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**SOCIAL INNOVATION IN EUROPEAN REGIONS AND BEYOND.
POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION,
MEMBER STATES, REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the case for further research to advance knowledge on social innovation policies and practices in three identified areas of work-family balance, education and services for the elderly. In particular, the proposed research features the development of a methodology designed to better measure and elaborate the impact that social innovation has on economic and social development. The research also addresses financial and recognition gaps that have, so far, constrained social innovation as a model of entrepreneurship in Europe and beyond. The value of the proposed research lies in addressing the factors that have conspired to diminish the impact of social innovation, such as fragmentation across policy fields and geopolitical areas, with the aim of ensuring much greater transferability across contexts. To date, most social innovation initiatives have been context specific. The proposed research aims not only to reveal the real impact of social innovation, but to create a common body of knowledge that transforms a series of isolated experiences into a comprehensive policy framework that can be applied by policy makers. Thus, the key aims of the proposed research is to develop new methodologies for the evaluation and diffusion of social innovations and to elaborate recommendations for sub-national, national and European levels on how to improve social innovation processes and dynamics.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a proposal for research funding that builds on previous work on employment policies, work organization, civil society, care services and education and aims to advance knowledge on social innovation policies and practices in relation to three sectors of policy: work-family balance; education; and services for elderly people. Social innovation is called on to provide reliable answers to some of the current socio-demographic and economic challenges such as the increasing importance of involving women in work and the change in household structure, the inadequacy of traditional educational curricula and demographic ageing. On all these fronts, European and extra European societies have provided the framework for diverse patterns of innovation, including innovation promoted by societal actors to address underserved needs (social innovation). However, there is a lack of methodology allowing the measuring of social innovation and its impact on both economic and social development. Moreover, there is a need for further knowledge on how social innovation can overcome financial and recognition gaps that keep it bound to the small scale level and prevents it from becoming a model of entrepreneurship in Europe and in other continents.

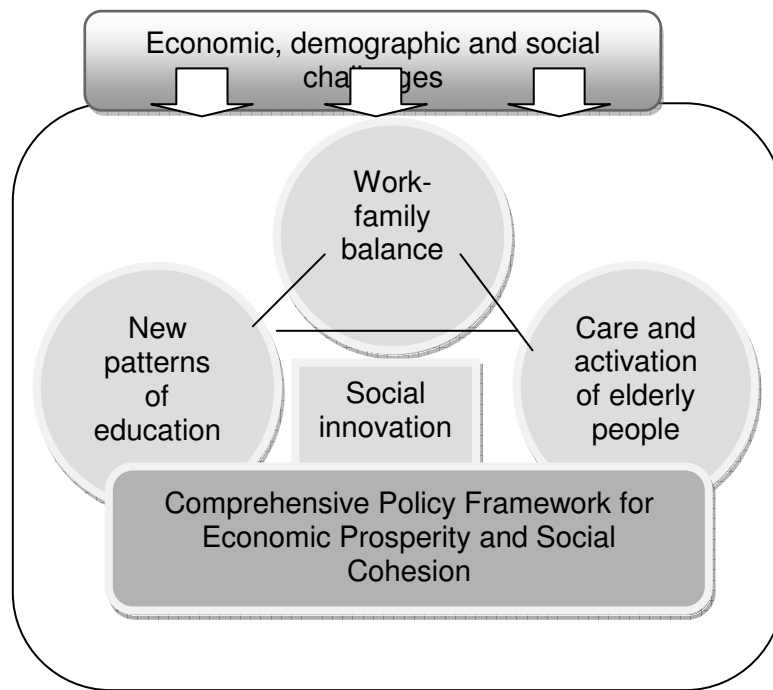
In fact, despite the abundance of practices and policies of social innovation on topics such as youth employment and inclusion, environmental protection, education, urban planning, and crime prevention, there is consensus among experts and scholars that several factors have contributed to reducing their impact. The lack of visibility of such innovative experiences, their fragmentation across policy fields and geopolitical areas, along with their context specificities have prevented social innovation from becoming transferable across contexts and from boosting a comprehensive policy framework for economic and social prosperity. Furthermore, most of the current social innovations policies and practices have not been bridged and have remained confined to their contexts. Hence, if, on the one hand, there is awareness among policy makers that social innovation is the way to further economic and societal development for Europe and beyond Europe, on the other hand, there is a tremendous gap of knowledge about the real impact of social innovation and about how to make out of all different types of social innovation a common body of knowledge turning scattered experiences into a comprehensive policy framework. There is, as well, a need for bridging actors capable of linking social innovation within Europe as well as between Europe and the rest of the world.

