



# A Social Work Approach to Social Innovation

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## **Abstract**

The Institute of the Future has identified several megatrends expected to shape the socio-economic and political problems and opportunities over the next century (Johansen, 2009). These include new forms of demographic-social-economic diasporas that result in fundamental shifts; new paradigms of roles and responsibilities for civil society; changes in the demand for/supply of food; threats to the ecosystem; and changes in longevity, health, and the social-developmental dimensions of life experiences. The confluence of these and other trends, such as the continuing increase in economic inequalities, means many social problems will become even more complex and with solutions remaining elusive. Some experts suggest that the task of tackling social problems has become even more challenging in recent years because many long-standing sources of financial support are no longer available to organizations that want to address the problems. The economic recession has had a significant impact on the funding of social services, with the decline of public and philanthropic support and the failure to keep up with increased demand for services (Husch, 2011; Lawrence & Mukai, 2011). There has become increased need for revenue diversification strategies and the development of strategic partnerships to enable nonprofits to survive (Kirkman, 2012). Further, blurring of public-private boundaries has created challenges and opportunities for rethinking traditional solutions to solutions to social problems (Chell, Nicolopoulou, & Karataş-Özkan, 2010). Given this climate, there is a compelling need to develop innovative, sustainable solutions to respond to challenging social problems. This paper argues social workers must become engaged in 21<sup>st</sup> century approaches to practice, planning, administration, policy, and community development.



The Institute of the Future has identified several megatrends expected to shape the socio-economic and political problems and opportunities over the next century (Johansen, 2009). These include new forms of demographic-social-economic diasporas that result in fundamental shifts; new paradigms of roles and responsibilities for civil society; changes in the demand for/supply of food; threats to the ecosystem; and changes in longevity, health, and the social-developmental dimensions of life experiences. The confluence of these and other trends, such as the continuing increase in economic equalities, means many social problems will become even more complex and with solutions remaining elusive. Some experts suggest that the task of tackling social problems has become even more challenging in recent years because many long-standing sources of financial support are no longer available to organizations that want to address the problems. The economic recession has had a significant impact on the funding of social services, with the decline of public and philanthropic support and the failure to keep up with increased demand for services (Husch, 2011; Lawrence & Mukai, 2011). There has become increased need for revenue diversification strategies and the development of strategic partnerships to enable nonprofits to survive (Kirkman, 2012). Further, blurring of public-private boundaries has created challenges and opportunities for rethinking traditional solutions to solutions to social problems (Chell, Nicolopoulou, & Karataş-Özkan, 2010). Given this climate, there is a compelling need to develop innovative, sustainable solutions to respond to challenging social problems. Social workers must become engaged in 21<sup>st</sup> century approaches to practice, planning, administration, policy, and community development.

Social innovation has been lauded as way to understand and achieve new solutions to social problems. Common themes in the definition of social innovation include a better or more efficient solution than what currently exists (Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller 2008), new collaborations or social relationships that support our responses to social problems, and solutions that not only create a positive response, but also enhance our ability to act. Some definitions also include the fact that true social innovations change the system, contribute to community development, imbue technological innovations, and/or promote digital connectivity (Rüede1& Lurtz, 2012). While the social innovation paradigm creates a new framework for solving social problems, few leaders from the field of social work have made significant contributions to this discussion (Germak & Singh, 2010; Berzin, 2012). As an emergent field, social innovation has had the most visible leadership from schools of management, with significant work from design, engineering, and public policy (Brock &



Steiner, 2009; Mirabella & Young, 2012). To date, social innovation has capitalized on the professional skill sets of these disciplines to solve social problems.

While this leads to expanded and often complementary strategies, this has also led to particular emphases in our conceptualizations and research in the field. The current approaches to social innovation reflect the perspectives developed by these professions and have resulted in heavy focus on the social entrepreneurship lens and case analysis (Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009). Social entrepreneurship, while, a critical pathway for social innovation, represents just one part of an expanded paradigm. There remains a need for a transdisciplinary approach to social innovation and to larger conceptualizations that include multiple pathways towards innovation (Nandan & Scott, 2012; Berzin & Pitt-Catsoupes, in review).

By engaging social work leadership in the social innovation dialogue, we begin to consider a broader approach to social innovation and can develop rigorous research that examines not only social entrepreneurship but other parts of this expanded paradigm. This article examines the contributions the field of social work can bring to social innovation. It outlines a conceptual approach that calls on particular principles and values from social work to embed into social innovation practice. A three-pronged model is proposed that suggests multiple change agents for social innovation, processes to support practice, and outcomes that support social justice.

### **The Imperatives of Social Work Leadership for Social Innovation**

Social work's rich history in solving social problems, supporting social change, and developing new responses to social problems makes social work well-suited to contribute to the development of the field of social innovation, particularly if considered using a definition that supports both entrepreneurship and innovation within existing social service structures (Berzin, 2012; Germak & Singh, 2010). Social work involvement complements the interdisciplinary approach to understanding, researching, and teaching social innovation (Nandan & Scott, 2012; Nandan, London, & Blum 2014). Particular conceptual and empirical leadership could come from social work around several key areas.

Too often, the complex social issues being addressed by social innovation are overlooked. The laser focus of other professions on solutions contrasts with the social work emphasis on the importance of identifying both root causes as well as identifying possible unintended consequence. As Dacin and colleagues (2011) noted in their social entrepreneurship discussion, a common theme



could be promoted that relates to the outcome of social value creation. This contribution is notable and differentiates social entrepreneurship from traditional entrepreneurship. It does not, however, speak to root cause or problem specification, but again encourages a focus on outcome. This outcome focus found in Ruedel and Lurtz's (2012) work on social innovation definitions neglects the critical gains made by first focusing on problem framing and re-framing before undertaking social innovation efforts.

Social innovation work has also been concerned with local embeddedness, assuming the importance of local relationships and their adoption of innovation efforts (Shaw & Carter, 2007). Social work brings critical expertise in community engagement and community-level change (Nandan, London, & Blum, 2014). Social work's ethical code provides the framework for community-driven engagement and collaboration (NASW, 2008).

Much of the current focus in social innovation remains on the individual pursuits of social entrepreneurs. There remains a lack of consensus on social entrepreneurship definitions but the focus on individual pursuit of social mission is almost universal in the espoused definitions of social entrepreneurship (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010). The individual approach creates a hero effect promoting the notion that particular individuals will 'save the world' (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2014), and neglects to build on the social capital, knowledge, and experience of existing organizations. An expanded paradigm of social innovation is inclusive of an entrepreneurial perspective focused on individual creation and the founding of new organizations, but also celebrates the possibility of accomplishment from larger groups of stakeholders, organizations, and cross-sectorial partnerships. Social work provides the leadership to support and understand this path to innovation.

Social work practitioners have longstanding experience leading and working with social service programs. When this is appropriately leveraged, this experiential capital could be an asset for both launching and sustaining social innovation efforts. Scholars have begun to acknowledge the role social intrapreneurship, which is launching innovation from within existing organizations, can have in the social innovation landscape (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010; Berzin & Pitt-Catsouphes, in review). The social work field's dominance in positions of human service management and practice can provide the frame for leveraging the intrapreneurship path.

While many professions recognize the importance of customer or client-led innovation initiatives, social work practices leverage participant direction and empowerment not only as a



means to the end of innovation, but also as being essential to the sustainability of the innovation.. Viewing the well-being of individuals and groups as the overarching goal of the profession, social work views social innovation through the lenses of professional ethic.

Social work also becomes a critical voice for social innovation as it represents the human service sector, a potential asset for innovation. Outside of intrapreneurship efforts, social sector organizations also serve as the testing site for the corporate sector (Kanter, 1999). Working on social challenges in the social sector stimulates business innovation. This link between business and the social sector and this blurring of boundaries (Ebrahim, 2012) has created an even greater need for social work leadership within the social innovation dialogue. Marrying social work values and ethical principles with social innovation strategies and processes creates a lens for innovation that best supports solving complex social problems.

### **Defining a Social Work Approach to Social Innovation**

Social innovation can be considered as a process reliant on particular agents of change, processes and approaches, and outcomes. In this expanded conceptual framework, we consider the mission of the innovation (see e.g, Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011), the actors, and the outcome working in conjunction rather than as separate entities. This approach is distinct from other conceptualizations that tend to focus on only one aspect of the innovation. Further, this approach is embedded in a value and belief system that is core to the social work code of ethics (NASW, 2008).

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### **Principles and Values**

Core to a social work approach to social innovation is the inclusion of particular beliefs and values that are congruent with social work practice. This supports the differentiation of this particular approach from other discipline's work in this area. While the desire to do something good is embedded into virtually all approaches to social innovation (Rüedel & Lurtz, 2012), concepts of empathy, social justice, social embeddedness and competence are distinctive.

As a profession, social work is explicit in its drive to respect human dignity and value each person's worth (NASW, 2008). Concepts of solidarity, partnership, integrity, and cultural competence promote a joint relationship with marginalized populations and value self-determination. Empathy is an important tool for social work practice as it represents a pathway to demonstrate and act on those values (Gerdes & Segal, 2011). In the social innovation context, this



lens allows for the development of reciprocal relationships between innovators and those in need. It creates a strong need for assessment and relationship-formation prior to intervention.

Social empathy extends this concept to not only understanding individual experiences, but also gaining insight into structural disparities and inequalities (Segal, 2011). In this view, social innovations attempt to not only solve an immediate problem, but also work on reducing these inequities. This work on behalf of marginalized populations permeates a social work approach, as it challenges social injustice. Understanding complex social conditions and the experience of others promotes the type of innovation that challenges poverty, discrimination, and inequity (Segal, 2011).

To work on behalf of others requires a social understanding of human experience and intensive human interaction. While NASW is explicit in a core belief of the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2008), our approach for social innovation uses the language of social embeddedness. Social embeddedness acknowledges the purpose of all innovation activities as related to social mission and the process of social innovation as an interactive pursuit. The process occurs through social interactions and in a social context.

Lastly, the NASW (2008) values promote a principle of competence, whereby one only practices in an area for which they have expertise. This value calls on the social innovation space to acknowledge the deep-rooted expertise of those within the sector and to entrench social problem 'experts' in solution development. Rather than celebrate only the heroic social entrepreneur who seems to emerge (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011), it creates a belief that we can build capacity for innovation. Leveraging the capacity of social work organizations strengthens our competence for solving problems and developing innovative solutions. The field needs research to understand how to utilize existing strengths and to develop a set of competencies around social innovation tasks and processes. This opens the field to a wider range of innovators and perhaps, a wider range of solutions.

### **Change Agents**

Social innovation, and social entrepreneurship more specifically, has often been considered as the work of the individual (Light, 2009), yet powerful change can also be driven by organizations and communities. At the individual level, entrepreneurs work to develop new organizations outside of the traditional and to solve problems in new ways. These efforts, often considered under the lexicon of social entrepreneurship, represent an important paradigm for developing new responses



to social issues (Bornstein, 2007; Dees, 1998). At the individual level, there is a complementary path that has received less attention in the literature and popular press. The intrapreneurship approach as conceptualized by Pinchot and Pellman (1999) represents individuals taking steps from within an existing organizational structure to pursue new ideas or innovations. Social innovation can also occur through the work of social intrapreneurs creating new programs, products, or services from within existing structures (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010; Berzin & Pitt-Catsoupes, in review).

At the organizational level, there are opportunities for organizations themselves to be agents of social innovation. Tracey, Phillips, and Jarvis (2011) explored innovation from institutional perspectives highlighting how interaction between individual, organizational and societal level processes support institutional work. At the institutional level, non-profit, for-profit, or hybrid organizations can spur change. For-profit organizations might espouse social innovation through the work of corporate social responsibility. Non-profit organizations could engage in innovation work, particularly as spurred by the need for sustainability and financial survival (Schmid, 2013). Social enterprise strategies as part of the non-profit structure or a hybrid organization may be the mechanism for change (Kirkman, 2012). Regardless of organizational structure, these represent some of the opportunities for organizations to be agents of change for social innovation work. This expanded conceptualization represents the potential for these multiple actors.

Lastly, we recognize that community and societal efforts may be necessary for comprehensive social change. Policy change as well as cross-agency collaborations can spur movements that radically transform social problems. Strong cross-sector partnerships may be needed to launch new initiatives and support innovation across organizations (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). Strategic alliances often promote business aims of social value creation, while supporting nonprofit work towards their missions (Austin, 2003). These cross-agency and cross-sector collaborations have the potential to lead to large scale change.

### **Traditional and Innovative Processes**

The social innovation process cycle is about blending traditional social work skills with innovative processes to develop, implement, and sustain effective solutions to social problems (Pitt-Catsoupes & Berzin, in press). The cycle begins with *identify problem/market opportunities and analyze root causes*. Social work has always been concerned with a deep understanding and assessment of social problems. Social work approaches like community needs assessment, root cause analysis, and



GIS can be complemented with market analysis, 3D modeling techniques, and rapid appraisals to enhance this part of the cycle.

*Specifying response alternatives* is about generating a wide range of solutions to a given problem. Solution generation has occurred through formalized and less formalized mechanisms, including brainstorming activities, literature review, and reviews of evidence-based practice models. Grant development and contract demands have spurred solutions as agencies seek funds to serve their population. Building on these activities, a social innovation approach adds concepts of open innovation, crowd sourcing, positive deviance, and user-led design to this phase.

In the *design, prototype, and pilot test* phase, we are concerned with testing out and improving on suggested ideas. Pilot testing and demonstration projects have been used consistently in social work practice to test out and improve on new approaches. The social innovation field provides new strategies that enhance this approach. Rapid prototyping, beta testing, and open testing strategies allow for more rapid assessment and response to support improvement of proposed innovations (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010).

The *implement, embed, and sustain* phase is about moving innovation from the testing phase to real time. Social work planning and implementation skills around resource procurement, scaling, building organizations, and program administration support this phase. With a social innovation approach, new organizational structures and funding structures become possible. Social enterprise models become a potential approach to support new revenue streams (Kirkman, 2012). Crowdfunding strategies and social impact bonds also provide potential new streams of revenue. Virtual organizations and hybrid organizations become organizational models for consideration.

In the last phase, *assess effectiveness and redesign for social impact*, this approach highlights traditional approaches to program evaluation, cost-benefit analysis, and research, but supplements this with consideration of social impact assessment and social return on investment (Tuan, 2008). This approach encourages consideration of business metrics with social outcomes. These five phases blend together social work approaches with additional competencies, enabling social work to bring added value to the social innovation dialogue (Pittcatsouphes & Berzin, in press).

## **Outcomes**

Like most conceptualizations of social innovation (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011; Ruedel & Lurtz, 2012), the proposed approach does have a focus on mission-based outcomes. The lens of



social work implores us to consider social justice in the outcome criteria. It also broadens the concept of transformational and new responses to social problems by affirming multiple pathways to reach that aim. Social innovation needs to acknowledge innovation outcomes that stretch beyond typical measures of the development of new products and/or companies. Social innovation can be thought to encompass three possible outcomes, thoughts, actions, and structures.

Considering *thoughts* as an outcome is about the generation of new ideas, paradigms, or concepts that have the ability to transform the way we understand or examine a social issue. Changes in language or framing of an issue can be as critical to its solutions as the development of a new program. For example, reframing disability services in terms of the disability rights movement had tremendous impact on the approach in policy and practice. Reframing youth violence as a public health issue, rather than a criminal issue has led to efforts in prevention and intervention rather than punishment.

In the area of *structure*, this approach acknowledges that alternative processes, practices, and organizational structures can meet social need in a transformative way. In this broader paradigm, a shift in structure or process can be equally effective at creating change. Individual development accounts represent this type of shift. It is a move in the process for how we act to move people out of poverty, a process that changes from welfare to savings and asset accumulation.

*Action* is an outcome with which we are all familiar. The social innovation literature is full of examples of individuals creating, programs, products, and services that enhance our ability to respond to social problems (Bornstein, 2007). Efforts like the product *Embrace*, which brought low-cost incubation to developing countries and *City Year*, which created a new service organization for young adults represent such efforts.

Outcomes across these three domains can meet the criteria for social innovation. In this conceptualization social innovation is about creating new responses to social problems, responses that have the potential to transform the problem, the possibility of being sustainable, and the promise of enhancing social justice.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

This article begins to outline a social work approach to social innovation that marries traditional concepts with innovation. Complementing social work strengths with new thinking about social innovation lends the possibility to engage a much broader group of people in the social



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innovation space. It creates a lexicon that allows for human service organizations to be engaged in social innovation work and celebrates the experiences that social work professionals can bring to this field. This approach outlines a set of competencies to begin to incorporate in social work teaching (Pitt-Catsouphes & Berzin, in press).

Current dialogue and literature have undervalued the role social sector organizations play as a distinct and alternative pathway to entrepreneurship for innovation. Leveraging the capacity of social work and social sector organizations provides opportunities utilizing existing strengths for developing, sustaining, and scaling innovation. Research needs to begin to examine these processes and evaluate the potential to bolster innovation work in existing agencies. Research that does more than articulate concepts, but begins to test theories and practice will support the field's development. Social work perspectives need to be better understood and included in the social innovation lexicon. Today's realities which suggest increasing complexity of social problems (Johansen, 2009), significant declines in spending for social services (Husch, 2011; Lawrence & Mukai, 2011), and the need for cross-sector partnerships to respond (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010), make it particularly urgent for social workers to develop the competencies for innovation, but also make it equally imperative that the social innovation field builds on the existing strengths and competencies of the social work field.



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Figure 1. Social Work Approach to Social Innovation (adapted from Pitt-Catsouphes & Berzin, in press)

