

Shortcomings of social innovation definitions and a proposed new definition

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation (SI) research still struggles with problems of definition (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017) and lacks a shared analytical framework and measurement methods. This lack of coherence is reflected in two bold, diametrically opposing views on SI research. „SI is an eclectic area, since differences still prevail also within the same research communities, revealing some intra-group fragmentation.” (van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016: 1932) In contrast, other authors propose that SI can – and should – be the main building block of a new, comprehensive innovation paradigm. (Howaldt 2019) The sheer number of SI definitions tends to confirm the former view: 252 definitions are identified in Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017). This paper argues that despite this plethora of SI definitions there is a need for a new SI definition for two major reasons. First, most of the extant definitions suffer from conceptual flaws: (i) the purpose and the nature of innovation is conflated; (ii) diffusion of SI is ‘required’; (iii) positive impacts of SI is stipulated in most SI definitions; (iv) the unit of analysis is also part of these definitions. Second, SI definitions seek to capture the essential features of SI. However, there are as many types of ‘essence’ as angles to analyse SI purposes, processes, and impacts. The abundance of SI definitions forcefully illustrates that it is impossible to construct a generic and essentialist SI definition. Therefore, the paper proposes a generic and nominal (non-essentialist) definition.

JEL codes: O35

Keywords: Social innovation (SI), Purpose of SI, The nature of change processes, Diffusion of SI, Impacts of SI, Unit of analysis in SI research

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Társadalmi innováció: definíciós problémák és javaslat egy új definícióra

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ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

A társadalmi innovációk (TI) kutatása még mindig definíciós problémákkal küzd (Edwards-Schachter és Wallace 2017), nincs közös, széles körben elfogadott elemzési keret, és ebből következően a megfelelő mérési módszerek is hiányoznak. A TI kutatások állapotát gyökeresen ellentétesen ítélik meg sokat idézett szerzők. „A TI egy eklektikus kutatási terület, mivel még mindig a különbségek uralkodnak a kutatóközösségeken belül, ami a csoporton belüli széttagoltságról árulkodik”. (van der Have és Rubalcaba 2016: 1932) Ezzel szemben más szerzők azt javasolják, hogy a TI egy új, átfogó innovációs paradigma fő építőköve lehet – és kell is legyen. (Howaldt 2019) Az TI definícióinak száma inkább az előbbi nézetet erősíti: Edwards-Schachter és Wallace (2017) 252 definíciót talált. Ez a tanulmány amellet érvel, hogy a TI definíciók megdöbbentően nagy száma ellenére is szükség egy új TI definícióra, mégpedig két ok miatt. Először, a legtöbb létező meghatározás definíciós hibáktól szenved: (i) az innováció célját és természetét összemoszák; (ii) a TI terjedését „követelik meg”; (iii) a TI pozitív hatásait rögzítik ezek a definíciók; és (iv) az elemzési szint része a legtöbb TI definíciónak. Másodsor, a TI definíciók a TI alapvető jellemzőit igyekeznek megragadni. A „lényegnek” azonban annyi változata van, ahány szemszögből az TI céljait, folyamatait és hatásait elemezni lehet. A TI definíciók nagy száma már önmagában is jól mutatja, hogy lehetetlen általános és esszencialista TI definíciót alkotni. Ezért a dolgozat egy általános és nominális (nem-esszencialista) TI definícióra tesz javaslatot.

JEL: O35

Kulcsszavak: Társadalmi innováció (TI), A TI célja, Az innovációs folyamat jellege, A TI terjedése, A TI lehetséges hatásai, Elemzési szintek

1 INTRODUCTION¹

Social innovation (SI) has become a widely used term – for some observers even a buzzword – in recent years. It is often portrayed as a solution – almost a panacea – to many different types of societal and environmental problems, both by policy-makers and SI proponents. SI research, however, still struggles with problems of definition (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017) and lacks a shared analytical framework and measurement methods. This lack of coherence is reflected in two bold, diametrically opposing views on SI research. „SI is an eclectic area, since differences still prevail also within the same research communities, revealing some intra-group fragmentation.” (van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016: 1932) In contrast, other authors propose that SI can – and indeed, should – be the main building block of a new, comprehensive innovation paradigm. (Howaldt 2019) The sheer number of SI definitions tends to confirm the former view: 76 definitions are reviewed in Edwards-Schachter Calò et al. (2012); 12 “archetypal definitions” are assessed in Benneworth and Cunha (2015); 252 definitions are identified in Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017); 48 ones by Ettore et al. (2015); while 11 ones are considered in Bulakovskiy (2021).

There is wide variety of SI definitions is understood – and interpreted – as a sign of lack of maturity, or theoretical sophistication by some researchers: “research on SI has been criticized for being *fragmented, non-cumulative*, while *the SI concept* itself has been *ambiguous* due to a plurality of definitions, perspectives and research settings” (van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016: 1932, emphasis added).

