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Understanding the initiators of social innovation in rural areas

Abstract: *As in the social innovation literature, the role of initiators / agentic engines is highlighted, the purpose of the paper is to deepen the understanding of initiators in the social innovation process and to further develop its evaluation. Accepting that the role of individuals is one of the most important aspects of the social innovation process, the main question posed in this study is how to develop the evaluation of this aspect further, and how to make it more objective. To get a deeper understanding of agentic engines, beyond literature review a group profile of selected social innovators is analysed. The results are based on their Profile XT personal competence assessments (provided by Profiles International Hungary) as well as in-depth interviews with them. The research reveals four elements for rating initiators: having a vision (purpose driven), being interested in serving people (Relationship System Intelligence), being proactive (positive attitude) and having a diverse network (outsider and insider).*

Keywords: *evaluation, social innovators, Profile XT, vision, network*

Introduction

An earlier study by one of the authors (Katonáné et al., 2016) examined the 'how' / the process of social innovation. This study and other literature were based on the analytical framework offered by Lawrence et al. (2013) for the analysis of social innovation. This introduced four aspects of the social innovation process, namely: the role of individuals, the impact of context, the sectors contribution and, finally, the way groups and networks are involved. Katonáné et al. (2016) examined these four aspects and their effects and beneficiaries through case studies in rural regions, using the Internal and External Factor Evaluation Matrix (EFEM). The relative importance of each aspect (context, initiator, sectors involved, group and networks involvement, effects and beneficiaries) was indicated by assigning a weight ranging from 0.0 (not important) to 1.0 (very important). The sum of all assigned weights was 1.0, where the role of individuals/initiator was rated as the second most important aspect (after the context with a weight 0.4), with a weight of 0.3. The next step in the comparison of different types of social innovation was to rate the aspects from 1 to 4, which captured whether the factor represented weakness (rating = 1) or strength (rating = 4). A question in the study by Katonáné et al. (2016) was how the rating could be more objective alongside the evaluation. This current paper follows the earlier research aims to improve the understanding and the evaluation of initiators / agentic engines in the social innovation process.

Pue et al. (2015, p.15) states that "the agentic engine of social innovation begins (Figure 1) when a (1) social entrepreneur (or social entrepreneurs, either individuals or organizations) devises a (2) socially creative strategy – that is, when an actor:

(A) driven by a particular MOTIVATION
(B) and possessing a set of VALUES,
(C) draws on his individual FACULTIES (i.e. creativity, knowledge, and experience)

to put into practice an idea which reconfigures society's approach to a given (3) social problem".

Dees (2001) describes social entrepreneurs as 'entrepreneurs with a social mission' and briefly defines them as follows: "social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector, by:

- Adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value),
- Recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission,
- Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning,
- Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand, and
- Exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created".

This definition combines an emphasis on discipline and accountability with the notions of value creation taken from Say, innovation and change agents from Schumpeter, pursuit of opportunity from Drucker, and resourcefulness from Stevenson.

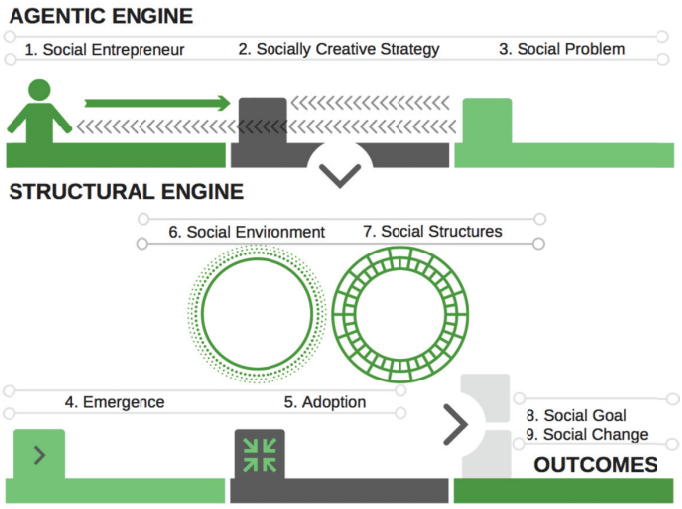

Figure 1. The agentic engine of the social innovation process
Source: Pue et al., 2015.

