



Perspectives of social innovation disseminated by support organizations: implications for the ecosystem

Perspectivas de inovação social disseminadas por organizações de suporte: implicações para o ecossistema


Perspectivas de innovación social difundidas por organizaciones de apoyo: implicaciones para el ecosistema

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ABSTRACT

Goal: This illustrative case study aimed to problematize the conception of social innovation underlying the work of prominent training support organizations in the EIS. **Methodology/approach:** The research was conducted through observation, document analysis and interviews, investigating two relevant training support organizations that operate in the EIS of Florianópolis (SC), based on the analysis of three dimensions of SI: process, actors and purpose. **Originality/relevance:** Unlike approaches that treat SI in a neutral or homogeneous way, the study reveals how these organizations are linked to specific narratives — technocratic or democratic —, shaping not only social innovation practices, but also the direction of social change processes in the ecosystem. **Main findings:** The research revealed that the technocratic perspective of SI is the most prevalent in the work of the organizations investigated. This shows that the conception of SI is not neutral, but represents a project of society in dispute. **Theoretical contributions:** The study expands the understanding of social innovation by showing how support organizations shape meanings and narratives in the ecosystem, highlighting the influence of technocratic and democratic perspectives on social change processes. **Management contributions:** The research offers insights for managers to align their practices and narratives with the desired social transformations, highlighting the impact of the perspectives adopted in the configuration of the social innovation ecosystem.

Keywords: Social innovation. Social innovation ecosystem. Support organizations. Perspectives on social innovation

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este estudo de caso ilustrativo teve como objetivo problematizar a concepção de inovação social subjacente à atuação de proeminentes organizações de suporte à formação no EIS. **Metodologia/Abordagem:** A pesquisa foi conduzida por meio de observação, análise de documentos e entrevistas, investigando duas relevantes organizações de suporte à formação que atuam no EIS de Florianópolis (SC), a partir da análise de três dimensões da IS: processo, atores e propósito. **Originalidade/Relevância:** Diferentemente de abordagens que tratam a IS de forma neutra ou homogênea, o estudo revela como essas organizações se vinculam a narrativas específicas — tecnocráticas ou democráticas —, moldando não apenas as práticas de inovação social, mas também a direção dos processos de mudança social no ecossistema. **Principais Resultados:** A pesquisa revelou que a perspectiva tecnocrática de IS é a mais prevalente na atuação das organizações investigadas. Isso evidencia que a concepção de IS não é neutra, mas representa um projeto de sociedade em disputa. **Contribuições Teóricas:** O estudo amplia o entendimento sobre a inovação social ao evidenciar como as organizações de suporte moldam significados e narrativas no ecossistema, destacando a influência das perspectivas tecnocrática e democrática nos processos de mudança social. **Contribuições para a Gestão:** A pesquisa oferece insights para gestores alinhar suas práticas e narrativas às transformações sociais desejadas, destacando o impacto das perspectivas adotadas na configuração do ecossistema de inovação social.

Palavras-chave: Inovação social. Ecossistema de inovação social. Organizações de suporte. Perspectivas de inovação social

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Este estudio de caso ilustrativo tuvo como objetivo problematizar la concepción de innovación social que subyace a las acciones de organizaciones destacadas que apoyan la formación en EIS. **Metodología/enfoque:** La investigación se realizó a través de observación, análisis de documentos y entrevistas, investigando dos organizaciones relevantes de apoyo a la formación que actúan en el EIS de Florianópolis (SC), a partir del análisis de tres dimensiones del SI: proceso, actores y propósito. **Originalidad/relevancia:** A diferencia de los enfoques que tratan la IS de manera neutral u homogénea, el estudio revela cómo estas organizaciones están vinculadas a narrativas específicas —tecnocráticas o democráticas—, dando forma no sólo a las prácticas de innovación social, sino también a la dirección de los procesos de innovación social. **Principales resultados:** La investigación reveló que la perspectiva tecnocrática del EI es la más prevalente en las actividades de las organizaciones investigadas. Esto demuestra que la concepción del EI no es neutral, sino que representa un proyecto de sociedad en disputa. **Contribuciones teóricas:** El estudio amplía la comprensión de la innovación social al resaltar cómo las organizaciones de apoyo dan forma a los significados y narrativas en el ecosistema, destacando la influencia de las perspectivas tecnocráticas y democráticas en los procesos de cambio social. **Contribuciones a la gestión:** La investigación ofrece ideas para que los gerentes alineen sus prácticas y narrativas con las transformaciones sociales deseadas, destacando el impacto de las perspectivas adoptadas en la configuración del ecosistema de innovación social.

