



Mapping out the challenges for social innovation research

Social entrepreneurs and enterprises may have limited resources but they're resourceful and are capable of tackling failed markets, as well as intractable 'wicked' problems. But the key question, according to Pamela Hartigan, Director of Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at Said Business School, Oxford University, is how far can social innovation help forge a new global order that is more sustainable, responsible, and humane than what has gone before?

In short, what can it contribute to new markets, sectors and institutions?

Speaking to INSEAD Knowledge following the recent International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC) 2009 held at Said Business School, Hartigan said social entrepreneurship and enterprise research has now reached a stage of maturity where it is important to go beyond questions concerning definitions, and foster "a new wave of high quality critical research on the topic."

An emerging field and new trends

The emergence of journals such as 'Social Enterprise' and 'Social Entrepreneurship' supports the optimistic view that there is an emerging field of researchers, ISIRC's co-chair Alex Murdock told INSEAD Knowledge. The social innovation research field reaches across a number of academic disciplines such as business, public administration, social policy and psychology. "It is an interesting question as to when, and whether, it will become established as a separate field."

The key message he drew from the ISIRC was that "everyone had much to learn from each other and

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that the possibilities for collaborative and international research were considerable."

Murdock, who is a professor of not-for-profit management and leadership at London South Bank University, says research is likely to switch focus to more overarching theoretical models, drawing on approaches such as governance, from descriptive case studies.

One emerging trend is the issue of public/private boundaries and the ability of social entrepreneurship and enterprises to span these and develop new and innovative ways to work, adds Murdock. There is also the increasing use of network approaches, social returns on investment and performance, as well as scalability and the ability to develop innovation beyond the original site or individual.

The future

In order to know where social innovation is heading, Hartigan feels that we first need to understand what social innovation is.

Social innovation, she says, is conceived as the

outcome of any individual, group, organisational or network activity that combines a distinct social or environmental mission with innovation, around processes, outcomes or context, and a clear market orientation.

The latter includes social enterprises that generate profit but also co-operatives, not-for-profit organisations, charities, voluntary groups, and state actors that demonstrate a performance-driven, competitive, and outward-looking strategic approach to their mission objectives.

Hartigan then draws a parallel between social innovation research and the development of other social science disciplines which use a four-stage sequential process to establish a field-level identity: descriptive research; theory-building; empirical testing of the theory; and finally, applying the theory to existing situations.

“Research in social innovation currently stands between the first and second stage,” says Hartigan. “Descriptive research abounds defining what is and is not social innovation, and the field is beginning to build a theory, drawing upon different established disciplines. But much remains to be done to advance social innovation research that feeds into, and draws upon, its practice.”

As social innovation research is at an early stage, it is “somewhat all over the place” but there is little doubt that scholars have a key role to play in co-creating the field of social innovation and entrepreneurship alongside practitioners and policymakers, argues Hartigan. The most important push is to incorporate more practitioners into this discussion.

“While this is a continuous struggle in academia in general, it can be least tolerated in relation to social innovation and entrepreneurship, as these are strongly grounded in practice, and divorcing the two will only make research irrelevant as it fails to be nurtured by, and act as a support to, the practitioners,” she adds.

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