in small places, you are not doomed to it’ (P-SE1).

The promotional tour was accompanied by remarkable media coverage. For example, the Polish Newsweek magazine featured the social entrepreneur and his wife, holding a piece of pottery in their hands, on its cover with the headline, ‘People who change Poland’. Likewise, in our personal communication, the CEO emphasises the innovative character of the theme village: ‘Our success is that we do absolutely non-standard activities [...] such as the theme village. I would say it is our experimental training ground’ (P-SE1).

5.2.3 *Innovation semantics and innovation grammar between social entrepreneur and policymakers*

The establishment of the theme village provides an insightful example for negotiation processes between a social enterprise that challenges the *rules of the game* and local policymakers who initially acted as defenders of the rules. A decision maker of the local authority remembers the reactions in the town hall when the CEO of the social enterprise introduced his ideas:

I remember when [the CEO] initiated a meeting. I worked in the office then. He told us that there would be a funding competition that supports four powiats [regions] in Poland. The winners would receive one million Złoty. But to get it, the local government had to cooperate locally with an NGO, setting up the initiative and running it in the form of a social enterprise. And I remember when we sat together, we couldn't understand it. The local government and an NGO should start an enterprise? It was unbelievable. But they said that it was a requirement for participating in the competition. I remember that I thought in this meeting: 'I have never built a social enterprise. I don't even know what it is'. Nobody knew anything. (P-GOV2)

The statement gives an impression of the irritation that the CEO caused. A social entrepreneur suggested the municipality could join a regional development project – something that has been regarded as a core task of public authorities. Even more challenging, collaborating with an NGO in a joint project would put local politicians in a position to share decision making power. Unsurprisingly, the first reactions of local policymakers were deprecatory, as our interview partner remembers: ‘The [social enterprise] was not treated seriously’ (P-GOV2). However, the interviewee, at that time already a responsible person in the local authority, was impressed with the idea and decided to convince the mayor to join the project:

I went to the mayor and [...] told him: 'Listen, I don't know what it is but people will talk about it in the country. So let's join it. They don't expect from us much efforts, only to declare our collaboration'. And then the mayor said to me: 'Listen, provided that you don't expect anything from me, you can join'. (P-GOV2)

The interview partner seeks to persuade by arguing that the collaboration can become a prestigious success for the town and would be possible at minimum risk. The mayor agrees, however, seemingly without inner conviction because he makes exemption from any responsibility a precondition for the acceptance of the municipality.

A further reason for the acceptance might be the fact that the project made it a mission to revive the craft tradition of pottery production. Taking up the role of the town as a former centre of pottery is conform to a remarkable interest in the pre-war history of the town. Numerous old photographs with pre-war panoramas of the

town and the maintenance of contacts with pre-war inhabitants and their families point to the importance that this part of the history has in the urban imaginary. This is surprising because, due to the almost complete destruction of the town in WWII and the transition from German to Polish rule, one could believe the contrary would be true. However, it seems that the thematic focus on pre-war pottery production presumably enhanced the legitimacy of the local innovation (Richter et al. 2020).

Irrespective of the initial reservation, today policymakers from the town, the county and the province praise the theme village for its positive image effects ('It's a promotion for the municipality [...] in all of Poland', P-GOV3), for functioning as a role model ('The theme village inspired all the people dealing with crafts', P-GOV2) and for its originality and authenticity ('Generally, the theme village and [the social enterprise] are treated as very important initiatives in the region because they work – they are authentic, tangible', P-GOV1). The statements show not only a change from skepticism to acceptance but also that challenging the *rules of the game* (public and private bodies have different interests that make cooperation lack meaning) through a novel idea can change the rules to some extent (private organisations can have a social mission, as well, and are worth public support and cooperation).

6. Discussion

Having undertaken the reconstruction of local innovation processes according to Rammert's innovation theory, I direct attention to the *communicative* construction of local innovations. In doing so, I take up IPA again. On the basis of the empirical findings, patterns will be identified regarding how actors outside the inner policy field use communicative means to organize political support for the establishment of innovative solutions. This will be realised in a cross-case analysis according to three leading questions about the construction of the problem–innovation relationship, communicative negotiation processes and the role of city-related knowledge.

How do actors construct problems and in which way do they justify the local innovation as a solution for these problems?