Palabras clave: Innovación social. Ecosistema de innovación social. Organizaciones de apoyo. Perspectivas de innovación social.

■ INTRODUCTION

The concept of social innovation (SI) has a long trajectory, contributing to a variety of meanings and a plurality of perspectives, giving a multidisciplinary nature to the field of studies on SI (Godin, 2012; Mouldaert & MacCallum, 2019; Bragaglia, 2021). Mouldaert (2009) identifies at least four areas of contemporary social sciences that use the concept: administration, arts and creativity, territorial development, and political science. Cajaiba-Santana (2014) also highlights that the debate on SI encompasses disciplines such as public administration, history, social movements, management, social psychology, economics, and social entrepreneurship. These different approaches result in diverse schools of thought about social innovation.

Shockley (2015) distinguishes two main strands of SI: one based on Anglo-American studies of entrepreneurship and the other on Euro-Canadian social economies. The first focuses on business innovation and organizational management, while the second is based on social movements and solidarity economy. These distinctions, as well as other dualisms in the field of research, reflect significant tensions that impact the advancement of SI studies (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Unger, 2015; Ayob et al., 2016; Montgomery, 2016). These multiple perspectives also influence social innovation ecosystems (SIEs), that is, the networks and support conditions that enable the emergence and dissemination of social innovations (Pel et al., 2020).

These networks forming the ecosystem are composed of diverse actors, including support actors who work to foster social innovation by providing coordination, funding, or training (Magalhães et al., 2020; OBISF, 2023). Support organizations that work with training support social innovation initiatives by promoting capacity building, workshops, and training, among other activities. In this context, training support organizations operate grounded in certain conceptions, expressed explicitly or implicitly, of what Social Innovation is, providing practical guidelines on how social issues can be addressed. Thus, by developing and experiencing these conceptions, training support organizations are deeply involved in producing the meaning of social innovation and influence how this meaning spreads within the ecosystem.

It is essential to understand these conceptions, as they directly affect the support that organizations offer to SI initiatives. This support can lean either towards maintaining existing social structures or challenging them to propose new social and relational structures (Wittmayer et al., 2019). Salles (2014) and Salles and Dellagnelo (2019), in analyzing the performance evaluation discourse promoted by training organizations, identified that they have strongly contributed to the expansion of managerialist thinking in the associative field. The authors argue that evaluation is a moment when a discourse-driven contest over what society should be takes place. In other words, the parameters used in performance evaluation involve ideological disputes, where some actors may benefit more than others, characterizing evaluation as a political act. Likewise, recognizing the conception of social

innovation disseminated in SIEs may provoke reflections on the societal projects at stake in the different visions of social innovation (Slee et al., 2021).

Despite the relevance of the topic, publications on SIEs are still incipient and scarce. A search in the Scopus database found 22 articles, none of which address the role of support actors, although several authors (Andion et al., 2020; Pel et al., 2020; Audretsch et al., 2022) have already highlighted the importance of further research on the topic.

Given the relevance of the topic and the scarcity of studies on it, this research aims to problematize the conception of social innovation underlying the actions of prominent support organizations within the ecosystem. To this end, we present an illustrative case study that describes and analyzes the actions of two prominent training support organizations operating in the SI ecosystem in Florianópolis (SC), Brazil, based on the analysis of three dimensions of social innovation: process, actors, and purpose. By shedding light on this issue, we aim to show the empirical diversity of contemporary conceptions of SI and their consequences for social change processes.

This article is organized into five sections. In addition to this initial contextualization, we present a literature review on social innovation and its analytical models. Then, we describe the methodological procedures and, finally, discuss the implications of the findings for the SIE and the field of social innovation studies, indicating directions for future research.

■ SOCIAL INNOVATION

In the literature, there is no consensus on the concept of social innovation, with a plurality of definitions. The concept's long historical trajectory has contributed to this scenario (Godin, 2012; Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019; Maldonado-Mariscal & Alijew, 2023). Contemporary ideas of social innovation recognize it as an important alternative for addressing increasingly complex socio-environmental challenges. However, looking retrospectively, it is possible to see that the term social innovation has transformed over time (Godin, 2012; Satalkina & Steiner, 2022; Alves, 2023).

