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## Networks for Social Innovation: devoting “learning spaces” to social aims

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Rossella Canestrino\*

Department of Managerial Studies and Quantitative Methods  
Parthenope University of Naples  
Via Generale Parisi 13, 80132 Naples (Italy)  
E-mail: rossella.canestrino@uniparthenope.it

Angelo Bonfanti

Department of Business Administration  
University of Verona  
Via Cantarane 24, 37129 Verona (Italy)  
E-mail: angelo.bonfanti@univr.it

Pierpaolo Magliocca

Department of Economy  
University of Foggia  
Via Caggese 1, 71121 Foggia (Italy)  
E-mail: pierpaolo.magliocca@unifg.it

Leila Oliiae

Iran Azad University-Mashhad,  
Mashhad (Iran)  
E-mail: leilaoliaee1392@gmail.com

\* *Corresponding author*

### Structured Abstract

**Purpose** – Our paper aims to investigate characteristics and the role that social networks have in the rising of SI. In doing this, we also examine the way social innovators devote to social aims, as well as how the set of relationships they establish may turn, over time, into *locus* for knowledge creation and diffusion, allowing the emergence of so-called Networks for Social Innovation (NfSI).

**Design/methodology/approach** – We propose a two step-based approach. Firstly, an extensive literature review has been carried out in order to shape a more wide

understanding of the SI, as well as to picture the characteristics and the dynamics of the NfSI. After this, a qualitative approach has been adopted by the means of ego-centred method for data collection. Three case studies located in the city of Naples have been selected and investigated in accordance with the chosen research technique.

**Originality/value** – Our paper can contribute to the literature improving about SI by developing a more comprehensive knowledge-based and network oriented picture for SI.

**Practical implications** – Our study allows academics and practitioners to recognize and understand SI, and how networks may be managed to support the effectiveness of firms' innovative practices with reference to both business and social goals.

**Keywords** – Social innovation; learning network; corporate social responsibility

**Paper type** – Academic Research Paper

## 1. Introduction

The concept of *Social Innovation* (SI) has been one of the most discussed in the field of innovation for the last years (e.g. [Ashta et al. 2014](#)) and even getting stronger in the debate about social development ([Rüede and Lurtz, 2012](#)). This is particularly due, on one side, to the relevance that knowledge and innovation have as the most important strategically resource for both firms and local systems competitiveness ([Calza et al. 2015](#); [Canestrino, 2008](#); [Grant, 1996](#)), as well as to the challenges that are affecting the worldwide social development and sustainability, on the other side ([Canestrino and Magliocca, 2016](#)). Despite these trends, the emerging process of SI ([Goldenberg et al., 2009](#); [Murray et al., 2010](#); [Westley and Antadze, 2010](#); [Rüede and Lurtz, 2012](#)) seems to be under-explored. Understanding SI is not easy, not only because of the existing overlapping between the theoretical backgrounds – namely innovation and social responsibility - usually used to explain the concept, but also because of the high number of actors – social entrepreneurs, investors, incubators, intermediary organisations, and transnational networks – usually involved in the process ([Avelino and Wittmayer, 2015](#)).

As already noted, the multiplicity of actors involved in innovative and social activities, as well as the variety of motives that lie upon their adoption - from profit-driven to voluntarily to philanthropic not-for-profit ([Baccarani and Pedrollo, 2015](#)) - often lead to a misunderstanding about the concept, the most relevant of which refers to the distinction between SI and Social Entrepreneurship (SE) ([Canestrino et al., 2015a](#)).

Additionally, the concept of innovation needs also to be clarified, mainly because of the high number of models that the authors have developed to interpret it. Many scholars ([Galunic and Rodan, 1998](#); [Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995](#); [Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998](#)) usually consider knowledge – mainly new knowledge - as the outcome of a learning process that is implicitly equated with innovation. In a broad sense, every innovation arises and includes certain knowledge; at the same time, every innovation is responsible for new knowledge diffusion ([Canestrino and Magliocca, 2016](#); [Grant, 1991](#)). Since very few firms are able to develop a wide range of knowledge internally, interaction among the actors is required to foster knowledge creation and innovation, as well. Here, innovation generally arises thank to a system of actors whose behaviour and patterns of learning are conditioned by institution ([Freeman, 1987](#); [Lundvall, 1992](#); [Edquist, 1997](#)).