The research proposal discussed here aims at filling such gaps by putting together higher education institutions and governments of various European and extra-European countries to investigate social innovation in three strategic areas of policy: work-family balance, education and services for the elderly. These policy fields are considered "strategic" by the European Union as well as by other institutional actors for the maintenance and further progress of the European Social Model (ESM) and its underpinning economy. But issues of harmonization of working time with family cycles, access to and performance of education, as well as employability and care for the elderly are considered key-issues for economic and social well-being in developing countries well beyond Europe. In fact, notwithstanding the differences existing among continents, in terms of individual and collective needs, the overall framework of social change at the time of globalization impacts everywhere.

Structural demographic, economic, cultural and social changes have led to a range of transformations in key-aspects of our societies such as family and household structure, gender equality, access to education and performance of education systems in terms of learning and social mobility, activation but also care of elderly people that all impact on the economic and social wellbeing of our societies. Moreover, such challenges come at a time when economic

equilibriums are shifting from Europe and North America to the Far East and to Latin America. Innovation and social innovation have thus become a key aspect, as emphasized by the European Commission in its Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative "Innovation Union", in assuring further European economic and social prosperity. The proposed research focuses on a comparative analysis of social innovation that can provide crucial knowledge for policy makers and academic communities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: the research context



2. CONCEPT AND OBJECTIVES

The European social model, in which innovation has been traditionally promoted not only a "top down" but also a "bottom up" approach, does represent an excellent starting point to investigate further possibilities for social innovation. The proposed research builds on the European tradition of societal involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies to go beyond that model by proposing new practices and policies of social innovation and new methodologies to make them successfully happen. The specificity of Europe is not only limited to the active role of its civil society, although with different degrees across countries¹, but also to its multi-level governance model in which societal actors interact with different layers of administration and policy making, from the European to the local level. Hence, focusing on Europe, and comparing the European complex system of policy making with respect to innovation, with other regions of the world such as Latin America and the Middle East, presents a very promising research approach for a better and more comprehensive policy of social innovation.

The proposed research aims to compare European and extra-European contexts, in fact, if European countries have been pioneering in practices of social innovation in child care service (e.g. the *Reggio Emilia* model born in the aftermath of the IIWW and assumed as a model in the world today) as well as in care for elderly people, other continents and countries have done no less. Actually, because of the peculiar character of social innovation as a by-product of extreme consequences, Latin America, Asia and Northern Africa have hosted extremely relevant experiences of social innovation to face economic strain, social conflicts, and demographic pressure. Micro-credit generated by the experience of innovative institutions like the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, or the "world-class orchestra" of El Sistema in Venezuela, as well as the Escola Pernambucana de Circo in Brazil and the Pratham schools in India have provided effective solutions to economic exclusion, need of education and prevention of youth crime. For this reason the proposed research aims at bridging expertise and skills on social innovation coming from Europe (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom), Latin America (through CEPAL/ECLAC, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) and the Middle East (Israel).

The European dimension of the proposed research does not rely only on its social model but it aims at emphasizing the innovation capacities emanating from sub-national institutions. Within multi-level governance (Hooghe 2001, Bache 2008), regions have played a key-role in European economic and cohesion policies, and among them the "Four Motors of Europe" (the agreement signed in 1988 by the four most dynamic and economically developed European regions: Baden-Wurtemberg, Catalonia, Lombardy and Rhône-Alpes) have been path-openers in pointing out innovation as a key-aspect for the future of Europe. This research proposes to use the "Four Motors" institutional and policy framework to develop a research proposal that is innovative in its research design as it involves different stakeholders from its inception. The general aim of the proposed research is to provide policy makers and civil society actors with examples and policy solutions feeding a wise comprehensive framework for social innovation policy. In order to involve states, regions, and societal actors we will invite them to closely monitor, advise and promote the research in all its steps for research management and work organization. Moreover, stakeholders, *in primis* regional governments and their implementing agencies in the policy fields selected, will also be involved in implementing the specific social innovation methodology/evaluation guidelines as they emerge from the research.