In the 19th century, social innovation was marked by two main connotations: associated with socialism, giving it a pejorative meaning; and with social reform, with a more positive meaning. In the 20th century, the concept acquired a more neutral interpretation, referring to new social behaviors or practices. Throughout this period, however, social innovation was not widely theorized. According to MacCallum et al. (2017), it was only from the 1970s onward that there was a renewed and growing interest in social innovation as an alternative to addressing social problems. These authors highlight that this revival of social innovation was influenced by various factors, such as radical emancipation movements, social struggles against capitalism and the patriarchal state, and the search for a new form of economic democracy.

At the end of the 20th century, various fields of action and study related to social innovation emerged, including social and solidarity economy, anthropology, arts and culture, urban and regional development, community development, and transition studies. This positive representation contributed to the spread of the term (Godin, 2012), reflected, for instance, in the increase in scientific publications on the subject. A search in the Scopus database

revealed that 92% of the total academic output on social innovation was published in the last ten years.

Although there is a wide variety of studies on social innovation, several authors recognize common elements underlying these research efforts and group them into schools of thought. Shockley (2015) distinguishes two main schools: one based on Anglo-American studies of entrepreneurship and the other on Euro-Canadian social economies. The first school refers to the literature on social innovation oriented toward business innovation and organizational management sciences, developed since the 1980s and gaining prominence in response to the rapid decline of the welfare state. In contrast, the Euro-Canadian literature is rooted in the emancipatory ideals of social movements and territorial development approaches that emerged in the late 1970s. For Cajaiba-Santana (2014) and Ayob et al. (2016), studies on social innovation have been polarized between the agency approach, which emphasizes the role of individuals or “heroes” as the primary causal force, and the structuralist approach, which focuses on how social structures and contexts influence and shape social innovation.

Unger (2015) offers two perspectives on social innovation: a minimalist and a maximalist version. The minimalist interpretation suggests that the social innovation movement merely seeks to humanize existing social and economic arrangements rather than fundamentally transform them. The maximalist view, on the other hand, emphasizes the need for comprehensive change in society, including both its institutional arrangements and its dominant forms of consciousness. Montgomery (2016) identifies two schools of social innovation: the technocratic paradigm, favored by neoliberalism and marked by a depoliticizing nature, and the democratic paradigm, championed by opponents of neoliberalism with the aim of creating spaces for alternatives to the neoliberal project. Andion et al. (2017) highlight two main approaches to social innovation: the instrumental approach, focused on solving specific social problems, and the institutional approach, which emphasizes long-term transformations in society.

Montgomery (2016) argues that the different perspectives on social innovation are grounded in a broader conflict between neoliberalism and its opponents within the field of social innovation. The technocratic paradigm aligns with neoliberal principles, emphasizing efficiency, effectiveness, and market-oriented solutions. In this model, technocratic governance prioritizes the use of specialized knowledge and technical data in policymaking, concentrating decision-making in the hands of experts, who are viewed as the most capable of addressing complex social issues. Conversely, the democratic paradigm challenges neoliberalism and seeks to promote alternative models of social innovation that prioritize social justice, equity, and democratic participation. This approach values collective action, grassroots movements, and community initiatives as driving forces of social change (Savall, 2022).

The diversity of perspectives and the long historical trajectory of studies on social innovation is reflected in a range of possible definitions of the concept, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Perspectives of social innovation disseminated by support organizations: implications for the ecosystem**Figure 1.**

Contemporary Meanings of Social Innovation

Reference	Social Context	'Specific "Messages"' – Definitions of SI
Moulaert et al. (1995; 2000) CRISES (Klein and Harrison, 2006)	Rise of the Local Development 'Movement' Territorial Dynamics	Innovation in Social Relations to Meet Collective Needs Role of Empowerment and Sociopolitical Transformation
EMES (Nyssens, 2007)	Succession of economic crises that unemploy people	Resumption of the social economy in interaction with the market logic, but aiming at the development of autonomous innovations
Young Foundation/SIX (Mulgan, 2007; Murray et al. 2010)	Transition from disciplinary liberalism to solidarity liberalism – Civil society as provider	"Innovations that are social both in their ends and in their means"
TRANSIT (Pel et al 2016, 2017) SI-DRIVE (Howaldt and Schwartz 2016) WISIR (Westley and Andatze, 2010)	Globally connected society; emergence of new counter-hegemonic movements.	Social innovations as transformative, drivers of social/systemic change.

Note. Adapted from Moulaert e MacCallum (2019).