Following the mentioned perspective, the *locus* of innovation relies no longer within the boundaries of a single firm, but within the nexus of relationships among different actors that are able to establish fruitful learning connections. In reality, analysing inter-firms cooperation as a way to create, transfer and share knowledge for innovation is not new in the literature about knowledge management: what is new, in our opinion, is the attempt to explore the characteristics and dynamics of NfSI.

On the basis of the above reflections, our paper aims to fill the research gap about the topic, by analysing some experiences of SI developed in the Italian city of Naples. This is the starting point for future studies.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, a literary background of SI has been provided, to underline the main differences between SE and SI. SI has been, then, examined within the field of *Knowledge Management* in order highlight the importance that collaboration between and among different actors (networks) has for both knowledge creation and innovation spreading. After that, the methodology has been outlined and the results presented. Conclusions and implications are showed in the last section.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Social Entrepreneurship vs Social Innovation

In recent years, a considerable amount of research has focused on debating what is included or excluded in the notion of SI, as well as which activities belong to the field of SI, instead of SE. As mentioned in the introduction, defining SI is not easy and a preliminary literary review about the issue reveals a deep linkage, but also the profound overlapping between the two concepts of SI and SE.

According to [Mulgan \(2006\)](#), SI refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social. In this direction, managing SI requires the evaluation of both organizations' innovative behaviour and their *Social Responsibility* in an integrated manner.

But a lot of scholars usually consider innovation as a distinctive trait of SE. Nicholls (2007), Austin et al. (2006) and Mair and Marti (2006), among the others, agree in recognizing the “innovative” trait of SE, (i.e. the importance of develop new ideas to find solutions to society's most pressing social problems). According to their perspective, therefore, SE always involves the creation of something new, rather than simply the replication of existing enterprises or practices. This “novelty” aims to get some social ends, usually referred as “social good” ([Cukier et al., 2011](#)). Depending on this, the “innovation-based” definitions of SE usually re-call and mix with the notions of SI, fostering both confusion and misunderstandings.

In reality, the debate about what belongs or not to SE instead of to SI and has been dated back for many years. In the attempt to distinguish the two concepts, a lot of authors provide narrower definitions for SE ([Hansson et al. 2014](#); [Zahra et al., 2009](#)). According to [Hansson et al. \(2014\)](#), for example, SE refers to the activities of individuals and groups (social entrepreneurs) who identify gaps in the social system as an opportunity to serve groups who are marginalized and aim to address these needs in entrepreneurial ways. SI, on the contrary, refers to ideas, concepts, processes and outcomes that address social

needs in new ways and, if truly successful, fundamentally change social, economic or other relations.

Is a matter of fact, that meeting social needs providing with problem-solving opportunities, or getting social aims are the key factors to identify both SI and SE. It means, therefore, that both SI and SE characterize for a high level of *Social Responsible Orientation*, the last one considered as the actors' propensity/orientation to satisfy societal needs. But SI additionally distinguishes for a high level of *Innovative Orientation* of both individuals or organizations, that mainly depends on the propensity they have towards innovation and knowledge creation (Canestrino et al., 2015a).

## **2.2. New knowledge to solve social problems**

As already noted, SI distinguishes from SE for the high level of *Innovative Orientation* that characterize both individuals and organizations aiming at solving social problems. *But what does it mean?*

Innovation may be considered the outcome of a learning process that is implicitly equated with knowledge creation, thus belonging to the field of *Knowledge Management*: in this perspective, innovation relates with knowledge creation and diffusion (Calza et al., 2015), that means that it depends on firms' ability to create, codify and store individual knowledge, using it for commercial goals (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Grant, 1996). From a knowledge perspective, therefore, innovation requires the creation of new knowledge at individual level, its sharing with the others and its diffusion within a given organization.

Following the above reasoning, we may outline that SI arises every time social aims are pursued by means of the introduction of new products, processes, methods, or systems that enable innovative solutions for societal problems. Additionally, SI also establishes when existing knowledge is managed in a very different way (e.g.: process innovation - [Schumpeter, 1934](#)) in order to satisfy social needs. Nevertheless, creating new knowledge or manage the existing one to gain novelties is not easy, and addressing innovation to social purposes may be even more difficult.

Particularly referring to the knowledge creation process, a lot of obstacles can undermine the success of firm's innovative activities, by limiting the effectiveness of both knowledge creation and transfer processes that lie upon an innovation. Both the nature of

knowledge and its causal ambiguity makes difficult the codification and the replication of the know-how usually embodied in social norms and practices ([Lippman and Rumelt, 1982](#); [Nonaka, 1994](#); [Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995](#); [Spender, 1996](#)). And, even when all the involved parties involved into the process - be them individuals or organizations – characterise for a high level of *Innovative Orientation*, innovating may be costly, besides risky. In these circumstances, cooperation becomes very important. It gives to the organizations the opportunity to share risks and costs, as well as to reduce the innovation time, through the sharing of resources. Both collaborations and networks become, therefore, crucial: complex learning process can arise, fostering the diffusion of new and valuable knowledge, and driving firms to easily innovate ([Calza et al., 2015](#); [Lundvall, 1993](#)). Accordingly, collaboration is also very important in fostering SI. This last one may be, particularly, considered as an outcome of the interactions among different kinds of actors - firms, organizations and institutions – able to create, transfer and share knowledge, in order to improve local welfare and fill social gaps. Under the mentioned circumstances, *NfSIs* may establish.

### **2.3. Collaborating for SI: the need for a NfSI**

Since very few firms are able to develop a wide range of knowledge internally, their accessibility to external relationship provides a new and broader knowledge-based source for innovation ([Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998](#)): thank to proximity, individuals, as well as organizations are able to come in contact one to each other, sharing resources, knowledge and capabilities. These spill-over promote the actors’ innovative capacities and the overall network’s competitive advantage, at least.

A well-established body of literature recognises the important linkage among knowledge, networks and innovation. Within this field, the concept of *National Systems of Innovation* ([Freeman, 1987](#); [Nelson, 1989](#), [Lundvall, 1992](#)), for example, explains the process of innovation, by considering it as the outcome of the interaction among firms, organizations and institutions. But, in spite of its usefulness within the framework of business innovation, the concept fails in depicting the drivers of SI, mainly because of the existing differences between SI and traditional Business Innovation (BI) ([Lizuka, 2013](#)).

As noted above, SI characterises for a high level of social orientation: solving a social problem, in order to improve the quality of life is the inner aim of SI. From this perspective, a new idea, good or services may be introduced - or not - to the market; it may produce – or not - pecuniary gains. But every time this kind of innovation supports society or community, it may be labelled as a SI. By the contrast, the direct link to the market and to economic returns (commercial ends) is the precondition for BI ([Canestrino et al., 2015b](#)). Many successful SI come from all sectors – the public sector, the private market, the third sector, and individuals/households, involving more than one of them, with the most exciting innovations often occurring at the edges of interfaces between sectors. Moreover, SI can be pioneered by a wide range of actors, including NGOs, community groups, charities, governments, business, academics, philanthropists, or combinations of these groups ([Moore and Westley, 2011](#); [Biggs et al., 2010](#); [Murray et al., 2010](#)) widening the set of players, usually devoted to BI, with non-conventional actors ([Lizuka, 2013](#)).

The existing research lastly suggests that actors involved in SI are likely to use networks to access information, funding and useful business contacts and markets much more than the other business players ([Sonne, 2015](#)).

According to all the above considerations, SI could be better investigated within the field of the *Social Network Approach*. Focusing on social network analysis turns attention to relationships/contacts between and among the players: the contacts that lead to successful outcomes, helping to get the entrepreneurial goals, are defined *Social Capital* ([Burt, 1997](#)). What is important in a social network perspective, is, therefore, the set of relations thanks to which the actors acquire information, capital, skills, and labour to start and develop business activities ([Greve and Salaff, 2003](#); [Hansen, 1995](#)). This is the reason why adopting a social network perspective allows us to better understand the way networks may turn into *locus* for knowledge creation and diffusion, finally supporting the emergence of SI.

### 3. Methodology

This research relies on primary and secondary data. Particularly, an ego-centred method to collect and analyse network data has been adopted (Greve and Salaf, 2003; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Ego-centred network analysis is a qualitative method that explores the relations around each sampled person, not the total network of which individuals are members. Here, the respondent (ego) describes his networks, activities, and his relations with the other network members (alter) (Suitor et al., 1997; Burt and Minor, 1983). The method is useful when the data on the whole population are not available, that is the case of a small sample of the population.

