

5 questions about Social Innovation from SI Experts

Anna Butzin

Project coordinator at Institute of Work and Technology, Gelsenkirchen (Germany) and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Social innovation research is important, because it implies having a broad view upon innovative actions. It is an alternative to the somewhat narrow technology and engineering driven understanding of innovation and related innovation research. Novelty can also come from society, grassroots engagement and social movements, and this is an important component research in social innovation strives to underpin!

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

Social innovations are very context-sensitive in the sense that social innovations are embedded in local or regional environments with specific socio-cultural institutions that influence actions and mechanisms of change. The challenge is to analyze the relationship of social innovation and its geographical environment, as it surely is a crucial aspect to understand why some social innovations diffuse while others remain a local phenomenon.

Furthermore, we may not forget that the process of developing social innovation is supposedly driven by a diversity of actor types (from civil society, non-profits, companies, the public sector etc.) that interact, communicate, engage, and thereby create novelty. To analyze these social dynamics and the related generation of new knowledge will shed light on the mechanisms of social innovation emergence.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

SI-Drive will advance knowledge about social innovation with the aim to progress theory development. We can therefore expect insights concerning the components, mechanisms and driving forces of both: the process of social innovation development and the process of diffusion. In addition, these insights will reflect different cultural backgrounds, because of the global scope of the SI-Drive project.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why? (Please don't cite own publications or publications from your institution).

I much appreciate Arnoud Legendijk's considerations of his inaugural speech when he became professor of economic geography at Radboud University Nijmegen. The speech was entitled »From 'spaces of hope' to 'networks of hope': How globalization gives rise to grassroots economies and new foundations of local wealth creation«. It can be found by following this link: <http://www.ru.nl/scapes/@672946/pagina/#publications>

Anna Davis

Senior Research Associate, The Young Foundation, London (GB) and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

For me, research in this area provides a framework with which to think about some of the most interesting questions we face concerning the way boundaries and responsibilities for meeting social challenges are shifting. Social innovation research also provides a great opportunity to explore the tensions between bottom up and more directed forms of innovation; we often talk about the user driven nature of much social innovation, but we also talk about the role of policymakers in directing or enabling social innovation. This is a tension that I think our research can start to unpack and address, hopefully moving us towards a more informed policy discourse.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

I think the biggest challenge comes from the breadth of this topic of research. Social innovation draws on economics, organizational and management science, political theory, entrepreneurship, history, communication studies and much more besides. There is a huge amount for us to digest and understand if we are to develop a rich picture of this discipline. This can be challenging as we need to be used to switching disciplines, traditions and making connections between them. That said, it also keeps things interesting!

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

I think SI-DRIVE is likely to make an important contribution in grounding social innovation theory. This is something that has been touched on in other European projects, but I think we are now at the stage of development in the field where there is more to reflect on and synthesize. I also expect that the methodology we develop for mapping social innovations could make a useful contribution to social innovation research in the future.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why? (Please don't cite own publications or publications from your institution).

The article I would recommend is not particularly new, but makes some important points. It is Stephen Osborne and Louise Brown's article for *Public Administration* from 2011, 'Innovation, public policy and public services delivery in the UK: the word that would be king?'. This speaks specifically to the UK policy adoption of the terminology of innovation but I think its relevance is much wider – it reminds us that not all positive change is always innovative in nature and that not all innovative change is always beneficial. These are in some ways obvious points, but they can sometimes get lost in social innovation discourse.

Steven Dhondt

Senior research scientist at TNO and visiting professor at the University of Leuven and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

My research is on how companies can change with the multitude of challenges they are presented. The goal is to identify the best way to create bottom-up change in these companies, public – private – social.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

The biggest challenge for SIR is to avoid prescription. Social reality cannot be made top-down. Approaches such as transition-thinking ‘breathe’ control and makeability. We should not fall into that trap. But we can identify the challenges and stepping stones for better life.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

The SI-DRIVE should deliver the landscape of thinking about social innovation. You should not expect the final theory on social innovation, but the bright new venues to help make change in societies. SI-DRIVE should be the building block for all new venues of thinking.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why? (Please don't cite own publications or publications from your institution).

