



Social Innovation
Research Agenda

The Social Innovation Research Agenda: What, how and why?

Prepared by the EMES International Research Network¹
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Background

As part of the SIE initiative, we have been asked to make a research agenda. There are easy and less easy ways to do this. The easy way is simply to list a number of topics that we believe to be relevant to social innovation research. But this would raise several issues:

1. There are already [several social innovation research agendas](#) out there, some of them by other EU-funded projects some already reported and closed, some still ongoing, and some in the pipeline.
2. Anyone can decide to draw up a social innovation research agenda. Ours is not necessarily more legitimate nor is it an authoritative document.
3. There are various constituencies here, each with their own perspective on an agenda: policymakers, professionals, the academics themselves. Whose agenda are we making?
4. The people who say they study 'social innovation' make up only a minor share of all the researchers studying social innovation.
5. We could aim at developing an agenda mainly covering issues defined in contemporary politics as social innovation or we could choose a broad approach that also includes other research traditions (e.g. classical sociologists on social change).

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6. An agenda can focus on topics currently seen as relevant or on topics that are likely to be relevant in the future. What most people believe to be important now is by definition not the most innovative.
7. Even if we do get the agenda completely right, it will be dated in a few years. This is a moving target.

Approach

With this in mind, we should approach (or perceive) the agenda more as a process than as a topic list. If we are to capture the input of various constituencies, drawing up an agenda should be an open process. If it is not to date quickly, it should be a continuous process. Inspiration for this can be found in the [open innovation approach](#), which assumes that sources of relevant knowledge are widely distributed and that more participative approaches are needed.

However, a social innovation research agenda cannot merely be an empty discussion platform. We may not be masters of the universe, but we do have a role as 'gardeners' of the agenda, helping it to grow and develop.

The implication is that we need to be pro-active in encouraging the evolution of the agenda. It is not enough merely to mention something interesting. We should also assess what is necessary for state of the art on a topic to progress, then where necessary take actions to kick-start this process. Such actions should of course be taken by the field itself, so ours should be merely to grease the joints.

As such, maintaining the agenda is in theory a three-step process:

1. **LISTENING:** encouraging input from various sources on the content of an SI agenda;
2. **LOCATING THE URGENCY:** encouraging reviews of this agenda that summarise the state of the art; identifying levers for progress of the agenda (e.g. is the purpose to diminish conceptual confusion or is it in a failing impact of research findings?);
3. **NUDGING THE DEBATE FORWARD:** organising research proposals and matchmaking events; starting policy experiments or randomised policy trials to evaluate innovations; etc.

What we can do within this project

Assuming that we agree on this basic approach, the question is what we can do within the limitations of this project. Even with ample resources, it would be impossible for us to circle the entire field. As our resources are far from ample, what we can reasonably do is to identify a selective number of topics and actions, based on strategic considerations, then use these to highlight our approach. Unless we focus our attention, it will be impossible to achieve anything at all.

This means our activities will have two levels: we work on a number of topics and we use that to highlight how we work, although such topics may in the end be arbitrary vis-à-vis other burning issues. It will be very important to stress the latter in our communication, because otherwise it may seem that have singled out topics X, Y and Z as *the* social innovation research agenda.

We could start by identifying a small number of salient topics to work with, based on past and future consultations. Preferably, they should be different types of topics: stages in a process, policy fields, communities, and so forth. Then we should start transforming these from 'points of interest' to 'points on the agenda', by assessing where we stand with these; then, where possible, help to do what's necessary. We have given an example of this in the matrix below.

The following topics and descriptions are only examples of what such an agenda-setting process might look like. They represent different perspectives on how social innovation can be studied: as an aspect of an evaluation process, a policy area, an organisation, a technological trend. The specific topics came out of consultations conducted during the process of defining our approach.

TOPIC	STATE OF THE ART	ACTION
Measurement of social innovation: it brings benefits that cannot be easily be demonstrated	Topic has been on the agenda for many years and is well defined. Problems are (1) the exchange of knowledge between disciplines; (2) how to integrate this knowledge.	We organise a targeted exchange between disciplines on this topic, e.g. through a special publication or event. We encourage policy experiments to get measures for social innovation into the policy process.
SI in childcare	Innovative practices abound in country A, but remain local and are not scaled up. In	In country A, we find partners to initiate an upscaling project.

	country B, regulation prevents innovations from arising at all.	In country B, we encourage policy experiments; get partners to write a policy paper.
Organisational changes and social innovation	<p>The global crisis prompted the need for welfare system change amongst key societal actors (State, market and civil society) and motivated them to think of different ways of producing added value. This situation has initiated a wide-ranging process of fundamental institutional change involving a range of key actors. This has stimulated the emergence of a new breed of <i>hybrid organisations</i> that doesn't fit neatly into the standard descriptors used in the private, public or non-profit sectors. The topic has been analysed from different research organizations around Europe. In particular, in Italy AICCON carried out a multiannual research project in collaboration with CGM Cooperative Group – one of the most important Italian consortium of social co-operatives consortiums– aimed to explore <i>hybrid organisations</i> originated within the cooperation movement.</p>	<p>We organize training programmes to empower the non-profit organisations' human capital with skills and competences required to manage hybridization processes.</p> <p>We encourage research projects able to support this processes in order to simplify it, for example through comparing different situations, studying success stories and proposing solutions.</p>
Digital social innovation	<p>Digital social innovation is “a type of collaborative innovation in which innovators, users and communities collaborate using digital technologies to co-create knowledge and solutions for a wide range of social needs and at a scale that was unimaginable before the rise of the Internet”. Today the growth of digital services has resulted in an imbalance between the dramatic scale and reach of commercial Internet models and the relative weakness of collaborative alternatives, mainly filling marginal niches and unable to gather a critical mass of users and exploit the network effect. However, the DSI communities play a key role to enable grassroots innovations that leverage the power of the Internet.</p> <p>The topic was introduced on the agenda in recent years and different research projects were carried out about it. Although, it could be well defined and analysed. That is why the European Commission is creating new research programmes, funding analysis, instruments and policy experiments to support the DSI communities.</p>	<p>To promote an analysis of the ethical dimension of using digital tools to collect data on social innovation (apps, digital games, etc.).</p> <p>We try to understand the relationship between the Digital social innovation and non-profit sector. In other words, how non-profit organisations can deal with sharing economy and DSI: on the one hand, strengthen their role adopting new models and tools; on the other hand, they could undergo these processes.</p>

Next steps

1. Present this document to members of the community already involved and agree on the basic approach to the SI research agenda;
2. Encourage the discussion on suggested topics and the emergence of new topics.
3. Specify the topics we will focus on, based on a review of the literature and consultations (the next one will be at the [5th EMES research conference in Helsinki](#));
4. Make a plan for how to pick up on these topics in the year following the Helsinki conference;
5. Present a draft of the complete research agenda (rationale + topics) and receive feedback;
6. Launch the final version of this research agenda as on-going work to be continued.

Throughout the entire process, informal feedback will be gathered through the various channels that we have set up for the community to participate (**#sieagenda**):



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1609053715990055>



<https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&qid=8235387>



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<http://www.emes.net/what-we-do/research-projects/social-innovation/2532-2>