We used purposeful sampling in selecting the sample (Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 1989). Three social innovators located in the city of Naples, in the South of Italy have been selected. They belong to different industries, and are at different stage of development. All of them, however, locate in the same city (Naples), even if in different urban area.

For all the three selected case studies, the “ego” has been interviewed, following “a conversation with purpose” (Burgess et al., 1991) approach, which allows interviews to vary the detail of the answers, as well as the order of the questions. Face- to-face interviews, visits and meetings have been undertaken to: learn about the activity and how it has been started; learn about the network in detail, with reference to both the actors involved and the role they play; and understand the way the network has developed over time.

Table 1 summaries the selected case studies with reference to their location, activities and the pursued social aims.

**Table 1 – Case study Selection**

Case Study	Urban Area	Activities/social Aims
La Paranza	Sanità neighborhood	Enhance the artistic and cultural heritage of the neighborhood, by recovering heritage and old places. Develop new and valuable way to attract tourists, both local and foreigners, and to show them the tradition and the “core” of the district, otherwise out of any touristic itinerary. Integrate the district in the city's productivity system



Chikù	Scampia neighborhood	Integrate Roma community in one of the most deprived areas of Naples. Foster an intercultural collaboration between communities, as well as starting an intercultural dialogue with all the citizens of Naples in order to prevent future conflicts.
Mappi(Na)	City centre	Provide an “alternative” map of the city. Change the image of Naples, as violent and criminal city, by collecting new postcards and iconic images (like a mandolin, a pizza or Pulcinella). It engages with those who reinterpret the city’s image, starting from the everyday lived experience. Enhance places through creative and innovative use, even if only temporarily. Allow citizens to co-produce social changes.

According to our knowledge aims, the main researches’ results are showed in the following section.

#### 4. Results remarks: SI to NfSIs

The willingness to “*change the things*” is a common content for all the examined experiences. At its beginning, SI is always inspired by the innovator/s’ hope to do something useful for the local community, inspiring this hope also among the others (citizens). At this stage, the relationships and the personal contacts, established between and among a few number of actors, are very important to identify new ideas, tools and strategies to start a process of social change.

As example, the origins of “La Paranza”, founded in 2006, dates back to the efforts of Antonio Loffredo, parish priest in the district of Sanità. Antonio Loffredo had a “*dream*”: he wanted to change reality, through the creation of a new attitude towards work. To get his dream, Antonio had to attract the youths, making strong efforts to get their trust. It wasn’t easy. Naples is a city of contradictions and within the city, Sanità district is the clearest example of the way great socio-cultural inequality and huge heritage co-exist, side by side. The youths in the district didn’t use to go out of the Sanità and they were not aware at all of their own skills, as well as of the value of the local resources. Antonio began to travel with a small group of youths (all aged between 17 and 20); allowed them

to visit Paris, London, Amsterdam, Spain; he wanted they spent time together and enjoy common experiences. Time by time, relationship between and among that friends, and between them and Antonio, grew stronger. They became to trust one to each other and to share the same “*dream*”. Thanks to their travels, moreover, they became aware of the resources available in the district, as well as of the skills they had to manage them. As consequence, those friends decided to act, changing reality and adapting it to a “*dream*”, that, in the meantime, had become the dream of all of them.

Informal and strong relationships have been also fundamental in developing the second examined initiative: integrate the Roma community in Scampia, one of the most deprived areas of Naples. Scampia, in the north of Naples, is an area that embodies the challenges of global modernity: a metropolitan periphery on the sitting border of the city and the countryside, with a large young population, limited access to education, high unemployment, and pervasive presence of the Camorra. This territory is shared by poor Italian citizens living in apartment blocks and Roma communities from former Yugoslavia. The Roma migrated to Scampia as war refugees decades ago, and are still living in poor conditions. In 2002 a group of seven friends – among them only Barbara Pierro, Emma Friulano, and Biagio di Bennardo are still present – started their activities, by building their own shack within the rom camp. At that time, the Roma community called it the “Scola Jungla” (that means jungle school). Here after-school laboratories for kids, activities for teenagers, workshops for women, theatre courses and cooking activities were organized.

