

**How social  
innovation  
leads to  
transformative  
change**

**Towards a theory of  
transformative social innovation**



Social innovations are today of great interest because many claim that they hold answers to key challenges that our societies currently face: to offer opportunities for meaningful work, sustenance and well-being, to foster social inclusion and cohesion, to offer care in different ways and to empower science and citizenry in addressing societal challenges. Yet at the same time, we still have a rather limited knowledge of how social innovations actually create change in the world.

In the TRANSIT project we are developing a new way of thinking about social innovation and how it interacts with transformative change: we are developing a new theory of transformative social innovation.

2

In this brief we start by addressing what we mean by a ‘theory’ and how we see its relevance to practice. We then present a summary of our current understanding of transformative social innovation, and finally we share seven insights about the practice of transformative social innovation that follow from this understanding.

**What is a theory? Why does practice need theory?** Our understanding of the world is based on our encounters with it and on our processes of interpretation. As social human beings, we have shared ideas about how our world works and the consequences that follow from our actions. These expectations are brought about by experience and by our thinking about the phenomenon at hand. Scientists engage in explicit reflections about a phenomenon or set of phenomena and for this they use theory.

A theory provides a way to generalise from one set of examples of a phenomenon to produce knowledge that can then be used to inform actions or policies in relation to other, similar or related phenomena. Theory informs the practical concepts and ideas that we use, which in turn affects what we do and do not choose to do. New concepts and ideas can bring about innovative actions – and vice versa.

3

There are different types of theory with different purposes—some aim to predict outcomes based on established fact while others are more tentative and frame a proposed explanation whose status is still conjectural and subject to experimentation.

# What sort of theory are we building?

In TRANSIT, we are interested in *how social innovation leads to transformative change*. To this end, we explored many literatures for relevant concepts and theories and engaged in original empirical research on some 80 social innovation initiatives and 20 related transnational social innovation networks. We looked at their transformative aims, how they are organised, how they interact with other actors and institutions, their use of resources, what role empowerment plays in social innovation, and how they learn across their journeys. The development of a theory then involved confronting our conceptual understanding of social innovation with the empirical examples, and based on that arriving at insights about how, and under what enabling conditions, social innovation might lead to transformative change.



In developing a theory of social innovation, we believe that it is important to acknowledge the fundamental non-determinacy of social life. This does not imply an absence of patterns, but rather that in attempting to discover patterns, we must pay attention to properties such as intentions, interactions and institutions, and how these play out in particular circumstances, giving rise to outcomes that are only partially predictable.

Consistent with this view, we are developing a process theory rather than a variance theory. Whereas variance theories provide explanations for phenomena in terms of relationships among dependent and independent variables (e.g., more of X and Y produce more of Z), process theories provide explanations in terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome (e.g., do A and then B to get C). A variance theory seeks to explain and predict observed outcomes with the help of explanatory variables, whereas a process theory seeks to explain how outcomes develop over time: outcomes are understood as partially predictable, based on a knowledge of process.

We are also developing a *middle-range* theory of social innovation. Middle-range theory is a well-established approach in the social sciences, that starts with a specific empirical phenomenon and tries to develop more general statements about it, that can then be further verified by data. The term ‘middle-range’ refers to the insight that in explaining social innovation we need not only to explain what is happening within an initiative, but also the enabling and constraining relations to the society that it operates in. But we can’t include everything, so a balance has to be struck where we try to include the minimal amount of social complexity required to explain how social innovation leads to transformative change.

# Social Innovation

A key feature of the TRANSIT approach is to view social innovation specifically in terms of how it leads to the creation of new *social relations*, both between the members of an initiative and between members and any aspect of society with which they interact. With this emphasis on *social relations* we place the social firmly at the centre of how we conceptualise social innovation. For instance, when citizens in a *Transition initiative* organise themselves into a cooperative who jointly own a wind turbine, they create new social relations between citizens, energy users and producers. An initiative in which there are new social relations for doing things differently, can be considered ‘socially innovative’.

