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**Towards a Social Innovation (SI) based Epistemology in Local Development  
Analysis: Lessons from Twenty Years of EU Research**

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**Abstract**

This paper gives an overview of over two decades of research projects on the study of the relationship between local development and social innovation (SI) made by the international action research network coordinated by the first author and funded by the European Commission. It explains the need to study the relationships between local development and opportunities for human development, and the aspirations for an epistemological turn, away from local growth to local development, and from disciplinary to inter- and trans-disciplinary perspectives. Using a chronological overview, the paper concentrates on questions related to the specific objectives of the projects and their epistemological (ontological, theoretical, methodological and validation) challenges. It explains how by meeting these challenges, over the years the network built a Social Innovation Action Research framework that can now be used as a reference for mutual enrichment between different approaches in SI action research.

**Keywords**

Social innovation; epistemology; action research; local development

# 1 Introduction

The history of local and regional development analysis goes back to at least the 19th century. Several methodological approaches have succeeded each other, many of which can be brought back to the *Methodenstreit* within the German Historical School and beyond – methodological individualism vs. holism – and the still ongoing discussions between adepts of economic growth and human development dynamics (Nussbaumer, 2002). More recently, in the 1980s, regional and local development analysis regained momentum through its engagement in the scientific debate on the institutional and cultural turn in social science (Jessop et al., 2013; Moulaert & Mehmood, 2010). Several new syntheses of how regional and urban development analysis and policy should be led have been published in recent years (Pike et al., 2010; Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2007).

Examining a sequence of seven international projects over more than twenty years of research on the connection between local and supra-local development and social innovation, interrogating the epistemological evolution in the research trajectory, this paper explains how progress in the analysis of the relationship between local development and the need to overcome social exclusion has contributed to the contemporary state of the art in local development analysis. Coordinated by the first author, with the core membership of the research network remaining more or less the same over the whole period, depending on the ambitions of a particular project, the size and composition of the action research partnership shifted.

The paper reconstructs the epistemological movement embodied in this research trajectory spanning more than twenty years. It explains how the epistemology, i.e. the research questions, the theoretical frameworks and methodologies have evolved over time into an open-ended Social Innovation Action Research framework.

*Social innovation* in this paper is considered from the perspectives of *integrated area development*, *interdisciplinary* and *transdisciplinary* action research. Integrated area development is a term that has been used in various contexts in European research (Rodriguez et al., 2001; Cameron & Coaffee, 2005). Its most explicit formulation – and also the first hit in Google Scholar – derives from the Integrated Area Development action research project within the Poverty III programme of the European Commission (1991-1994) (Moulaert, 2000), the first project in the research trajectory on which this paper focuses. Integrated area development was defined there by targeting the integration of sectors of collective action, spatial scales and partners in development action research (Moulaert et al., 1990). This research project laid the foundation for the definition of social innovation as a practice (collective satisfaction of human needs) and a process (changes in social relations, empowering governance dynamics) in local development (Moulaert et al., 2005). It also gave direction to the research process, which had to be indispensably space-time dynamic, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005a). Space-time dynamics are inherent to the conceptualisation and modelling of the local development process but also to the research process, its partners and its components. The research process needs a sufficiently long timespan with moments reserved for appropriate epistemic and methodological reconsideration, taking into account the diachronic dialectics between space and place (Massey, 2013), thus valorising the opportunities for interdisciplinary (re)theorising and new forms of transdisciplinary cooperation. *Interdisciplinarity* in the research methodology refers to the necessity to combine different scientific disciplines and fields for the study of local and regional development. Disciplines and fields have different methodological and theoretical foci (Lévesque et al., 2014). In the research

trajectory surveyed here, moving from multi- to interdisciplinary research practice involves a growing interest in the epistemic features of the research, the building of a meta-theoretical framework with a shared ontology endorsing essential and complementary explanatory and action-inspiring concepts. This ambition required important epistemological reflections on how disciplines and theories could be synergised. The *transdisciplinary cooperation* between research and action partners should satisfy their diverse needs, meaning that appropriate combinations of analysis and action should be present throughout the entire action research process. This requires a combination of problematisation and action choices (Miciukiewicz et al., 2012). Their comparison and partial integration into what we will call the ‘meta (analytical) framework’ is essential for action research on social innovation in local and regional development.