If you want to understand how the policy context has changed, and how policy can help promote social innovation, then the following book is a must-read:

Bourgon, Jocelyne (2011). *[A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century](#)*. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press. p. 31. [ISBN 978-1553393139](#).

Dmitri Domanski

Researcher and lecturer at Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, central scientific unit of TU Dortmund and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Social innovations can be found in all societal areas, they have a lot of influence on our everyday life. Still, often we don't know why they occur and how they occur. We may know it in a specific context, e.g. of education, health care or climate change. But we need a systemic approach in order to understand how we can better develop, promote and foster social innovations. I'm sure, this issue is crucial if we want to meet successfully the grand challenges our societies are facing.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

Basically, I see two major challenges. First, the world is still lacking a comprehensive social innovation theory, so the time has definitely come to develop it. Second, we need to carry out systematic comparisons of social innovations from all over the world, especially if we want to know more about their typical success factors. This has very much to do with social innovation infrastructure, national social innovation systems as well as regional social innovation systems. At the same time, it's also about empowerment and therefore education in social innovation.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

Considering both major challenges mentioned above, one key task of SI-DRIVE will be advancing on a comprehensive social innovation theory, so that we can expect a better understanding of the phenomenon of social innovation. Another key task will be a global mapping of social innovations. Hence, for the first time in history there will be empirical findings on social innovations from all world continents as results of a systematic analysis.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why?

I would like to recommend the article “When scaling out is not enough: Strategies for system change” by Frances Westley and Nino Antadze (2013). It’s very interesting because of the idea that social entrepreneurs need to change the system that created the problem if they want to reach their goal. This scaling-up approach goes beyond the common idea of dissemination. It shows the importance of thinking social innovation differently.

Josef Hochgerner

Scientific Director; Zentrum für soziale Innovation (ZSI) Wien (A) and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

While innovations in technology will continue changing life styles and social relations, social innovations will become even more important in the course of the 21st century. To create a socially desirable future, research and innovation must not neglect their inherent social dimensions, because all innovations are socially relevant. Against this background, the particulars of social innovation increasingly require special attention and focused research.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

As in many cases there are two sides of the coin: On the one hand the most challenging issue is to grasp the characteristic features of social innovation within the endless frontier of practices in social change; on the other hand social innovation research needs development and recognition in the established fields of innovation research, based on a wider scope of the innovation paradigm itself.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

SI-DRIVE will connect debates, research projects, survey methodologies and data bases concerning social innovation from around the world. Thereby international comprehension of social innovation theory and practices will become decisively advanced, including better understanding and concrete relevance of outcomes pertaining to major world regions and critical policy areas. Acting beyond the life-span of the project, SI-DRIVE will provide foundations to assemble international communities of social innovators and researchers as well as to configure infrastructures for social innovation research, education and implementation, indicating ways towards national and international “Systems of Social Innovation”.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why?

Christopher Freeman, 1995: The 'National System of Innovation' in historical perspective. Cambridge Journal of Economics. Vol. 19, pp. 5-24.

Available (free download) at

http://www.globelicsacademy.org/2011_pdf/Freeman%20NSI%20historial%20perspective.pdf

Exactly this should everybody read for preparing the discussion about infrastructures and national systems of SI.

Jürgen Howaldt

Director of Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund, Central Scientific Unit of Technical University Dortmund and coordinator of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Social innovation is an exciting topic for me, as it allows to me to think about innovation in a new way. Social innovations open new potentials for meeting great societal challenges and for the further development of our society. They rely on participation and involvement of different societal actors and open new perspectives for social sciences when analyzing and creating social processes. 100 years after Schumpeter, social innovations have become an indispensable key component of an emerging new innovation paradigm.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

The biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research is to learn more about the diffusion of social innovations and how they spread into society. We do not have a lack of good ideas or socially relevant inventions. The more important question is how they become part of new social practices that help us to cope with the grand societal challenges such as social exclusion, unemployment or climate change.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

