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Introduction
Social Innovation and Social Policy

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This themed section discusses the conceptual development and related empirical applications of social innovation (SI), a concept acquiring a prominent position in both academia and the world of policy. When SI started being used in the early 1990s relatively few social scientists were familiar with it, mainly those interested in urban policy. Less than two decades later, not only is SI at the heart of the largest public research funding programme in Europe (*Horizon 2020*), it is also constantly referred to in the discourses of senior level policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The concept refers to the capacity of society (through not-for-profit organisations, charities, social movements and community groups, as well for-profit enterprises) to address needs unmet due to the failure or absence of markets or state provision. The nature of the 'innovation' can be in the content (what action is taken) or the process of provision (how needs are met). Focusing on the latter shifts the barycentre of innovation from the mere response to a problem to the methods and tools used to solve it. In this sense, some commentators consider genuine social innovations to be primarily interventions through which individuals develop self awareness and civic spirit – thereby overlapping with another prominent concept, 'social capital'. More generally, from this perspective such citizen-led solutions should change social relations; that is, an initiative is innovative in so far as it empowers those who provide or receive it (when these are not the same individuals).

The concept of SI therefore raises the question of what role citizens, or society in its broadest sense – including sections of the market – can play in contributing to identifying, planning and delivering measures which meet social needs. In this respect, SI is hardly a concept which captures a new phenomenon: nineteenth-century examples of innovative solutions to address unmet needs and drive social change include the cooperative movement in Italy, credit unions in Germany and friendly societies in the UK. This consideration leads us to examine the impact of SI in current socio-economic and political contexts.

Numerous SIs addressing a range of different issues – from unemployment, to care for elderly and frail people, from childcare, to economic development – have recently developed at a time of economic crisis, in which rising public deficits have prompted sharp reductions in public investment. The increasing prominence and promotion of SI as a solution to social needs at this time of public expenditure retrenchment raises questions

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about what motivates advocacy of social innovation, its capacity to solve social problems, and its wider implications for citizens as service providers and users, as well as for policy making and the legitimacy of power mechanisms. This themed section considers how far current SI discourses and policies are sincerely inspired by a spirit of participatory-emancipatory policy making, or whether in fact they camouflage an agenda of further liberalisation and public service withdrawal, or even worse, public failure on a multi-level scale. Consequently, this themed issue provides a critical analysis by scrutinising the discourses, policies and practice of SI across a range of countries and areas of social policy .

The themed issue begins with an article by Borzaga and Bodini, who examine alternative definitions of SI and assess the capacity of alternative organisational models to promote innovative solutions to social problems. The authors challenge the link attributed between the development of social innovation and welfare cuts, and propose instead that SI is considered as evidence of the failure of the marketisation and privatisation of state welfare. In the second article, Evers and Ewert draw upon findings from a large European project, *Welfare Innovations for Local Cohesion* (WILCO), to discuss SI in relation to a 'changing culture of welfare', and relate it to existing social policy debates and discourses about enabling, activating and investment.

The article by Ruddat and Schönauer focuses on the question of transferability and the wider relevance of the SI discourse and practice by analysing whether and how SI and the related discourse of social enterprise used in English-speaking countries can be incorporated into the German Conservative/Bismarckian welfare regime.

Giraud and colleagues examine and compare discourses of innovation in local elderly care in Germany, Scotland and Switzerland. They present innovation as a three-step process, involving framing, consolidation and institutionalisation, and suggest that the nature of the SI discourse changes as it progresses through these stages. The article argues that a discourse of innovation emerges at least in part as a reaction to the challenges of reconciling conflicting service aims, and proposes that an SI discourse is used by particular groups to legitimise their preferred reforms.

Roy, McHugh and Hill-O'Connor discuss evidence of the impact of and practical lessons from selected social innovations which have developed initially in industrialising countries in the South, and the feasibility of transferring such models (entirely or in part) to societies in the developed North, where extensive welfare systems already operate. While focusing on health inequality, the authors discuss how discourses of SI relate to important social policy and social science debates, including ideas of agency and structure in the causes of and solutions to social problems, and the relationship between SI and social capital.

Finally, the Review Article, which concludes this themed section, provides an overview of some of the key issues which emerge from the separate contributions, and discusses areas where social policy research and analysis could contribute to strengthening understanding of the potential implications and impact of social innovation.

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