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Institutional forms of social innovation

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Abstract: This paper offers a critique of the contemporary institutional discourses in social innovation theory and practice. It synthesises these discussions into the assumptions of replicability, durability and resistance of socially innovative actions and initiatives. Using the example of Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), the paper makes a case for alternative dimensions to these assumptions in the form of adaptability, sustainability and institutional resilience for addressing the socioeconomic needs of individuals and communities. From this perspective, the institutional setup of OPP emerges as a form of social innovation that has proved sustainable and resilient over time by sticking to its core ethics, sustaining its network of institutions, and adapting to the changing needs and demands of local communities. In conclusion social innovation is emphasised as a catalyst for social and institutional transformation.

Keywords: Urban transformations; Social sustainability; Sustainable Development Goals; Urban informality; Institutional resilience; Qualitative secondary analysis

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1 Introduction and background

Social innovation as a concept is not new. The term has particularly existed in religious, political and economic contexts since the seventeenth century (Godin 2012). By about halfway through the twentieth century its use had evolved from the earlier incarnations in religious beliefs, political ideologies and economic feasibilities, into a fluid interdisciplinary theoretical and analytical concept as well as a policy discourse. In this respect, social innovation refers to such changes in agendas, agency and institutions that lead to a better inclusion of excluded individuals and groups into various spheres of society (Moulaert and Hillier, 2007). It offers a vision of human progress that favours “solidarity over individualism, integration over sectoralization, and collaboration over division, it distinguishes itself through epistemological, ethical and strategic approaches” (Klein 2013, p. 11). It also helps explain spatial processes of local change, social inclusion

and bottom up creativity. Despite wider conceptualisation and applications, Jessop et al (2013) observe that social innovation remains a relatively under-theorised concept in academic literature today. With the diffusion of social innovation-related policy discourses, a need has arisen not only to understand the emergence of social innovations in contemporary societies, but also to look at how socially innovative initiatives can be sustained by institutions in a society over time in the face of uncertainty and change. The challenges of urbanisation such as housing, employment, social inclusion, health and environment have resulted in a number of attempts at redefining and reimagining social innovation in contemporary society from various perspectives. For instance, whereas Phills et al. (2008) look at the role of financial regimes and funding mechanisms such as microfinance in promoting social innovation, Mulgan (2006) and Murray et al. (2010) refer to the importance of civil society in promoting social economy and social entrepreneurship. From a socio-ecological perspective, Westley (2008) recommends an integrated approach to social innovation relating communities to their local environments. Appreciating this diverse scope, the Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA) divides social innovation into three tiers: first, grassroots innovations as a response to the (unfulfilled) social demands of vulnerable communities (e.g. elderly, children and minority groups); second, innovations addressing societal challenges for wider social and economic benefits to society (e.g. organisations such as the Red Cross); and third, innovations that bring fundamental and systemic changes "in attitudes and values, strategies and policies, organisational structures and processes, delivery systems and services" (BEPA, 2010, pp. 7-8) (e.g. adaptation to climate change). This scalar categorisation assumes that institutions play a key role in social innovation, and that people are empowered through participative mechanisms reshaping social relations.

This paper provides a critical perspective to contemporary debates, and offers an alternative view to understanding of the institutional dynamics of social innovation. To demonstrate the viability of the approach, the paper refers to the vulnerability of complex urban social, economic and environmental fabric in the rapidly growing urban centres in the global South. Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) exhibits an institutional framework with a range of actions and initiatives that have transformed the living standards of local communities, especially those living in squatter settlements. In the following, section 2 gives a brief overview of concepts and practice in social innovation. It outlines certain preconditions for the emergence of social innovation for local and community

development. Section 3 synthesises the institutional discourses through the assumptions of replicability, durability and resistance in social innovation literature. It subsequently offers an alternative approach to these assumptions in the form of comparative but strategic features of adaptability, sustainability and resilience in the present day social innovation practice. Section 4 uses these features in parallel to look at the case of OPP as a set of institutions that has adapted with the changing demands of the local communities, proved resilient in the face of change, and sustained its activities since its inception in 1980. The conclusion refers to the institutional aspects of social innovation and emphasises its evolutionary character whereby socially creative agendas and strategies become embedded within communities' institutional dynamics.