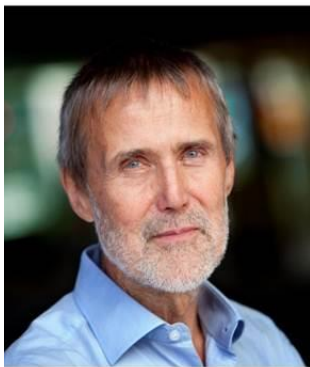
The most important result would be to better understand the social mechanisms that make social innovations work on a larger scale. This could help us reshape our National Innovation Systems and our innovation policies to better promote social innovations.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why? (Please don't cite own publications or publications from your institution).

I really like the french sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) and his book 'The laws of imitation'. Recourse to Tarde's social theory, which is actually sociology *of innovation*, allows us to widen our perspective - which was narrowed to economic and technological innovations as described by Schumpeter and after him by the sociology of technology - to include the wide variety of social innovations.

Jeremy Millard

Visiting Research Fellow at Brunel University, London (UK) and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Because social innovation represents *par excellence* the need for multi-disciplinarity, and indeed disciplinary integration, in order to conduct research as well as support practice and policy. It is an important battering-ram breaking down the towers of traditional disciplinary silos! My academic carrier started as a geographer, which also uses a multi-disciplinary approach although within a spatial context, so my mind is already geared to hopping between subject areas to borrow and integrate what is useful to tackle real societal problems.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

To get the balance right between helping to establish social innovation as an important academic research discipline with its own rigorous theories, whilst also remaining embedded in the grounded realities of the lives of people and communities so that it can assist in providing practical sets of tools to those on the front line.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

Many results of course, but the most important for me is to spread awareness of social innovation research, as well as its tools, to the main big international organisations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the OECD and the World Economic Forum. These organisations definitely work in many of the areas where social innovation is highly relevant, but in the main, they do not know about social innovation nor deploy its insights and tools.

There is huge potential here, not least for the United Nations which is currently preparing the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for sustainable development – or whatever they might be termed – concerning ‘wicked problems’ like inequality, employment, health, education, environment, good governance, etc. I am already working with most of these organisations and hope to use the global reach of SI-DRIVE to make an impact here.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why? (Please don't cite own publications or publications from your institution).

It is extremely difficult to select just item one (just like on “Desert Island Discs”, which the Brits will know about☺), but if really pushed I would plump for:

Prahalad, C.K.; Hart, Stuart L. (2002). "The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid", Booz Allen Hamilton Inc.

Maybe not considered mainstream social innovation, but for me its approach and cases exhibit both high social impact on the poor of this world whilst also equipping them with new capacities to become entrepreneurial and earn decent livings. The book discusses new business models targeted at providing goods and services to the poorest people in the world, so shows how entrepreneurship need not be anathema to social good. According to Bill Gates, it "offers an intriguing blueprint for how to fight poverty with profitability."

Peter Oeij

Senior Research Scientist and Consultant, TNO Innovation for Life, Leiden (The Netherlands) and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Changes in society have always been started by people. Social innovation stresses a shift from institutional change (like economical and technological innovation) to bottom up activities set in motion by motivated people. The importance about social innovation for me is that the make-ability of our societies indeed comes more into the hands of ourselves as individuals. Not only is this relevant in terms of social change (social cohesion, social inequality), but also with regard to political and economic structures being changed (i.e. people's voice, well-being and welfare).

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

From a research perspective the challenge is to gather solid, rigorous evidence how social innovation works. I say this because it is not easy to get a full picture of bottom up activities, until such activities have grown into something more substantial. By hindsight it is always obvious whether an innovation was really an innovation. However, we know from innovation studies (in technology, management and business) that 70% 'fails'. And these studies focus on institutional activities (R&D, academia, etc.) which are often top down initiatives as well. Not overlooking the sparkles in the dark is an important part of our mission! Like it is hard to say where a river exactly begins, so is innovation.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

We should be modest and ambitious at the same time. Modest because many social innovations may 'fail' like non-social innovations tend to do. Patience, creativity and stamina then is asked for. Ambitious because we face major social issues today (environmental and human).