We can also perceive this diversity of SI definitions as a strong impetus to clarify its meaning, the actors involved in SI processes, their objectives, activities and interactions, as well as SI processes, their outcomes and impacts – and thus advance the measurement of SI – and derive apt policy implications. These objectives would be way too ambitious for a single author in a single study. Hence, this paper is aimed at discussing the main features of extant SI definitions, relying on review articles (Benneworth et al. 2015; Benneworth and Cunha 2015; Bulakovskiy 2021; Calò et al. 2024; do Adro et al. 2020; Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017; Gök et al. 2023; Havas 2016; Havas et al. 2023; Howaldt et al. 2014; Martins et al. 2022; Phillips et al. 2024; Rüede and Lurtz 2012; Satalkina and Steiner 2022; van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016; Weber et al. 2024), as well as on own experience gained when analysing SI cases. Linear and systemic SI models are discussed in Havas and Molnár (2022) and Weber et al. (2024a), a multi-channel interactive learning model of SI is introduced in Havas and Molnár (2020), while a new approach to SI processes is discussed in Bodenheimer and Weber (2024). The literature on the attempts and difficulties to measure SI is also rapidly expanding. (Cunha and Benneworth 2020; Havas 2016; Krasnopolskaya and Korneeva 2020; Krlev et al. 2014; Krlev and Terstriep 2022; Lee et al. 2021; Mihci 2020; Mulgan et al. 2023; Shi et al. 2024; Schmitz et al. 2013; Terstriep et al. 2021; Uceta et al. 2016, 2020)

This paper is not yet another review, nor a metareview. The body of reviews is expanding at such a pace that even the number of scoping reviews is increasing rather fast, focussing on certain fields where SIs are introduced, for example, *concerning cross-sector collaboration*, that is, collective initiatives involving joint work between any combination of public, not-for-profit, and for-profit actors (Galego et al. 2021; Pache et al. 2022), *co-creation* of SI with

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citizens (Voorberg et al. 2015), *education* (Maldonado-Mariscal and Alijew 2023; Petrova Bariakova 2019), *energy* (Dall-Orsoletta et al. 2022; Wittmayer et al. 2022; Wittmayer and Rogge 2023), *environmental issues and sustainable development* (Haskell et al. 2021; Jha and Sachan 2023; Lu 2024; Ziegler et al. 2022), *health* (van Niekerk et al. 2021) and *public services* (Husebø et al. 2021; Merlin-Brogniart et al. 2022).

Further, the paper considers neither social entrepreneurship, which can be understood as a hybrid form of innovation in the ‘spectrum’ of business vs social innovation, nor the rather strange, controversial, or even misleading term of corporate social innovation. The interested reader is referred to reviews on these concepts and practices labelled by these terms, as well as collections of case descriptions. (Collina et al. 2023; Defourny and Nyssens (eds) 2021a, 2021b; Dionisio and Raupp de Vargas 2020; Grobler 2023; João-Roland et al. 2020; Phillips et al. 2015; Samidi et al. 2021; Sottini et al. 2024)

The paper argues that despite this plethora of SI definitions there is a need for a new SI definition for two major reasons. First, most SI definitions suffer from one or even more types of conceptual flaws: (i) the purpose and the nature of innovation is conflated; (ii) diffusion of SI is ‘required’; (iii) positive impacts of SI is stipulated in a large number of definitions; and (iv) the unit of analysis is part of some SI definitions. Second, the extant definitions seek to capture the essential features of SI. However, there are as many types of “essence” as angles to analyse SI. The abundance of SI definitions forcefully illustrates that it is impossible to construct a generic and essentialist SI definition. Therefore, the paper proposes a generic and nominal (non-essentialist) SI definition.

2 BUSINESS INNOVATION DEFINITIONS: A YARDSTICK

For decades, various actors have devoted major efforts to study business innovations conducted by companies to improve their performance. Researchers, policy analysts, and policy-makers want – and need – to understand the dynamics: why innovations occur; how and by whom those are developed, implemented, modified and diffused; what factors and mechanisms make a difference between success and failure. Although many policy-makers, journalists, natural scientists and other opinion leaders tend to think of innovation as a ground-breaking technological idea, the modern literature on business innovations is based on a different understanding. First, innovation is not an idea, but a solution introduced into practice. Second, not only path-breaking new solutions need to be analysed as innovations; these new solutions are distinguished by their degree of novelty: a solution can be new (i) to the firm introducing it, (ii) to a given market, or (iii) to the world.

Classical economists had thoroughly analysed major change processes without using the term “innovation”. They were interested in explaining various types of changes by considering complex relationships, including the co-evolution of technologies (in a broad sense, that is, both products and processes), organisations, markets, institutions, and various societal features. They had also paid attention to the diversity of contexts, in which changes occurred.