2. Social innovation: From concept to theory

Theoretical conceptualisations of social innovation began with the rise of mass protests and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s around the world, largely spearheaded by intellectuals, students and workers demanding social and democratic rights, equality and emancipation (Fuentes and Frank 1989, Moulaert and Leontidou 1994). The emergence and raison d'être of these movements were analysed by Chambon and colleagues, who based their arguments on the social and political importance of such events, and the subsequent debates on the role of social transformations. To them, social innovation largely refers to those practices that let individuals or communities satisfy their social needs (Chambon *et al*. 1982, p. 8). These social movements impelled states to choose between two options: either to put obstacles in the path of social innovations, or to become facilitators or catalysts for such initiatives (Henderson 1993). Subsequently, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the revival of social innovation to describe new organisational structures, forms and work ethics (Drucker 1987, Moulaert *et al*. 2000). As a product of social movements in the mid-twentieth century, social innovation maintained the same flavour from the 1980s on into the twenty-first century, with a particular conceptual focus on neighbourhood development (Moulaert *et al*. 2010). Part of this attention can be attributed to the success of various actions since the 1960s in the social and economic spheres; it has also helped academics, activists, practitioners, politicians and policy makers to make use of social innovation potential beyond the opportunity spaces typically flagged up in debates on social capital, social networks, and social change (Jessop *et al*. 2013). In parallel, however, various activities and approaches in the social (policy) sector continue to utilise social innovation as a tool for social (as well as political, economic and

environmental) engineering through incentivisation and/or behavioural change. Addressing the question of whether social innovation could be on the verge of becoming a fashionable term in local and regional governance and policy making, Moulaert and Mehmood (2011) maintain that despite its wider adoption in social, political, economic and environmental policy discourses at different spatial scales, social innovation in the twenty-first century remains a robust and scientifically meaningful analytical concept, especially in terms of socio-political mobilisation, social empowerment, bottom-up creativity, and collective action for the larger benefit of the society.

Based on empirical work on bottom-up strategies for social inclusion derived from a range of international case studies, Moulaert *et al*. (2005) have set out three preconditions for social innovation: a) the satisfaction of basic social needs; b) reconfiguring social relations (social transformation); and c) socio-political empowerment or mobilisation at interconnected spatial scales. The approaches and categorisations mentioned above tend to address two of these three main conditions in a general sense, that is, satisfaction of fundamental social, economic and/or environmental needs of vulnerable groups in a society, and their socio-political empowerment within extant societal structure. These approaches do not give due regard to the social transformation aspect and the fact that one of the key impacts of any socially innovative action is to reconfigure existing social relations. This calls for a wider view on the economic, socio-cultural and political logic of social innovation and the necessary connection between social innovation at a micro level, social reform and social transformation (Moulaert *et al*. 2013).

3. Institutional discourses in social innovation debates

A growing body of theoretical and empirical literature has focused on the role that institutional forms of social innovation play in terms of social and behavioural change in society and economy (Hochgerner 2012; Howaldt & Schwarz 2010). These discussions particularly pay attention to process dynamics of social innovation and the conditions under which social innovations develop, flourish, sustain, and subsequently lead to societal change. Howaldt et al (2014) consider social innovation as a means for institutionalisation of social practices. They demonstrate how a combination of instrumental, constitutive and prescriptive rules and norms can lead to institutionalisation or de-institutionalisation of social change. From internationalisation perspectives on social innovation, Franze et al (2012) consider social innovation as a source of social

integration and capacity building in firms, institutions and societies. Institutional aspects also emerge in the literature on socio-scientific and socio-technical innovation systems studies (see e.g. Fagerberg et al. 2005; Geels and Schot 2007; Moulaert and Mehmood 2010; Butzin and Widmaier 2015). Attempts have been made to better integrate social innovation into wider interdisciplinary theorisation in social, economic, environmental policy and planning and to apply these in transdisciplinary practices such as participatory planning, action research, and stakeholder engagement (Moulaert et al., 2013). From a historical perspective, certain assumptions have been taken for granted in an extensive adoption of the concept and attempts to transform it through various perspectives and perceptions. These preconceived notions can be grouped into three assumptions, namely the 'replicability' of social innovations so that such actions can be imitated elsewhere; the 'durability' of such actions so that these could last longer; and, their 'resistance' to any forces of opposition. Whereas assumptions of replicability and durability may be recurrent in social innovation conceptualisation, policy and practice today, the third, i.e. 'resistance' can be traced back into history of social innovation as social movement which largely remained implicit (Godin, 2012). As discussed below, these assumptions need to be explicitly clarified and attuned to corresponding social needs, as not all socially innovative actions in the longer term may inherit these qualities or intentionally follow certain assumed paths.

