

## **TRACK 8: Social Innovation as a Challenge for a Comprehensive Innovation Policy**

### **Session Proposers:**

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### **Description:**

Research into innovation has a long history, arguably dating back to the pioneering work of Schumpeter in the early 20th century (2006). Much of the early theoretical work emphasised the socio-cultural dimensions of innovation (Kallen, 1932; Tarde, 1903; Ogburn, 1966). However, this socio-cultural dimension was displaced by more economic and technological perspectives, in part because of the increasing importance of innovation to economy and society, and greater policy interest to stimulate innovation for economic growth. Indeed, a belief in the central role of science and technologies for socio-economic development is still the basis for contemporary innovation policies as well as much of the scientific discourse on various kinds of “Innovation Systems”.

In recent years, in parallel with this, there has been a growing realisation that both innovation research and policy is falling short of its potential to address the multiple globally-derived challenges that affect contemporary and future societies. Attempts to address these challenges through innovation demand a better understanding of ‘the new nature of innovation’, including the changing role of technologies (FORA, 2010). These challenges are not only grand in scope and scale, but also complex, made up of wicked problems and “largely impervious to top-down rational planning approaches” (Cagnin, Amanatidou & Keenan, 2012, p. 141). There may exist a potential relationship between increasingly economic-functional perspectives on innovation, and the growing disassociation between innovation and the so-called ‘grand challenges’.

Against this background of emerging paradoxes and confusion in prevailing innovation perspectives, it is clear that technology-oriented innovation paradigm relevant for the industrial society is becoming increasingly less functional. International innovation research is providing a variety of indicators where we are witnessing a fundamental shift in the nature of innovation (Fagerberg et al., 2005). What we might consider to be this new paradigm is characterized by at least three key stylised processes, namely:

- (1) The opening-up of the innovation process to society,
- (2) its orientation by the major societal challenges, and

(3) a stronger recognition of non-technological innovations geared to changing social practices.

What is common to all these three categories is the expansion of the purview of innovation to cover more explicitly social domains, and indeed social innovation is becoming increasingly evident in policy, scientific and public debates (see e.g. The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). A social innovation can be defined as a new combination of social practices, which is prompted by certain actors in order to better respond to needs and problems and diffused throughout society (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010).

But social innovation studies and practices have emerged largely outside the field of innovation studies, and it is acknowledged that we are still lacking conceptions of social innovation in both research and practice. The challenge for science and policy is developing a theoretically sound concept of social innovation beyond the empirical and policy domains in which it is popularised, across a range of different policy areas, research fields and regional perspectives.

There is now a considerable body of evidence exploring this diversity of policy areas and regional perspectives, led not least by the European Commission who have invested heavily in research in this area (including SI-DRIVE, TRANSIT, CrESSI or SIMPACT).

Comprehensive approaches to innovation policy, supporting both technologies and new social practices, remain in their infancy. We contend a new model for innovation policy is needed that supports both technological and social innovations and creates framework conditions for developing systemic solutions. Many potential social innovations are hindered by traditional approaches in public policies alongside various barriers (financial, legal, institutional etc.) that could be addressed through public policy. But what makes it difficult for the necessary policy innovation to develop rules and regulations supportive of social innovation is precisely the fact that “social innovation” has emerged as an activity disconnected from the mainstream.

This conceptual differentiation between social and technological innovation requires above all a deeper understanding of the principles and modes of action of social innovations and their relations to and embedding in technological innovations. The systemic perspective on innovation, an important achievement of Innovation Studies, provides new coherent visions of social innovation beyond its current sector-specific and actor-centred approaches. Technology Assessment perspectives would likewise help in bringing a differentiated perspective towards the ambivalence of social innovations, where analyses are often dogged by an implicit normative belief in the moral goodness of these social changes.

This research session aims to further this dialogue within Innovation Studies and seeks for contributions to this debate, potentially addressing one or more of the following questions:

- How can the area of social innovation benefit from the experience of Innovation Studies?
- How are social and technological innovations intertwined and what does it mean for innovation policy, also regarding designing new policy instruments?
- To what extent do social and business innovations interact? In which ways do these various innovation processes affect each other?
- How can we shape or govern social innovation to move towards social transformation?

- What is the role of universities and research institutions in developing social innovations and which new forms of policy advice can be introduced?
- How can the innovation potential of societies be used and which concepts and methods can be developed and applied to support social innovation, especially considering the changing relationship between citizens, researchers, policy decision-makers and other stakeholders?
- What kinds of policy interventions are needed to foster social innovation ecosystems, also considering new innovation systems concepts, and which governance models are becoming increasingly important?
- Social innovation as an autonomous policy area or as a part of a comprehensive innovation policy: What are the (dis)advantages of both approaches?

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