The actors in an initiative will engage with, and innovate, different *doings*, such as engaging in new ethically-motivated lifestyles or pioneering a new approach to social care.



As the initiative develops, they will also engage in different *ways of organising* themselves and their actions, and develop new understandings, *framings* and meanings about their world (as issue definitions, visions, imaginaries).

At the same time, new knowledge comes about in the form of cognitive resources, competencies, types of appraisal, etc. (*new knowings*). We use the term *co-production* to describe how an initiative engages in activities of ‘producing together’ new ways of doing, organising, framing, and knowing. And new social relations are produced together with new ways of doing, organising, framing, and knowing.

A particular initiative is made up of, and operates through, the web of social and material relations that it is part of. Social innovation both acts on the surrounding context and is produced by it. The agency (capability to be the producer of change) of social innovation must be understood in terms of the relations that it is embedded in. Agency is in a sense *distributed* and an emergent property of the web of relations that it is a part of. This *relational* framing of social innovation emphasises the embedded and context specific nature of social innovation, and leads to an interest in how and why an innovation may take a certain form at a certain time and place in history.

In TRANSIT we approach **social innovation** as a process and as a qualitative property of ideas, objects, activities, and different groupings of people. We define a **social innovation initiative** as a collective of people working on ideas, objects or activities that are socially innovative and a **social innovation network** as a network of such initiatives. Two other important concepts that we use are social innovation agent and social innovation field. We refer to **social innovations agents** as any collection of individuals, initiatives, or networks that engage in social innovation, and the **social innovation field** as the web of constantly changing agents and social and material relations through which a social innovation takes place.



# Transformative social change

Social innovation takes place within a broader context that is made up of the sum-total of all actors and the different social and material relations between them, as well as the institutional arrangements with which a social innovation interacts. We call this setting the social-material context (hereafter referred to simply as ‘the context’).

Transformative change also occurs within this broader context, taking the form of a persistent adjustment in societal values, outlooks and behaviours of sufficient ‘width and depth’ to alter any preceding situation in the context. Broad societal transformations such as the industrial revolution, European integration, or





the rise of the market economy and ideology of economic liberalism, have historically transformed the context. Change in only one dimension is not considered to be a societal transformation. There have to be related changes in several dimensions in the context, and they have to happen simultaneously and across an array of places.

In this research we set out to learn about the role of social innovation in transformative change by studying actual empirical cases, and to do this we needed to approach transformative change in a way that could be readily identified and assessed in these empirical cases. We did this specifically by focusing on transformative change as *institutional change*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an institution as “An organisation founded for a religious, educational, professional, or social purpose”, but also as “An established law or practice” such as the institution of marriage, or “A well-established and familiar person or custom”.

We are interested in both *formal institutions* in the sense of the first definition above and also *informal institutions* which may take the form of norms, rules, conventions or values. We claim that both can be involved in the types of change brought about by social innovation. Institutions are conceived of as rule-like ‘social facts’ – as arrangements of established social rules that structure social interaction. They provide: *prescriptions, cognitive models (frames with tacit assumptions and schemas), identities and roles, and arrangements (family, clubs, work organisations, platforms, communities) that help us to make sense of the world, identify options, and take action*. Institutions vary greatly in how tractable or intractable to change or replacement they are.

Social innovation initiatives have complex relationships with established institutions: they can be constrained or enabled by them, they can be reproducing some established institutions, while at the same time challenging, altering or replacing others.

# How social innovation leads to transformative change

Social innovators seek to develop new practices that address an identified need or vision. In doing so they make use of available resources and are also conditioned by sets of institutionalised traditions or rules (that both enable and constrain their actions). Institutions have a shaping role in human action but at the same time are constituted through human action. This interplay between actors and institutions, referred to as the *process of structuration*, accounts for the stability and continuity of social life—but actions that change or modify existing structures are also possible.