The next section gives an overview of the two-decade trajectory of research on the relationship between local development and social innovation in seven EU funded projects (1991-2010). It addresses questions related to the specific objectives of the projects and their methodological challenges, such as: How theoretical approaches and foci have evolved throughout the trajectory? How did the thematic foci stimulate methodological challenges and how were these addressed by methodological developments? The third Section, starting with the Integrated Area Development Model, i.e. the base-model of this research trajectory, delves into the evolution of the meaning and the theorisation of the local and local development throughout the two decades of research and beyond. The fourth Section then explains the epistemological challenges that emerged from this research trajectory and how these were addressed through interdisciplinary theorising and transdisciplinary action research methodology. In this process, a meta-(theoretical) framework capable of hosting a variety of definitions and theories of local development as well as action research modes holds a central position. The final section summarises the Social Innovation Action Research framework and examines its affinity with other action research perspectives on social innovation, community and local development.

## **2 Chronological overview of the research trajectory**

At the end of the 1980s the European Commission launched Poverty III, its third programme “for the integration of the least privileged population groups in Europe” (European Commission, 1989). As in the previous European anti-poverty programmes (1975-1980 and 1984-1988), research for the third consecutive period (1989-1994) had a prominent role, not only to evaluate the different projects funded to combat poverty in a diversity of cities in Europe, but also to contribute to a better understanding of the role of research “to promote an effective strategy to combat social exclusion in Europe, the key principles being partnership, multidimensionality and participation” (European Commission, 1989). As the start of Poverty III fell in a period when in Europe renewed attention was given to local and regional development action and policy, there was a deep interest in obtaining a better understanding of the potential of local development strategies in combating poverty (Moulaert, 1995).

The first project, “Integrated Area Development” (IAD; 1991-1994) in the sequel of seven projects in the research trajectory this article reports on, should be situated in this context. The IAD project took on board the focus of the European Commission to overcome social exclusion (Room, 1999; Vranken, 2001). What does social exclusion mean at the local level? What are its factors? But especially, how these factors should

be situated within the local communities' socioeconomic and social political systems? Can a collective action capable of integrating different local development initiatives be co-constructed, thus making them more effective in overcoming social exclusion? The philosophy of the IAD model was based on the satisfaction of basic needs, pursued through a combination of several processes – the revealing of needs by grassroots movements, bottom-up and bottom-linked institutional dynamics feeding into or catalysed by socio-political transformation (Moulaert et al., 1990; Nussbaumer, 2002). Thus, the tenets of the IAD became foundational to the definition of social innovation in local areas (see Section 3). The integration of deprived groups into local production systems (construction of housing, ecological production activities, urban infrastructure development, social services, SMEs for manufacturing and trade) and training facilitates participation in the labour market and lays the basis for diversification and revitalisation of the local economy. Institutional dynamics play a predominant role in the process of empowerment that should lead to economic proactivity (Klein et al., 2014).

Local democracy, relationships of local development actors with local authorities and with other public as well as private partners situated outside the locality but participating in local development, are permanently nourished by these institutional dynamics. In this way, the local community (re)appropriates its own governance, putting its own movements at the heart of the renaissance process (Martens & Vervaeke, 1997).

The IAD project was covered especially in the Anglo-Saxon and Francophone literature (Kaika, 2003; Hillier et al., 2004; Gerometta et al., 2005; Cassiers & Kesteloot, 2012) and also meant the start of a close collaboration with CRISES in Montreal (Klein & Harrisson, 2006; Klein et al., 2014) who became a key partner in the subsequent international research collaborations (KATARSIS and SOCIAL POLIS) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Chronological overview of SI/local development projects funded by EC

