

SOCRISIS
Social Innovation against the Crisis:
how leadership practices and civic capacity improve
neighbourhood development

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Summary Report

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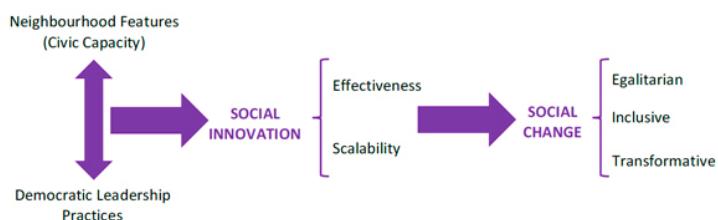
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Evidence in many places around the world suggest that citizens are, increasingly, self-organizing to produce innovative solutions as they face the collective problems that governments are failing to solve in a context of scarcity and austerity policies. Social innovation is usually conceptualized as a way of improving territorial development in disenfranchised neighbourhoods. However, little attention has been paid to the dynamics by which responses emerge, how social impact or scalability could be achieved and, finally, how social change could be effectively accomplished.

Combining theories of social innovation and collective leadership, the SOCRISIS project analyses the ways in which local communities, at neighbourhood level, are addressing the effects of economic recession in two global cities: Barcelona and New York. We focus on those socially innovative responses emerging from below, and we use our analysis to draw conclusions aiming to both understand and foster social change.

Aims

Through the SOCRISIS project we aimed to contribute to three debates regarding social innovation and democratic leadership practices.



First, the question as to what extent historically and geographically influenced features (such as civic capacity, social capital, urban morphology, public facilities and amenities, sense of belonging, socio-demographic composition, etc.) enable or constrain the emergence of social innovation, its effectiveness and its scalability. Our hypothesis was that those neighbourhoods with greater civic capacity produce socially innovative responses that are more effective and have greater potential for scalability.

Second, assuming that processes of social innovation are spatially and institutionally embedded, we claim that some leadership practices (at the community or organizational level) not only enable the emergence of such processes but also foster their sustainability and increase their impact. Our hypothesis was that democratic forms of collective leadership produce social innovation that is more effective and has a greater chance of being scalable. Hence, agency – in the form of leadership practices – is also important for understanding how social innovation works, especially in those contexts where neighbourhood features constrain socially innovative initiatives. We explored the extent to which new forms of leadership that emerged following the 2011 urban rebellions could constitute interesting practices with respect to doing things in a democratic and inclusive way.

Third, we wanted to show that social innovation can effectively contribute to social change, and to better understand how it does so. We aimed to demonstrate how socially innovative initiatives, through democratic leadership practices, can be understood as an egalitarian, inclusive, and transformative form of radical democracy.

Methods

We have carried out four case studies, at neighbourhood level, from two different cities in two different countries in which the Great Recession has had very different effects and been met with very different institutional responses. In each city we selected one neighbourhood rich in civic capacity (Sants in Barcelona and South Bronx in NYC) and another with lesser civic capacity (Nou Barris Nord in Barcelona and Bushwick in NYC). Finally, in each neighbourhood we analysed two socially innovative initiatives: one post-recession initiative and one initiative deriving from an older organization or an older neighbourhood struggle.

Conclusions

To be effective and scalable, social innovation should be carried out in a context with the necessary features to make that innovation successful. Consequently, to make social innovation a feasible alternative that might foster systemic social change, **community capacity building** should be engaged. Rather than focusing on specific socially innovative initiatives, we therefore suggest that policy processes should be developed at a community level to build capacity where it is lacking. This way, social innovation could emerge and be effective and scalable in any place, rather than only in those neighbourhoods with greater existing capacity.

At the same time, unleashing human energy, bridging difference and reframing discourse have, in the course of this study, emerged as three types of **democratic leadership practices** that can help make social innovation effective and scalable even in those neighbourhoods with lesser capacity. Moreover, democratic leadership practices not only make social change happen, but also democratize it. Those initiatives aiming to become drivers of democratic social change should, therefore, pay attention to all three of these leadership practices.

Finally, we found that purely institutional approaches are insufficient for facing the collective problems prominent in the post-recession context of austerity. Yet localized and purely grassroots initiatives do not seem to have either enough potency to trigger systemic social change. There is evidence that strategies for solving contemporary social problems need to be multi-scalar; supra-local structures and agents must be accounted for, because social innovation at the local scale depends on resources that are both local and extra-local, endogenous and exogenous. In this context, as existing studies have stressed, a **bottom-linked perspective** appears to hold promise. A bottom-linked perspective stresses the importance of initiatives that combine both social and institutional innovation; initiatives that emerge at a community level, from below, but are linked to higher-level public institutions that enable them to be effective and scalable.

Impacts

The project advances both theoretical and empirical understandings of social change. Its results appeal to scholars in urban studies, geography, leadership studies, political science and sociology. It is also of interest to practitioners, policy-makers and leaders in social organizations, as it provides ideas and tools to help foster social change. Several activities have been carried out to disseminate these results, not only among scholars but also to the general public.