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the different patterns of civil society involvement in policy making in Europe see, *inter alia*, Kendall 2009; Evers and Zimmer 2010.

This research proposal is valuable as it addresses key-policy challenges for Europe and other geo-political regions. In particular it addresses:

- how to combine private and public efforts into a coherent innovative policy framework allowing a better combination of work and family needs. In many countries, economic development is stagnating. One facet of this is the difficulty women experience in gaining equal access and opportunities in the labour market, a big component of this difficulty manifests from the current organization of work and family life as the former is usually organized irrespective of the cycles of the latter.
- how to tackle underperformance and inequalities in education systems of European countries. How to tackle enrolment, access, and costs of education for all in developing countries?
- how to address demographic ageing in its bifurcated meaning: the increasing need for long term care of elderly people but also new solutions for employability and activation of "the old getting younger".

2.1. Four key aims of the proposed research are:

- (i) to identify existing recognition and funding barriers to social innovation and suggest solutions to overcome them;
- (ii) to identify existing methodologies that can be transferred for the purposes of evaluating and diffusing social innovations;
- (iii) to develop new methodologies for the evaluation and diffusion of social innovations;
- (iv) to elaborate policy recommendations for sub-national, national and European levels on how to improve social innovation processes and dynamics.

Reflecting different national and regional needs of social innovation and diverse traditions of policy in the selected fields, there will be analysis of social innovation policies and practices according to four objectives:

2.1.1. To assess the different contexts in which social innovation takes place:

- (i) analysis of contexts firstly in terms of specific human needs. Social innovation, in fact, is conceived of as the attempt to serve individual or collective needs that are underserved by public or private actors (this is the so called "content" dimension of social innovation) (Moulaert et al. 2005). Moreover, bearing in mind the "context-bound" nature of social innovation, we will systematically compare

human needs across countries and continents. However, we will focus our needs-mapping phase to the three selected policy-fields (work-family balance; education; services for elderly people).

- (ii) analysis of the impact of economic, social, cultural and demographic changes in those needs. Which specific socio-economic and demographic dynamics underpin such needs? How do they differ across countries? Are there clusters visible among factors/countries?
- (iii) analysis of contexts by making an inventory of social innovation policies in the countries concerning the three areas of policy. Such an analysis has two purposes, firstly, it allows making a typology of social innovation by clustering countries by social innovation policies and, secondly, it will provide the empirical information to assess the recognition and methodological barriers obstructing transferability of social innovation.
- (iv) the inventory of social innovation policies and practices will facilitate the choice of case studies: a case in each of the three policy fields, to be analysed in depth and to provide the basis for the elaboration of evaluation and transferability methodology criteria that will guide the following phases of the research.

2.1.2. To investigate how organisational characteristics and dynamics of a social innovation experience work or do not work.

To study organisations, and through them to elaborate evaluation and transferability methodology, we will use the dynamic capabilities theory elaborated in management studies as this approach focuses on the resources and capabilities of the organisation, rather than product-market dimensions. The theory is appropriate for the evaluation of methodologies for social innovation as it is capable of being applied to new processes, systems or business models. Implementation of strategy facilitates investigation of dynamic interrelationships between organisational structure and learning. The social innovation of human and social capital can result from structural change and innovative behaviour around internal organisational relationships, creativity and learning. This concept can be broadened beyond the commercial sphere to incorporate public and third sector organisations where the outcomes of innovation extend beyond competitiveness, but may include social welfare returns. These constitute important criteria for this research as much of the investigation hinges on the satisfaction of human needs that are excluded from market or state provision.