Neoclassical economists dropped these issues as they focussed their attention on a short-term issue, namely allocative efficiency. By turning the efficient use of available resources into their central research question, they followed a static approach, neglecting how to find or create new inputs, especially new knowledge. Hence, defining innovation was a non-issue for neo-classical economists. Their main objective was to develop sophisticated models of general equilibrium and by doing so to turn economics into a ‘hard science’, exemplified by Newtonian physics in the 19th century.

Then *Schumpeter* reintroduced dynamic analyses into economics. He had a broad understanding of innovation, going beyond new products and processes, encompassing the

opening up of a new market; the conquest of a new source of supply of raw materials or semi-manufactured goods; the formation of new organisations to restructure an entire sector, e.g., the creation of a monopoly or breaking up of a monopoly.

The European Union and the OECD have made significant efforts to measure R&D and innovation activities since the 1960s and indeed achieved noteworthy progress (Gault, 2020; Gault (ed.) 2023; Smith, 2005) with the intention to provide comparable data sets as a solid basis for assessing R&D and innovation performance and thereby guiding policy-makers in devising appropriate policies. A series of handbooks have been jointly developed to establish guidelines on how to measure various aspects of R&D and innovation activities

Technological (product, service, and process) innovations, together with non-technological (organisational and marketing) innovations are defined in the third edition of Oslo Manual: “An innovation is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations.” (OECD 2005: 46) The more recent edition only distinguishes product and business process innovations, with the latter including process, organisational, and marketing innovations: “A business innovation is a new or improved product or business process (or combination thereof) that differs significantly from the firm's previous products or business processes and that has been introduced on the market or brought into use by the firm.” (OECD 2018: 20)

Clearly, these definitions are less comprehensive than Schumpeter’s understanding of innovation for an important practical reason: it would be extremely difficult, time-consuming, and thus costly to measure all aspects and forms of business innovations. For measurement purposes, however, these seem to be acceptable. But it is important to keep in mind these limitations: the data collected by following the joint Eurostat–OECD definition and guidelines to measure business innovation can only provide a partial picture. For certain analytical purposes other methods are needed to obtain the necessary pieces of information, e.g., interviews with experts and managers, as well as processing historical data on scientific, technological, business, policy, and societal developments, relevant company reports, and trade journals.

This paper takes this definition of business innovation, together with the closely related notions of the level of change (unit of analysis) and degree of novelty, as a ‘benchmark’ when considering SI definitions. There are *several key features* of this definition. First, an innovation is the *implementation* of a new solution: it is not just idea, it must be introduced into practice. Second, when an innovation is introduced even by a sole actor, it is an innovation, regardless of the breadth of its *diffusion* (or the ‘scale’ of its application). Thus, diffusion is not part of the definition of innovation; it is not required by definition to be ‘qualified’ as innovation. Third, the *impacts* of business innovations are not specified in the definition, either. They might have positive, neutral, or negative impacts on the firm that introduced those, on other firms and organisations, on various social groups, or on the environment. Fourth, *the unit of analysis* is always the firm that introduces a certain innovation or a set of interrelated innovations; it does not change at the discretion of authors using the term. No doubt, the unit of analysis depends on the research question as the level of change vary in practice, and thus has to be diverse in analyses as well.

3 SOCIAL INNOVATION DEFINITIONS

There is a wide variety of SI definitions. Probably the most widely accepted ones are the following two ‘variations on the same theme’:

„Social innovations are new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations.” (Murray et al. 2010)

“Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. Specifically, [...] social innovations [are] new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act.” (BEPA 2010)

Just to illustrate the diversity of SI definitions, a few other ones are also recalled here, some of which are stretching the definition too far, conflating social impacts of business innovations with social innovation:

“A partnership between private enterprise and public interest that produces profitable and sustainable change for both sides; innovations that have business as well as community payoffs.” (Kanter 1999, cited in Logue 2019)

“The term social innovation ... refers to the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organise interpersonal activities, or social interactions, to meet one or more common goals.” (Mumford 2002, cited in Logue 2019)

“The application of innovative, practical, sustainable, business-like approaches that achieve positive social and/or environmental change, with an emphasis on low-income or underserved populations.”

3.1 Purpose and nature of change

As shown above, there is a dominant, almost ‘monopolistic’ tendency in social innovation studies to juxtapose social innovations with technological ones. Most likely, this approach has been shaped by the history of how these concepts were brought into policy debates rather than based on any systematic theoretical considerations. The social innovation concept entered policy debates around societal challenges and societal transformation in the early 2000s, while in previous periods innovation studies were dominated by scholars whose work was coordinated by – or followed – the OECD’s influential Technology and Economy Programme on (predominantly technological) innovations by firms.

Social innovation recently gained increasing attention as a means to solve the grand challenges of the 21st century. (Benneworth et al. 2015) At the EU policy level, a cornerstone was the Renewed Social Agenda launched by the Barroso Commission in 2008.² Although the 2005 edition of the Oslo Manual had already been published at this time, strongly emphasising the need to measure both technological and non-technological business innovations, social innovation scholars tended to continue contrasting social innovations with technological ones.