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The URSPIC project (“Urban Restructuring and Social Polarization in the City”, 1997-1999) following the IAD project looked at the impact of large scale projects on urban development, both at the city and the neighbourhood level. The focus of the URSPIC project differed from that of the IAD project. The IAD project was very much oriented towards the analysis and definition of local development actions capable of combating particular conditions of social exclusion (see Table 2). In this way IAD was voluntarist in approach, underestimating the role of the laws of the market, especially real estate markets. URSPIC in contrast was focused on understanding the structural and institutional dynamics of the urban economy and polity. It studied these through the lens of large-scale development projects and examined how these increased or constrained the action space for such initiatives (Moulaert & Swyngedouw, 1989; Moulaert et al., 2003). URSPIC approach received wide attention in urban studies literature. It was prominently present in debates on neo-liberal urban policy and became a core reference showing the connections between large scale urban development projects and the neo-liberalisation of urban development policy (Baeten, 2001; Dalla Longa, 2009; Swyngedouw et al., 2002).

URSPIC's dialectics of urban restructuring did not obliterate the interest in counter-hegemonic urban development projects. Through its structural-institutional analysis URSPIC laid the grounds for the analysis of the change dialectics in the subsequent

research project on “Social Innovation in Governance of Local Communities” (SINGOCOM) in 2001-2005. SINGOCOM revealed structural and institutional constraints but also opportunities to identify and set up socially innovative initiatives in local, especially urban neighbourhood development (Moulaert et al., 2010). Still the project was referred to as being too normative in approach (Ibert et al., 2015). But by analysing the interaction between the institutional conditions of path dependency and path paving and thus how an actual local development trajectory is the outcome of the interaction between *development as it is*, and *development as it is conceived, desired and inspired* by philosophies, practical ideologies, experiments and experiences from elsewhere, SINGOCOM offered a reasonably successful synergy between analysis of what develops and what development from a human development perspective could be (Martinelli, 2010). SINGOCOM hinged on the ALMOLIN model (“Alternative Model for Local Innovation”) which defined the multidimensional change potential of a local community at the crossroads of socio-structural emergence, new cultural visions and patterns for collective actions and active revisiting of governance frameworks (Moulaert et al., 2005).

In 2004-2007 DEMOLOGOS (“Development Models and Logic of Social Organisation in Space”) capitalised on the results from the three previous local development projects and brought them into dialogue with sociological, political science and political geography literature that also addressed the spatial significance of the cultural and institutional turn, the post-political critique of modernist governance perspectives, the multi-scalarity of political and governance processes (scalar politics etc.) as well as the spatial dialectics of path dependency and path making (Moulaert et al., 2016). With DEMOLOGOS the research network completed the circle of interdisciplinarity, confirming the necessity of, and valorising the scientific value-added of combining various disciplinary perspectives into an integrated approach making use of an interdisciplinarily negotiated meta-theoretical framework built on the time-space dynamics of Agency, Structure, Institutions and Discourse (ASID) in regional and urban development (Martinelli et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2016). But building the latter also required more transdisciplinary research methods which would guarantee productive cooperation between scientists and (other) practitioners, allowing to combine their views of the world of local development into a shared ontology, and construing methods of (action) research together. These were among the main foci of the subsequent work in KATARSIS (2006-2009) and Social Polis (2007-2010) projects. KATARSIS (“Socially innovative strategies against social exclusion”) examined existent and emergent socially innovative initiatives in various existential fields of urban life (MacCallum et al., 2009). It focused on how bottom-linked governance transforms politics and make them more catalytic to citizens and local authority driven social and economic change initiatives (García et al., 2015; Franklin et al., 2016). The specific roles of a diversity of actors with complementary skills and practice experiences stood out in the analysis and allowed to refine the transdisciplinary methodology and the concept of knowledge alliance (Novy, 2012). Social Polis (“Cities and Social Cohesion”) then was launched as the first social innovation platform (in analogy with the technology platforms) of the European Commission. Its mission was a wide consultation with a multi-actor network to work toward a democratically supported research agenda on Social Cohesion in European Cities. This consultation process which was organised at the local, national, European and intercontinental level allowed to improve transdisciplinary (action) research methodology significantly (Kunnen et al., 2013; Cassinari & Moulaert, 2014; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016).