Lawrence et al. (2013, p. 5) refers to papers where the role of individuals in managing social innovation has been highlighted. "A review of historical cases, such as the initiatives of Benjamin Franklin (Mumford, 2002, in Lawrence), identify the importance of individuals who were able to develop ground-breaking ideas out of their everyday experiences and a willingness to experiment". They draw attention to two overlapping skills (Lawrence et al., 2013, p. 5) "Social innovators appear able not only to diagnose causes of social problems, but also to consider the 'downstream consequences' of any proposed solution. This diagnostic ability may come from having a unique combination of outsider and insider knowledge (Marcy and Mumford, 2007, in Lawrence). Second, successful social innovators seem distinctively able to garner elite support and financial resources: Franklin, for instance, was able to enrol supportive elites who provided him with ideas and finances (Mumford, 2002)".

According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leadership is constituted from the following behavioural components: inspirational motivation (articulating an appealing and/or evocative vision), intellectual stimulation, (promoting creativity and innovation), idealised influence (charismatic role modelling), and individualised consideration (coaching and mentoring). Leaders of organisations communicate their personal beliefs, and these become implanted into an organisation's culture (Schein, 1992). Successful social innovators or movements succeeded because, when their ideas became shared

with many minds, they outlasted their originators in the long run (Mulgan, 2006). Moreover, successful innovators are those who have the deep knowledge of organisational culture (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and break some established organisational patterns and rituals (Battilana, 2006). Crucial is also an ability of institutionally-embedded actors to distance themselves from institutional pressures and to take strategic actions (DiMaggio, 1988).

In the literature, attention is frequently paid to both organisational settings and individual features of organisations' leaders. Profoundly, studies emphasise an embedded character of leadership: the effectiveness of an individual in leading the change is strongly rooted in her / his situation within the organisational framework. This can be explained as Bourdieu's (1990) 'habitus' and 'fields', which are structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place over resources, stakes and access. Individuals are socially constituted agents, thus their social position can be considered as the key variable of change and innovation (Battilana, 2006). "The social entrepreneur is influenced by the social environment and existing social structures" (Pue et al., 2015, p. 12)

An organisation is placed within a broader context of many agents: other organisations and networks, with varying power and resources enabling social innovation. Particularly, network type of organisations seem to be good accelerators for innovative processes. They often cross various organisational and hierarchic boundaries and sectors, thus sometimes are difficult to be described clearly as a legal or organisational entity. Attempting to explain this, Obstfeld (2005) examined microprocesses in social networks dealing with organisational innovation and the ways they connect individuals in the networks, with the innovation occurring both within and outside organisations. The study revealed that innovation is more likely to be triggered by individuals in the organisations with lower status than higher. The key to success was access of an individual to the strategic resources, controlling decision making, and her / his position in the organisation's hierarchy. However, an individual could be more likely to be successful as an innovator when he / she belongs to organisations favoured by the existing socio-economic regimes (Battilana, 2006).

Interorganisational mobility can be a significant factor to speed up innovation processes. Moving in between organisations and bridging different knowledge regimes (intermediation) is considered as the key asset of an innovation broker (Aldrich and von Glinow, 1992; Howells, 2006). Individuals with more informal contacts outside the organisation (gatekeepers) may be critical for importing novel information and connecting an organisation with its environment (Alien, 1977). In addition, Alvord et al. (2004) consider the perception of individual's risk as an essential factor for inducing social innovation: when the financial risk for social entrepreneurs is low and their individual material situation stable, they are more likely to make an effort to innovate. Often, they are supported with established networks and contacts but at the same time avoid losing their established credibility.

The hypothesis of this paper, based on the literature review and the experience of the authors, is that the following elements have to be considered when understanding and evaluating agentic engines of social innovation:

- social innovators have vision – MOTIVATION;
- they have people-serving interest – VALUES;
- they are proactive, agreeing with results from the literature that they can enrol support if it is needed, if they do not have – FACULTIES;
- they have diverse networks – STATUS IN STRUCTURAL ENGINE.

Methodology

"Arriving at measurable characteristics that define an entrepreneur generally and a social entrepreneur in particular, remains an elusive task" (Pue, 2015, p. 16). On the other hand, in business sector there are more and more tools developed for personality assessments, such as DISC four aspects of behaviour, MBTI Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Profile XT personal competence assessments used in this study. Dennard (2009) notes that information on skills, experience, education gives just 10 per cent (i.e. the tip of the iceberg) of the whole picture measuring the total person, while thinking styles, behavioural traits and occupational interests measured by Profile XT give the other 90 per cent.

