

Universities' Contributions to Sustainable Development's Social Challenge: A Case Study of a Social Innovation Practice

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing recognition that dealing with sustainable development need to address the social structures that encourage unsustainable economic and environmental practices. Universities represent important sources of knowledge for addressing sustainable development, but there has been relatively limited consideration of their contributions to these social elements. Drawing on recent interest in social innovation as to conceptualise social change and community development, this paper aims to understand universities' involvement in the process of social innovation, for the particular case of a Brazilian higher education institution. By exploring how universities can contribute to the different stages of the social innovation process, it highlights the capacities that universities have to address the social sustainable development challenge. The paper identifies five characteristics of universities contributions to social innovation and sets out an agenda for future research necessary to understand universities' wider contributions to sustainable development.

KEYWORDS

Case Study, Community Development, Social Change, Social Innovation, Sustainable Development, Universities' Mission

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most urgent contemporary debates concerns the achievement of the sustainable development goals (Moore, 2015), covering economic growth, environmental protection and social progress. However, the social dimension is often overlooked in favour of the more urgent economic dimensions or the more visible environmental dimension. Understanding the social dimension is vital to achieving true sustainable development given an increasing sense of crisis in many areas of contemporary social development at the moment where after decades of progress, there are starting to be growing intractable problems around urban sustainability, climate change, food security, energy security and poverty/inequality (Cunha & Benneworth, 2013). The social dimension of sustainability concerns protecting society's vulnerable groups, respecting social diversity and ensuring social capital formation (Cunha & Benneworth, 2013; Rinkinen, Oikarinen & Melkas, 2016). Delivering sustainability's social dimension demands extensive innovation to reshape society in ways that deliver these protections and potentials (Schmidpeter, 2013). Socially innovative practices offer a response to the unfulfilled needs of communities to improve social relations and foster socio-political emancipation (Mehmood,

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2016). This paper therefore considers this process of social innovation as a driver of sustainable development, here defined as innovation primarily driven by the intent of benefiting the society (Bhattacharya, 2013).

This paper seeks to consider the roles played by universities in driving these social innovations necessary to deliver sustain sustainable development, and specifically the gap that has arisen in contemporary understandings of university contributions to social innovation. To date the discussion has mainly focused on two kinds of university contribution (OECD, 2007), firstly universities as sources of technologies that can solve the particular environmental problems that become evident during unsustainable development practices, and secondly in universities' own practices as large institutions. This paper seeks to extend this discussion to where we identify a potential gap, proposing a third role that universities can play, namely in developing new kinds of social practices and organisations. These new social practices and organisations can potentially address the social exclusion problems that are increasingly evident in the challenges of sustainable development. But at the same time, we acknowledge that universities do not have specifically social innovation missions, and this can create barriers for universities in seeking to create these new social practices and organisations. To address this issue, the paper asks the specific research question of how can universities contribute to wider processes of social transformation that are necessary to deliver coherent and integrated sustainable development?

Any consideration of the roles of universities in social innovation need be mindful of the shortcomings of universities as drivers of institutional change. Benneworth (2013) concluded that university contributions to dealing with social exclusion is hindered by the wider institutional environments for higher education emphasising research excellence and teaching quality over place based contributions. Belyaeva & Kazakov (2014) claim that sustainability is not strongly integrated in majority business practices in firms in least developed (or emerging) countries, contrary to Europe countries (Crets & Celer, 2013), and similar claims might be expected for universities. However, in many of these countries, notably South America, universities are expected to make strong societal contributions (Tapia, 2008; Ramirez, 2011). This places practical expectations on universities to support and facilitate social innovation initiatives and therefore, contributing to social development. This in turn requires the effective integration of social innovation focus on their strategic planning and everyday practices, to drive forward social development and contribute to social sustainable development. We see for example that universities in various countries have begun creating learning environment that both allows "regular" students to acquire knowledge and skills needed in their particular subject area whilst also allowing students from disadvantaged social groups to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to overcome their practical social exclusion (Russo & Muller, 2013).

The paper adopts the process model for universities' involvement in the process of social innovation proposed by Benneworth and Cunha (2015) and applies it to an example from a Brazilian university. The paper provides insights into the practicalities of how universities may contribute to different stages of social innovation processes and what precisely are the various universities' inputs that may become involved in social innovation process, and thereby contribute to wider processes of social change and development. The paper highlights the great potential that exists for universities to contribute to solving the Grand Challenges of the 21st century, particularly through collaboration between sectors and different stakeholders and focusing on social sustainability (Rinkinen et al., 2016). At the same time, universities operate within wider political-economic contexts, and the capacities that universities have to realise this potential are constrained by these wider contextual factors.

2. SOCIAL INNOVATION CONTRIBUTING TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The most common definition of sustainable development is provided in the Brundtland Report: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). Definitions of sustainable development have focused on three main dimensions (Hopwood et al., 2005): economic, environmental and social. As

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