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Re-evaluating the power of social learning and social innovation: an application to transport

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Extended Abstract

1.1. Problem statement

The future of (urban) mobility requires changes to the current status quo. The pressures from explosive urban population growth, widening socio-economic inequalities, and sustainability demands are just three of many persistent challenges. Looking for solutions, academics and practitioners have recommended social innovation as an agenda for future mobility, combined with social learning in collaborative, co-creative, and inclusive governance settings. This is evident in the current policy agenda directing multiple discussions on the future of mobility (European Commission, 2014; Moulaert, 2017; Moulaert et al., 2013; Mulgan et al., 2008; UN-Habitat, 2016; Vergragt and Brown, 2007; Willson, 2001). In these discussions, social learning is defined normatively, as a form of interaction and knowledge exchange which necessarily leads to something constructive and new – a social innovation. This article **challenges the normative stance and the combined ideals of social learning and social innovation through two cases of neighbourhood-scale, citizen-led projects in the Netherlands to achieve sustainable future urban mobility** in the Netherlands. Both cases indicate that (i) social innovations can appear through chaotic and non-inclusive means, in which social learning is a burden rather than an enabling process, and

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that (ii) social learning can be a valuable process in its own right, for those involved in it, but is by no means a guarantee for social innovation.

1.2. Research objectives

This article aims to (i) approach social learning as an analytical lens rather than as a normative political agenda, showing its added value, (ii) investigate which social learning strategies, if any, are used in the successful implementation of social innovations, and how different approaches to social learning relate to the success of projects, and (iii) discuss the value of social learning for social innovation, and their mutual relationship in planning for future urban mobility.

1.3. Methodological approach

To understand the role and process of social learning and innovation, this research adopts a comparison of two similar projects on urban mobility in adjacent neighbourhoods within a medium-sized city in the Netherlands. These embedded cases are similar in (i) their goal to achieve what they frame as a social innovation, by improving mobility for a marginalised demographic – the elderly and those unable to take usual transit due to physical handicaps; (ii) their project design and (iii) their form as community-led initiatives. The context in which the cases take place is also constant (the same municipality, the same set of policies and regulations, extremely similar area population). The cases' results in terms of social innovation, however, are significantly opposite: one project succeeded in implementing their idea within a few months, the other is taking several years and has not yet implemented their idea; one project is rather chaotic while the other attempts to be as well-thought-out as possible.

Both projects aim to organize small electric cars driven by volunteers or unemployed residents of each neighbourhood to facilitate the elderly and handicapped to reach whichever desired or necessary location - such as supermarkets or the local care centre - for very little money. They are partially funded by the businesses and health institutions serving these groups. The key variable of study in these cases is their approach to collaboration and learning: one puts a strong emphasis on frequent discussions and joint decision-making and knowledge exchange, in other words, on a process that follows the normative definition of social learning; while the other almost completely lacks this kind of interaction and rather focused on implementing a rushed project as quickly as possible, relying on knowledge indexing.

Both projects are studied and observed over a period of six months from September 2017 to February 2018. In-depth interviews with all key stakeholders and participants are held. As part of a larger action-research project, the researchers are also present in internal meetings of both projects. The qualitative data (interview, policy documents, internal email exchange and discussions) will be analysed systematically to reconstruct the social learning process, with attention to the participants' perceptions, their experiences, their recognition of social innovation, triangulated through the researchers observations. Given the expected continued study and observations of the cases, the project pertinent information will be anonymous and redacted.

1.4. Expected results

Currently, the project already being implemented – Project A – hints at two possible conclusions. First, it manifests as a social innovation far from the theoretical ideal of social innovation as suggested in literature. This is namely because it does introduce a new form of mobility and addresses a social problematic that hasn't been addressed in this way, but relies on weak social structures and does not appear to be very safe and fair for those involved. Secondly, this indicates that for social innovations to be implemented - contrary to normative policy beliefs - less focus on social learning, and more on knowledge indexing appears more fruitful.

In turn, in the case of the slower and not-yet-implemented project – Project B – a social innovation has taken more than two years to reach a very meager version of their initial idea, or might even fail at its implementation altogether. Contrary to theoretical and normative ideals, the participants experienced intense social learning, which could influence them in their future endeavors (noticeably in both positive and negative ways). This suggest taking a first step to uncoupling social learning and social innovation as proposed.

The article will conclude (tentatively) that i) social innovation is independent from social learning, ii) social learning, while valuable, is as likely to lead to 'positive' (desired) and 'negative' (undesired) results contrary to normative social-political narratives, and lastly iii) knowledge indexing – that is, knowing who knows what and

referring to them for answers rather than to build on one's own knowledge – is the less innovative but potentially more fruitful and frequent approach to producing social innovations. These results are valuable in understanding how future urban mobility could be organised and how governance models including citizens and private, commercial interests can best be facilitated.

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