Given the theoretical and practical relevance of SI, it is time to surpass this distinction with a new one, based on conceptual considerations. This paper, therefore, proposes two key dimensions along which innovations can be distinguished both for analytical and practical – especially policy – ends: the principal *purpose* and the *nature* of innovations. Their *purpose* can be towards (i) social ends: to tackle a societal problem or create new societal opportunities, or (ii) business ends: improve the performance of a firm or create a new firm. In real life we also observe hybrid innovations, those pursuing a societal purpose, but following a business

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_08_1070

logic, and thus using business organisational forms and business methods and practices. Examples include firms operating similarly to their competitors in a given market – but employing people suffering from various types of disadvantages and/or discriminations. Other social enterprises offer products and services addressing a social objective, while their aim is to stay economically viable or even profitable. When they make profit, they reinvest it into their cause rather than paying it out to investors (either to develop their capacities to address the social need or fund other social projects).³

As for the *nature* of innovations, that is, what is changed (or: what its object is), innovations can be purely technological, non-technological,⁴ or a combination of the two, that is, socio-technical. When characterising a given innovation, it is crucial to maintain a ‘hierarchy’ between these dimensions: the purpose defines if it is a business (profit-oriented), social or hybrid innovation, while its nature refers to its object: what is being changed by it. This distinction is crucial both from a theoretical and a policy point of view. For example, new organisational solutions can be an integral part of a firm’s innovation activity or can be elements in social innovation processes. The types, ways, and frequency of contacts among people, as well as their communication and co-operation channels, methods, and patterns are changed in both cases; still, in terms of purpose, the first one is a business innovation, while the latter one is a social innovation. Further, changes in social practices (networks, institutions, cognitive frames, etc.), without an explicit purpose to tackle a societal problem or create a new societal opportunity are not SI (in terms of purpose), even if it may have major social consequences. A trivial example is the impact of the widespread diffusion of television sets: that was a business innovation, causing immense changes in the every-day life of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people.

Following the two dimensions of innovations presented above, one can identify two main types of definitions: type A) ones focus on the purpose of innovation; and type B) ones focus on the nature of change processes of innovation (or object of change).

A type A) SI definition, that puts the emphasis on the purpose of innovation, will be introduced in section 4. This approach is also taken in several EU policy documents (e.g., European Commission 2017), where the term social innovation is defined as part of the "European Pillar of Social Rights" to reaffirm the EU's commitment to equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions, and social protection and social inclusion.

Type B) definitions of social innovation stress that SI is aimed at introducing new social practices and/or changing social relations: “Changes in [human] structure and organization are social innovations.” (Simms 2006) Howaldt and Schwarz (2010: 21) offer a detailed definition that also focuses primarily on the nature of change rather than on its purpose: “A social innovation is a new combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices. An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it, conveyed by the market or ‘non/without profit’, is socially accepted and diffused widely throughout society or in certain societal sub-areas, transformed depending on circumstances and ultimately institutionalized as new social practice or made routine.” The purpose of an innovation is deliberately left open in their definition and can be

³ For-profit firms can also aim at serving the needs of disadvantaged people or addressing other societal challenges with new goods or processes, see, e.g. Andries et al. (2019).

⁴ For reasons of clarity, it seems to be preferable to speak of non-technological innovation rather than of social innovation (in terms of nature) to avoid any misunderstanding with the use of the term social innovations (in terms of purpose). However, we need to be aware that some authors refer to social innovation primarily in terms of their nature (e.g., Howaldt and Schwarz 2010; Howaldt et al. 2014).

either business-oriented or social, while, as they explicate, “in essence innovation occurs on the level of social behavioural patterns, routines, practices and settings” (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010: 24).

Moreover, they argue with reference to Lindhult’s work that “(t)he commonly found normative link between social innovation and socially esteemed values overlooks the fact that different purposes and interests can indeed be pursued with a social innovation depending on the related utility and prevailing rationale and that these accordingly by no means have to be regarded as ‘good’ per se in the sense of being socially desirable depending on interests and social attribution in order to be called social innovation, ‘there is no inherent goodness in social innovation’ (Lindhult 2008: 44), their utility or effects can also be ambivalent depending on a point of view, just as with technical innovations. Expanded assessment criteria are also needed in evaluating social innovation and a social discussion process must be initiated enabling an exchange of different perspectives and rationales.” (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010: 27).

A shorter, and thus less complex version of this definition was presented in Howaldt and Hochgerner (2018: 19): “Taking its cue from Schumpeter’s basic definition of innovation, social innovation is seen as a new combination of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts.”

