

Local Social Innovation to Combat Poverty and Exclusion, Edited by Stijn Oosterlynck, Andreas Novy and Yuri Kazepov, The Policy Press, Bristol ISBN 978-1447338444 published 27 Nov 2019, 276 pages

This is a welcome edited collection about social innovations for fighting poverty. Its understanding of social innovation is inspired by the work of Frank Moulaert (2013) who has written a forward. According to Moulaert and the contributors, social innovations aim to satisfy basic needs, to transform social relations, and to increase capabilities and/or access to resources for a target group. This is more a description than a definition but helpfully encompasses content, processes and goals. Social innovation is quite a crowded field but this book has a strong, distinctive voice, foregrounding governance challenges and empowerment dynamics in the face of persistent poverty.

The volume contains ten chapters which draw together original research with 31 case studies across eight countries (Belgium, Netherlands, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, Spain and Brazil). It is based on results from a project called ImPRovE ('Poverty Reduction in Europe: Social Policy and Innovation') funded by the European Union. The three editors set the scene in 'Governing Local Social Innovations against Poverty across Europe' (Chapter 1). They introduce a social innovation perspective to debates about poverty and welfare, making clear that they understand poverty as lack of participation in society as well as monetary deprivation. A set of governance challenges that underpin the book are outlined and the chapter ends with a brief rationale for case study research and the selection of cases. These are listed in an Appendix with a short (one page) description of each and web links for further information.

The case studies are situated in three policy fields identified as important for fighting poverty, namely work activation, inclusive education and housing (especially in relation to homelessness). They are extremely diverse, operating at different spatial scales and with variations in size, funding sources, targeted groups and the kinds of innovative instruments they use. Some are quite long-established interventions and others much more recent. A few appear to have ceased with the end of project funding (not an unusual outcome in the field of social innovation). Others can demonstrate a more lasting legacy and even an element of mainstreaming. This is an important aspect of their divergence, taken up in a chapter on scale (Chapter 5) and revisited under the heading of 'consolidation' (Chapter 9).

The 'down to earth' projects that comprise the case studies are reported and discussed in each chapter throughout the book. The only exception is chapter 2, 'Historical Trajectory of Social Innovation in the European Union' by Gert Verschraegen, Stijn Oosterlynck, Sebastiano Sabato and Andreas Novy, which does exactly what it says on the tin, recounting how EU strategies and programmes on social innovation have unfolded from the 1970s to the present day. It is in the third chapter entitled 'On Elephants, Butterflies and Lions: Social Protection, Innovation and Investment' (Yuri Kazepov, Tatiana Saruis and Fabio Colombo) that we begin to get to grips with the case studies. The first half overviews 'paradigms' of welfare policy. It does so using the animal metaphor of the chapter title to denote in turn social innovation, social protection and social investment, arguing that the latter most adequately captures recent welfare reforms. A social investment paradigm implies that welfare should build citizens' capacity for resilience over the life course rather than merely compensate individuals in moments of misfortune (Hemerijck, 2015). Social investment is the lion, powerful and assertive. Social protection is a solid, slow moving elephant while social innovation - light, creative and fragile - is represented by the butterfly. The second part of the chapter turns to the case studies and illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the paradigms in different contexts, and how they can variously be mutually reinforcing or undermine each other. Rather than pushing the animal imagery to its limits, the chapter ends by reflecting on the difficulty of alliances or symbiosis.

Four chapters follow that view social innovation for fighting poverty through a series of thematic lenses: Chapter 4 on the welfare mix and modes of governance; Chapter 5 on the 'multi-scalar puzzle'; Chapter 6 on empowerment; and Chapter 7 on equality and diversity. Each chapter is informed by analysis of original primary research evidence from case studies undertaken by the authors. Data and analysis are presented in combinations of narrative text and summary tables. For me, the chapter on equality and diversity by Andreas Novy and Carla Weinzierl is perhaps the most original and enlightening. These authors grapple with the fraught issue of power politics and who gets to define what matters for groups with a long history of oppression (such as informal workers in Brazil and Roma in Europe). Although several case study projects had roots in social movements and participatory social action models, examples of effectively respecting equality and fostering diversity were surprisingly rare. Only two, for example, actually included members of the target groups in their knowledge alliances.

The later chapters turn from substantive social investment dynamics to the bigger issues of knowledge (Chapter 8) and consolidation (Chapter 9). I particularly appreciated chapter 8 'Knowledge for social innovation' in which Andreas Novy, Pieter Cools, Gert Verschraegen and Carla Weinzierl tackle the production and use of knowledge. Focussing on case studies in housing and labour market interventions that also combat waste, they explore some of the strengths and limitations of different kinds of knowledge ranging from official statistics to personal narratives. Local, contextualised, experiential knowledge fosters the co-creation of shared goals and collective implementation. Impact measurement, standardised metrics and cost benefit analysis, on the other hand, are more likely to support diffusion and upscaling. Chapter 9, 'Consolidating Social Innovation' by Yuri Kazepov, Tatiana Saruis and Fabio Colombo picks up on diffusion and upscaling. They contend that either or both of these - together with institutionalisation - can lead to survival, development and (occasionally) integration into the mainstream. They discern 'critical junctures' for consolidation in the form of political opportunity, legitimacy and funding but no single best practice, hierarchy or chronological sequence. It is notable, although not discussed in any depth, that the case studies show almost no innovation in funding. There are a few moves towards marketisation (bringing attendant costs to mission), one instance of crowdfunding and none at all of instruments such as outcome investing. In the concluding Chapter (10), Stijn Oosterlynck, Andreas Novy and Yuri Kazepov revisit current welfare policy and the social investment paradigm. They observe through reflection on the case studies that under its dominance local social innovations can sometimes become instruments of macro-level economic policy and lack focus on collective empowerment, thus weakening their transformative potential. This is particularly true in labour market activation and sometimes education, whereas housing can prove at least a partial exception.

In general, I think the thematic organisation of this volume works very well. The selection of case studies feels rather ad hoc and perhaps more pragmatic than the authors choose to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the book unites its analysis and empirical evidence under a common logic of micro-governance and empowerment to combat poverty. Moreover, the editorial team have written or co-written each chapter, resulting in coherence of style and logical flow of content. In this way, the book avoids the fragmentation that can mar edited collections based on large international projects. I have no hesitation in recommending it as a valuable, research informed contribution to the expanding social innovation literature. It may also serve to introduce researchers on poverty and social exclusion to the possibilities of social innovation.

References

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Moulaert, F. ed. (2013) *The international handbook on social innovation: collective action, social learning and transdisciplinary research*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

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