Table 2 Objectives of projects and methodological challenges

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

### **3 Local development and social innovation: from Integrated Area Development to bottom-linked governance**

This section addresses the evolution in the meaning of local development and the role of SI (theory) throughout the two decades research trajectory and beyond. It touches upon the different roles of theory in local development epistemology: theory as constituent of ontology, as analytical tool, as a trigger of research and action methods in local development through social innovation.

In the previous section, we briefly explained the pillars of the Integrated Area Development Model, the base model of this local development and the social innovation research trajectory. The IAD model was instrumental to building the local development approach of the Poverty III programme of the European Commission. The Programme's mission was to design and implement strategies to combat poverty, especially at the local level. This is why the building of the IAD model starts from the analysis of the factors of poverty in cities and localities (see e.g. Paugham, 1996; Vranken, 2001), situates them in processes of social exclusion and inclusion (De Muro et al., 2008; Room, 1999; Moulaert et al., 1994; Moulaert et al., 2007a) and analyses these processes by use of the then available models of local socio-economic development (Moulaert, 2000). Dynamising the analysis of indicators and factors of poverty by integrating them into the dynamics of socio-spatial exclusion and inclusion processes at the local level was a main step forward in the analysis and planning of local strategies to combat poverty. Theories that were brought on board to this purpose were local and regional versions of regulation theory (Lipietz, 1986; Moulaert et al., 1988) and local economic development theories that gave a prominent place to social relations and the role of culture in development processes and agencies (Industrial Districts, Milieux Innovateurs, Regional Innovation Systems, The Learning Region, the Social Region; for surveys and critical discussions see Storper & Walker, 1989; Moulaert & Sekia, 2003). This dynamisation allowed to establish the link between the (re)production of diverse social relations and the development potential and strategies of local communities; and to identify the cultural diversity, the universe of agents and their communities of practice and the extent of cooperation in building development agendas and implementing them. In this way, *Integrated Area Development* was *integrated* as process in three ways, i.e. by: (i) revealing and mobilising the connections between different types of social relations; (ii) revealing and connecting different existential fields, policy domains and strategic agencies; (iii) revealing and connecting the agency and process dynamics at different spatial scales (Moulaert et al., 1994). This triple interconnectivity gives prominence to social innovation perspectives in the process dynamics. It shows existent and potential social relations and how existent relations can be modified (cooperation, solidarity, social efficiency within particular socio-cultural and socio-political environments).

URSPIC, the second project in the trajectory, brought back this – as some called it 'naïve' and 'normative' view of SI – at the local level, to its material reality, especially the capitalist city as it was – and still is – in its transition from fordist to postfordist economic organisation, and from a Keynesian to neoliberal policy regime. The first transition was already partly covered in IAD as industrial restructuring and the fiscal



crisis of the state were identified early on as main processes of socio-spatial segregation and socio-economic exclusion (Moulaert et al., 1997). In URSPIC, however, the capitalist entrepreneurial state – far from contradictory with the neo-liberal state – was spotted as a real estate developer, in various roles: institutional facilitator (through exceptionality measures), co-funder (through providing land or taking on the major part of the financial risk on returns); or development project manager or planner. These roles put an extra burden on state budgets, thus squeezing funding for neighbourhood development, welfare services, education etc. (Moulaert et al., 2003; Gerometta et al., 2005; Häussermann & Haila, 2005; Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005a). These conflicting interests in the state as an arena of social struggle motivated the URSPIC researchers to dig deeper into theories of the state, especially looking at conflicts between different state functions and state levels. State functions were analysed in connection with existential fields and policy domains in urban life as identified in IAD.