Another brief, type B definition is offered by Avelino et al. (2019: 197): “We conceptualise SI as changing social relations, involving new ways of doing, organising, framing and knowing.” A more recent version of this definition by some co-authors of Avelino et al. (2019) is a mind-blowing ‘offspring’ of this one. On the hand it does mention purpose, but it ‘allows’ any purpose, on the other: “this paper works with a non-teleological understanding that leaves the ends open. We agree with the common understanding that SI involves innovation that somehow seeks to alleviate societal problems, but we do not take it to be inherently ‘good’. *Colonial history, Nazism and communism have shown abhorring examples of practices that can be classified as social innovation.* Furthermore, many social innovations seem to elude judgements of either good or bad. Seeking to explore that ethical ambiguity of many social innovations (Cf. Wittmayer et al., 2020), we define SI as purposive changes in social relations, involving new ways of doing, organizing, framing and knowing (Avelino et al., 2019).” (Pel et al. 2023: 1–2, emphasis added)

Another shocking example is offered by Gillwald (2000): depending on the theory one uses, the Ku Klux Klan can either be called a social innovation or not. It is a social innovation if one uses “social change” as the criterion, but it is not, when one uses the purpose as the gauge. (referred to in Rüede and Lurtz 2012)

It would be highly desirable – both from a theoretical and an ethical point of view – to establish a strong consensus: new social structures and practices imposed upon the entire population of countries by dictators as fundamental social changes are not social innovations. When almost any social change is labelled SI, this notion’s coverage is way too broad. It becomes shallow, very close to be empty, and thus it loses its analytical value.

There are also definitions incorporating both aspects (i.e., combine types A and B definitions). A prime example is the widely used one coined by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers: “Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. (...) Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act.” (BEPA 2010)

This definition is well in line with the findings from reviews of social innovation literature. Based on a literature analysis of 318 sources, Rüede and Lurtz (2012) identified the following three top categories of social innovation definitions: i) social innovation for “doing something good in/for society” (127 contributions); ii) social innovation for “changing society in terms of practices and/or structures” (52 contributions); and iii) social innovation for “contributing to local development” (39) contributions). Similarly, in a more recent and more comprehensive literature review, Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017) found that social innovation mostly targets “social goals/social values” or addresses “unmet social needs”.

To maintain the still widely used juxtaposition between technological and social innovation turns out to be rather artificial, as most innovations rely to some degree both on new technologies and new social practices (more generally: non-technological changes). Acknowledging this, the OECD has re-phrased its framework and coined the term “business innovation” to stress their focus on innovation driven by profit motives, considering both technological and non-technological forms of innovation motivated by that purpose.

It is therefore important to keep in mind for analytical purposes, as well as from the angle of policy-making that both social and business innovations can – and in most cases do – rely on technological innovations. A prominent example of this for social innovations are “digital social innovations”. Some purely technological innovations can be found primarily in the business realm to enhance productivity, competitiveness, or growth. Yet, when radical innovations are introduced – either new consumer products are being produced or new production equipment is applied – non-technological innovations, especially new organisational solutions and managerial methods, are also required (Pavitt 1999; Tidd et al. 1997).

To explicitly consider the purpose of SI is also important to keep a clear distinction between social innovation and social change. “What distinguishes social innovations from other manifestations of social change is that they are *driven by certain actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of* better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices.” (Howaldt and Hochgerner 2018: 19, emphasis added) It should be noted, however, that SI is confined (restricted) to social practices in this definition, that is, neglecting the diversity of SI activities and processes. Moreover, positive impacts of SI are also stipulated in this definition. (see section 3.3 on this issue)

3.2 Diffusion of SI is ‘required’ in the definition

Clearly, it is crucial to distinguish the introduction of a given SI from its diffusion, just as in the case of business innovations. (Havas et al. 2023) Otherwise these phenomena neither can be analysed in a thorough way, nor can be devised, monitored and evaluated in an appropriate, useful manner. Hence, SI researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and evaluators all need to keep in mind the difference between a given SI and its diffusion. (cf. Davies and Simon 2013) However, diffusion is an element of several SI definitions:

“An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it, conveyed by the market or ‘non/without profit’, is *socially accepted and diffused widely throughout society* or in certain societal sub-areas, transformed depending on circumstances and ultimately institutionalized as new social practice or made routine.” (Howaldt and Schwartz 2010: 21, emphasis added)

Those SI definitions that stress social acceptance and/or macro level changes (e.g., Heiskala, 2007 and Moulaert et al., 2013) in essence ‘coalesce’ innovation and diffusion, while analytically these should be distinguished. To put it simple, tackling a social issue in a single location cannot be dismissed as an SI just because it has not been diffused. Of course, this distinction has practical relevance as well, including SI policy preparation and evaluation.

3.3 Positive impacts of SI is stipulated in the definition

The overwhelming majority of extant SI definitions stipulate *positive impacts as a crucial property of SI*. A telling example is that 7 of the 11 SI definitions reviewed in Bulakovskiy (2021) do that. (Table A1) It is rather worrisome, as this paper by Bulakovskiy is a methodological framework for building local ecosystems for social innovation, published by the OECD, and thus it is likely to be highly influential both among SI analysts and practitioners.