In both cases we observe that societal challenges are very present in personal communication with social entrepreneurs, as well as with policymakers and civil society actors. Interestingly, in the Greek and Polish cities, the 'mentality' of the people – both use the same term – is a subject of concern. The interviewees report a lack of proactivity, willingness to change and entrepreneurial thinking, which is regarded as a legacy of agriculture as the dominant economic sector in both provincial cities. Even though different reasons for the negative impact are mentioned, they both argue – indirectly – that the resulting *mentality* would be incompatible with the social and economic requirements in present times and would hamper local and regional development. While in the Polish town, the problem construction is based on a rather individualistic narration according to the credo 'every man is the architect of his own fortune', in Greece the problem construction also has a strong societal component. According to the interviewees, the main reasons for the economic downturn and insufficient incomes are the debt crisis of the Greek state and the tobacco crisis that resulted from EU policy. Unlike in the Polish town, this narration externalizes the reasons for the problems to some extent (see Table 2).

Table 2. Cross-case analyses in three dimensions.

	Local innovation in ...	
	... the Greek city	... the Polish town
Construction of problem and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social enterprise refers to shared problem construction • Causes of the problem partly internal (farmers less cooperative and innovation friendly), partly externalised (EU policy, debt crisis) • Local innovation addresses problem and seeks social impact as a role model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause of the problem mainly internal (passivity of the people)
Communicative negotiation process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local policymakers' natural allies in the search for innovation in agrifood • Social enterprise seeks political support by communicative embracing strategy (fraternization) • Support endangered through rivalry • Avoidance strategy through supra-regional networks and recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially, local policymakers defended the <i>rules of the game</i> • Social enterprise seeks political support by communicative embracing strategy (offer that is hard to reject)
Addressing city-related meanings, beliefs and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social enterprise affirms the self-perception of local people (resilience, familiarity, solidarity) and local pride (using the name of the city as a brand) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social enterprise contributes to local self-affirmation by reevaluating the history of the town as a former centre of pottery and ceramic tiles

The social entrepreneurs make use of communicative mechanisms according to which a shared problem definition paves the way for an agreement on the need for action, as Heinelt and Terizakis explain: 'The communicative construction of challenges or problems can thus be understood as a central component of any narrative pattern, as the construction of a problem is also about the need for action, because to label something as a social problem expresses the expectation or demand that it should be remedied.' (Heinelt and Terizakis 2020, p. 9). In light of this, it does not surprise that the social entrepreneurs introduce their innovations as solutions for the mentioned problems. In both cases the logic of problem-solving, however, is related not only to the products and organisational structures themselves, but to their functions as role models. The entrepreneurs express their hope that giving a successful example makes people rethink their beliefs about cooperative work, starting a business and taking over the successful approach 'like a flu'. In both cases, 'cooperation' between formerly separated and competing actors is propagated as key for changing the *rules of the game*.

Which communicative negotiation processes take place if advocates of local innovations seek political support in provincial cities?

In both cases, the social enterprise seeks political support at the beginning of the innovative project. The reasons, communicative strategies, and political responses, however, are different. In the Greek case, the social entrepreneur hoped for political support in convincing farmers to join the cooperative. Receiving support turned out to be less difficult because the social enterprise and policymakers were natural allies in their quest for a modern agrifood industry and for more collaborations among small family farms. The communicative strategy to secure political support is characterized by putting emphasis on the similarities between the young and reform-oriented

government and the ambitious cooperative. In a personal communication, the latter praises the government for its responsiveness to the entrepreneurs' concerns ('I feel that I have someone to call, that hears me if I have a problem'). Unlike in Greece, the Polish social entrepreneur was aware that local policymakers might not support the public-private partnership. This presentiment made the social entrepreneur presenting the plans to a group of local decision makers where he highlighted the opportunities for the town and minimised the risks for the public authority. This *embracing strategy* made it difficult for the local government to reject the proposal. In fact, even though the mayor remained sceptical, the entrepreneur convinced another person in the authority who persuaded the mayor to join the partnership.

However, in both cases the support of local politicians remains fragile. One reason is the rivalry between the ambitious social entrepreneurs and local policymakers. In Greece, the CEO admits to facing opposition from selected policymakers '[...] because they see me as a threat' (G-SE3). Likewise, in the Polish town, the relation between the social entrepreneur and the mayor is not without tensions as the mayor admits ('However, [the social entrepreneur] is a difficult man', P-GOV3). As a consequence, the social entrepreneurs maintain contacts with politicians on other political levels, such as the Ministry of Agriculture (Greece) and regional and national governments (Poland), which might enable passing over local politicians if needed. They also seek acknowledgment beyond the region through publicity (Polish Newsweek magazine) and awards (start-up of the year for 2017 in Greece), which in turn strengthens their reputation and negotiating position.