As a stepping stone toward SINGOCOM, the next project in this research trajectory, URSPIC clarified the material boundaries of the arenas in which struggle over the right(s) to the city takes place, thus denaturing the social innovation approach in IAD from its so-called naiveté. In SINGOCOM the complexity of local politics, the local state and its functional shifts, the role of civil society, the interaction between discursive and material practices in collective – including state – action were important building blocks of the ALMOLIN model (Moulaert et al., 2005; MacCallum et al., 2009). The model is also more dynamic in its analysis of the time-space trajectory of the ‘making of’ as well as ‘the institutionalisation of’ SI initiatives (De Muro et al., 2008; Hamdouch et al., 2009; Vitale, 2009; Van den Broeck, 2011). More than IAD, it bolsters itself against a temptation of social blueprinting and social engineering, and keeps a balance between the evaluation of assets available for community development and the prospects for designing development agendas and empowering development agents. Thus, in SINGOCOM cases of social innovation were analysed as historically and spatially embedded. Their cultural, social, political and economic agencies and processes are categorised and explained by use of what could be called a combination of a culturalised regulationist perspective with some insights from urban regime theory on the one hand (Sum & Jessop, 2013; Moulaert & Mehmood, 2010), and a community-based solidarity economy organisational perspective on the other hand (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2009). ALMOLIN does combine a solid theoretical perspective with an empirically grounded research manual for analysing local development initiatives (Moulaert et al., 2005). But it also provides a schema for drawing up a realistic roadmap for socially innovative community development initiatives (Novy & Hammer, 2007; Harrisson et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2010; Franz et al., 2012; Wamuchiru & Moulaert, 2017).

Table 3 shows the theoretical contributions to the four most explicit *local* development research projects (IAD, URSPIC, SINGOCOM, DEMOLOGOS) in the research trajectory. At the same time it mentions how the projects revealed weaknesses of these theories; weaknesses that are suggestive of ‘what is missing’ and how different theories supporting a shared ontology (see Section 4) can complete each other, as is evidenced by the culturalised regulationist approach (Sum & Jessop, 2013; Moulaert et al., 2016). Yet self-evaluation moments towards the end of SINGOCOM – especially in preparation of the ‘Can neighbourhoods save the city?’ book (Moulaert et al., 2010) and the transversal VALICORES project in 2000-2004 (“Valorising Linkages between Private Consultancy and Public Research”, Hamdouch & Moulaert, 2006) drew the research network’s attention to the risk of eclecticism in theorising agency, social innovation and processes in local development analysis and planning. VALICORES

visualised this risk by examining affinities between different concepts of innovation in innovation models and systems and the ease by which some researchers put them together without interrogating their ontological coherence (Moulaert & Hamdouch, 2006). DEMOLOGOS made a tantic effort to develop an epistemology capable of guiding such quest for coherence. It was particularly preoccupied with analysing ASID by looking at their multi-scalar and multi-epoch time-space trajectories. To that purpose it made use of Cultural Political Economy and different currents in relational geography (Moulaert & Jessop, 2013). The next two projects (KATARSIS, Social Polis) gave a boost to the transdisciplinary ambitions of the research network. They privileged the development of methods and practice of cooperation between scientists and practitioners from different fields and disciplines. Very soon in the collaborative research experiences the importance of epistemic reflection and epistemology became evident. In these reflections, theoretical debates had a significant share, not the least through the way they revealed the absence of reflexivity and multi-agency in the research practice.

Table 3: Balancing theoretical inputs to the local development/SI research trajectory

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

#### **4 Epistemological challenges for socially innovative (local development) action research**

The IAD project, the scientific and policy-oriented trigger of the research trajectory, paralleled the heydays of the local development literature and policy approach which became very scientifically and socio-politically relevant from the late 1970s onwards (Storper & Walker, 1989; Dunford & Benko, 1991; Courlet & Soulage, 1994; Pecqueur, 2000; Benko & Lipietz, 2002; Moulaert & Swyngedouw, 1999). This *literature* had two main merits: it brought back to the attention the (endogenous) development literature giving a more significant place to culture in development processes and agencies (Nussbaumer, 2002); and it reconnected analysis and collective action (including public policy) of spatial development (Morgan & Cooke, 1998; Moulaert & Sekia, 2003). Yet it remained orthodox in the sense that it left scientists within their expert role and it limited theoretical enrichment to the adding-on of social and community dynamics to the local economic development models (Pecqueur, 2000; Courlet et al., 2008).