Further examples to illustrate this definitional mistake:

„Social innovations are new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need – *more effectively than existing ones* – and lead to new or *improved* capabilities and relationships and *better use of* assets and resources.” (The Young Foundation, 2012: 18, emphasis added)

“acceptable *progressive solutions* for exclusion, deprivation, alienation, lack of wellbeing; (...) *actions that contribute positively to significant human progress and development* (...) *improvement of social relations* – micro relations between individuals and people, but also macro relations between classes and other social groups” (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013: 17, emphasis added)

“Social innovations are changes in the cultural, normative or regulative structures (or classes) of society that *enhance* its collective power resources and *improve* its economic and social performance” (Heiskala, 2007: 74, emphasis added)

“Social Innovation refers to novel combinations of ideas and distinct forms of collaboration that transcend established institutional contexts with the effect of *empowering and (re)engaging* vulnerable groups either in the process of social innovation or as a result of it” (Rehfeld *et al.*, 2015: 6, emphasis added)

“Social innovation refers to new ideas that *resolve* existing social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges *for the benefit of people and planet*. A true social innovation is system-changing—it permanently alters the perceptions, behaviours and structures that previously gave rise to these challenges. Even more simply, a social innovation is an idea that *works for the public good*.” (Centre for Social Innovation, 2008, emphasis added)

“(...) we define social innovation as: any new object or process able to address a social need which change the socio-economic structure and/or improve the people’s quality of life.” (Ettore *et al.* 2015: 137–138)

Most scholars have assumed for long that business innovations also have favourable impacts. This view is shared by many policy-makers, beyond the STI policy domain as well. Business innovations – in particular technological ones – are supposed to lead to improvements in the properties of goods; productivity and thus financial performance of firms; health conditions of people; the use of inputs and so forth. Ultimately, all these changes amount to an increase in the wealth of nations. It should be added, however, that business innovations, characterised as creative destruction, have a destructive element as well: incumbent firms need to adjust to new circumstances by abandoning some of their previous activities, reducing labour force, reorganising their production and business processes, changing management and other practices, etc. It is a crucial feature of market economies that firms are driven out of business by more efficient competitors. The net impact is still assumed to be positive, given the advent and subsequent rise of the new entrants.

This still widely held, optimistic assumption concerning business innovations has been questioned more recently.⁵ Probably the most widely known cases of destructive business innovations by now are those financial ones that have been introduced in the name of ‘dispersing the risk’, but in essence allowed a few, well-informed and well-positioned actors to earn substantial profits while putting a huge burden on society as a whole (Soete 2013: 141–142). The environmental burden of new products and technologies is also rather high in many cases.

Social innovation may also have a ‘dark side’ (Nicholls *et al.*, 2015: 5–6). Clearly, no society is homogenous, not even those social groups that are marginalised and disempowered: their members still have their own values and views, and thus might perceive a certain change process and its effects in different ways. Moreover, a particular solution that improves the situation of some groups can, in fact, affect other groups negatively – and not because they perceive in that way, but as an actual (‘neutrally measurable’) impact, e.g., their access to funds could become more limited.⁶

The way, in which Lundvall (2007) uses the term ‘function’ in relation to national systems of innovation⁷ might be applied to refine the definition of SI: instead of stipulating a positive impact in the definition itself, that could be stated as a function (the principal objective) of SI.⁸ The new SI definition, proposed in section 4, has been devised following this approach.

3.4 Unit of analysis and level of change

Innovation system scholars have clearly identified the level and types of change. Business innovations at the level of *goods* (products and services) can be incremental and radical,⁹ and the latter even disruptive. Incremental innovations lead to a moderate change or improvement to existing goods, services, processes, and solutions, but do not challenge the existing artefacts or solution fundamentally. The latter is done, in turn, by radical innovations, which are also more likely to contribute to transformations.

Moving to the next level of changes, from time to time a ‘bundle’ of radically new products, services, and/or production equipment and processes are introduced, which is termed as the emergence of a new *technological system*. A new technological system deeply affects several existing sectors at the same time or even creates new sectors. The diffusion of these radical technological innovations – e.g., electrical household equipment or plastic goods –

⁵ For a short overview of the literature stressing the negative societal and environmental impacts of business innovations, see, e.g., Havas and Molnár (2020).

⁶ Havas and Molnár (2020) present two examples of the ‘dark side’ of social innovation: inadequate interventions can even further aggravate the position of marginalised groups, namely poor people in several continents and the socially excluded Roma in Hungary.