To get a deeper understanding of social innovators and answers to some of the hypothesis statements (linked to values and faculties), firstly Profile XT (Table 1) personal competence assessments (provided by Profiles International Hungary) was carried out among three social innovators who were ready to take part in the two-hour survey and the interview following it. The Ashoka database (specifically, its map of Hungarian social innovators) was the source for the selection of social innovators. Bill Drayton founded Ashoka in 1980, based on the idea that the most powerful force for good in the world is a social entrepreneur: a person driven by an innovative idea that can help correct an entrenched global problem (Ashoka, no date). Between July and October 2015, the Hungarian regional team of Ashoka carried out snowball research to create the map of Hungarian social innovators. This research involved three of those social innovators selected by Ashoka and living in the eastern regions of Hungary. In these regions of Hungary, the GDP per inhabitant purchasing power standard, by NUTS2 region, is below 75 per cent of the EU-28 average (Eurostat, 2016).

After the personal Profile XTs, the group profile of the three social innovators was analysed to define the common characteristics which give the key competencies of social innovators.

As a third step, to find answers to the hypothesis linked to motivation and status, in-depth interviews were conducted with them.

Strengthening the findings of the group profile, five colleagues (involved in social activities) of one of them a participating social innovator, filled out the Profile XT as well.

Table 1. Structure of Profile XT

Thinking style										
Learning index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Verbal skill	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Verbal reasoning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Numerical ability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Numeric reasoning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Behavioural traits										
Energy level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Assertiveness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sociability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Manageability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Attitude	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Decisiveness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Accommodating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Independence	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Objective judgment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Occupational interest										
Enterprising	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
People service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Creative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Financial/Administrative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Technical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mechanical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Source: own illustration based on Dennard (2009).

Results

Profile XT

The results (Table 2) of the Profile XT were introduced and checked with the social innovators.

Table 2. One of the social innovator's occupational interests – result from the Profile XT

Occupational interest										
Creative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	**8**	9	10
Enterprising	1	2	3	4	5	**6**	7	8	9	10
People service	1	2	3	4	**5**	6	7	8	9	10
Mechanical	1	2	3	**4**	5	6	7	8	9	10
Technical	1	2	**3**	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Financial/Administrative	1	**2**	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Source: own data collection based on Profile XT.

Group profile

Thinking style

As far as the social innovators' thinking style is concerned, their cognitive skills (both verbal and numerical) are above average. They can process information and learn quickly, and prefer to work on difficult tasks requiring thinking. They communicate in a sophisticated style and are able to draw conclusions quickly from verbal or written texts. They easily recognise and apply connections between concepts. They are quick problem solvers.

Behavioural traits

An assessment of the behavioural traits of social innovators is as follows:

- Energy level – social innovators have mid to high energy levels as compared to the entire working population. They use their working time effectively and generally work in a dynamic pace. They are regularly inclined to multitask which is required to run this social business often parallel to doing their 'normal' everyday work.
- Cooperation and managing conflicts – social innovators are balanced in handling conflicts. They strive to come to win-win agreements. They are friendly and cooperative but occasionally they can be critical, too. (Both their assertiveness and accommodating are of average level as compared to the entire working population). They are keen to undertake a leadership role but are also happy to follow others if necessary. They are enthusiastic team players.
- Sociability – social innovators are fairly sociable. They are rather extroverted, very likable and open. They like to share their ideas with other people. They tend to involve others in implementing their ideas. They constantly need to interact with other people on a personal level. They like to give feedback and expect to receive it, too. They have friendly characters. They are happy to participate in group work. They are good public speakers.
- Manageability – they are able to work effectively even under less structured circumstances than the average working environment. They prefer to create their own working conditions. They do not require (nor tolerate) a high level of direct control.
- Attitude – they are continuously very positive and express their positive attitude. They believe in the cause they work for. They trust other people easily. Also, they believe in their own capabilities and skills. They use an encouraging and optimistic voice when communicating. This is a key factor why other people follow them.
- Decisiveness – social innovators are quite thorough decision makers. They prefer to make well informed decisions. They react on time to requests but require a relatively long time and an extensive amount of information to study their options before making their final decisions.

- Independence – they more or less require a framework for their work. They prefer to work independently and flexibly, and expect others to let them do so as well as to work on their own, too. They are very supportive to their colleagues.
- Objective judgment – they make decisions and communicate based on both objective and rational information and their intuitions.

Occupational interests

Based on the data from the Profile XT assessment reports as well as the interviews, social innovators are driven by:

- Creative interest – They have new ideas all the time and get excited by brainstorming. They are good at problem solving. They are motivated by putting down the foundations of a new system or organisation. They are not very good in maintaining or operating an organisation by a routine since they have an inner drive to innovate. They always try new ways of working, discover new opportunities and plan how to make their dreams come true.
- People service interest – they like to help other people, support them or facilitate processes. They have a high sense of justice. They are very good listeners. Other people tend to find them with their problems. Saying 'no' is a great challenge for them as is asking others to do favours for them.
- Enterprising interest– they are result oriented and practical. They have a strong inner drive and need to get ahead constantly. They have a strong vision with regard to their cause. They like to lead other people toward their goals and other people just like to follow them. They handle business and money issues effectively, as opposed to 'traditional' non-profit fellows.

