



SOCIAL AND ECO INNOVATIONS

WHAT IS SOCIAL INNOVATION?

Social innovation is used to describe a very broad range of activity. This includes: the development of new products, services and programmes; social entrepreneurship and the activity of social enterprises; the reconfiguration of social relations and power structures; workplace innovation; new models of local economic development; societal transformation and system change; non-profit management; and enterprise-led sustainable development.

There is no single, commonly agreed definition of social innovation. This reflects the fact that social innovation is predominantly a practice led field in which definitions and meanings have emerged through people doing things in new ways rather than reflecting on them in an academic way. There are several developments which have had an effect on the practice of both innovation and social innovation. For example, 'open innovation', first coined by Henry Chesbrough, represents a paradigm shift in the field of innovation.



The concept describes a new model of product development based on the free flow of information and ideas across departments and organisations. The term has since taken on a wider meaning, largely because of digital technologies that have enabled new forms of collaboration between users and firms.

INNOVATION:

The concept and practice of 'open innovation' is very much mirrored in the social field where there has long been a focus on engaging citizens in the design and development of social innovations. More recently, there is an emerging literature focused on learning from frugal or 'jugaad' approaches to innovation, which is about improvising solutions to problems using scarce resources, based on a rich understanding of local needs.



These frugal approaches to innovation are now impacting on corporate ideation processes. Instead of researching and developing products in the West and then adapting them for developing markets, companies are creating innovations in resource-constrained developing markets and then distributing them globally. This overlaps with the concept of inclusive innovation and innovation at what Prahalad has called the 'bottom of the pyramid'.

Other significant contributions to the field of social innovation include systems thinking and design thinking. The former is integral to the work of a number of academic institutions working in the overlapping fields of social innovation, sustainability and socio-technical systems, such as The Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience and the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT).