Chapter 1

Social Innovation as a Promoter of the Welfare: The Case of One Dollar Glasses in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Although there is already much literature on innovation, the term social innovation is still relatively recent and underexplored. Social innovation refers to ideas, actions, and new or improved knowledge with the goal of overcoming the social needs in several areas of cooperation and participation. This influences the improvement of welfare, mainly through some regional projects that diagnose high priority needs of the most vulnerable population. This chapter aims to discuss the influence of social innovation in the improvement of daily life and presents a case study of the project one dollar glasses in Brazil. This project was developed initially by the German researcher Martin Aufmuth, who designed the production of resistant glasses with a lower cost. Renovatio in Brazil delivers about 12,000 glasses and covers a gap of ophthalmologists (85% of municipalities in Brazil don’t have this specialty) and the access to this fundamental product.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays it is consensual the role of social innovation to solve several problems mainly when state fail in assist poor and excluded people. Nevertheless, we don’t have a single definition for social innovation, however most of the definitions provided by the literature highlight that this type of innovation provides solutions for societal problems and involves multiple stakeholders in networking, such as, social enterprises, non-profits, individuals, universities, government agencies, volunteers, etc. These kinds of solutions have a huge societal impact on the day life of the citizens and could be replicate in different contexts and geographies.

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This chapter aims to discuss the influence of social innovation in the improvement of daily life of population and present the case study of the project one-dollar glasses in Brazil. To achieve the objectives this chapter is divided in two main parts. The first part presents a literature review about social innovation. And the second part present the case study of one-dollar glasses and in the context of Brazil. The chapter also provide some considerations about learning objectives and outcomes and also some questions to discuss to allow the application of this chapter as a pedagogical case study.

BACKGROUND

Social Innovation

Nowadays it is possible to find an extended literature about innovation, nevertheless the concept of social innovation still underexplored. According to Pol e Ville (2009) social innovation it is a concept that everyone like however nobody knows really whom this concept means. In the last decades social innovation has receive several contributes from different fields such as, local development studies, urban studies and studies of labour organization (Moulaert et al, 2013). Nevertheless, the scholarly literature on social innovation in the field of social policy and welfare studies still scarce (Jenson, 2014).

A study developed by BEPA (2010) suggest that Max Weber was the first author that introduce this concept, when defined the relation between social order and innovation through the impact of the behaviour in the social. Nevertheless, Bernatchez (2006) referred that Taylor (1970) and Gabor (1970) are the pioneers in the use of the social innovation concept, due this author understudied how new ways to do things could response to the social needs and highlight the importance of the new social arranges reflected in the law and technology and their social impacts. In the fact the earlier studies associate social innovation to social change and are more linked with sociological studies.

However, during the last years the theories evolution and it is possible to find three blocks:

1. Theories of social change focusing on practice theory, institutionalisation and development theories;
2. Theoretical approaches in the different fields of social innovation research (social entrepreneurship, social economy, local and regional development, design thinking, development studies);
3. Innovations studies including science and technology studies (STS), management and business innovations.

In the fact, social innovations cover new practices (concepts, policy instruments, new forms of cooperation and organisation,) methods, processes and regulations that are developed and/or adopted by citizens, customers, politicians etc. in order to meet social demands and to resolve societal challenges in a better way than existing practices (European Commission, 2013).

Bignetti (2011) defined social innovation as new ideas, actions and new or improved knowledge to overcome social needs in several areas of cooperation and participation in society. Mulgan (2006) highlighted that the actual business models tend to become outdated and limited in their use and focused the importance of innovation followed social innovation patterns in the last decades. The same research referred huge limitations associated to: population ageing, diversity of cities and countries around the world, increase in chronic diseases, behaviour problems, difficulties in transition to adult age, crime,