A common point across various perspectives of SI is the role of cooperation and the participation of diverse actors in proposing sustainable social solutions (Bignetti, 2011; Cloutier, 2003; Tardif & Harrison, 2005; Mulgan, 2006; Rollin & Vicent, 2007; Buckland & Murillo, 2013; Cunha & Benneworth, 2013; Avelino et al., 2019). This network of actors forms what can be called a social innovation system or ecosystem (SIE). The social innovation ecosystem is understood as a network that brings together various actors who collaborate to address social problems and create innovative solutions, including social entrepreneurs, governments, nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and the community. The ecosystem creates an environment conducive to social innovation by facilitating the exchange of knowledge, resources, and ideas, as well as encouraging cooperation and experimentation. Its goal is to drive sustainable development, promote democratic practices, and tackle complex public problems (Fulgêncio & Fever, 2016; Andion et al., 2020).

According to Pel et al. (2020), the idea of a Social Innovation Ecosystem goes beyond the reductionist view of the agency of individual "heroes" of innovation. Thus, SIEs are not only support structures for social entrepreneurs, but involve many actors and organizations that collectively shape social innovations. When exploring an SIE, it is identified that, in addition to initiatives directly addressing social problems, there are organizations that operate "behind the scenes," providing various forms of support, such as coordination, funding, or training (Magalhães, Andion & Alperstedt, 2020; Domanski & Kaletka, 2018; 2020). They highlight the importance of studying the support network, and Cajaiba-Santana (2014, p. 48) suggests investigating the complex interactions within the network, "more specifically, what they think, what they value, how they behave, and how the interrelations between actors and social systems occur".

Support organizations for training are those that provide specialized technical support, training, and content aimed at social innovation. By generating and disseminating knowledge, these organizations influence the definition of what is understood by social innovation. In other words, the

concept disseminated by these organizations shapes perceptions, strengthens, and reinforces a particular narrative of social innovation. Thus, they not only “teach” new ways to develop social innovations but also participate in the construction of social reality, potentially proposing new frameworks and knowledge perspectives (Wittmayer et al., 2019). Therefore, the ideas promoted within the social innovation ecosystem (SIE) affect how social issues are interpreted, the visions of future scenarios, and the pathways to achieve them. This means that the actions of support organizations are shaped by the SI concepts they adopt (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), which underscores the importance of recognizing them.

In the next section, we discuss analysis models of SI that can contribute to this recognition by highlighting dimensions that allow exploring the dynamics of SI development.

MODELS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION ANALYSIS

Various authors have developed models to analyze social innovations, such as Cloutier (2003), Tardif and Harrison (2005), Mulgan (2006), Rollin and Vicent (2007), Buckland and Murillo (2013), Cunha and Benneworth (2013), and Haxeltine et al. (2013). These models provide theoretical frameworks that serve as references for exploring the development of SI. In Table 1, we summarize the main dimensions proposed by each of the studied models.

Table 1.

Summary of Social Innovation Analysis Dimensions

Author(s)	Analysis dimensions
Cloutier (2003)	Form; Process; Actors; Change Objective; and Results Achieved.
Tardif e Harrison (2005)	Transformation; Innovative Character; Innovation; Actors; and Processes.
Mulgan (2006)	Diagnosis; Proposal Generation; Prototype Development; Maintenance; Scaling and Diffusion; Systemic Change.
Rollin e Vicent (2007)	Emergence; Experimentation; Appropriation; Alliance; Transfer; and Diffusion.
Buckland e Murillo (2013)	Social Impact; Economic Sustainability; Type of Innovation; Intersectoral Collaboration; Scalability and Replicability.
Cunha e Benneworth (2013)	Idea Generation; Creation of Protected Space; Demonstration; Decision to Expand; Support Coalition; Codification; and Diffusion.
Haxeltine et al. (2013)	Social Innovation; System Innovation; Game-changers; Change Narratives; Societal Transformation.

Although they support different perspectives, when explored in detail, these models present common dimensions to analyze SI, among which the following stand out: process, actors, and purpose of social innovation.

The process dimension refers to the creation and implementation of SI and is an important element for analyzing it. Understanding how solutions are generated and implemented highlights their originality and objectives (Cloutier, 2003). According to Tardif and Harrison (2005), the process can be understood through the mode of coordination, means, and constraints.

The mode of coordination refers to how the organizations involved interact, coordinate, and relate in the social innovation process, which can be more hierarchical or horizontal. The means refer to the resources used to carry out the process, including human, informational, financial, and technological resources. Partnerships, interest negotiations, resource mobilization, and sector integration for the development of the process are also considered means. Finally, the constraints are the barriers and challenges encountered during the process, which may be related to resistance from certain groups, political, economic, or cultural issues, and the complexity of the context in which social innovation is being developed.

The actor dimension highlights that social innovation is a dynamic process that requires the involvement of individuals, groups, or organizations that participate directly and indirectly in the social innovation process and are essential for its promotion (Cloutier, 2003; Tardif & Harrison, 2005; Buckland & Murillo, 2013; Andion et al., 2017). According to Tardif and Harrison (2005), there are four types of actors involved in the social innovation process: social actors, organizational actors, institutional actors, and intermediary actors.

Social actors are those directly involved in the social problem, actively participating in its solution and often being the main beneficiaries of social innovation initiatives. They can be individuals from communities experiencing social problems or civil society, such as cooperative movements, community associations, and cooperatives. Organizational actors are the organizations that work in favor of social innovations, which can include companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community associations, social economy organizations, or collective enterprises. Institutional actors are represented by state institutions, governments, and regulatory and legislative institutions, which play relevant roles in creating public policies, as well as monitoring and regulating social organizations operating in the area. Finally, intermediary actors are those referred to as hybrid actors, as they play a role in connecting the different actors involved in the social innovation process, promoting collaboration and facilitating dialogue between the various actors through committees and social networks (Tardif & Harrison, 2005).

The third dimension of social innovation is the purpose, which is related to the objective of addressing social, environmental, economic, or political problems (Cloutier, 2003; Alperstedt & Andion, 2021). In general, the objective of this confrontation may be the provision of services or products that contribute to mitigating the problem, or it may involve the development of actions aimed at transforming the dominant social structures (Montgomery, 2016).

Since the social innovation process promoted by training support organizations is not neutral (Wittmayer et al., 2019), we argue that there are differences in the characteristics of the dimensions of social innovation according to the prevailing and underlying concept of social innovation, either explicitly or implicitly, in the activities of training support organizations within the social innovation ecosystem (EIS). Table 2 links these dimensions with their respective characteristics, according to the underlying concept of social innovation.

Table 2.

Conceptions of SI involved in the activities of support organizations

Dimension	The conception associated with the technocratic perspective of SI holds:	The conception associated with the democratic perspective of SI holds:
Process	that the cycles of SI involve: diagnosis of the problem, proposition of new solution ideas, prototyping and testing, sustaining, diffusion, and systemic change. Adoption of Design Thinking, methods from management and design. Focus on creativity in addressing social needs.	that the social innovation process involves collaboration and consensus among a plurality of actors and logics. Strengthening the social and solidarity economy, participatory governance, co-production of services, co-construction of public policies
Actors	the prominent role of social entrepreneurs, experts, and organizations.	the prominent role of those affected by the social problem, institutions, citizens, and network formation.
Purpose	that the social problem is solved with the result of the social innovation cycle (products and/or services).	that the social problem depends on structural transformations (modes of production and consumption and development model).

Note. Adapted from Montgomery (2016) and Andion et al. (2017).

In the next section, we present the methodological procedures, in which we explain how the dimensions of analysis of SI were used to highlight the underlying SI conceptions of each of the analyzed support organizations.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This research was guided by the following question: what are the underlying SI conceptions in the activities of support organizations in promoting social innovation? To answer this, we conducted a multiple case study with an illustrative character, aiming to demonstrate the SI conceptions that underpin the activities of training support organizations within the social innovation ecosystem (SIE) in the city of Florianópolis, Brazil.

The case study is defined as “the analysis of people, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods” (Thomas, 2011, p. 513). Specifically, the illustrative case study is a descriptive approach that uses one or two dimensions to characterize a situation, with the aim of making the unfamiliar familiar and providing a common language on the topic (Brown et al., 2005).

To identify the most representative organizations related to the issue at hand and to select cases for the study, we used the mapping available on the platform of the Social Innovation Observatory of Florianópolis (*Observatório de Inovação Social de Florianópolis*, OBISF) as a starting point.

With this data in hand, we ranked the organizations by relevance, adopting the following criteria:

1. Social media presence and number of search engine mentions - We assessed the number of followers and engagement on Instagram, as well as search results on Google, as these parameters indicate the reach and impact of the ideas disseminated
2. Interaction network of support organizations with social innovation initiatives - This criterion was analyzed based on resources available on the OBISF platform.

To confirm this classification, we conducted interviews with three researchers and four professionals in the field of social innovation. They validated the presented data and confirmed the Community Institute of Greater Florianópolis (*Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis*, ICom) and Social Good Brasil (SGB) as prominent training support organizations for social innovation in Florianópolis, which were selected to illustrate our discussion on the conceptions of SI disseminated in the SIE.