⁷ „If I were to assign a function to the national system of innovation I would be more specific than defining it as just ‘pursuing innovation’ and propose that the function is to contribute to economic performance on the basis of processes of creation and diffusion of knowledge. This corresponds to the normative focus of those who pioneered the NSI-concept.” (Lundvall 2007: 15)

⁸ Among the numerous definitions of SI, we have found one with this type of additional explanation: “Taking its cue from Schumpeter’s basic definition of innovation, social innovation is seen as a new combination of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts. What distinguishes social innovations from other manifestations of social change is that they are *driven by certain actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of* better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices.” (Howaldt and Hochgerner 2018: 19, emphasis added) It should be noted, however, that SI is confined (restricted) to social practices in this definition, that is, neglecting the diversity of SI activities and processes.

⁹ Although this distinction is not applied to analyse process, organisational, marketing, financial or business model innovations, it can be readily extended to characterise those as well.

necessitates financial and organisational innovations, new cognitive frames, behavioural changes, modified or new curricula to train (or retrain) the producers of these new goods, as well as finding adequate ways and forms of “educating” the consumers (users) of these new goods. Hence, a new technological system is a system, indeed: its elements on their own, or in isolation, would not be sufficient to induce significant changes.

When all crucial elements of an economic system – the major materials and inputs, the decisive technologies, business models and processes, the structure of the economy (both in terms of its sectoral composition and the structure of supply and demand), the interactions among businesses, the mindset of decision-makers, the behaviour and preferences of consumers – are being fundamentally changed, we speak of the emergence of a new *techno-economic paradigm*. Clearly, that is a lengthy and cumbersome process, with substantial economic and social costs, as well as societal transformation processes.

In contrast, the level of change (the unit of analysis) varies in many SI definitions, depending on the social problem being analysed. (Table 1) Hence, these definitions are relevant for specific analytical tasks. In contrast, a widely applicable, generic SI definition must not stipulate the level of change. It should be a separate analytical to task when devising or studying an actual SI initiative to establish whether micro, meso, or macro level changes – or a combination of some these – are occurring (would be required for a successful SI).

Table 1: Social innovation definitions and their unit of analysis

Social innovation definitions	Unit of analysis
Godin (2012)	Macro level structures
Drucker (1957)	Macro level structures
Heiskala (2007)	Meso and macro level structures
The Young Foundation (2012)	Micro level
Moulaert et al. (2013)	Micro and macro level
Andries et al. (2019)	Micro level
Rehfeld et al. (2015)	Micro and meso level

Source: own compilation

4 A NOMINAL SI DEFINITION

Most SI definitions aspire to identify the essential features of social innovation. Undoubtedly, these features are appropriate in certain cases, but given the diversity of SI processes, cannot be applied across the board. The plethora of SI definitions also demonstrates that it is impossible to construct a generic and essentialist SI definition. Having considered the major features of the joint Eurostat–OECD definition of business innovations, as well as the conceptual weaknesses of many extant SI definitions, in Havas and Molnár (2020) we have proposed the following generic, minimalist and nominal definition:

Social innovations are novel initiatives or novel combinations of known solutions, aimed at tackling a societal problem or creating new societal opportunities, introduced into practice.

Societal problems can be identified by a person, a social group affected by the problem, external actors, or jointly. Similarly, potential new societal opportunities can be identified by a social group, which is likely to benefit from this new opportunity, external actors, or jointly. The level of intended changes and the type of intended changes should be determined when an actual SI is analysed. The same goes for the outcomes and impacts of a given SI.

Having reviewed 172 articles on social innovation, van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016: 1932) have identified two ‘core conceptual elements’ that need to be included in “any attempt to create an overarching definition for the field” [of SI]: “SI encompasses 1) a change in social relationships, -systems, or -structures, and 2) such changes serve a shared human need/goal or solve a socially relevant problem”. Our definition to some extent is in line with this way of thinking, but also has its distinguishing properties, discussed below.

One implication of this new definition is the distinction between social change and social innovation. The former can be an intended or unintended result of various processes, while in the case of the latter there is always an intention to achieve certain changes to tackle a societal problem or create new societal opportunities.

There are three distinctive features of this new SI definition. First, it stresses the intention of social innovators – but does not stipulate that a given SI must achieve its objectives. The assumption of automatically achieving the set goal entails a linear approach to the process of social innovation. Just as other types of innovations, SI is a learning process. This definition can be, therefore, applied to analyse failed social innovations, partially successful ones, or those with mixed impacts. By analysing these various types of SI, practitioners and policy-makers can learn valuable lessons. Second, it can be tailored to an actual case, as several important characteristics of an SI process can be added (determined) on a case-by-case basis, in particular the level and type of intended changes, as well as the main actors, who initiate the SI process. From a different angle, it doesn’t ‘prescribe’ any stage of SI processes, let alone the sequence of these stages. Third, it draws the attention of SI analysts, policy-makers, and practitioners to those SI processes, which intend to create new societal opportunities, i.e., it goes beyond the approach when attempts to tackle a societal problem are considered only.¹⁰