Firstly, it is often assumed that social innovations can be easily replicated, that is by following prescribed steps individuals and groups can become social innovators (Mulgan, 2007). This can be termed the assumption of the 'replicability' of social innovation. Actors in this case are expected to pursue certain patterns and follow specific steps (Westley, 2008). The replicability assumption is also used as a solution to socioeconomic problems, as in social economy discourses, by means of policy or support mechanisms (e.g. social entrepreneurship, microfinance, or even philanthropy) that can increase the pace of social innovations and allow people to resolve their own problems (Antohi, 2009; Phills et al., 2008). Such an approach has been visible in the UK government's Big Society agenda (Civil Exchange 2015). The assumption of replicability as a form of ready-made solution can be counterproductive for communities. As Healey (2012) demonstrates, the flow of ideas, concepts, techniques and instruments contingently evolve through experience, innovation, debate and critique. Successful examples should be learnt from. Rather than imitating them, social innovations can be 'adapted' in accordance with

respective local social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges and needs (Gonzalez and Healey, 2005). Governance institutions play an important role in achieving a balance between top-down policies and bottom-up actions to support socially innovative initiatives (Baker and Mehmood, 2014, Miquel et al., 2013). Hence, the 'adaptability' of social innovations seems a better approach than replicability. As the case of OPP institutions demonstrates, the programme's success can be attributed to its focus on adapting to changing needs rather than replicating its own models and practices.

The second assumption anticipates that social innovations can remain effective and durable for an extended period of time. This 'durability' argument sees social innovation as a 'disruptive force' that challenges existing social norms and brings longer term effects to society (Westley, 2008). Such a view tends to look at the *role* of social and political systems and institutions rather than their wider social, economic and environmental *impacts* on society as a whole. Durability, within this perspective, also becomes a criterion for the relative success of a socially innovative action. Counter to this argument, social innovation should be instrumental in incorporating social, economic and ecological dimensions into grassroots and community actions, in particular as a response to problems of unsustainable practices and unsatisfied social and economic needs, whilst not overlooking environmental impacts. Transition towns can be cited here as a successful example of locally championed and institutionally-oriented sustainable development visions and their implementation (Mehmood, 2015). Based on concerns around peak-oil, climate change and financial crisis the Transition movement has emerged through community action (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). However, the movement has largely remained confined to the global North with relatively little impact on southern countries (Mehmood and Franklin, 2013). Also, it is worth noting that not all socially innovative actions may deliberately put sustainable development goals on their primary agenda. This concern appears in the case of OPP where a lack of focus on environmental sustainability is evident. There is, therefore, a need to make the social sustainability focus much more prominent, especially in grassroots socially creative strategies (Mehmood and Parra, 2013).

The third assumption which exists intrinsically, but does not explicitly feature in most of the discussions above, is the ability of social innovations to stay resistant in the form of social movements to face the situations of crisis. The crisis, uncertainty or disturbance

might exist or occur in the form of social, economic or climatic changes, policy interference or political challenges. Irish Loan funds in 1720s are considered an earlier institutional form of social innovation. As an alternative to the conventional banking system, these independent microfinance institutions offered low-interest loans to the poor. The institutions survived a number of crisis situations over a long period of time until the government introduced legislations to favour conventional banking systems (Hollis and Sweetman 2001). The institutional experience of Grameen Bank reflects the applicability of micro financing to social business and social profit objectives (Yunus *et al*, 2010). Whereas late-twentieth century work had already recognised urban crises as among the main drivers of social innovation (Chambon et al., 1982; Moulaert and Leontidou, 1994), the contemporary challenges for adaptability and sustainability would do well to assume that social innovations have a strategic focus, and are able to face external shocks and maintain their goals for community wellbeing. The objective here remains social emancipation, such as innovation in social relations, rather than in the social order, that is, social relations as a means to sustain the status quo (Jessop et al., 2013). Despite the limited latitude for replicability and durability assumptions mentioned above, it is much more important for socially innovative strategies to stay 'resilient' in the face of uncertainty and change. Where a lack of replicability can be rectified through adaptability, and a limited view of durability can be broadened through an overall social, economic and environmental sustainability focus, there is little room for longevity in the absence of resilience.

