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Social Innovation For A Just Sustainable Development: Integrating The Wellbeing Of Future People

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EDITORIAL

It is heartening to see that the ninth issue of the VICHAARA AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT has been brought out successfully. An educational journal is a platform where knowledge gets amplified and disseminated; research results and innovations are documented and unique experiences are shared for enhancement of knowledge. The design architecture of Vichaara is made in such a way that it becomes a comprehensive document to reflect the different dimensions of Management discipline. Business Research forms the core part wherein original, empirical based research papers are included. This issue comprises articles on recent issues in business world from different disciplines. These articles show a methodological way of conducting a research and presenting their findings. Findings on technology influence, cultural changes in the organizations, behavioural changes among the consumers and their expectations have been presented with relevant facts. We invite scholarly articles and research papers and write ups on robust cases. Suggestions and views from readers and scholars are solicited for the qualitative improvement of the Journal.

SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR A JUST SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: INTEGRATING THE WELLBEING OF FUTURE PEOPLE

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Abstract

As a tool for sustainable development, social innovation has drawn more attention. The Brundtland Commission emphasises that improving current circumstances shouldn't come at the expense of meeting the requirements of future generations. Up until now, the primary goal of (social) sustainable development has been to improve the well-being of the current generation, with future generations' needs coming in second. In light of this, I believe it is imperative to (re-)direct social innovation in order to promote the welfare of future generations. From a strong sustainability viewpoint, I propose the idea of irreplaceable products, which might then be incorporated into social innovation methods related to sustainable development.

Keywords: Social innovation; sustainable development; irreplaceable goods; intergenerational justice; strong sustainability

1. Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is a term that has been used more and more in the media, research, and policymaking in recent years. This is primarily because a profusion of policy studies, initiatives, platforms, and incubators devoted to the creation and implementation of novel social practices have emerged. This indicates that institutions and individuals alike are beginning to recognise the potential of SI in generating societal value. Despite the enormous effect of SI in our lives today, as noted by Edwards-Schachter and Wallace, researchers and the general public are still trying to come up with a (more) clear understanding of what it really involves. Generally speaking, SI is best described as innovative and useful concepts that tackle unfulfilled societal demands. Typically, SI describes the design. This article falls precisely under SI's valuative dimension. It adheres to the work on the normative (and political) components of the SI, but, as will be explained below, it does not adopt a single ethical theory. Examples of such theories are the capability approach and moral pluralism. This scope hasn't gotten nearly as much attention as SI related to procedures and results thus far. This is most likely attributable in part to the inherent theoretical and empirical obstacles that make assessing the evolution of social systems of beliefs and values more difficult. (Social) Innovation has historically assisted society in overcoming obstacles on a local and international level.

There have been appeals to address pressing environmental issues since the late 1980s, and none have been more symbolic than the United Nations (UN) report "Our Common Future." In order to achieve a sustainable socioeconomic development, the countries were recommended to alter their course by the Brundtland Commission. The appeal was made in a way that pushed the countries to raise the standard of living for their citizens without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own demands. This argument highlights the moral benchmark for sustainable development (SD) as being the imperative of providing justice to future generations (FG). Since then, there has been a significant evolution in our understanding of SD in all of its dimensions. But FG's well-being continues to be crucial to the moral case.

Social Innovation as an Instrument for a Fair Sustainable Development

For SI to facilitate SD, it would have to translate in an idea (e.g., 'new' value), process, action or outcome that promotes and/or facilitates the transitional developmental path towards, at least one of the SD dimensions (environmental, social or economic). If the starting point for any type of innovation is an idea or a societal need that is not being (adequately) met, I argue that this applies to the current SD, as it does not properly address the interests of people to be leaving a door open for SI.