Table 4: Evolution in theorising local development and SI

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The change in the theoretical interpretation of local development through the trajectory of local development and SI projects shows how the research network revised its theoretical perspectives to overcome these shortcomings. Table 4 summarises the theoretical focus of each project, while at the same time flagging up the socio-political frustrations uttered by the researchers and their partners in the course of the research experience. The second column of the table can be read in the light of the scientific progress made in theorising social innovation and local development as explained in Section 3. The content of the third column of the table may warrant some surprise

among non-action researchers: why should socio-political frustrations be confronted with theoretical foci? Mainstream science practice could consider these frustrations as omissions in the theory; or as exogenous to it, not relevant for local development concerns. Yet as this research had to address socio-political challenges and policy concerns as recognised by the EU, its Member States and Regions, socio-political concerns and frustrations became part of the scientific debate. As from the start of the research trajectory, most researchers were well aware of the theoretical and the socio-political debates in their disciplines and several among them also in affine disciplines or in interdisciplinary debates such as on '*Combating social exclusion*' (Room, 1999; Moulaert et al., 1994) or '*Territorial Innovation Models*' (Moulaert & Sekia, 2003). There was a recurrent change of focus on the analysis of the socio-political structure and institutions in which the socially innovative development initiatives were taking place, or the pro-active power of the socially innovative agencies and processes. This *pendulum movement* between structural analysis and socially proactive practice shows some correlation with the socio-political frustrations about the theoretical foci in each project. The IAD project at the start only scratched the surface of socio-economic and socio-political reality and called for the structural lens of URSPIC which in its institutional and structural way revealed such a gloomy or even stifling political and economic bodice disempowering change initiatives, tending to completely overlook the power of alternatives. SINGOCOM then volunteered a new action-research perspective making socially-innovative strategies bargain with their structural dynamics and socio-institutional processes. It ventured a fresh synthesis of material and discursive practices in SI, socialisation processes and socio-political transformation. Yet the feeling of the weight of rebuilding the 'whole house' through socio-political transformation stiffened as more theoretical as well methodological questions emerged. This weight was carried by DEMOLOGOS which in a way echoed the institutional-pessimism of URSPIC, yet also abstracted the theoretical components essential to the building a meta-theoretical framework which would have an essential role in the development of the epistemology of social innovation in spatial development (Moulaert & Van Dyck, 2013). The methodological questions concerned the interaction between research and action, theory and methods, and the roles of different actors in the research process. These were especially picked up first in VALICORES with meta-theoretical reflections on different types of innovation, the collective learning processes in which they materialise and the actors and networks that make them happen. VALICORES brought a realistic picture of how partnerships are built in the business and policy world of innovation, but as it was based on the literature of national, regional and local innovation systems in the Lundvall tradition, it nested its analysis in a business and economic culture perspective (Hamdouch & Moulaert, 2006), difficultly but not impossibly reconcilable with the community development perspective of socially innovative spatial development (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005b). Not so for KATARSIS and Social Polis following different logics allowed to produce a first epistemic synthesis for researching social innovation in community development, taking into account the multi-scalar interaction between agents involved. Empirically and different from the projects covered in VALICORES, the initiatives and experiences forming the empirical basis of both these projects, are community development and solidarity economy initiatives, and networks with variegated scalar dynamics. KATARSIS screened various projects resorting under either the 'Bottom-up Creativity', 'Governance' or 'Social Innovation' flag. In reality, several of those projects flocked around these three flag poles. The objective of KATARSIS was to compare the methods used in these cases, thus making inter- and transdisciplinarity tangible and comparable, and work toward epistemic and hence