The ICom, founded in 2006, is a non-profit civil society organization whose mission is “to promote community development in Santa Catarina by mobilizing, articulating, and supporting social investors and collective actions of public interest” (ICom, 2023). Headquartered at the Catarina Technology Center (*Centro Catarinense de Tecnologia*, ACATE), ICom has a team of eight professionals and focuses its activities on three main areas: community knowledge and articulation, strengthening of organized civil society, and encouraging private social investment.

Social Good Brasil (SGB), founded in 2012, is also a non-profit organization that aims to promote the use of technology and social innovations to address problems and improve people’s quality of life. SGB operates through proprietary methodologies in developing training programs, events, and social innovation projects in collaboration with companies, government, and civil society organizations. Initially focused on technology, SGB began to incorporate data-related topics into its actions in 2017, recognizing its social impact.

The second phase of data collection aimed to understand how these organizations operate. For this purpose, we gathered secondary data from information available on the organizations’ websites, videos, news reports, social media posts, and institutional documents. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with the project consultant at ICom (Interviewee 1) and the executive director of SGB (Interviewee 2). Both were selected based on their tenure in the respective organizations, their positions, and their representativeness concerning the phenomenon under investigation.

For the analysis, we developed an analytical framework based on three dimensions (see Table 2):

1. **Process:** this dimension examines the creation and implementation of SI, analyzing the mode of coordination, resources, and constraints.
2. **Actors:** agents involved in the development of SI, including social, organizational, institutional, and intermediary actors.
3. **Purpose:** the objective to be achieved with SI, analyzing the focus of the action.

The collected data were analyzed through interpretative analysis, involving critical reflection by the researchers, resulting in a set of associations between the data and the analytical dimensions. The researchers' creativity played an important role in this process, as suggested by Godoy (2006).

Finally, after understanding how the support organizations operate, we proceeded to analyze the underlying conceptions of social innovation in their actions. The data were interpretatively analyzed, associating the characteristics of each of the three dimensions with the technocratic or democratic conceptions of SI. The results are presented and discussed in the next section.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first dimension analyzed was the **process** dimension. Its understanding involved analyzing the coordination mode of social innovation, means, and restrictions (Tardif & Harrison, 2005). In this context, we identified that ICom's strategies include: promoting knowledge through the realization of participatory social diagnoses and training; community articulation through the mapping of non-governmental organizations; strengthening organized civil society through technical and financial support; and encouraging private social investment, aiming to engage companies and individuals in public interest causes through donations.

In the social innovation process, the community is not merely a beneficiary or recipient of a service but a relevant actor in projects it identifies as its own. As an example of this co-participatory approach, Interviewee 1 stated, "We [keep] talking and encouraging what they [social initiatives] bring to us in the form of questions, the pains, and challenges they face are a way for us to identify the problem, and then we can intervene." In addition to emphasizing community participation, this organization establishes connections with various actors such as municipal councils, universities, civil society organizations, local communities, and social entrepreneurs, as can be identified in the documentary analysis.

One of the main restrictions faced in social innovation processes is the lack of financial resources. To address this issue, ICom focuses efforts on creating a culture of recurring donations to meet the demands of social organizations. The need for professionalization in the field is also another challenge pointed out. As supported by the organization in several of its materials (such as its website, training sessions, and publications), overcoming philanthropy and assistance and promoting transparency, reporting, and figures is crucial for social innovation initiatives to demonstrate their work's importance to society.

Still regarding the process dimension, we found that the other organization analyzed, Social Good Brasil, seeks solutions by promoting training and programs focused on the use of data in decision-making, based on cycles that include problem diagnosis, solution ideation, and prototyping. Its activities primarily involve private companies, with an emphasis on the figure of the social entrepreneur. Interviewee 2 comments that the organization has increasingly sought to diversify the actors involved, primarily identifying "impact leaders." Among its main challenges is fundraising to sustain its activities and ensure the organization's survival. The organization understands this

funding process as complex, requiring constant efforts to diversify funding sources, adapt the organizational structure, and innovate.

It was possible to verify that ICom and SGB develop different processes in promoting social innovation. While ICom encourages private social investment as a source of funding for social innovation initiatives, it also works on strengthening these organizations to ensure their autonomy. Furthermore, SGB addresses social problems through a more structural approach, such as participation in municipal councils, for example. On the other hand, Social Good takes a different approach to social innovation. This organization seeks to create learning spaces and technological solutions that encourage the use of data for social solutions by training individuals and companies. Therefore, its efforts are focused on training individuals capable of generating innovative solutions.