How do city-related meanings, beliefs and knowledge inform the communicative negotiation process for the establishment of a local innovation?

We find typical knowledge, meanings and beliefs that shape the urban imaginary of both cities even though they do not appear distinct throughout, but partly blur with meanings and beliefs prevalent in the surrounding region. The social entrepreneurs address these meanings and beliefs to gain legitimacy for the innovative project and to reach compliance and interest. This is important because, as with every innovation, the social enterprises irritate established thoughts and practices, which is still more challenging in less innovation-friendly cities.

To gain legitimacy in the policy field, both social enterprises present the innovative approaches as solutions for societal challenges. The Polish social enterprise, for example, meets concerns about structural unemployment and passivity in parts of the local population as they are constantly expressed by policymakers. Communicating the local innovation in a way that addresses shared concerns requires an understanding of city-related knowledge and beliefs. The same is true in the Greek case where the social enterprise seeks legitimacy in the policy arena and in the farmers' community. Regarding the former, the social enterprise meets concerns about the low readiness to cooperate and embodies goals of the present agricultural policy towards a modern agrifood industry. With regard to the farmers, the social enterprise addresses the common belief that it would be time to get their fair shares for their hard work by sharing the profits from final sales and not only from the raw products. It addresses local values such as familiarity, solidarity, and honesty ('we are good people [...] we help each other', G-SE4) by constantly highlighting the social function of the organisation ('We are a big family', G-SE2).

For convincing local people to support the innovation, the advocates draw on further elements in the urban imaginary. In the Greek case, the marketing of the product seeks to create emotional bonds with the city by relating the brand to the name of the city in a subtle and charming way. Marketing spots of the sugar substitute make the farmers into heroes of an innovative product and tell a story of defying the crisis. This addresses a self-perception of the people, which is shaped by resilience, honesty and hard work. In the Polish case, the revival of the pottery tradition and the revaluation of the town's history as a centre of ceramic production serves as a positive point of reference in the urban imaginary. The social and economic problem made the town suffer from a bad reputation for years. In this situation, reactivating positive aspects in the history adds to the self-affirmation of the town and the acceptance of the local innovation.

7. Conclusion

Local innovations also emerge in provincial cities and towns and in interaction between (social) entrepreneurs and policymakers. This article sheds light on these local innovations at the edge that are rarely a topic of innovation research. It aims to contribute new knowledge about communicative negotiation processes in the establishment of local innovations in less favourable environments. Irrespective of affirmative views on innovations, novel ideas often face resistance because they challenge established thoughts and routines. This is particularly true in provincial cities where defending the *rules of the game* can be stronger, affirmative attitudes towards innovation weaker and the resistance against local innovations more visible. This makes provincial cities a promising environment for investigating local innovations. The research has been undertaken by the reconstruction of communicative negotiation processes and by means of a cross-case analysis. The theoretical approach relies on a fruitful combination of IPA and the innovation theory of Rammert (2010, 2018). While the first puts communicative negotiation processes at centre stage, the latter contributes a useful terminology that has received only scant attention in English-speaking debates on innovation.

The article shows that, in both the investigated provincial cities, local innovations face opposition. It is not the innovative products themselves that provoke resistance, but how they were realised. Interestingly, the establishment of the innovative approaches requires collaboration between groups that were not used to collaborating before. This has been demonstrated for small family farmers in Greece who rather reluctantly collaborate in an agricultural co-operative, as well as for local politicians in the Polish town who were not used to collaborating with a non-governmental organisation to jointly set up a regional development project. Thus, while in Greece, parts of the local population defended the rules of the game to 'better work alone' in Poland, local policymakers initially followed this principle. Of course, these observations by means of two case studies are only indications and are far from offering generalizable conclusions. Developing robust patterns of innovation-related resistance requires further research that discloses often hidden forms of opposition and the rules of the game that motivate the antagonists of novel developments.