However, one needs to be cautious of the various connotations associated with resilience as a contested notion, due to variable definitions across disciplines. Its conceptual meanings vary from vulnerability to stability (bouncing back) of material systems, and from adaptability (bouncing forth) to transformability of interdependent socio-ecological systems (evolutionary resilience) (Davoudi et al., 2013). Although the concept of resilience has been entangled with that of complex systems, it enhances the role of social actors and their networks in capacity building (Moore and Westley, 2011). Whether seen as a process or as a specific end-state, resilience in social innovations can only be guaranteed when both internal and external mechanisms (actors, networks, institutions) are mobilised. Internally, it involves more empowered and well-networked actors who continue to develop and apply good learning and adaptive practices. Externally, it demands an approach to 'bottom-linked' governance where institutions can facilitate

bottom-up initiatives with top-down support (Baker and Mehmood, 2014). This is important when considering social innovation as an impetus for change to institutional structures and social transformations, especially through impacts on public policy and practice.

The following section looks at OPP as a collection of interlinked institutions and a resilient network of institutional actors and networks. The research was conducted using qualitative secondary analysis. As a mode of inquiry, the secondary analysis allows use of different datasets and generates new knowledge by addressing new research questions and issues that extend beyond the scope of the earlier research (Thorne 1994; 2003).

4. Orangi Pilot Project as institutional social innovation

Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) is a non-governmental voluntary organisation that started in 1980 as an initiative for slum improvement and redevelopment in Karachi. More than 334 squatter settlements (*katchi abadis*) make up almost 40% of the total population in Karachi (MPGO-CDGK 2007). About 113 of these settlements are concentrated in the area of Orangi spread over 500 acres and housing about 1.5 million people (Rahman, 2004). Historically, the settlements developed and spread through informal and incremental construction of buildings with minimal or no government support. Largely accommodating labourers for the nearby industrial areas, growth of these settlements outpaced formal housing provision by the government. As a result the road and water infrastructure remained non-existent. By the time government agencies realised the scale of the problem, it was too expensive to intervene through public money or development funds. But local residents continued to expect governance institutions to take responsibility for infrastructure development and maintenance. Realising this dilemma, a social activist Akhtar Hameed Khan devised an approach of ‘development from below’, based on his experiences of rural cooperative development in Comilla (Bangladesh), and started a low-cost sanitation initiative under the banner of OPP (Khan, 2005).

OPP fulfils the three preconditions of social innovation for local development as set out by Moulaert et al. (2005). The programme recognized the communities’ unfulfilled needs; empowered local communities through technical assistance, support and advice to fulfil those needs; and, helped in strengthening local social capital. More specifically, starting with the dire need for a decent sanitation system, OPP identified technologies that could

be implemented by local residents and improved design features that could reduce the incurred costs up to one-fourth of the prevalent rates (Hasan, 2010). It also promoted street-level participation, planning and management. OPP volunteers would first visit local communities and win the trust of residents in each street (about 20-30 households) and convince them to take responsibility for street improvement and share the costs, whereas the OPP teams would support with technical expertise, advice and knowledge transfer. Not only did people agree to participate in the construction works, they also took responsibility for maintenance, replacement and rectification of the infrastructure (Hasan and Vaidya, 1986). OPP institutions adopted an internal-external strategy in which the (internal) street sewers were built with citizens' support whereas the (external) trunk sewers remained the local government's responsibility. OPP itself acted as a bridge by training people for internal infrastructure development while advocating citizens' needs and demands to the government and acting as consultants to plan and guide external developments (Hasan, 2008).

4.1 Replicability vs adaptability

OPP considered the street as a unit of organisation and self-help with collective representation at neighbourhood level. It invested through research and extension promoting self-management and capacity building. The initial success of the sanitation project subsequently evolved into a wider programme of work based on a cooperative model of participatory development in four additional areas: housing, health, education and microcredit for local communities (Hasan, 2010; Hasan and Raza, 2012). Many actions such as microcredit, health and education initiatives were soon replicated in other parts of Karachi as well as across the country (Rahman, 2012). Later, in 1988 the areas of focus were consolidated into three autonomous and self-managed bodies: a Research and Training Institute (RTI) to manage water supply and sanitation, housing support, children's education and women's savings programs besides core objectives of research, advocacy, training and rehabilitation from natural disasters; Orangi Charitable Trust, to manage microfinance and microcredit schemes for small enterprises in the local area; and, Karachi Health and Social Development Association, to formulate, support and manage public health actions for local communities. Over recent years, although the overall framework of institutions has remained the same, OPP has adapted to the changing socio-legal and urban environment (Hasan, 2010). In fact, more autonomy has been given to each body to self-manage and to collaborate with funding bodies and local communities

besides keeping healthy partnerships with government departments, international institutions and other NGOs working on similar issues.