Interviews

The most important common points of the interviews are linked to the motivation, the sector they mainly act and their network:

- Motivation – all three social innovators are purpose driven in the field of education, but working with different groups. One of them is focusing her actions on talent development and personality development with an emphasis on children from underprivileged backgrounds. The other purpose is to increase human and social capital in her region through developing entrepreneurial mind-set, and the purpose of the third social innovator is to develop the culture of community-based enterprise, and start a development programme for local actors, with special regard to farmers. An interesting message from the interview was "I brought the idea, become the 'face' of it. I cannot pass this role over. This system was born in my head and I put the others in it".
- Civil sector – all of them work as a social innovator in the form of an association and they are residents, not incomers. Although they use associ-

ation as a legal form, as it was mentioned earlier they handle business and money issues effectively, they have customers from the market as well. Transparency is an important issue in their social enterprise.

- Network – they have a diverse and strong network inside and outside their region, addressing all four sectors at different levels (academia, government, industry/business and civil society). There are different possibilities for networking with business for example, getting knowledge in the field of IT and developing the homepage, or supporting with equipment such as a printer. Or they organise meetings for brainstorming with different actors. Two of them speak English as a foreign language and have connections from abroad as well, with international organisations, such as Ashoka, Observatoire Social International (OSI), Impact HUB network, and TEDx community.

It is also an interesting result that administrative interest is their lower interest.

Discussion

The literature review and also the primary research underlined our hypothesis that during the evaluation of agentic engines of social innovation the following aspects of social innovator could be considered:

- purpose driven, innovation and creation or not – MOTIVATION;
- people service interest or not – VALUES;
- proactive with a positive attitude and responsibility or not – FACULTIES;
- have diverse network or not – STATUS IN STRUCTURAL ENGINE.

Taking in mind the EFEM and rating the aspects of initiators from 1 to 4, which captured whether the factor represented weakness (rating = 1) or strength (rating = 4), each of these four elements could be evaluated separately. Evaluating the aspects of initiator (taking the four elements as equally important), whether the element represented weakness (rating = 0) or strength (rating = 1) and the sum could give the total evaluation of the initiator / the agentic engine within the social innovation process.

The results from the group profile showed that people service is a high interest of social innovators. This could be one of the most important characteristic to emphasise. As rural regions normally have low capacity to develop genuine technological or market innovations, social dimensions and, within those social innovation, should receive more attention. Thr literature on intelligent, high performing teams, such as the results from Rød and Firdjhon (2016) draw attention to the fact that we need to shift our attention away from the traditional focus of individual performance to the human relationship system itself and what it creates. Through interaction with others and being part of human relationship systems, individuals are able to release more of their resources and creative energy. By shifting from 'I' to 'we', the personal focus is deflected, thus empowering the human systems as a whole to find ways forward. They also emphasise that only by redirecting the focus from the individuals in the

human relationship system to the system itself, and all the possibilities this offers in terms of leadership, creativity, wisdom, awareness and choice, can we tap into the true potential of human beings in action. We can create intelligent teams. They use the term Relationship System Intelligence (RSI). RSI is the capacity to read, understand and intentionally interact with the dynamics of human relationship systems. In order to develop a high-performing human relationship system, a leader and his or her team need to become aware, responsive, accountable and intentional about the dynamics of their team system. Moving from Emotional Intelligence to RSI, from self-awareness to systems awareness, from 'me' to 'we' (collectively), from self-focus to system focus.

The message of Lencioni (2016) is that ideal team players are humble. They lack excessive ego or concerns about status. Humble people are quick to point out the contributions of others and slow to seek attention for their own. They share credit, emphasise team over self and define success collectively rather than individually. According to Pue et al. (2015), connecting communities and empowering individuals is one of the three goals served by nurturing social innovation. The final item of literature to emphasise why the aspects of people service interest and networks of social innovator are important, is from Pentland (2014). His sociometric data showed that the pattern of idea flow by itself was more important to group performance than all other factors and, in fact, was as important as all taken together. Individual intelligence, personality, skill, and everything else together mattered less than the pattern of idea flow.

Finally, the cooperation of different sectors (academic, business, civil) in this research has to be emphasised as a good practice. The corporate social responsibility activity of the business sector carrying out the Profile XT and group profile assessment for free helped the awareness of the social entrepreneurs involved in the research and also supported the academic sector by deepening the understanding of social innovators.

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