2.1.3. To assess the role of individual characteristics in the promotion of social innovation.

After organisations, we will study individuals involved in the case studies of social innovation selected in the previous phase. We will analyse individuals by considering their characters in terms of skills, leadership, networking, communication, beliefs, background etc.. through life-history interviews techniques.

2.1.4. To implement evaluation and transferability methodology in regions and/or countries with the more general aim of elaborating new social innovation policies.

The evaluation and transferability methodology criteria will be implemented, i.e. transformed into policy in the final phase of the research by the governmental institutional partners (primarily regional governments but in liaison with national and EU levels). The final aim of this implementing exercise will be the joint elaboration by research partners and governmental institutions of policy guidelines for social innovation policies to be adopted in Europe and beyond.

3. PROGRESS BEYOND THE STATE-OF-THE-ART

Social innovation is becoming a popular concept not only in the social sciences but also in EU political jargon. Among the scientific community, the concept, originally introduced by Weber and with more emphasis by Schumpeter to ascertain the social nature of innovation in economic theory (Moulaert et al. 2005) has become a key-topic in social analysis in the last couple of decades (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2006). Although the concept has served the larger purpose of acknowledging the role of civil society in post-modern processes of transformation of the whole society (Chambon et al. 1982; Moulaert et al. 2005; Swyngedouw 2005) it has been used by a broad range of disciplines. Management science and business administration used social innovation to study how to improve organisational efficiency; economic theory, as mentioned above, referred to social innovation to pinpoint the need to accompany technological innovation with advancements on the social plan; political science and public policy introduced social innovation to explain new, more 'horizontal rather than vertical' models of decision making; fine arts focused on social innovation in terms of intellectual and social creativity (Moulaert et al. 2005; Mumford 2002).

In the European Union political discourse, social innovation has been applied since the early 1990s to indicate a new approach to tackle local (in particular neighbourhood) development in a larger anti-poverty policy framework to become, today, a key component in the European Commission strategy for economic competitive growth and social cohesion. In particular, the European Commission Communication 546/2010 "Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative Innovation Union" includes a set of recommendations addressed to Member States on how to achieve innovation in all policy fields. The Commission expresses the need to foster innovation by adopting a more strategic approach, meaning that: *"innovation is the overarching policy objective where we take a medium – to longer- term perspective, where all policy instruments measures and funding are designed to contribute to innovation, where EU and national/regional policies are closely aligned and mutually reinforcing, and last but not least, where the highest political level sets a strategic agenda, regularly monitors progress and tackles delays"*.

"Social Innovation" represents a pivotal part in this European innovation strategy and specific recommendations are devoted to it. In particular, social innovation should help member states to modernise their school systems, deal with the challenge of a healthy ageing and, in general, *"develop a better understanding of public sector innovation, identify and give visibility to successful initiatives, and benchmark progress"*. However, this vast and differentiated use of social innovation puts it at risk of becoming an example of "concept stretching", that is, how to make a concept meaningless by applying it to too many and too diverse empirical evidences (Sartori 1971). Hence, for the purposes of this research, we will conceive of social innovation as those policies and actions that serve individual or collective needs that are underserved by

public or private actors and that imply a change in social relations of governance (Moulaert et al. 2005; Leadbeater and Wong 2010). From social innovation literature, in fact, it emerges as a common denominator whether social innovative ideas were applied for the improvement of welfare services, for the promotion of further integration between public institutions and private firms in local development or for changing systems of education in developing countries. In all these experiences, society-led innovations are characterized by two aspects: they serve the purpose of including individuals and communities into different spheres of society by providing specific services, and they give voice to actors who traditionally could not place their claims in the political or in the public sphere (Moulaert et al. 2005).

In other words, social innovation can be analysed for its:

- (i) **content** (the undeserved needs it aims at addressing);
- (ii) **process** (the mechanisms of interaction among individuals, organizations and contexts leading to innovation);
- (iii) **empowerment** function as social innovation does not only provide a service but it rather mobilizes people, making them able to directly tackle the challenges they face.