Barbara, Emma and Biagio have been involved in voluntary work and common experiences in social services for many years, supporting the local community – rom and non rom – in Scampia. Thanks to everyday works and collaboration, they have pursued a common goal, turning the neighborhood in a *locus* devoted to intercultural integration and collective learning processes. Doing things together and enjoying experience allowed people to overcome distrust and suspicions. Time by time, rom and Italian women begun to share their own competences, building the background for their dream of change. Thus, a project for the inter-cultural integration between the Italian and the Rom communities has been rewarded in two competitions for SI: the international competition for SI by United Nation (2001) and the “Naples 2.0” national competition, supported by Unicredit

Foundation and “Fondazione con il Sud”. Winning the competition allowed the start-up of the first of italo-rom enterprise in the hearth of Scampia.

The role of informal networks in fostering the pursuing of social aims, as well as in supporting knowledge flows and development is, finally, showed in the experience of MappiNa (Alternative Map of Cities). MappiNa is a platform for urban communication built through collaborative mapping, aimed at creating a different image of the city through contributions by its residents. MappiNa has been planned and founded by a urban planner, Ilaria Vitellio, with and six other women from different backgrounds linked by friendship relationships. This “core” based on close connections and strong ties among the parties has developed over time, widening the MappiNa community. This last one is composed of Mappers – those who upload content on the platform, and Lovers - platform users and fans on social media. There are currently more than 400 mappers, many who get together in groups and associations.

The examined social networks have all developed over the time, involving new and different kinds of players. The first enlargement of the “core” network is usually linked to the fundraising. In all the three examined situations, the entrepreneurs/innovators refused public support looking at private investments, crowdfunding or price-competition<sup>1</sup>, as the most effective and useful way to get money.

“L'altra Napoli Onlus”<sup>2</sup> firstly invested in “La Paranza” in 2002. By that time, many other partners have joined the network supporting the projects planned by the association. Nowadays, “San Gennaro Foundation” brings together all the organizations that have worked in the local area for many years, promoting the social and the economic growth of the district.

Barbara Pierro and her co-founders also refused public support. They participated in a funding competition organized by Unicredit Bank which they won. Later they got funds also from “Fondazione per il Sud” and Vismara Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to price competitions, the winners receive seed funding to transform their ideas into projects with a solid business plan that would allow for the possibility of extending their project further [http://www.euclidnetwork.eu/files/Naples\\_booklet\\_web\\_version.pdf](http://www.euclidnetwork.eu/files/Naples_booklet_web_version.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “L'altra Napoli Onlus” was founded in 2006 by Ernesto Albanese, a manager from Naples who don't live in the city. Many others Neapolitans, living in other Italian cities, belong to the onlus.

Finally, MappiNa did not benefit from any funding. The online platform has been launched in late October 2013 and in April 2015 MappiNa launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise €30 000. After ninety days, the target was surpassed, raising €44 600.

All the three mentioned initiatives are now self-sustained, even if they go on sharing the spirit of collaboration with other associations, consortia and companies with co-design initiatives and technologies.

## 5. Implications and conclusions

This paper points out the relevance of social networks in the development of successful SI initiatives. Since SI requires both “novelty” and the pursuing of social goals, at the same time, relationships among the parties (ego and alters) became very important to create new knowledge (innovation) and to share a common “*dream*”.

SI is rarely the outcome of an individual initiative. More frequently, it is the output of the joint efforts of many actors, differently linked, and inspired by the same values. This kinds of networks change substantially since they started. At the beginning they usually rely on friends, family, or even on mentors (ego) able to attract the “alter” in emotional way. Further, this “core” network opens to other connections to get funds and other resources. At this stage, the social network spans relations to organizations, associations, sectors, as well as to other people that help them to develop the initiative.

The examined case studies sustain the relevance of connections in all the stage of the SI process: these contacts are mainly informal, extend across professional networks, reaching friends, and colleagues from earlier jobs. Joining activities around the same domain allows the establishment of “tight knit” relationships thanks to which the people may learn one from each other. In doing that, they also began to trust one to each other to share more other resources (experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems practices) that, in turn, reinforce collaboration and the reaching of the planned social goal. By this, the social network turns itself in a driver for SI, shaping the context among which knowledge is created and managed to get a well-defined, common and shared social goal.

Finally, what is relevant in the first stage of the social network development is turning the *dream* of one or few innovator/s in a common *vision* of many. The “core” of social networks shares *values*, establishes *trust* and the *willingness to change reality*, much more than other resources.

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