In the SD field, the consensus is the need to accelerate the process of socioeconomic transformation to meet sustainability targets. In that sense, over the last few years, we have witnessed several examples of SI aiming at systems change. Lately, there has been a resurgence of social movements and political actors, groups or networks targeting changes in power relations and/or social dynamics to grant justice to underprivileged individuals or groups. One of the most striking recent examples is the 'School Strike for Climate' movement, headed by, among others, Greta Thunberg.

This SI movement, which classify as disruptive is particularly significant in the overall context of SD because despite being a bottom-up phenomenon it has had an unexpectedly global impact. These movements tend to be relatively loose coalitions of individuals united by a particular issue (e.g., SD, climate change), making use of technology such as social media, that became increasingly organized participation wise and have gained (transnational) sociopolitical relevance. These types of disruptive SI can be understood, at least partly, as responses to societal development patterns that have negatively impacted human beings, more decisively particular groups (e.g., young people), creating additional social and environmental injustice. It regard them to also be reactions to the understanding of individuals as essentially being passive consuming actors instead of active participants of both SD governance and collective decision-making processes.

Reclaiming Future People's Wellbeing in the Social Innovation Landscape

As mentioned before, the moral obligation of ensuring FG wellbeing is tightly woven into the concept of SD. Accordingly, SI should somehow steer SD towards the accomplishment of this obligation. I think that one possibility to do so is for SI, in this context, to integrate into its discourse and/or practices this very notion. Notwithstanding, it does not seem to be a common praxis. In general terms, the relation between innovation and ethics has yet to be extensively analyzed, making it difficult to understand how SI can influence systems of beliefs or value frameworks. Despite this panorama, authors such as Fontrodona recognize this connection especially by acknowledging how ethics inspires and encourages innovation. With ethics being, in simple terms, a reflection on how to act in a good and/or right way, it seems that this relation should be the object of far more attentiveness by innovation researchers. This is particularly the case because designing and implementing better or the right solutions for societal problems are commonly desired processes and outcomes of SI.

Typically, the ethical analysis of innovation is associated with technological innovation. Under such circumstances, the reflection tends to be about the moral acceptability of what is technically possible and desirable. It also includes mostly the normative scrutiny of the potential effects of innovation and how ethics can function as a kind of compass driving innovation for doing good. However, the understanding of the role of ethics in innovation is slowly shifting, and the focus is now on how it could be a motivation for innovation. In this sense, the reflection on acting well or being good (ethics) transforms the conditions in which innovation is created and implemented.

In this article, it is further than the mentioned approaches and assert that the role of ethics in SI can and should be wider: apart from being a motivation for innovation, ('new') moral values and obligations can be an integrative component of SI, prompting a shift in the moral or belief structure of society. Put differently, SI can be a vehicle for societal transformation that embodies the result of ethical reflection around a specific matter (e.g., distribution of goods), turning the 'new values' (e.g., sufficiency) into transformative societal tools.

Despite the trend of lessening FG's wellbeing relevance in SD, its weight in the fields of environmental and climate justice is fairly high. The concern about FG has proven itself to be a significant driving force for reflection on current developmental practices and has served as a map for improved environmental and climate strategies

As argued before, SI is one of the weapons to achieve (fair) SD. I further assert that concern for FG wellbeing is a case of (disruptive and ‘value-driven’) SI that can push forward an intergenerational fairer societal development. In spite of the small relevance of intergenerational fairness in the SI panorama, there are some examples of its potential relevance for achieving fair sustainability. Severo et al. show how concerns towards FG are a driver for increased environmental awareness and consequently, sustainable consumption through different contemporary generations. Another example of the high potential of FG concerns as means of achieving social improvement is related to the decrease in health inequality. Both studies demonstrate that people are sensitive enough to FG wellbeing to change their patterns of behavior and adopt more sustainable ways. Nevertheless, SI practitioners seem not to have been able to fully harness the power of this notion for inducing a transformative human development.