The differences in the actions of both organizations regarding the process dimension reflect the discussion by Cajaiba-Santana (2014) and Ayob et al. (2016). They argue that social innovation has been polarized between the agency approach, which emphasizes the role of individuals or “heroes” as the primary causal force (SGB), and the structuralist approach, which focuses on how structures and social contexts influence and shape social innovation (ICom).

The second dimension, **actors**, refers to the social, organizational, institutional, and intermediary actors who are (or are not) involved in the social innovation process. ICom has a close relationship with social actors, accessing civil society through movements, informal groups, grassroots initiatives, and collectives. As stated by Interviewee 1, “ICom is always a bridge between the actors.” Regarding companies, ICom acts as a bridge for the implementation of private social investment. In terms of institutional actors, there is a partnership with local universities and participation in municipal councils and some networks. It was also identified that ICom maintains frequent dialogue with municipal and state governments and their respective secretariats. Lastly, in addition to its team of 8 employees, ICom has a network of volunteers who collaborate to strengthen local communities.

In SGB, the social actors are impact leaders involved in social and environmental causes, social entrepreneurs, and companies focused on corporate social responsibility through their institutes and foundations. For specific campaigns, SGB seeks financial support from companies to promote social projects. As Interviewee 2 stated, “SGB is not solely responsible [for the projects developed]. If we have a company that wants to offer training for women, we organize campaigns and calls, but sometimes we need that company’s support to attract [participants].” Although SGB primarily focuses on training individuals, it recognizes that solitary efforts are not sufficient to promote its projects and reach the target audience, highlighting the importance of connections with tech companies, incubators, and startups. Lastly, regarding intermediary actors, SGB primarily relies on its staff and volunteers who support the development of new solutions and technologies, working directly in local communities.

Although both organizations mobilize a range of actors, aligning with Montgomery’s (2016) discussions, we observe that SGB leans toward a technocratic perspective, emphasizing the social entrepreneur, data experts, and technology. In contrast, ICom aligns with a democratic perspective, prioritizing those affected by social issues and network formation.

Regarding purpose, the third dimension of social innovation analyzed, we sought to understand what drives the actions of the studied organizations by examining their motivations as support organizations for social innovation, the values and principles guiding their activities, and the goals they aim to achieve. We found that ICom seeks to strengthen the structures and practices of social innovation initiatives, aiming to increase their social impact and contribute to the socioeconomic development of the communities served. The adopted approach avoids providing ready-made, traditional solutions, which, according to Interviewee 1, “are often inadequate.” The main focus is to be a mediator, recognizing that power and knowledge already reside within the initiatives or community itself. In this sense, ICom collaborates with those interested in solving problems, working to identify ways to strengthen these initiatives while respecting each initiative’s institutional development stage and values. Thus, ICom’s purpose assumes that solutions to social problems should be co-developed with the community rather than imposed by external actors.

SGB views social innovations as a quest for solutions that are both creative and transformative, understanding that social innovation should be geared toward the common good, aiming for a better quality of life and promoting equity and sustainability. The organization’s purpose is centered on promoting meaningful societal change by addressing complex problems through innovative approaches, technologies, and strategies that can generate positive impact. Within this context, SGB’s purpose is grounded in generating social impact by using data to identify trends and develop practical solutions. Here, data usage is considered a component for solving social problems, though it does not account for structural, historical, or social factors in addressing root causes.

In revisiting theoretical discussions on the purpose of social innovation (SI), we find that SGB’s focus on the outcome of social innovation aligns with a more technocratic SI perspective (Mulgan, 2006; Murray, Mulgan & Caulier-Grice, 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010). In contrast, ICom’s emphasis on community perception of social issues and its effort to identify root causes through territorial diagnostics indicate an SI approach more consistent with a democratic perspective (Cloutier, 2003; Moulaert, 2009; Westley, 2008; Wittmayer et al., 2019; Savall, 2022).

In summary, ICom’s approach reveals elements of the democratic SI perspective (Montgomery, 2016), as it prioritizes long-term processes and takes an integrated view of phenomena. The organization promotes SI by fostering collaborative networks and strengthening local institutions, acting as an intermediary among businesses, government, and civil society organizations. Recognizing the role of grassroots organizations, ICom seeks to elevate the visibility and importance of socio-environmental projects as essential actors in the city’s development. By emphasizing community knowledge and engagement, ICom works to enhance active involvement from individuals and local communities, highlighting the transformative power that emerges when these actors are actively engaged in resolving social issues. This SI approach underscores the importance of community leadership in driving social transformation (Taylor, 1970; Cloutier, 2003; Andion et al., 2020).