4.2 Durability of actions vs sustainability of initiatives

The OPP model of bottom-up development based on voluntary contribution had many demonstrative and multiplier effects. The approach of community participation through experimental social research allowed flexibility to suit respective local needs (Hasan and Vaidya, 1986). Whereas OPP institutions continue to provide social and technical guidance, expertise and credit support for local enterprises, development work is largely self-funded. This model demonstrates how neighbourhood level financing, management and maintenance of such facilities as water supply, sanitation, primary education, health clinics, waste and security can be financed by the communities. The focus of government institutions has been providing larger infrastructure such as treatment plants, large sewers, water mains, hospitals, landfill sites and higher education institutions. The microcredit schemes in particular were replicated in other urban and rural areas in Pakistan by a number of independent NGOs (often in collaboration with OPP) targeted at small farmers, smaller entrepreneurs, and rural women. OPP has continued this work through training, market research, and credit appraisals, etc. (Hasan and Raza, 2012). These community-participation and self-management aspects are the key features of OPP's long-term sustainability; as a result the model has been widely adopted both nationally and internationally.

4.3 From resistance to resilience

As mentioned earlier, the concept of social innovation has historically been rooted in the idea of resistance or disruption to an existent order. Hasan (2002) interprets the initial objectives of OPP as supporting the 'geographies of resistance' by communities to the 'insensitive' developments occurring in various parts of the city. However, subsequently it paved the way for a resilient informal sector in terms of social, economic and health services. OPP has proved to be more resilient than many similar institutional innovations elsewhere in the world (Hjorth 2003). This long term success is attributed to the fact that the programme was initiated by voluntary sector organisations and is still primarily managed by people themselves (Hasan and Vaidya, 1986). Not only the institutional networks and structure proved resilient, it also helped build community resilience in respective areas of work. This has been done in terms of human resource development,

empowering women, and bringing radical changes in power relations between producers and market operators (Hasan and Raza, 2012). It has also brought forth the role of leadership and foresight. The founder of OPP developed sufficient social capital, human resource and expert individuals to maintain institutional functions long after he passed away.

5. Conclusion

The concept and practice of social innovation has existed in human societies for centuries, with different periods in different societies having positive and negative biases towards and perspectives on the emergence, existence and continuation of social innovations (Godin 2012). More recent academic and policy debates have broadened the concept to include interdisciplinary conceptualisations and transdisciplinary practices. It should be stressed, however, that although social innovations can neither be engineered nor replicated, they can be adapted in line with changing social, political, economic and environmental contexts. It is no surprise then, that many socially innovative actions may appear to be reactive rather than proactive, in the sense of offering a response to the unfulfilled needs of communities or to situations of crises, to improve social relations and foster socio-political emancipation (Mehmood 2015). In this respect, social innovation also exhibits an evolutionary character (Mehmood 2010), whereby socially creative agendas and strategies become embedded within institutional dynamics. Institutions themselves, however, are prone to social change that can catalyse – positively or negatively – social innovation policy and practice. The main lesson to be learnt from these ongoing debates and experiences is that social innovation initiatives, in all their diversity, will be most resilient if embedded in a broader social change movement that leads to essential social transformations (Moulaert et al 2013).

With an initial focus on filling a developmental vacuum, OPP has emerged as a model of ‘development from below’ that managed to provide an alternative to existing institutional forms (Khan, 2005; Hasan 2010). It fulfils Moulaert et al’s (2005) three preconditions of social innovation for local development as it clearly identified the unsatisfied needs of local communities (i.e. lack of proper sanitation facilities, and subsequently other needs such as education, healthcare etc.); strived to fulfil those needs by collaborating with funding agencies, mediating bodies and local people as well as experts besides providing technical advice and support to build infrastructure (sanitation systems, schools,

dispensaries, etc,) and strengthened the local social capital by encouraging participation in such actions and initiatives. The success of OPP as a network of institutions indicates that the social innovation debates need to move on from the replicability-durability-resistance discourse. More stress should now be given to those socially innovative institutional actions that give due consideration to the adaptability of institutional forms, sustainability of the socially innovative actions, and the resilience of such initiatives in order to address the socioeconomic needs especially for communities in the global South that are increasingly faced with social, economic and climatic risks, uncertain future, lack of sufficient means and resources and a chronic absence of top-down support. More academic and policy analysis is required in this respect to discover, encourage and enhance new forms of social innovation through more inclusive interdisciplinary conceptualisations and transdisciplinary practices.

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