Reapplying is reframing – A perspective on how to analyse and adapt social innovations to different contexts

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Abstract

As social innovations are positive for society as a whole, it is natural to wish that some successful local initiatives might be spread across the globe. Rather than being utopian, this aspiration is, in fact, a challenge to be achieved in a world calling for social transformation. Nevertheless, the process of transferring and adapting local social innovation and social technologies has been repeatedly debated in literature, being seen as a huge challenge due to the specific social, cultural, institutional and local contexts. We join this debate by presenting a new proposal. Based on previous work on global/local adaptations, we present a framework that aims at helping researchers and practitioners deal with social innovation reapplication and increasing their chances of succeeding in that effort.

Introduction

Exclusion, in any shape or form – economic, cultural, educational, political or social – is a central dilemma that our society faces nowadays. Social innovation has been documented as an effective response to tackle this problem by mitigating inequalities and promoting social inclusion. Literature on social innovation reports two major challenges in the area: sustainability in the long run and scaling up (Mulgan, 2006, 2007). This paper aims at helping to address the second challenge and to answer the following research question: *What local adaptations are required when reapplying and reframing a given social innovation to another context?*

Social Innovation and Social Technology

James B. Taylor is apparently one of the earliest authors to state that social innovation might be defined as *new ways of doing things in order to meet social needs*" (Taylor, 1970: 70). The concept, however, has evolved over the decades by incorporating multidisciplinary and territorial approaches (Hillier, 2004), by linking it to the domain of arts and creativity (Mumford, 1992) and, by regarding the social interactions in the process of identifying needs, strategies and alternatives to solve social issues (Moulaert et al, 1989, 2002). Moreover, Universities such as Stanford, Harvard, Brown and Cambridge have been developing in-depth research on the social innovation field. In Canada, noteworthy research has been developed by CRISES (*Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales*) that observes social innovation through different lenses concerning territory, life conditions, work and employment. Also outstanding is the report published by the Young Foundation that, indeed, could sum up the large amount of definitions by stating that "*social innovation aims to meet unmet needs*" (Mulgan et al, 2006: 8). In other words, social innovation aims to satisfy social needs through processes that favour the arising of *new arrangements*, *procedures* and *polices*.

When focusing on these *new arrangements, polices* and *procedures* that satisfy social needs and, ultimately, conduce to social innovation, what we are doing in fact is paying further attention to some technical aspects inherent in the social innovation concept. By doing so, we are also getting closer to the field of the Sociology of Technology that, amongst other things, observes social innovation under constructive and sociotechnical lenses. Moreover, this field also researches the interaction involving *social groups* engaged in specific *processes* that are seeking *solutions to satisfy social needs*. Therefore, when talking about reapplying or scaling up a given social innovation to another sociocultural context, it makes sense to use (or adopt) the terminology of *Social Technology (ST),* provided by Sociology of Technology.

The concepts of social innovation and social technology may occasionally overlap and be taken as synonyms, which is not erroneous. Nonetheless, it is relevant to remark that

Social Technology does not intend to replace the concept of Social Innovation. Instead, Social Technology would contribute to adding or revealing a technical scope of Social Innovation which may help in scrutinizing it and favouring its dissemination elsewhere.

Regardless of other disparate interpretations concerning social technology worldwide, some even referring to social media networks (Bernoff, 2008, Leibetseder, 2011), the definition we use in this paper is aligned with the South American concept of ST and is provided by the Social Technology Network (RTS – Rede de Tecnologia Social), in Brazil. Put simply, Social Technologies are *products, techniques or methodologies that may be reapplied and developed in interaction with communities all the while by representing effective solutions for social transformation* (Otterloo, 2009). Another simpler definition designates Social Technology as a tool to transform *good ideas into official policies, leading to social transformation* (Mattar, 2005).

In order to understand how a given social transformation (or innovation) has succeeded, Social Technology observes and scrutinizes sociotechnical arrangements in a community in an attempt to successfully reapply this technology (or methodology) into another territory. By sociotechnical arrangements, we understand this interaction of social groups or stakeholders that, through processes and activities, create collective solutions to social issues, as stated before. Nonetheless, ST does not consider that there are pre-established and ready solutions to various social problems; instead, each context or community requires specific particularities demanding precise answers (Dagnino, 2009: 35). Thus, the act of reframing technologies or methodologies would be more appropriate in considering the complexity involving the transfer, adaptation and reapplication of specific and local TS to another territory (Thomas, 2009; Dagnino, 2009).

This led us to the idea that reapplying is reframing. It means that reapplying a social innovation to another context is to engage in the exercise of reframing its arrangements, polices and procedures in order to be socially accepted, useful and, beneficial. Reframing means re-interpreting and adapting sociotechnical aspects of a given social innovation model to be reapplied in (or adopted by) another community.

