

SOCIAL INNOVATION:

Making a case for participatory approaches



Increasing poverty and inequality, alongside technology, are indicative that technological innovation only benefits an elite few. We need to start disrupting traditional structures around what society needs and drive social innovation with the same vigour as technological innovation, writes *Nicole van Rhee*.

Modern science has made advances in technology that boggle the human mind, yet we struggle to effectively diagnose and remedy the livelihood issues that plague our society.

The draft of the Department of Science and Technology's new white paper defines social innovation as a sub-set of innovation that is context specific, underpinned by values and leads to social change. One of the key principles of social innovation is the empowerment of its beneficiaries through the resolution of social needs.

What defines social innovation is the extent to which it seeks to meet social needs in a novel way, by being critical of the way needs have been met historically. By definition, social innovation advocates a people-centred approach. Geoff Mulgan, one of the key theorists of social innovation, holds that "people are competent interpreters of their own lives and competent solvers of their own problems" and should therefore be at the centre of efforts to interpret those problems. This aligns very closely to a participatory approach of need identification, similarly supported in public policy discourse.

People-centred development theories are rooted in the proposition that local members of a community should inform and participate in what determines development. Participation makes provision for local knowledge and prioritises how people interpret their needs. This

approach enables social, economic, political and cultural components of social needs to be considered.

Using a participatory approach to social innovation enables an in-depth investigation into understanding social need deprivation and, in so doing, can inform sustainable, socially sensitive solutions. Yet, it is not established as fundamental to social innovation in practice. This research set out to investigate whether participatory approaches were used in social-innovation case studies. It looks at how social needs were determined by founders of socially innovative organisations and the motivators that led to the establishment of the organisations.

Participants were drawn from a database of international social-innovation case studies developed by the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, a special unit of the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business. Recipients of recognised social innovation awards were also contacted for participation. Thirty-seven case studies were identified, of which 10 were used in the research.

What motivated the founders?

The top three motivators leading to the establishment of each founder's organisation were personal experience, community engagement and a desire to make a difference.

Some founders had personally experienced social-need deprivation, having lived in a particular community for several years. Others embarked on extensive community engagement processes establishing long-term relationships with the community to understand its social needs and dynamics. The third most prominent motivator was a desire to make a difference, whereby founders became aware of the social need through the media or being informed by someone they knew personally.

The research revealed that founders with personal experience or that had extensive community engagement, demonstrated meeting the social need directly. Those who did not use a participatory approach met the need in an indirect way.

Direct impact is distinguished by social impact being embedded in the core business model of the organisation. Indirect impact is when social impact is secondary to the organisation's objectives, for instance, organisations that created a trust or fund as a subsidiary for social investment.

Direct social impact

The following case study is an example of how extensive community engagement created direct social impact.

CASE STUDY 1: A social enterprise established to reduce female unemployment through the production and sale of trinket boxes created from recycled plastic bottles in a low-income coastal community in the Western Cape.

The innovation was to create a local business that would draw its labour force from women in the local community, and develop skills related to craft, workmanship, management and finance. The innovation is profitable and now exports the boxes globally. The founder had previously worked in the community as a volunteer, had established relationships there, and was sensitive to the local social dynamics during the establishment of the organisation.

The founder helped to address the community's waste problem by using plastic bottles as the raw materials to manufacture the trinket boxes. Community members who cleaned and collected plastic bottles also received compensation for delivering them to the organisation.

Indirect social impact

The following case study is an example of how little to no participation amounts to indirect social impact.

CASE STUDY 2: An enterprise development consultancy that established an impact investment arm to fund incubators for SMMEs as a poverty-alleviation strategy.

The innovation was to fund incubators that would aid start-ups and SMMEs, as the founder didn't have time to do it directly.

This for-profit business permitted its clients to donate to the separately established impact investment arm. Only high-level engagement took place with incubators to determine expenditure. There was no participatory review process, but feedback from beneficiaries was positive. The case study showed that the firm had expertise in enterprise development, which was beneficial, but not specific to the nature of SMMEs in the local community.

Little or no impact

The following case study illustrates how the absence of participation amounts to indirect or no social impact. The founder displayed no social awareness in this extreme case.

CASE STUDY 3: A social enterprise piloted a stove powered by renewable energy to reduce CO₂ emissions in low-income areas, as a paraffin stove alternative.

The founder conducted no prior investigation into the needs of the community. The product was designed as a pursuit of personal interests. The prototype received nominations for social-innovation awards, but no sales were made. The product failed due to its purchase price, high running cost, maintenance and slow heating mechanism, and it was unsuitable for its low-income community target market.

Conclusion

Social change requires technological and social advancement in how we problematise issues around poverty and inequality. It was evident that the identification and corresponding resolution of social needs for social innovation require an approach that places experiencers of the deprivation at the centre of the resolution. Public support, discussion, interest and funding need to be prioritised alongside technological innovation.

Authors: *Nicole van Rheede, a PhD candidate in the HSRC's Centre for Science, Technology & Innovation Indicators, supervised by Prof. Mohamed Saheed Bayat at the Department of Development Studies, Nelson Mandela University.*

nvanrheede@hsrc.ac.za