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An approach to the concept of social innovation and its contribution to territorial development studies

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ARTICLE SECTION

An approach to the concept of social innovation and its contribution to territorial development studies

Abstract: A growing number of scholars have conceptualised the phenomenon of social innovation. Contemporary social challenges are complex and require greater attention to the social dimension of development processes. This paper aims to design an operational definition of social innovation in the framework of territorial development studies. The origin of the social innovation concept is reviewed in the first part of the article. A critical analysis of the different discourses around this notion is then carried out. The scientific production in the field of territorial development is examined with particular attention and constitutes the basis for the original conceptualisation of social innovation. In the findings' section, social relations are placed at the epicenter of innovation and development processes. In addition, different elements of socially innovative processes are identified and described, which contribute to configure an analytical framework for social innovation research, such as the territorial context, networks, governance arrangements or attitudes.

Key words: Irrigation modernization, organic farming, drip irrigation, fertilization, irrigation communities.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. La innovación social es importante para resolver algunos de los desafíos sociales actuales.
2. Los estudios de desarrollo territorial enfatizan la dimensión de proceso de la innovación social.
3. Las relaciones sociales y los actores son el principal sujeto de la innovación social.

1. Social innovation is important to solve some of today's social challenges.
2. Territorial development studies emphasise the process dimension of social innovation.
3. Social relations and actors are the main subject of social innovation.

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2. Els estudis de desenvolupament territorial emfatitzen la dimensió de procés de la innovació social.
3. Les relacions socials i els actors són el principal subjecte de la innovació social.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

Innovation is a fundamental factor for the renewal of local production systems and to enhance the development factors existing in every region. Territorial development studies have conceptualized it as a phenomenon under economic rationality. The exchange of knowledge, learning processes, networks, governance arrangements, social capital or culture are mechanisms present in the territorial development literature, although they have been usually employed from a utilitarian perspective circumscribed to economic growth and business processes.

In recent years, several authors have recovered the notion of social innovation to underline the social dimension of local development. Social innovations refer to new relationships that imply changes in society and that have an impact beyond productive and technological processes, for example, in other social, cultural, political or environmental processes. However, it is a diffuse concept, with multiple interpretations and without a definition that generates the necessary cohesion among scholars. In this context, our research aims to design an operational definition of this phenomenon that is useful for its analysis and study within the framework of local development processes. The main method used is literature review on social innovation and the qualitative categorization of different terms and discourses. Searches have been carried out in the Web of Science and Scopus during January 2021 - February 2021, with special attention to the most cited documents and different areas of knowledge.

The meaning of social innovation has changed throughout history and is linked to the institutional context of each time and space. There are some antecedents in the field of economics, and in general, in the social sciences. Our study shows the growing use of the term, especially during the second half of the 20th century, and its resurgence at the beginning of the 21st century. In the 20th century, several authors consolidated the use of social innovation. Among them stands out Joseph Schumpeter, who elaborated his work, in part, encouraged by the contributions of Marx, Veblen or Walras. Another noteworthy antecedent, although usually less developed in the literature on innovation, is Karl Polanyi. At the end of the 20th century, the sociologist W. Ogburn was a pioneer in recovering the studies on social innovation and in differentiating technical from social innovations. Since then, the use of the term "social innovation" has experienced a rapid growth, particularly from 2008.

This work identifies four major approaches that reflect the current discourses of social innovation: entrepreneurship and practice, business organization, social change and well-being, creativity, and territorial development. The perspectives are examined according to an operational criterion: whether social innovation is emphasized with an orientation to the product or to the process. Product-oriented definitions focus on results. They see social innovation as new solutions (innovation) to a problem or need, which are considered socially desirable (social). Social innovations are an end and incorporate many tangible or identifiable elements. They refer to innovations that seek to be socially acceptable, relevant and ethically appropriate. In addition, different social groups are positively affected (social responsibility of innovation). The perspective of entrepreneurship and practice would be located in this spectrum.

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

The definitions that build a conceptualization of social innovation where a process vision predominates are those in which a result or solution to a problem is not necessarily identified. If it exists, what is innovative and generates value is the method or mechanism through which a solution is generated. They are social innovations by its means, fundamentally, intangible and with complex elements to identify. Social mechanisms of innovation are central in this perspective. These mechanisms refer to social relations, norms, values, etc., that are part of the social context in which innovations emerge. They attend to the adjustment of innovations to the social context in its implementation, as well as to the changes that they provoke in it. On the other hand, social innovation as a process includes perspectives that emphasize innovations that contribute to a better, more just, equal and inclusive society, with a clear link to socio-political changes (innovation in society). In this context, business organization approaches, social change and well-being, and creativity would be included in this area.

In territorial development studies, an approach that combines product and process elements is chosen, although the latter dimension is more relevant. There are two great schools in this area: the Quebec school and Frank Moulaert's school. In the case of the Québec school, social innovation is conceptualized with a view to the social transformation of the territory as opposed to an altruistic and individualistic one. The authors of *CRISES*, in particular Juan-Luis Klein, agree to affirm that all these socially innovative initiatives affect, at least, to three dimensions: i) governance; ii) co-construction and co-production; and iii) plural economy. In Europe, one of the greatest exponents of social innovation from a territorial development approach is Frank Moulaert. From this school, the process of social innovation promotes changes in governance, the satisfaction of needs, improves participation, especially of excluded social groups. Additionally, these authors explain that social innovation has an empowering dimension that consists of increasing sociopolitical capacity and access to resources.

Our work builds an original definition that can guide the study of social innovation in territorial development processes. This definition, and the analytical framework that accompanies it, are inspired by previous works, especially those linked to the field of territorial development. The definition we suggest of social innovation is the following one: "Social innovation is a process of a reconfiguration of social relations (networks, attitudes and governance agreements) between actors from a territory –and also from outside the territory– that leads to new forms of action that meet collective objectives, whose main result is the creation of social value". Territorial context, triggers, agency, power relations, networks, attitudes, governance mechanisms, and learning processes are some of the essential analytical elements for social innovation research examined in this work.

The notion of social innovation, as conceptualized in this article, contributes to expanding and recognizing the range of initiatives that produce innovation with an impact on the bases of territorial development. As a process, in addition, it emphasizes the social assets that derive from innovation, mostly intangible, as well as the collective dimension of these innovations, rather than individual. Actually, this view also can encompass economic or technological innovations, so it should not always be contrasted as opposed to these types of innovation. In fact, both can be particular forms of social innovation in a territory. However, not all technological or economic innovation is a social innovation. Innovations necessarily incorporate a social dimension, but this does not mean that social relations between actors are reconfigured in a new way, that there are collective objectives, or that social value is generated.