Actors may find ways to use existing institutions and resources in novel ways, leading eventually to transformative change in the form of new institutional structures (see table 1). Actors may also find ways to create new resources or new ‘proto-institutions’. In these ways, social innovators have the potential to create novelty in existing structures—and this is the key to how social innovation leads to transformative change.

The concept of *institutionalisation* describes the process by which changes in institutional structures emerge and become more widely embedded. It refers to the process of embedding some aspect of social life (which can be e.g. norms, rules, conventions and values, or a mode of behaviour) within an organisation, a wider field of social relations, or within the context as a whole. There can be differing ‘degrees’ of institutionalisation at different times and in different parts of the context—or in other words, transformations can occur at different speeds in different places.

11

As a social innovation develops over time and space, it challenges, alters, or replaces established institutions, while at the same time it also inevitably reproduces established institutions. A social innovation process is made up of the actions of a variety of different social innovation agents, who interact through a social innovation field, in which their actions collectively lead to changes in the structuration of local practices. In other words, *transformative* social innovations interact with and influence the processes of *institutionalisation* by which changes in institutions emerge and become more widely embedded. The transformative impact of a social innovation can be empirically assessed by identifying the degrees of institutionalisation of its core elements.

**Transformative social innovation (TSI)** can now be understood as a process by which social innovation challenges, alters or replaces the dominant institutions in a specific context. Rather than as a ‘type’ of innovation, we consider TSI as a particular ‘process’ that transforms existing institutional arrangements in the context.

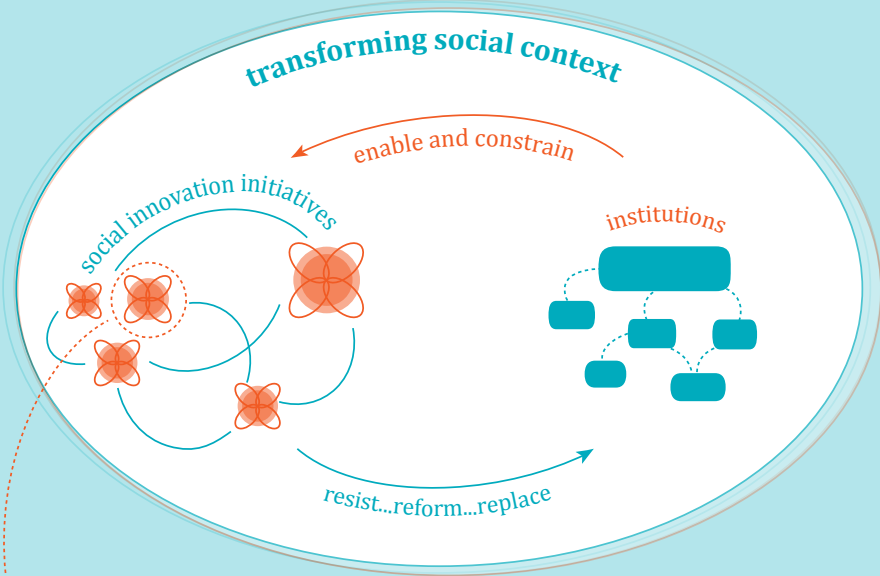
# Theory development based on empirical cases

The diagram illustrates the relations between transformative social innovation (TSI) and the context. The social innovation initiative illustrated in the lower part of the diagram is made up of different 'TSI agents' that work together to create new social relations, and innovate new forms of doing, organising, framing and knowing. Social innovation initiatives do not exist in isolation but rather are connected through a wider social innovation 'field' as illustrated in the left-hand side of the upper diagram.

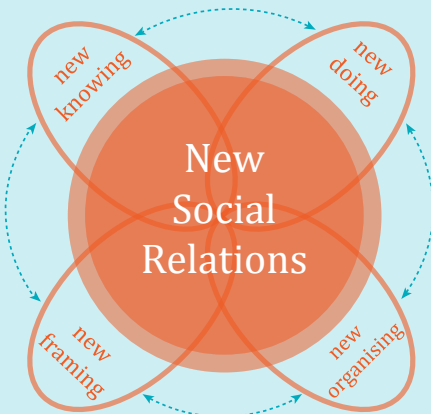
TSI exists in a reciprocal relationship with the transforming context: the TSI agents involved, and the relations between them, also undergo change. TSI is both enabled and constrained by existing institutional arrangements. This may, for example, result from voluntary interactions with new partners, such as social impact investors, or be due to specific demands imposed upon them by government and judges through e.g. legal rulings, financing schemes or other policy measures. Agents may also be affected by broader processes of economic, social or cultural change. At the same time TSI contributes to institutional changes in the context by resisting, reforming or replacing dominant institutions.

To develop a theory of TSI we made use of the conceptual understanding outlined above in analysing some 80 social innovation initiatives and 20 related transnational social innovation networks, many of which have explicit transformative ambitions. Let's briefly look at just two of the cases that we studied.

# the relations between transformative social innovation and the context



13



**Slow Food** is “a global, grassroots movement with more than a hundred thousand members in 160 countries that links the pleasure of food with a commitment to community and the environment.” (Slow Food UK, 2016). Slow Food is first and foremost a *culture movement* that aims to promote the intrinsic cultural value of local production, and critiques the globalised and delocalised food production system. There is an emphasis on re-claiming the right to the pleasure of food, and on conviviality, tradition, family, and cultural roots.

Activities include: placing traditional food practices in ‘dialogue’ with a new food narrative that establishes the relationship to climate change, the flourishing of local communities, and the fair treatment of producers; the *Slow Food University* and bringing Slow Food into schools, through educational projects such as edible gardens; *Kilometre Zero Restaurants*, networks of chefs using Slow Food principles; and, connecting different world regions by bringing people together in international events and projects.





We can now look to explain these diverse activities as attempts to build new social relations and transform currently dominant institutions around food. Slow Food aims to contribute to transformative changes in food cultures, and in food production, distribution and consumption systems. To succeed, Slow Food must also build and maintain its membership and supporters, lobby EU and national governments to promote the Slow Food vision (helping to create more favourable conditions for the changes it wants to see), and in doing all of this maintain the coherence and credibility of the Slow Food vision over time.

Developing a middle-range theory of TSI then involves the generalisation of insights about the potentials and conditions for success in such an endeavour. We see this as an ongoing research challenge, for social innovation researchers in the coming years. A central part of such a theory involves developing *explanations* for how processes of institutional change are unfolding in contemporary examples of transformative social innovation.



Another network that we studied was the **Transition movement** which is a social movement consisting of individuals who come together voluntarily in place-based communities (Transition initiatives) to work on projects and activities that relate to the broad goal of achieving a 'transition', understood as "...changes we need to make to get to a low-carbon, socially-just, healthier and happier future..." (Transition Network, 2016). Their vision calls for a transformation towards radically new localised systems of production and consumption, in a world where fossil-fuel resources are increasingly scarce.

The following table captures some of the strategies employed by Transition initiatives. It illustrates how the empirical cases that we studied can be used to develop more generally applicable insights and explanations about how social innovations interact with transformative social change. These can in turn inform practice and offer social innovators different questions to consider.



**Four generic strategies for institutional change, illustrated for the example of an initiative in the Transition movement.**

Institutional change strategy	New activities that members are engaged in
<p><i>Enact an (existing) institution in a different way</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Questioning conventions around lifestyle and energy use, then promote alternative practices</i></li> <li>- <i>Subverting norms around use of public spaces (e.g. plant nut trees in the city)</i></li> <li>- <i>Taking Transition Towns into local schools</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Make (novel) choices about which (intersecting) institutions to enact</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Emphasise or enact more traditional social practices around making stuff, food growing, sharing, etc.</i></li> <li>- <i>Choose to buy a veg-box from a community-supported grower scheme rather than a supermarket</i></li> <li>- <i>Subvert notions of “the good life” and attach social value to low impact lifestyles (e.g. air travel becomes taboo)</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Use resources differently, use different resources, or create new resources</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Enhance local social networks</i></li> <li>- <i>Create a local currency</i></li> <li>- <i>Secure government funding for a community-owned energy project</i></li> <li>- <i>Turn domestic gardens into a shared food growing spaces</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Take advantage of chance events and context dependence (in resource accumulation)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Financial crisis makes it possible to grow membership (or the number of Transition Towns)</i></li> <li>- <i>Take advantage of high oil prices to grow members by presenting Transition Towns as a response to a Peak Oil narrative</i></li> <li>- <i>Respond to lower oil prices by re-focusing on the need for local job creation</i></li> </ul>

# Seven insights for practice

Theory development, based on the analysis of 80 social innovation initiatives and 20 transnational social innovation networks, led to the following insights for the practice of *transformative* social innovation:

**1) Social innovation is fundamentally about changing social relations.** It is important to understand how an initiative is changing social relations. A key proposition is that the experimentation with novel or unfamiliar social relations within an initiative can in itself be a necessary precursor to wider institutional change. Social Innovation initiatives often respond to people's need for autonomy, social bonds and meaningful relationships, and to their desires to engage in meaningful activity (both paid and unpaid) and contribute to a better world that is more equal, fair and respectful of people and nature.

Questions for practice: *What new social relations might be desirable in order to respond to an identified need or vision?*

**2) Transformative social innovation is fundamentally about institutional change.** Such processes of institutional change may involve: the legal recognition of social enterprise, developing income-streams, sustained forms of government support, support from public intellectuals, alliances across TSI initiatives, or the creation of a complementary economy. Social innovators often come together to form an initiative in response to a local problem or unmet need, and must then translate this into an identification of what institutions need to be transformed or provided. The challenge may involve both 'de-institutionalisation' as well as the demonstration and diffusion of new 'proto' institutions. Understanding the inter-relations of current institutional arrangements

is a key to success. Initiatives need to understand how institutions are connected, and the ways in which their stability presents barriers to transformative change.

Questions for practice: *What institutions need to be transformed? What new institutions are needed? How are these institutions connected in the broader context?*

**3) Social innovation initiatives with transformative ambitions lack an ‘institutional home’ and need to find or create one.** Social innovation initiatives are typically on a journey of becoming institutionalised which can be both empowering and disempowering in terms of achieving transformative impacts. It is empowering so long as they are still able to negotiate and create new hybrid institutions that support their particular institution-challenging goals. In order to do so, initiatives need explicit political tactics and strategies to deal with the two-way challenge of institutionalising social innovation for sustainability, balancing between capture and transformation. It is disempowering when it leaves them without continuity in activities or drives them towards wholesale conforming to existing institutions. For new social innovation initiatives with transformative ambitions it can thus be useful to reflect on what is currently lacking in their institutional ‘home’ (including both formal and informal ‘rules’) and what institutional changes might be involved in moving to a more desirable state of affairs.

19

Questions for practice: *What is lacking in the current institutional home? What institutional changes might be involved in moving to a more desirable state?*

**4) To be successful a social innovation initiative needs a degree of autonomy.** Implementing a social innovation as some form of experiment or pilot project requires both connections to existing actors and institutions but also some degree of autonomy from them. By autonomy we refer to the ability to choose one’s own acts and to act in line with personal or collective values and identity. It relates then to an ability to develop ideas, plans and actions that differ from those of currently established institutional arrangements, both individually and collectively.



Through their individual psychology, social relations, and embeddedness in a wider context, social innovators may find autonomy in certain ways but not in others. Formal institutions such as prevailing legal frameworks or economic arrangements may be easier to be aware of, while informal institutions in the sense of norms, values, and worldviews, may pervade actions and thinking in ways that are harder to discern.