methodological integration through three *integration exercises*. The integration exercise focusing on ‘Bottom-up Creativity’ widened the spectrum of visions and agencies to combat social exclusion and test the artistic and cultural ways of life and expression as modes of communication and decision-making, thus contributing to better communication and cooperation between the three types of agents (artists, community agents, scientists) who were involved (Vaiou et al., 2009; Dietvorst, 2004; André & Abreu, 2009; André et al., 2013). The governance integration exercise (bottom-linked governance) screened socially innovative governance experiences at various spatial scales and within various socio-political settings. In this way, the cooperative, solidarity based, iterative co-decision governance modes applied in many of the civil society case-studies (e.g. Olinda in Milan; see Vitale, 2010) provided new insights and opportunities for more democratic modes of governance by local states. And state agencies or semi-public services started working in more interactive and co-productive ways with their clients or partners including socially innovative neighbourhood development initiatives (such as Community Centre Gellerup in Arhus). This two-way learning process synergised in the concept and practice of ‘bottom-linked governance’ (García et al., 2015), a concept which today applies to the formation of new state governance systems fought for by new political movements and parties which emerged from grassroots movements (anti eviction movements, Occupy; see Parés et al., 2012; Parés et al., 2016).

In each integration exercise, social innovation with its focus on improving social relations was manifestly central. And it is also central to the epistemological transformation of SI rooted in local development research. Widening and tightening social relations is key to the three basic epistemological questions which have always been in the back of the mind of the action research network: What to research? How to research? And how to validate the outcomes of the research? (Moulaert, 2016) ‘What to research?’ has been a question that is partly specific to each project, yet also transversal to the research trajectory. Answering this question has also meant a continuous dialectics between socio-political issues and frustrations on the one hand and theory-building on the other (see Table 4), and also had consequences for ‘Who should be involved?’ and ‘How?’ they should be involved.

Introducing SI into theory building, as argued above, requires the integration of various theoretical perspectives on the role of social relations and collective action in local development. Adding on theories to each other, to complete the picture does not work. *Theories* should talk to each other with the ambition of building a *common (meta-) theoretical framework*, with a shared base-line ontology showing the tensions between the big bad world out there (URSPIC, DEMOLOGOS) and, among other agencies and institutionalisation processes, the optimistic, pro-active, often social utopian visions and strategies of change (Jessop et al., 2013), thus also hosting the dialectical dynamics of social change and transformation and the role of research in these dynamics (Moulaert & Van Dyck, 2013). In its contribution to overcome the adverse agencies and relational antagonism of the ‘real world’, SI research goes for radical cooperation and co-production – transdisciplinarity as research shared between different types of actors in various roles like problem definition, research, collective action, policy making etc. This also means that SI researchers themselves adopt diverse action roles and can only work as action researchers (Nussbaumer & Moulaert, 2004).

*Social Innovation ethics* then, as one of the main normative dimensions of SI agency (Martinelli, 2010; Gerometta et al., 2005), are probably the main cements between transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in SI research. Social innovation ethics are about solidarity, mutual respect, democratic communication, collective self-evaluation

and co-production in agency, institution building and governance practice. These ethics are key principles to transdisciplinary action research. They are conceptualised and theorised as part of the (meta-) theoretical framework covering all types of strategic agency relevant to the action research. The meta-theory does not only reflect the SI development dynamics, but also the ‘world of science’ and of relationships between scientists and other actors involved in the research in their socio-economic and political environment. It therefore also plays a role in the self-evaluation process of the participants in the action research and how they cooperate with each other – the meta-theory as a dynamic tool for a self-reflexive process (Moulaert & Van Dyck, 2013; Moulaert, 2016; Moulaert et al., 2016). Although initiated and usually coordinated by the scientists, all actors are involved in a collective problematisation process defining the research questions, developing the meta-theoretical framework and deciding on the action research methods (Novy, 2012). This reflects a particular socially innovative way of doing SI research.

In the final section, we summarise what this socially innovative perspective on doing SI research means for the future of SI research in local development (and articulated spatial scales). We dwell on recent research and on ideas to develop new SI research.

## **5 Bargaining the future of SI action research**

The term SI had existed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1970s social innovation research (re-)invented itself by way of a long research trajectory on socially innovative strategies in processes in local development and community development. Especially CRISES (Benoit Lévesque, Juan-Luis Klein, Jean-Marc Fontan, Marie Bouchard, Denis Harrisson) and the Social Polis network on whose research this article focuses gave it a new élan. Figure 1 summarises the evolution toward the epistemological state-of-the-art today.