SI-DRIVE has simply no other option than put all effort possible in laying bare some important working mechanisms how social and societal innovation can be taken up, put forward and scaled up. And yet, we should not expect miracles.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why? (Please don't cite own publications or publications from your institution).

To 'deviate from the norm' (which according to innovative avant-garde musician Frank Zappa is the cornerstone for renewal) I would like to suggest not a read on social innovation, but on innovation from the world of business and management. Andy Van de Ven et al's 'Innovation Journey' (1999) addresses most logical and irrational aspects of innovation. But even a less expected work to recommend would be 'Managing the unexpected' (2007) from Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe, as it stresses the need for a great sense of urgency for (social) change, otherwise innovation will not come about, to the detriment of the resilience of our societies.

Julie Simon

Acting Head of Research, The Young Foundation, London (UK) and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Chronic disease, an ageing society, climate change, youth unemployment and a broken economic model – these are just some of the challenges we face. None of these can be solved by new technologies or market based innovations alone. To address these we will need social innovations – new practices, new behaviours, new institutions, new social arrangements etc. So, it is absolutely critical that we better understand how to generate social innovations, how they spread, which are the most effective etc. In my mind, research plays a critical role in better understanding these processes and should help to guide the work of policymakers and practitioners.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

I think there are two challenges: the first is to make our research and our findings relevant and accessible to those outside academia. Until fairly recently, social innovation was a practice led field. But, there are now numerous projects, institutions and organizations dedicated to social innovation research. This is highly promising but we need to make sure that the borders that separate the worlds of academia, practitioners and policymakers remain very porous. We must ensure that we continue to learn from one another – that research is informed by practice and that policy is influenced by research and so on. The second challenge is to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’. Since the field of social innovation research is relatively new, there is a danger that projects focus on the same issues – often duplicating work that has already been done. This is especially the case with EU funded projects. We need to ensure better collaboration and co-ordination – potentially by putting in place some structures to facilitate the spreading and sharing of new knowledge.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

I think SI DRIVE is going to make contributions in two main ways. First the global mapping of social innovations will be a highly useful resource for practitioners and researchers alike. A few years ago, I helped put together the Open Book of Social Innovation. This book listed some 500 methods of social innovation, including methods for generating and testing social innovations as well as the enabling conditions for social innovation. The global mapping will build on these and earlier initiatives and dramatically advance the state of knowledge about social innovation. Second, SI DRIVE will develop our theoretical understanding of social innovation. The aim is to create a general theory of social innovation. This is both highly ambitious and timely - and will undoubtedly contribute to the strengthening and deepening of the field of social innovation research.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why?

I would suggest two things although neither is about social innovation directly. The first is Carlota Perez's work on technological revolutions and techno-economic paradigms (Perez, 2009, 'Technological revolutions and techno-economic paradigms', Cambridge Journal of Economics, Vol. 34, No.1, pp. 185-202). She writes about the changing nature of innovation – and this has huge implications for the changing nature and new forms of social innovation. The second is the inspirational story of a social innovator – Augusto Boal (see Theatre of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre). He used theatre as a way of engaging and empowering some of the most marginalized and vulnerable people in Rio de Janeiro. The most interesting thing for me is that he was elected as a City Councilor and used his method as a way of co-creating legislative proposals with the people of Rio de Janeiro.

Matthias Weber

Head of Unit Research, Technology and Innovation Policy, Innovation Systems
Department, AIT Austrian Institute of Technology, Vienna (Austria) and member of SI-
Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

By emphasizing the social shaping and the social impacts of innovation, research in social innovation represents an important complement to prevailing innovation research. It is not only important to better understand how innovations in society come about, but also to provide the foundations for making social innovation happen and for better informing public policies on innovation.

