Ten types of social innovation – a brief discussion paper

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Introduction

There appear to be a number of different interpretations regarding what "social innovation" is about (van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). This brief discussion paper intends to contribute to a demystification of the term. First of all, it suggests to define social innovation quite simply as innovation which is social in nature. In other words, innovation which emerges in the social realm of experienced reality. The social dimension is about human interaction and about interaction of people with their environment. Social innovation is then about new ways in which people interact and about new ways in which people interact with their environment. Such interaction relates to both thinking and acting (behaviour). This way of understanding social innovation implies that social innovation comes in many shapes and forms, connecting the social realm to different realms of experienced reality.

> **A broad and diversified interpretation of social innovation**
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> This paper suggest that there are many other types. Social innovation is not the prerogative of certain groups in society. This broader interpretation of social innovation helps to see how the potential of social innovation can be put to use in all spheres of life and in all corners of society.

A theoretical typology of social innovation

Figure 1 provides an overview of different types of social innovation as they may be distinguished along the lines of the theory of modal aspects. This theory encompasses a systemic framework developed by Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd and was popularised by e.g. Brandon and Lombardi (2011) when applied in evaluation of sustainability in the built environment. The figure distinguishes between ten types of social innovation, briefly characterising those and providing one example as illustration.

Figure 1: A typology of ten different types of social innovation
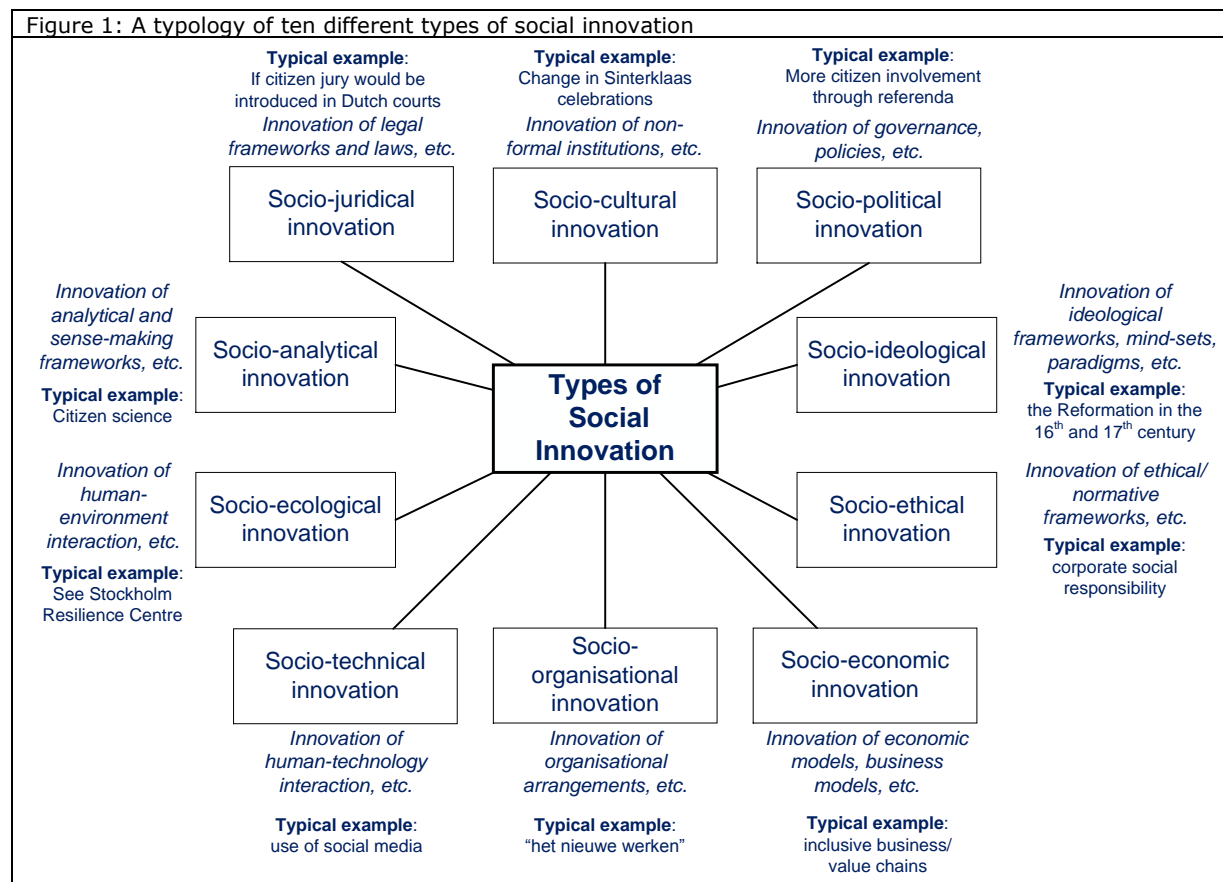
This is an initial overview which may be further elaborated and linked to different types of social innovation practice. In many cases of social innovation, different types of social innovation will be involved e.g. because one leads to another, or one requires another. New thinking may be needed before new practice becomes possible and new practice may trigger new thinking.

Social innovation as such is not something new

Discussion and conclusions

So what is the use of such typology? First of all it helps to prevent a limitation of the concept of social innovation to just certain types of social innovation. By doing so, it broadens our understanding of social innovation, leading to the realisation that social innovation has happened since the beginning of society and is in no way 'the new kid on the block'. Certain types of social innovation may be new, but not social innovation as such. This interpretation also acknowledges that all Wageningen UR staff have been involved in social innovation in one way or another.

Also, this interpretation points out that the key question in research on "social innovation for value creation" is not about how to introduce social innovation to Wageningen UR, but rather about finding out what types of social innovation (both in general terms and in concrete examples) have helped and could help create (enhanced) value for society and how this interplays with other types of innovation. This is about doing things in different ways which is primarily about what people (in knowledge institutes, government, private sector, and civil society) do and how they do it (e.g. in terms of interaction, collaboration, participation) and only secondarily about what they use in the process (e.g. devices and technologies).

> **Social innovation, as any innovation, may be more or less 'radical'**
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> Social innovation may be about a new management arrangement in which e.g. a number of employees start playing a more significant role than was the case before (which is about socio-organisational innovation). But it may also be about new ways of doing research which affect scientific practice much more deeply such as is the case in getting involved in e.g. transdisciplinary research, action researching, and citizen science.
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> Some social innovation proponents equate social innovation with radical social innovation. In this discussion paper, we stick to a broader interpretation.

Types of social innovation	Depth of change involved →		
	Slight change	Significant change	Radical change

The above sketches a rather complex picture of what is involved in innovation. It is much easier to focus on technical innovation over which we can exert much more control. And that is why knowledge institutes may focus on technical innovation capacity. A plea for taking social innovation seriously has everything to do with taking value for society seriously since such value cannot be based on the introduction of technologies alone. Even more, capitalising on the potential of technologies often requires social innovation, hence the reference to the role of socio-technical innovation.

Finally, social innovation is not something which is good by nature. It depends. It depends because it often involves agendas, interests and preferences which are motivated by theories of change about which people may (strongly) disagree. Social innovation in all its diversity and with all its potential to contribute to creation of value for society will therefore often involve a considerable amount of discussion and debate.

This is a discussion paper which means it is meant to stimulate critical thinking about the topic at hand. Critical responses to suggestions put forward in this paper are welcome.

References

Brandon P, Lombardi P., 2011. Evaluating sustainable development in the built environment. 2nd edn. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, UK

Van der Have, R.P., Rubalcaba, L. 2016. Social innovation research: An emerging area of innovation studies? Research Policy 45: 1923–1935.