Figure 1 Local development and social innovation research trajectory: Toward an integrated social innovation action research

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Social innovation research has significantly favoured interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research approaches to local development. It laid the stepping stones for a socially engaged problematisation approach that hinged on a collectively built meta-(theoretical) framework, a shared ontology as well as an open ontogenetic space allowing for co-construction of new initiatives, social and governance relations (Khan et al., 2013, 2014). The collective problematisation method is an instrument of shared action research (Miciukiewicz et al., 2012). It allows to fine tune the relationships between two essential questions: ‘What to research?’ and ‘What collective action is this?’ The meta-framework – combining interdisciplinary theorisation (culminating into an evolving meta-theoretical framework and transdisciplinary methodology) serves as a guideline for understanding the complex, multi-scalar and highly contradictory world in which local development and SI initiatives carve out their trajectory for the good or for the bad. In other words: the framework keeps the post-structuralist aspirations of local SI initiatives with their feet on the ground, while guiding them on high ridges along deep gorges. The meta-framework – and especially its meta-theory – serves as a mirror for the self-reflection process in which SI

researchers and other actors become involved. These actors also have a position in the meta-theoretical framework. Their social ethics and work methods are evaluated in the course of the process and their roles as members of the action space in which SI is pursued (Moulaert et al., 2017). A corollary of this self-reflexive approach in SI research is that SI researchers seek to work according to the value systems and principles of social relating inherent to social innovation; these, however, are the object of continued mediation between partners in the action research arena.

*Does this summary of progress in SI and local development research mean that a solid epistemic state of the art for SI research has been reached?* Clearly the epistemological built-up in Figure 1 has inspired other research on socially innovative local development. And also reflects the methodological concerns of comparable research trajectories. It has introduced reflexivity from sociology and critical planning theory into development agency analysis; and it has widened the reading of socio-cultural dynamics bypassing the market logic to enter the complexity of socio-cultural relations; it has significantly contributed to abandon the systemic reading of multi-scalar governance to the benefit of scalar socio-politics and the role of bottom-linked governance (Parés et al., 2016; Howaldt et al., 2015). In addition, it has warned for theoretical eclecticism that seeks to analyse social innovation in analogy with other types of innovation, e.g. by making SI a dimension of innovation systems (see Howaldt & Kopp, 2012) or by analysing social innovation starting from theories using a functionalist or exclusively agency-oriented vision of social innovation (see Mulgan, 2012). In sum, it is allergic to approaches that address SI as an ‘extension’ of the overall innovation literature, rather than a driver and a movement of societal change (see also Unger, 2015; Moulaert & Mehmood, 2013).

Thematically and theoretically the research trajectory’s main focus has been on SI in community dynamics at the local level with a clear outreach to out- and upscaling, and a continuous attention to the relationships between SI, social change and socio-political transformation. In this it comes very close to recent contributions in post-political action research (see e.g. Kaika & Karaliotas, 2014; Velicu & Kaika, 2016; Van Puymbroeck & Oosterlynck, 2014) on new practices of participation and self-governing (Parés et al., 2012), rights to housing, public space and social services (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Midheme & Moulaert, 2013), environmental justice, the remaking of governance (Moulaert et al., 2007b; Putri, 2017; Paidakaki & Moulaert, 2017; Wamuchiru & Moulaert, 2017), new urban commons, social sustainability (Parra & Moulaert, 2010; Mehmood & Parra, 2013; Juntunen & Hyvönen, 2014; Paidakaki & Moulaert, 2017), complementary currencies and LETS (Granger et al., 2010). It has given less attention to social innovation as recognition and conquest of social and political rights (but see Oosterlynck et al., 2013); and gave less thought to the cognitive and psychological dimensions of socially innovative communities (Noack, 2014). These dimensions of SI are in need of further exploration. Yet it is our belief that the main challenge ahead is to open the epistemic debate to other disciplines and communities of practice searching for an open-ended yet interactively structured Social Innovation Action Research Framework.

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