From a scientific perspective, the integrative and multi-disciplinary nature of research in social innovation is particularly appealing. As a process engineer, political scientist and economist, I am very much aware of the difficulties encountered by research approaches that cross traditional boundaries between scientific disciplines in order to propose novel perspectives for tackling real-world problems. This is a fascinating task, but also a major scientific and social challenge.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

The biggest challenge for research in social innovation is to establish itself as a recognized field in between other, more established fields of research on innovation. This will in particular require demonstrating the added value of social innovation research, as compared to those neighboring fields with their respective scientific trajectories, while building precisely on that already existing body of knowledge on processes, systems and policies on innovation.

A second major challenge consists of delivering on the promises. Too many appealing concepts and approaches have raised major expectations, but either fell into the trap of either over-selling their potential benefits or being too slow in providing the expected guidance for action.

Against this background, the major contributions of research in social innovation then lie in a) raising awareness of those types of innovation that have been largely ignored before by research and policy, but that can make a real difference to the life of people, and b) in offering insights into the approaches, tools and policies for making social innovation happen in practice.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

Due to the comprehensive nature of SI-DRIVE, the results of this project should first of all raise the awareness that the social dimension of innovation is not just an “add-on”, but rather an integral and core part of any innovative activity. Innovations can come in various forms, but they always have a social dimension, and ultimately they should always contribute to changing our society to the better. The global coverage of SI-DRIVE should also allow demonstrating the diversity of social innovation and its embedding in different cultural contexts. And there is still a lot to learn about and from these different social innovation experiences. The rich empirical material should in particular show how different types of mechanisms and institutions, market as well as non-market, can contribute to the realization and spread of social innovations. This is expected to enhance our ability to tackle what has been termed in policy debates the ‘Grand Societal Challenges’, which can hardly be addressed without the contribution of social innovation. By focusing on a major subset of these challenges, SI-DRIVE shall directly feed into the design of policies and initiatives for addressing them, both within Europe and beyond.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why?

Robin Murray, Julie Caulier, Geoff Mulgan (2010): The Open Book of Social Innovation, NESTA and Young Foundation

This report represents an excellent mixture of theoretical and practical insights into social innovation, and is a highly recommended reading for everybody who wants to get a good grasp of the different facets of this phenomenon. By combining a good overview of theoretical perspectives with many examples of social innovations, the reader is equipped with a good understanding why social innovation makes a difference, how it happens and how it can be supported at different stages of development.

Vishanth Weerakkody

Professor of Digital Governance at Brunel University, Business School, London, and member of SI-Drive Project



Why is Research in Social Innovation important for you?

Services that were traditionally delivered by the state or public sector are now increasingly becoming difficult for governments to afford due to economic as well as socio-political challenges faced by society. In this environment, social innovation plays an important role as it encourages civil society, NGOs and business communities to work together to find cost-effective solutions to local as well as national and regional problems faced by society in terms of policies and services that impact the day to day lives of people.

What is the biggest challenge for Social Innovation Research?

The relative newness of social innovation as a research theme means that there are limited studies that have been conducted in the field to make any significant theoretical contributions. While empirical studies are emerging in the field, mainly through funded research, these studies are not grounded in theoretical foundations or carried out using well thought out methodological frameworks that are justified or supported through reference to prior research. As such, there are gaps in current research when it comes to the scientific replicability and generalisability of social innovation studies.

What result can we expect from SI-DRIVE?

SI-DRIVE will make a significant contribution to the field of social innovation by using a systematic approach to analyzing normative research in the field and investigating empirical cases where social innovation has been implemented in practice across Europe and rest of the world.

By combining the efforts of an inter-disciplinary team of experts and applying a well-thought out methodological framework that is grounded in scientific rigor, the project will aim to develop research propositions for social innovation that are based on theory and supported through empirical evidence.

Which book or article about Social Innovation should everybody read? Why?

Goldsmith, S. (2010). *The Power of Social Innovation: How Civic Entrepreneurs Ignite Community Networks for Good*. Jossey-Bass.

This book explains the influence that entrepreneurship, public sector, private sector, civil society and the modern ICT landscape have on facilitating social innovation. In my view, these are all essential elements for social innovation to succeed in any society.