As for the outcomes and impacts of a given SI, the level(s) of change(s) required for its success, and actually occurring during an SI process, as well as its diffusion, these features and phenomena can and should be analysed on a case-by-case basis, i.e., these features must not be included in the SI definition.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has considered the main features of the large number of diverse, extant SI definitions in the ‘mirror’ of the joint Eurostat–OECD definition of business innovations and highlighted four definitional weaknesses, of which at least one is observable in most SI definitions: (i) the purpose and the nature of innovation is conflated; (ii) the diffusion of SI is ‘required’ in the definition; (iii) positive impacts of SI is stipulated in the definition; (iv) the unit of analysis is part of the SI definition. Further, it has also claimed that the extant definitions seek to capture the essential features of SI. However, there are as many types of ‘essence’ as angles to analyse SI. The abundance of SI definitions forcefully illustrates that it is impossible to construct a generic and essentialist SI definition. Therefore, the paper has proposed a generic and nominal (non-essentialist) SI definition. In this new definition social innovation is understood as

- a set of novel initiatives or novel combinations of known solutions to tackle societal problems or create new societal opportunities, introduced into practice

¹⁰ In this respect it follows Drucker (1957), as well as those innovation scholars who stress that innovation policies can contribute to creating new opportunities (e.g., new markets), besides tackling systemic failures.

- an interactive learning process: new initiatives are devised and introduced by various actors: those who are in need, or can benefit from the new opportunities, ‘external’ social innovators, or jointly by these actors
- a co-evolutionary process of
 - social innovation and required or ‘parallel’ (‘supportive’) business innovations
 - various social innovations.

This new understanding of SI would be relevant for analysts, practitioners, and policy-makers. It would be overly optimistic to assume, however, that the proposed new SI definition would be widely accepted. Moreover, diversity is an indispensable source of creativity. Still, it would be useful to arrive at a widely used, widely accepted, relevant SI definition. This is a time-consuming process: first an appropriate SI definition needs to be coined, discussed thoroughly – perhaps occasionally even in a harsh way –, tested in further theoretical and empirical work, and then disseminated by conscious efforts, using a variety of channels and means.

SI scholars and innovation system (IS) scholars can learn from each other. To start with, the joint Eurostat–OECD definition of business innovations can provide some ‘guidance’ as to the essential features of an SI definition.

Thorough longitudinal case studies of social innovations, e.g., those on social housing and fresh water supply (Schimpf *et al.*, 2019; Schimpf and Ziegler, 2019), clearly indicate that in many cases social innovations can only be successful when supported by various types of business innovations, be they product, process, management, organisation, business model or market innovations. (cf. Havas *et al.* 2023) Social innovations, therefore, need to be considered in science, technology, and innovation policy-making processes as well, not only by social innovation policy-makers.

Annex

Table A2: Shortcomings of SI definitions: further examples

Source	Year	Definition
OECD LEED	2000	Social innovation seeks new answers to social problems by identifying and delivering new services that improve the quality of life of individuals and communities and identifying and implementing new labour-market integration processes, competencies, jobs and forms of participation as diverse elements that contribute to improving the position of individuals in the workforce. Social innovations can therefore be seen as dealing with the <i>welfare of individuals and communities</i> , both as consumers and producers. The elements of this welfare are linked with their quality of life and activity. (...) Social innovation is <i>distinct from economic innovation</i> because it is not about introducing new types of production or exploiting new markets in themselves, but is about satisfying new needs not provided for by the market (even if markets intervene later) or creating <i>new, more satisfactory ways</i> of insertion in terms of giving people a place and a role in production.
Moulaert	2005	The <i>satisfaction of alienated human needs</i> through the transformation of social relations: transformations which <i>'improve' the governance systems</i> that guide and regulate the allocation of goods and services meant to satisfy those needs, and which establish new governance structures and organizations (discussion fora, political decision-making systems, interfaces, allocation systems, and so on).
Mulgan et al.	2007	New ideas that address unmet social needs – and <i>that work</i> .
Phills et al.	2008	A novel solution to a social problem that is <i>more effective, efficient, sustainable ... than existing solutions</i> and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.
Murray et al.	2010	Social innovations are new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously <i>meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives)</i> and create new social relationships or collaborations.

Howaldt and Schwarz	2010	A social innovation is new combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices. An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it, conveyed by the market or "non/without profit", is socially accepted and <i>diffused widely</i> throughout society or in certain societal sub-areas, transformed depending on circumstances and ultimately institutionalized as new social practice or made routine.
BEPA	2010	Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and <i>their means</i> . Specifically, [...] social innovations [are] new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously <i>meet social needs</i> (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are <i>not only good for society but also enhance society's capacity to act</i> .
Neumeier	2012	Social innovations can be generally understood as a change in the attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that, in relation to the group's horizon of experiences, leads to new and <i>improved ways</i> of collaborative action in the group and beyond.
European Commission	2013	New ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. It represents new response to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving human well-being. Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means.

Source: own compilation drawing on Bulakovskiy, M. (2021) and Logue (2019)

Note: Definitional weaknesses are indicated by italics

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