Past research also includes elements allowing pinpointing some of the shortcomings of social innovation experiences that can help to improve the new ways of conceiving of and experiencing social innovation at the centre of this proposal. Particularly interesting for a critical analysis of social innovation is the literature having focused on specific dimensions of social innovation, such as organisational structures of innovation actors, financial sources, field of action, membership and leadership (e.g. Bifulco 2009). On the organisational dimension, most of the examples of social innovation speak about 'small or very small organisations', of 'core groups' of few individuals taking care of operative and managerial tasks. Social innovation tends to be informal or to arise from informal activities: the most successful examples of social innovation are considered to be "spontaneous" and loosely organized. Of course, this can be an advantage in the start up phase, but in the long period, small organisations with low professional and managerial support may fail to fully address the needs they were created for.

Another characteristic of social innovation is its "network dimension". Because of its spontaneous and low level of formalization, social innovation entrepreneurs tend to work in networks. Through them, even small organizations or fairly organized groups can have an impact on a larger territorial and population scale, and this is for sure an advantage. However, network structures may be associated with weak and sporadic forms of individual commitment. Moreover, a consequence of the network dimension in which these organisations operate is that social innovation initiatives are usually supported by diverse financial sources, combining public and private funds. Most of the times the public source is predominant and includes different institutional channels like the EU, central governments, or regional and local authorities (Bifulco 2009) and this may discourage the development of self-funding.

Notwithstanding the numerous possible combinations of the above mentioned elements in social innovation experiences, one of the most recurrent aspects included in social innovation is the quantity of "informal work" produced by citizens (Orsi et al. 2009). Social innovation is often about pointing out a number of activities which are carried out by common people both within their families and their social network (associations, friends, parishes) and trying to connect them in order to take benefits from synergies and extend those benefits within a territory. A

crucial aspect of social innovation is how to individuate ways to aggregate, integrate and invest in these resources (Orsi et al, 2009), or, in other words, how to bridge all these diverse experiences and put them together in a comprehensive policy framework. This is the most relevant aspect of the proposed research aims and forms the basis for generating new knowledge that enhances understanding and extends the state of the art.

4. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Despite the amount and quality of current and past research on social innovation, we still have a poor knowledge about the relationships between the individual, social, and institutional aspects creating social innovation. In other words, we still know little about the interaction of the personal experience of social innovation entrepreneurs, the presence and activities of various organizations (e.g. civil society formalized organizations, informal groups, social movements, interests groups, for profit organizations), and the policies implemented by state powers (at all administrative levels) to promote social innovation. In order to better understand and predict the capacity of social innovation to answer people's needs, we need to know how factors located on different levels combine to produce social innovation.

The proposed research will provide an integrated approach to the study of social innovation by studying the relationship between institutional approaches to innovation and the personal situation of social entrepreneurs and people involved in socially innovative activities. While we do have some insights into the potential of individual skills, ideas, creativity, leadership on the creation of social innovation, this is most often attributed to peculiar, context-bound, characteristics. However, we know from research on social innovation and on public policy in the selected policy-fields that the situation is shaped also quite clearly by the structure of the country-specific needs and policy configuration.

The strongly specialized agendas of previous research have largely prevented scholars from addressing these pressing issues. A more integrated approach will enable the provision of insights that are of value for policy-makers at the regional, national and European level. This research intends to examine a variety of factors that may affect the success of social innovation. Unlike previous studies, which usually focus on a single set of factors, the proposed research focuses attention on institutional, social, and individual determinants of the creation of social innovation. A key assumption is that to reach a better understanding of social innovation it is important to take account of factors located at the contextual (macro), organizational (meso), and individual (micro) level of analysis. This will enable the study of the relationships between the political-institutional context (e.g. governmental policies to promote social innovation), the social-organizational context (e.g. the density and activities of organizations of the civil society which are active in promoting social innovation in the three selected policy fields), and the backgrounds and experiences of different groups of social innovation entrepreneurs (e.g. social origins, personal life trajectory, work history).