In an effort to avert the small significance of FG wellbeing in SI, I conceptualize this notion, mainly at a macrolevel and I propose a conceptual tool to be integrated into governance institutions associated with SD. The chosen level of application of this tool does not exclude its likely application at meso- and micro-levels as is discussed in the next sections.

Strong Sustainability: For an Inclusive Future

When examining social movements, the interest in including FG wellbeing in the current development strategies has not been as relevant in comparison to guaranteeing social and environmental justice for current people. However, the idealization and concretization of a future with less inequity is fundamental to almost all of these phenomena. Many young participants of social movements for sustainability consider the concern over future wellbeing. Despite the increasing interest in this topic also by governance institutions and engaged agents, there are significant theoretical and practical hurdles to ensure that SD secures generations to be, at least, decent living conditions. The adoption of the strong sustainability concept in SI discourse and practices, as part of the necessary operationalization for the inclusion of FG wellbeing in the current SD strategies.

Strong sustainability states that due to the characteristics of the sustainability capitals it is not possible to replace some goods with others of a different kind, i.e., natural and manufactured capitals are not all intersubstitutable. If we accept this stance, we conclude that (present and future) human wellbeing cannot be reached by a complete substitution of particular capitals by others of different nature.

It is regarded that the integration of strong sustainability in SD strategizing and implementation strengthens the ‘original’ understanding of SD (focus on decent conditions for FG). Moreover, it would stir SD away from the preponderance of the economic reasoning, to the social and environmental aspects of sustainability. Furthermore, I consider that SI is the right vehicle to favor the full acknowledgement of planetary boundaries and ensure that strong sustainability integrates SD in concrete and socially transformative ways.

Integrating Future Generations Wellbeing in SI Practices

The increase in the world’s population, the greater production and consumption of products and energy have been causing impacts on the environment, which compromise a sustainable future. This situation must be addressed promptly and efficiently, and SI can back a transformation towards sustainability. With the creation of the role of ombudspersons or the establishment of ‘guardians for FG’, in Wales and Hungary , the interests of future people can be systematically contemplated in the development and assessment of (SD) policies and strategies. Such initiatives are proof that SI can have a great impact in this matter, as well as being examples of innovation themselves. It is argued that the (circumscribed) success of such initiatives can be further amplified if the FG representatives have available a conceptual toolkit that acknowledges the specificities of what FG wellbeing might entail. Having this in mind, I defend the inclusion of irreplaceable goods in their vocabulary, so as to steer the design and implementation of developmental actions towards the insurance of, at least, sufficient conditions for future people. The adoption of irreplaceable goods as a governance tool would have repercussions in the set of criteria used to elaborate policies, strategies and even technologies. Among FG representatives, they and the institutions with these responsibilities would have to evaluate actions and strategies over their impact on these goods, to not neglect their duties towards the assurance of wellbeing for future people. Such assessment would expand the time frame of examination, mitigating the potential negative effects of short-termism.

In circumstances where such goods would be affected, they have to examine if there would be a risk to their level of (future) sufficiency. If there would be the possibility of a decrease in the quality and/or quantity of irreplaceable goods below this threshold, the FG representatives would have to advocate for not spending these goods due to their low or impossible substitutability.

On the overall, FG representatives and related institutions would advocate or create initiatives and/or policies dedicated to saving and/or ameliorating the levels and quality of irreplaceable goods. When those capitals whose quality and/or quantity are presently above a sufficient threshold, it would still be morally valid for them to promote savings out of precaution, i.e., the precautionary principle would be a valid reason for avoiding over expenditure.

There are two (moral) justifications for applying the precautionary principle to endorse the nonuse of irreplaceable goods that might be at (immediate or future perceived) risk: threat and uncertainty. The fact that sufficient levels of (future) human wellbeing are at risk if the quantity and/or quality of goods are jeopardized justifies the threat dimension of the precautionary principle. Additionally, when future eco-socio-economic scenarios are involved, there is always uncertainty associated with projections and estimations, which might serve as a justification for supporting actions that promote savings of irreplaceable goods.