Questions for practice: *How can we nurture and sustain a sufficient degree of autonomy from established institutional arrangements? What methods of reflection do we need to set in place in order to become aware of how certain institutions might be reproduced through our actions?*

**5) Institutional change happens through the changing webs of social relations between the agents in a social innovation field.** The concept of the social innovation field describes the webs of social relations and institutional arrangements through which the emergence and unfolding of a social innovation process takes place. Figuring out how to operate advantageously within this field of relations, how to cope with changing power relations, is key to success. The interactions between different social innovation initiatives are of great importance, especially in terms of the development of common framings and common narratives of change. Identification of the relations within a particular social innovation field also provides a way to better resolve the context—happenings in one ‘field’ of social innovation may influence happenings in another.

Questions for practice: *What field of social relations are associated with the institutions to be transformed? Which are the actors in the field? What power relations exist? How can we operate advantageously within that field?*

**6) Social innovation initiatives need an adequate theory of change and also an understanding of the opportunity context in implementing successful strategies for institutional change.** Generalised framings of different strategies for institutional change



(such as those briefly introduced in the table) can be a useful starting point in thinking creatively about how to achieve institutional change in specific cases. To succeed, initiatives need an adequate theory of change for use in developing vision and strategy, and this will involve learning and updating over time, as the context changes and new knowledge becomes available. Social innovators also encounter varying degrees of opportunity for institutional change over time. Thus understanding and taking advantage of the opportunity context is an important challenge for them: the potential for institutional change is dependant not only on the agency and resources of the social innovators but also on whether the conditions, the place and the timing, is right in the societal context.

Questions for practice: *What is an adequate 'theory of change' for developing vision and strategy? What are the opportunities for creating institutional change? What strategies for institutional change or institutional innovation can we identify or create?*

**7) Transformative social innovation finds itself in between transformation and capture.** To succeed, social innovators have to negotiate a number of difficult trade-offs as they expand and develop. From the context, there will be reactions to resist, subvert, or capture an emerging social innovation initiative. To deal with this, social innovators need a portfolio of different strategies towards existing institutions that may include: complying, irritating, avoiding, resisting, compromising, hijacking, exploiting institutional pressures etc. They also need to continuously update and adapt their portfolio of strategies, and theories of change, while holding on to their original core intentions and vision. The latter holds especially when established institutions are taking up (some of) the initiative's new ideas or practices. We find that when a confrontation with established institutions occurs, there is a possibility for transformative change to happen, but this is also the moment when an initiative can get 'captured' by established institutions.

Questions for practice: *What are the risks of capture by established institutions? How can we best mitigate these risks?*



TRANSIT is a research project which aims to improve understanding of how social innovation can bring about empowerment and societal transformation. The research team is carrying out in-depth case studies with around 20 transnational networks and the use of engagement with social innovators, social entrepreneurs, policymakers and scientists in workshops, to gain new insights into the field. The outcomes will include training tools as well as policy and practitioner briefings like this one, to share this knowledge and help support social innovators for sustainability.

Coordinators:  
Flor Avelino & Julia Wittmayer (Drift)

Consortium:  
TRANSIT – Transformative Social Innovation Theory

EC contact: Anne Nielsen  
Anne.NIELSEN@ec.europa.eu

Duration: 2014 - 2017

Funding scheme: FP 7 – Social Innovation –  
empowering people, changing societies, no. 613169

Project website: [www.transitsocialinnovation.eu](http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu)

For more information: Alex Haxeltine,  
[alex.haxeltine@uea.ac.uk](mailto:alex.haxeltine@uea.ac.uk)

Authors of the TRANSIT brief:  
Alex Haxeltine, René Kemp, Stefana Cozan, Saskia Ruijsink, Julia Backhaus, Flor Avelino and Adina Dumitru

[transitsocialinnovation.eu](http://transitsocialinnovation.eu)  
[communication.transit@ihs.nl](mailto:communication.transit@ihs.nl)  
[transit@drift.eur.nl](mailto:transit@drift.eur.nl)  
[@TransitSI](https://twitter.com/TransitSI)