In order to do this, we build on previous work on local adaptations (Pozzebon and Van Heck, 2006) to propose a framework that might guide practitioners and researchers in assessing the barriers to and triggers of social innovation transferability from one context to another and in identifying required local adaptions from the perspective of different social groups involved in the process.

Previous work on global/local adaptation has formulated three main propositions to deal with local adaptations (Pozzebon and Van Heck, 2006). The first is to pay attention to the *design-use gap* between the context where a given technology or methodology is designed and conceived, and the context where it would be used or applied: the smaller the gap, the easier the nature and effort of local adaptations. The second proposition is related to the need of a *mutual-influences relationship*, which means taking local, contextual socio-cultural requirements into account without neglecting the "generic" knowledge (what people have already learned worldwide). Finally, the third proposition reminds us that the *nature of local adaptations* may vary from one culture to another, as people engage in local adaptations in different ways. Put simply, local adaptations are culturally dependent.

Although these three propositions were formulated to address the transferability of global technologies – technologies that are supposed to be generalizable to different contexts if well parameterized – we argue that they are valid for the transferability of social innovations as well. In that vein, in this document we summarize the results of our practical experience in formulating a framework that might help practitioners in the assessment of local adaptations required to reapply a given social innovation – whether this social innovation is an organizational form, a project, a technology or a methodology – to a new context.

The global/local adaptation framework adopted by Pozzebon and Van Heck (2006) was indeed inspired by the work developed by Kambil and Van Heck (1998, 2002) termed *process/stakeholder framework.* Such a framework was initially developed in the context of Dutch flower auctions but was further developed and improved to be applied to other industrial, social, and cultural contexts, such as the African-European flower business

(Cunden and van Heck, 2004), and beef markets in Australia (Driedonks et al., 2005). Afterwards, Pozzebon and Van Heck (2006) extended the previous work to take into account the application of the framework when a global/local dialog was at stake. Finally, Pozzebon (2012, 2013) transformed the framework to be specifically adapted to deal with social innovations.

Applying a social-groups/processes framework for identifying local adaptations

The framework is based on two axes: relevant social groups and key processes. Figure 1 illustrates the frame.

Figure 1: social-groups/processes framework

Social group Process	Social group 1	Social group 2	Social group 3	Result for each process
Key process 1				Possible adaptations
Key process 2				Possible adaptations
Key process 3				Possible adaptations
Result for each stakeholder	Cost or benefit?	Cost or benefit?	Cost or benefit?	

The underlying logic of this framework is that any social innovation is a social activity in which different social groups want to feel that fair and equitable outcomes, results and impacts await them. All "players" should perceive they would have a "benefit" – direct or indirect – from the implementation of the social innovation. The four steps in the application of this frame are:

1. *Identify the relevant social groups;*
2. *Identify the key processes;*

3. *Identify local adaptations;*

4. *Evaluate the final balance for each key process and for each social group;*

5. *Make a final recommendation.*

So, the first step in the application of our framework is to *(1) identify the relevant social groups* that are involved in or affected by the implementation of a given social innovation. *Relevant social groups* represents a key concept in the social-constructivism stream and refers to a set of people forming a given group by sharing a common geographical space, occupying the same functional boundaries or belonging to an identical same social class. A relevant social group might be also constituted by people sharing a common goal – political, economic, social, cultural, etc. In addition, from a constructivist point of view, people within a relevant social group are likely to share a set of assumptions about a given subject of interest, such as the expected benefits of the implementation of a new project. People act in the world on the basis of how they interpret and re-interpret it. Subgroups and alliances between groups form social spaces and play important roles in the implementation and transformation of any project (Pozzebon et al., 2008). From a managerial perspective, one could say that relevant social groups and sub-groups may also be perceived as stakeholders that – through alliances and interactions linking actors from different spheres and natures (public, private, agencies, suppliers, clients, etc.) – are engaged in the exercise of interpreting reframing of collective building experiences and exchanges.

The second step is to *(2) identify the key processes*, i.e., the basic key processes that are distinctive and fundamental to help a given social innovation work well. The identification of key processes is a major challenge in the application of this framework. It is difficult to find a generic or universal way to identify key processes. For some social innovations that take an organizational form, a business model (like the Business Model Canvas of Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2000) or the chain value model (like Porter, 1999) could serve as a good reference point to identify key processes. However, not all social innovations embody an organizational structure; at least not as we are used to conceiving a formal organizational structure. Some social innovations take the form of specific projects, networks of people, or a combination of methods and technologies. In those cases, a careful analysis of the social innovation "functioning" might help in the

identification of those key processes, pillars or principles that, if absent, prevent even the implementation and operation of a given social innovation. The task here is to systematically list all the vital, routine and sporadic activities and processes – such as administration, financing, R&D, etc. – and rank them within a logic of strategic relevance that should be readapted and reframed to the new context. A huge part of the success of reframing relies on clearly identifying the main strategic key processes of a given social innovation.