Overcoming the resistance and winning political support takes place, amongst others, in communicative negotiation processes. In accordance with Heinelt and

Terizakis (2020), I find that the protagonists of local innovations gain persuasive power from making use of general communicative mechanisms as well as city-related knowledge. Regarding the first, both social entrepreneurs succeed in addressing locally prevailing problem perspectives, such as the income crisis of small family farms in Greece and the passivity and long-term unemployment of parts of the local population in Poland. The shared problem perspective suggests an agreement about the need to act which is a precondition for convincing local policymakers and communities of the innovative approach. At this stage city-related knowledge and local narratives come into play. Convincing policymakers and local people that the offered innovation provides a solution for the problem is more likely if the innovation is not fully new but refers to locally prevailing meanings, beliefs, and narratives. In Greece, the promise that the innovative product would help the farmers benefit from the whole value chain addressed the belief that farmers do not receive their fair share from food sales as a result of their hard work in the fields. In Poland, references to the tradition of the city as a former centre of pottery and ceramic production, as well as the possible improvement of the city's image, promised to cure the low self-confidence and the lack of reputation prevailing in the provincial town. Again, the results provide only initial observations and require further investigation. For example, to capture local narratives in more depth, it would be promising to conduct interviews with a larger number of ordinary residents than was possible in this research.

I also find that communicative negotiation processes are not limited to the local environment. On the contrary, the persuasive power in interaction with local policymakers and groups benefits a lot from the attention and recognition the innovative approach receives in supra-regional media and institutions. Additionally, maintaining contacts with supra-regional politicians and networks avoids dependence on local policymakers and offers further access to power, information and financial resources. Thus, research on local innovation should not be limited to an isolated local environment but should also consider the interdependence of local actors, activities and communications with supra-regional structures. Another scientific outcome is related to the notion of 'innovation semantic'. In previous research 'innovation semantic' refers to the communicative construction of a novel object as new and different (Rammert 2010, pp. 34–35). In addition, this research shows that the persuasiveness benefits not only from the communicated attributes of the innovation itself but from the communicative construction of a problem, the need for action and the way the innovative approach addresses local meanings, beliefs, and narrations so that the innovation appears to be a better solution than existing measures. From this, it follows that the notion of 'innovation semantics' would benefit from a more relational and procedural understanding of what it means to attribute meaning to a local innovation. Having considered this, investigating local innovations in less favourable environments remains a promising task for further research. It can help to overcome hegemonic views on big urban centres as seemingly natural areas for novel solutions and progress. Local innovations at the edge are ideal for exploring the challenging negotiation processes between the advocates of novel solutions and the defenders of the *rules of the game* that accompany every innovation.

Note

1. Here and in the following interview, excerpts and further empirical data will be earmarked with identification codes. The codes refer to the following empirical material:

G-CD: Description of the Greek social enterprise, written by a staff member of the enterprise (2016-2017).

G-GOV1: Member of the regional government of Central Greece, interviewed by the author, 7 March 2017.

G-GOV2: Member of the regional government of Central Greece, interviewed by the author, 12 May 2016.

G-SE1: CEO of the Greek social enterprise, interviewed by the author, 11 May 2016.

G-SE2: CEO of the Greek social enterprise, interviewed by the author, 12 May 2016.

G-SE3: CEO of the Greek social enterprise, interviewed by the author, 1 April 2017.

G-SE4: Farmers and members of the Greek social enterprise, interviewed by the author, 14 March 2017.

P-GOV1: Member of the regional government in Northeast Poland, interviewed by the author, 14 February 2017.

P-GOV2: Decision maker at the local authority in the Polish town, interviewed by the author, 15 February 2017.

P-GOV3: Mayor of the Polish town, interviewed by the author, 24 January 2017.

P-SE1: CEO of the Polish social enterprise, interviewed by the author, 20 February 2017.

P-TH1: CEO of a local bank in the Polish town, interviewed by the author, 2 February 2017.

Acknowledgements

This study was carried out by means of the EU-funded research project RurInno ("Social Innovation in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: How Social Entrepreneurs Foster Innovative Solutions to Social Problems"). I would like to acknowledge our interviewees for sharing their insights and experiences, our local partners for their openness and support, and Matthias Fink and colleagues at the Johannes-Kepler University Linz (Austria) for the pleasant collaboration. Many thanks go to Gabriela Christmann and the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (Germany) for making this long-term research possible and providing any support that was needed. Further thanks go to the European Union for funding the project under the Horizon 2020 MSCA RISE 2015 funding scheme (Grant agreement No. 691181), and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and advice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Commission [Grant agreement No. 691181].

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