From existing research we know that social innovation depends on both exogenous and endogenous factors, hence we will consider both. For this research the contexts will be analysed, firstly, in terms of specific human needs. Social innovation, in fact, is conceived of as the attempt to serve individual or collective needs that are underserved by public or private actors, the "content" dimension of social innovation (Moulaert et al. 2005;). Moreover, bearing in mind the "context-bound" nature of social innovation, the research will systematically compare human needs across countries and continents. However, there will be a focus of the needs-mapping phase on the three selected policy-fields (work-family balance; education; services for

elderly people). Secondly, there will be an analysis of contexts by making an inventory of social innovation policies in the countries concerning the three areas of policy. Such an analysis has two purposes. It allows making a typology of social innovation by clustering countries by social innovation policies and it will provide the empirical information to assess the recognition and methodological barriers obstructing transferability of social innovation. The inventory of social innovation policies and practices will allow the choosing of case studies: one case in each of the three policy fields, to be analysed in depth and to provide the basis for the elaboration of evaluation and transferability methodology criteria that will guide the following phases of the research. However, other dimensions of the political-institutional context may have an impact on social innovation and need to be considered: for example, at the EU level, the existence of inclusive and bottom-up approaches to policy making, like the above mentioned multi-governance system or the Open Methods of Coordination, may represent "innovative political contexts" favouring social innovation, similarly, at the national level, forms of participatory democracy or a political culture of subsidiarity may as well contribute making social innovation work.

To study organisations and, through them to elaborate evaluation and transferability methodology the theoretical perspectives of the Resource-based view (RBV) and dynamic capabilities theory elaborated in management studies will form the basis of the investigation. These are appropriate as they focus attention on the resources and capabilities of the organisation, rather than product-market dimension. Thus, it is the valuable and firm-specific resources and capabilities that improve the capacity to develop new products and services that determines performance (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). Teece and Pisano (1994) extended the RBV approach by developing the dynamic capabilities theory. Dynamic capabilities are viewed as a sub-set of the competencies/capabilities that underpin a firm's ability to produce new products and services and to adapt to changing market conditions. The theory is appropriate for the evaluation of methodologies for social innovation as it is capable of being applied to new processes, systems or business models.

Implementation of strategy facilitates investigation of dynamic interrelationships between organisational structure and learning. The social innovation of human and social capital can result from structural change and innovative behaviour around internal organisational relationships, creativity and learning. This concept can be broadened beyond the commercial sphere to incorporate public and third sector organisations where the outcomes of innovation extend beyond competitiveness, but may include social welfare returns. These constitute important criteria for the proposed research as much of the investigation hinges on the satisfaction of human needs that are excluded from market or state provision. To assess the role of individual characteristics in the promotion of social innovation, after organisations, it is intended that a study of individuals involved in the case studies of social innovation selected in the previous phase be carried out. Analysis of individuals will consider their characters in terms of skills, leadership, networking, communication, beliefs, background, through life-history interview techniques.

Finally, to implement evaluation and transferability methodology in regions/countries with the more general aim of elaborating new social innovation policies requires that the evaluation and transferability methodology criteria be implemented, i.e. transformed into policy in the final phase of the research by the governmental institutional partners (primarily regional governments but in liaison with national and EU levels). The final aim of this implementing exercise will be the joint elaboration by research partners and governmental institutions of policy guidelines for social innovation policies to be adopted in Europe and beyond.

5. SUMMARY

This paper has presented the case for further research to advance knowledge on social innovation policies and practices in three identified areas of work-family balance, education and services for the elderly. In particular, the proposed research features the development of a methodology designed to better measure and elaborate the impact that social innovation has on economic and social development. The research will also address financial and recognition gaps that have so far constrained social innovation as a model of entrepreneurship in Europe and beyond. The value of the proposed research lies in addressing the factors that have conspired to diminish the impact of social innovation, such as fragmentation across policy fields and geopolitical areas, with the aim of ensuring much greater transferability across contexts. To date, most social innovation initiatives have been context specific. The proposed research aims not only to reveal the real impact of social innovation, but to create a common body of knowledge that transforms a series of isolated experiences into a comprehensive policy framework that can be applied by policy makers. Thus, the key aims of the proposed research is to develop new methodologies for the evaluation and diffusion of social innovations and to elaborate recommendations for sub-national, national and European levels on how to improve social innovation processes and dynamics.

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