Another important implication of the inclusion of irreplaceable goods in SD governance is the necessary consideration of possible investments for the improvement of the present levels and quality of such goods. There might not be a (moral) obligation towards the implementation of such strategies, but at least, there is a (moral) desirability towards actions that could improve the actual levels and quality of irreplaceable goods.

The above suggestions and explanations refer to the macrolevel level of application of the notion of irreplaceable goods. However, I do not exclude the possibility of existing implications at lower levels. As FG representatives are part of (governance) structures that include other actors, there are common occasions and spaces where these actors can be influenced by the representatives and by their concrete application of the concept, i.e., the shared spaces of interaction may facilitate a change at mesolevel without an actual targeted strategy for this level. In any case, I believe it would be easier, as a starting point, to have FG representatives and associated institutions applying this notion to a concrete assessment of SD strategies and/or to the design.

The incorporation of irreplaceable goods in their discourses and processes can have a considerable impact on other SI practices. As mentioned in the introduction, social movements such as ‘Fridays for Future’ (or ‘School Strike for Climate’) would also benefit from having at their disposal a notion of essential goods that integrates sufficient and long-term perspectives as means of strengthening FG interests, specifically because FG interests might conflict with standard approaches to SD.

It might be argued that for the assessment of actions in relation to FG wellbeing or even for the application in the SD social movements, it is necessary to have a list of what are or could be exactly irreplaceable goods. Since this article is not specifically dedicated to a full explanation of irreplaceable goods, I do not enter into theoretical characterization details. However, I offer here a practical approach to discern if a good should be integrated into this category. If a particular good (or capital) is absolutely necessary for sufficient levels of wellbeing and its levels and quality are currently under threat then it is deemed an irreplaceable good, i.e., it must comply with both premises. The fact that this proposed classification is open, offers the additional benefit of allowing stakeholder involvement in the operational classification of particular goods. Additionally, this definition is adaptable to evolving developmental circumstances (e.g., regional and temporal factors) and future eco-socio-economic conditions.

In sum, the concept of irreplaceable goods can materialize and uphold FG wellbeing because it engages strong sustainability in SD practices. However, the concern for future people still needs a voice in (concrete) strategizing, and SI has an essential role to play here. If environmental-oriented social movements, organizations and FG representatives include in their discourses and practices the notion of irreplaceable goods, they will be attempting concretely to ensure that people in the future will have, at least, sufficient living conditions.

Conclusions

The role of SI in the swift and successful implementation of SD is being more than ever recognized by individuals and organizations. Despite the relevant place of innovation in many SD strategies, it still lacks ensuring that the interests and wellbeing of FG are systematically taken into account. The fact that SI can have a moral dimension associated with a potential change in the societal framework of beliefs and values predisposes it to be an ideal instrument for ensuring that future people enjoy, at least, sufficient living conditions.

To ascertain that SI will be an instrument towards the concretization of (one of the moral) essences of SD, it is essential to make the notion of FG wellbeing operational at the discourse and practice levels. To accomplish this undertaking, I affirm it is indispensable to routinely integrate the strong sustainability paradigm in SD, which I reason can be achieved when (innovative) SI practices are put in place. To do so, I propose the integration in SI discourses and practices associated with sustainability the notion of irreplaceable goods.

By including this concept in daily practices and/or as justification for actions and strategies, organizations, social movements (macrolevel) and individuals (meso- and micro-level) can legitimately endorse or create initiatives that ensure the levels and/or quality of irreplaceable goods do not fall below (present and future) sufficiency. Moreover, the systematic integration of irreplaceable goods in the SI discourses and practices aimed at SD can have an actual impact on the restructuring of power relations and social dynamics. It would weaken the short-termism still considerably afflicting our current eco-socio-economic development, and by doing so, not only, would it tend to FG interests and wellbeing as well, it would deliver a fairer and more efficient SD.

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