Once the relevant social groups and the key processes are identified, we should **(3) identify local adaptations**. In order to carry out this task, a careful assessment of each cell of the framework should be performed. For this, we suggest a number of meetings with representatives of each relevant social group, ideally in participatory sessions where all voices of those social groups can be heard. The main idea here is to examine the current design of each key process as it is supposed to work and to collectively identify what local adaptations are required in order to have this process work in the new context. In addition to identifying the necessary adaptations from the perspective of the given relevant social group, such an assessment should also recognize intended consequences of the implementation of those processes in the everyday life of the members of the relevant social groups. Do they see the implementation of that key process as a cost or a benefit? What can be done to minimize the costs and to maximize the benefits?

Once all the social groups have been met and all the cells of the frame filled in, a second round of meetings should be planned, this time putting together representatives of all social groups. If such meetings are unlikely to be undertaken, the local adaptations may alternatively be enumerated as an exercise in forecasting the likelihood of reapplication and reframing that would ultimately be validated with the relevant social groups, sub-groups or stakeholders. The underlying premise in this second phase is to collectively **(4) evaluate the final balance for each social group and for each key process**.
First, for each row – that corresponds to each key process (1, 2, 3, etc.) – we should make an assessment regarding what local adaptations will be finally proposed for the re-application of the social innovation in the particular context. This discussion helps to identify convergences and divergences in the way different social groups perceive the implementation of each key process. If some divergences are irreconcilable, perhaps the

re-application of the social innovation is at high risk and destined to a failure. On the other hand, negotiations are possible in that phase. Likewise, for each column – that corresponds to each relevant social group (1, 2, 3, etc.) – we should make an assessment regarding the final balance regarding benefits/advantages or costs/disadvantages. This discussion helps to identify the willingness of each social group to embark on the process, based on their perception that the implementation of the social innovation will being them certain desired benefits. This is also the moment to convince and persuade social groups – government, private firms – that will guarantee the major part of the material or financial support that, although they will have more costs than other groups, the social benefits for the society or the community justifies the investment. Although this final balance could be considered highly subjective, it is nonetheless based on discussions and meetings with the relevant social groups, which is so important in the assessment process.

The last step is *(5) to make a final recommendation*. The final overall analysis of the framework will indicate the suitability of re-applying the social innovation in the given context or not.

Provisional conclusions

In order to address the following question – *What local adaptations are required in reapplying and reframing a local social innovation to another context?* – we have adopted a social-group/key-process framework as appropriate for identifying the *extent* and *desirability* of local adaptations.

The framework presented here intends to diagram the exercise of reapplying and reframing new ideas that meet unmet needs; new ideas that have proved successful in a given context. In order to benefit other sociocultural contexts, we have seen that the concept of Social Technology helps to technically sort out the arrangements, procedures, polices, products and methodologies that constitute the ensemble of a given Social Innovation. From the field of the Sociology of Technology, we have borrowed the term sociotechnical arrangements in order to define this technical ensemble constituting Social Innovation. And we have also seen that, within this context, social groups and sub-groups are in constant relationship through key process aimed at achieving social solutions.

The identification of these social groups and key-processes is important so as to include them in the Social-group/key-process framework that will serve to calculate and predict costs and benefits over the process of reapplying and reframing the chosen Social Innovation in its new context.

The proposition presented here does not presume to be a method for serial reproduction or artificial replication of social innovations. Instead, we first recommend an in-depth analysis comparing the contexts where the social innovation was generated and to which it is destined, by also considering the mutual-influences relationship that may take place in the process of reapplying and reframing.

This reminds us that social innovations – be they organizations, projects, technologies or methodologies - cannot be taken as black boxes, but should be considered in all their specificities. It also suggests that the successful implementation of a given social innovation, with sociotechnical fitting adaptations, is enhanced when all parts share values and see benefits in this process.

Finally, local adaptations can vary from one culture to another and we need to pay attention to particular ways in which people engage in local adaptations to better understand the entire process. Future research on this subject could focus on these aspects: how the nature of local adaptations - such as social acceptability, cultural influences, institutional legitimacy, etc. - may affect the process of reapplying and reframing, in order to provide a robust macro context and better detect local adaptations needed. Equally, improvisations are presumed to occur as a reaction to a crisis, emergency situation or unexpected event. Yet the concept of improvisation as a *recurrent element* is absent from the literature of organizational change.

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