A Multi-actor Perspective on Social Innovation

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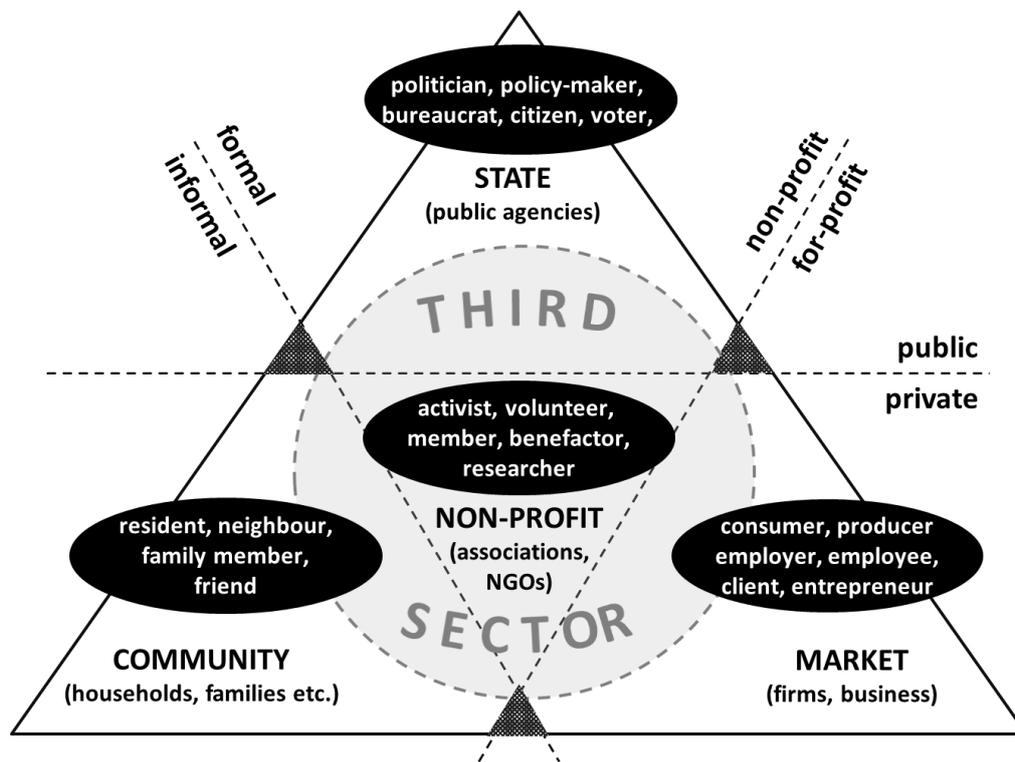
Social innovation can be understood as a change in social relations, involving new ways of doing, organising, framing and knowing (Haxeltine et al. 2015, building on Franz et al. 2012, Moulaert et al. 2013). There is a strong tendency in public discourse to associate social innovation with initiatives by 'civil society', 'the community', 'the Third Sector' and/or 'social entrepreneurship'. Mulgan et al., for instance, define SI in terms of "*innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purpose is social*" (2007:8, emphasis added). The Third Sector can be seen as an 'intermediary' sector, in between government, market and community (see figure 1 below), and has been characterised as "*a place where politics can be democratised, active citizenship strengthened, the public sphere reinvigorated and welfare programs suited to pluralist needs designed and delivered*" (Brown et al 2000:57). Individual actors (e.g. 'social entrepreneurs' and 'institutional entrepreneurs'), intermediary organisations, and transnational networks, act as crucial nodes at this intersection between market, government and community; they translate, spread and connect social innovations across different sectors and localities.

In order to unpack how different actors and sectors are involved in social innovation processes, this paper proposes a so-called Multi-Actor Perspective on social innovation. The Multi-Actor Perspective has been developed as a heuristic framework for specifying different categories of actors at different levels of aggregation (Avelino & Wittmayer 2014). Building on the Welfare Mix model in Third Sector studies (Evers & Laville 2004, Pestoff 1992), the Multi-Actor Perspective distinguishes between four sectors - state, market, community, third sector - and between actors at different levels of aggregation: 1) sectors, 2) organisational actors, and 3) individual actors. At the level of sectors, the distinction is based on general characteristics and 'logic' of a sector (i.e. formal vs. informal, for-profit vs. non-profit, public vs. private). While sectors themselves can be viewed as 'actors', they can also be seen as specific 'institutional contexts' or 'discursive fields' in which collective/organisational or individual actors operate and with which they interact (see figure 1 below). These sectors are not fixed entities: rather, the boundaries are contested, blurring, shifting and permeable, and they provide sites of struggle and/or cooperation between different actors.

This perspective allows us to acknowledge the important role of the Third Sector in processes of social innovation, while also emphasising that social innovation can be initiated by any kind of actor, in the context of any kind of sector, with any kind of motive or intention. As such, we argue that understanding social innovation requires us to look beyond the Third Sector and Social Enterprises, to also include social innovation phenomena as manifested in the more informal community sphere, as well as the more public state sector. Moreover, these shifting relations

between and within these sectors, and the redefinitions of the boundaries between these different institutional logics, can be considered as a manifestation of social innovation in themselves (Nicholls & Murdoch 2012; Pel & Bauler 2015). Such shifting relations and contested boundaries inherently come with power struggles and processes of (dis)empowerment, which is why these are particularly pertinent topics when considering processes of social innovation. This paper employs the Multi-actor Perspective to conceptualise how power relations between sectors and actors are shaped and contested in social innovation processes.

Figure 1. Multi-actor Perspective (Avelino & Wittmayer 2014)

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