Conversely, SGB focuses on creating innovative and transformative social solutions, prioritizing measurable, high-impact outcomes. Through its focus on training and programs aimed at data-driven decision-making, SGB

employs a cyclical process that includes prototyping and testing, with a strong emphasis on the social entrepreneur as a key agent of social change. The organization's narrative highlights the need for disruptive approaches and innovative solutions to social challenges, leveraging technology, data analysis, and new strategies to foster social impact. This focus on tangible, innovative results reflects a commitment to finding practical, effective solutions that can drive meaningful societal change (Stanford, 2003; Mulgan, 2006; Murray et al., 2008; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010). Thus, SGB's actions are more aligned with the technocratic SI perspective, as characterized by Montgomery (2016).

While ICom tends toward a democratic SI perspective and SGB aligns more with a technocratic approach, we did not observe practices of resistance or counter-hegemonic actions challenging the prevailing system (Barcellos et al., 2014). This suggests that both organizations operate within the broader context, adhering to established market-driven dynamics and expectations. This adaptive approach could represent a survival strategy, enabling support organizations to secure resources, legitimacy, and sustainability for their activities by not overtly challenging the existing system.

However, this form of engagement may limit their capacity to question and alter the social structures and norms that sustain socio-environmental issues (Westley, 2008; Wittmayer et al., 2019; Avelino et al., 2019; Slee, 2021). Consequently, although support organizations can encourage SI initiatives, their activities may be confined to conventional practices, without confronting the foundational aspects of the current system. This highlights the importance of adopting a critical perspective toward the strategies embraced by actors within the SI ecosystem, acknowledging the need for approaches that not only innovate but also critically engage with systemic issues.

■ FINAL REMARKS

This article had the purpose of problematizing the conceptions of social innovation underlying the work of prominent training support organizations in the social innovation ecosystem (SIE). In exploring this question, we sought to demonstrate that these support organizations are deeply involved in shaping the meaning of social innovation and how this meaning spreads within the ecosystem, thus influencing the direction of social change processes.

The actors in the SIE, through their practices and values, contribute to building a social reality that may either seek improvements within existing structures or challenge them, promoting new configurations. In the case of training support organizations, their practices may align with a technocratic perspective—associated with a neoliberal and depoliticized approach—or with a democratic perspective that aims to create spaces for resistance and alternatives to the prevailing neoliberal project (Montgomery, 2016).

Therefore, social innovation is not a neutral term; it represents a vision for society that is actively contested. As such, social innovation can (or cannot) be a tool for social change and for transforming the social structures that perpetuate asymmetric power relations. In this context, although promoting social innovation is the stated goal of training support organizations,

the project of social transformation they operate within may lead to antagonistic visions of society, depending on the perspective of social innovation to which they align.

The possibilities for action for support organizations are vast; however, when anchored in a particular perspective of social innovation, other approaches are sidelined. This means that one narrative gains prominence, while others lose attention or may even cease to exist. By examining the conceptions of social innovation promoted by support organizations through their methods of operation, we can discern which perspective of social innovation predominates in the field. In this context, our research outlined dimensions of analysis to explore the role of support organizations in promoting social innovation in Florianópolis and to critically assess their approach. We highlighted the interconnection between IS conceptions and support organizations' practices, which manifest as expressions of their positions and worldviews. By analyzing the work of these organizations through the dimensions of processes, actors, and purpose, we identified the predominant IS conceptions, observing a tendency toward a democratic perspective in ICom and a technocratic perspective in SGB.

Examining the work of social innovation training support organizations, the study contributed to an understanding of how social innovation is driven and disseminated. Additionally, the investigation analyzed how organizations conceive and interpret social innovation, revealing the different perspectives and approaches used to tackle complex social challenges. These findings hold significant implications for both organizational theory and practice, offering deeper insights into how organizational practices shape the social innovation ecosystem.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of a research agenda focused on the work of these actors, as previously suggested by Pel et al. (2020). One key question emerging from our study is how social innovation initiatives supported by training organizations interpret and apply the guidance they receive, recognizing their active role in constructing social reality. Future studies could provide further analysis that contributes to the consolidation of knowledge in this vital aspect of the SIE.



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NOTES

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