



## A particular type of intervention

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The problems we are facing today, such as climate degradation, energy shortages, increasing inequality, and demographic change, require new approaches and far-reaching changes. Technology innovation can help address them, but we cannot rely on technology alone, we also need social innovation (SI) - new ideas, paths, and measures for dealing with society challenges - as a driver of society change.

In comparison to technology assessments, research about the SI impacts is in its early stages. New concepts are needed to better record and evaluate SI effects, especially on the systemic and society level, and to develop standards for the assessment process.

A broadening discourse on the analysis of SI impacts has emerged, considering its transformative, but also its unintended consequences and questioning some of its positive assumptions. Most of the impact assessments reviewed by the authors focus on the past individual projects and interventions. However, participatory development processes and foresight approaches are increasingly finding their ways into estimating and evaluating SI in its design phase.

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## Background

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## Context



- **Social impact measurement methods**, such as the Social Return on Investment (SROI), are mostly used to capture the social impacts of single interventions/projects or - in fewer cases - of a particular types of interventions. They face difficulties related to the the differentiation of outcomes, attribution to a particular intervention, displacement of the problem to another territory/group, and in the maintenance of effects over time.
- **Transformative social innovation** is understood as SI that challenges, changes or replaces dominant institutions in the social context, through new knowledge and practices and changed social relations. Transformative change emerges from interactions of changing paradigms, mental models, political institutions, physical structures, and innovative developments on the ground.
- SI effects can be tracked at three levels: 1. **individual project level** in the achievement of goals; 2. **dissemination of an innovation** through scaling, growing, or mainstreaming; 3. **systemic effects** as the successful innovation spreads in society and becomes the norm.
- **Is there a dark side to social innovation?** A critical look at the unintended consequence of SI can inspire practitioners to assess its harm potential. Is this about state withdrawal from its responsibility and a hand over of new markets to venture capitalists? Is empowerment a guise for a process of pressuring already depleted resources of vulnerable groups? Is dissemination linked with the quality of the innovation or the power of the actors engaged? Does it create a democratic and accountability deficit?

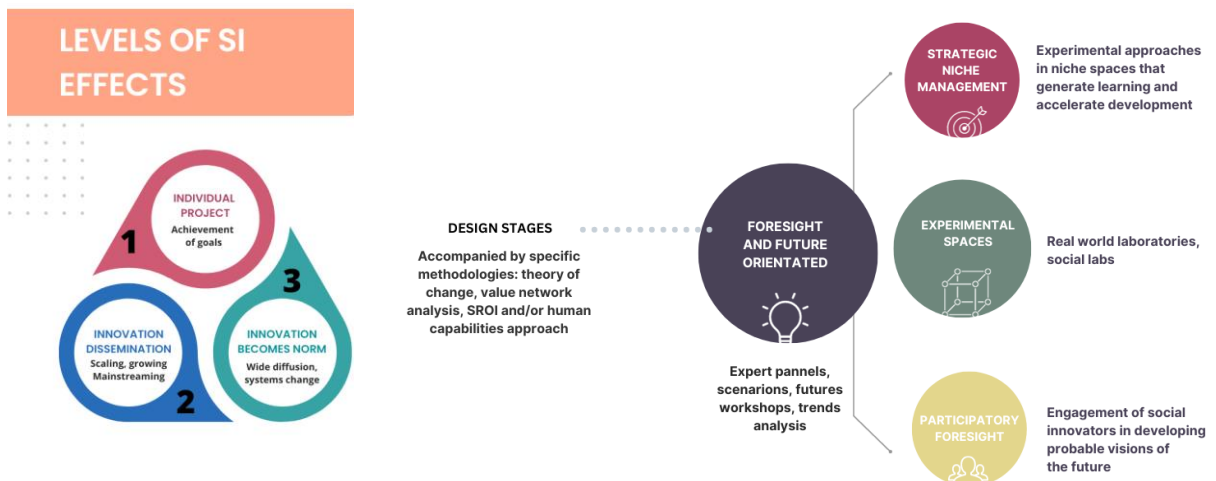
# ERNOP Research Note

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## Take aways & Learnings



- The previous questions are relevant to ask in the initial design phase of SI, thus increasing the need for methodologies of impact assessment that are forward looking, offering a base for decisions with sufficient information on the context and its future evolutions.
- **Different design stages can be accompanied by specific methodologies.** For example, the structuring of goals and activities can be supported by theories of change. SROI can help to estimate impacts quantitatively, while a value network analysis supports a better assessment of the roles of various actors. A human capabilities approach can be used to track the impact of the social innovation on the individuals involved.
- **Foresight and future orientated methods** can include the use of expert panels, scenarios, future workshops, and trends analysis, complemented by interviews and surveys to track the particularities of context. Interactive and participatory methodologies can be particularly helpful.
- The following conceptual approaches can also offer helpful lenses.
  - **Strategic niche management** – niche spaces in which experimental development is carried and examined in a way that generates extensive learning for the next stages. For example, defining social entrepreneurship as a niche and analyzing its shared and contrasting values with the economic and civil society sectors can help its further development.
  - **Experimental spaces for SI can include** *real world laboratories* with time bound and geographic limits to test innovation or *social labs*, often involving many different actors, with a focus on solution generation to concrete social problems.
  - **Participatory foresight** - development of probable visions of the future through participatory processes. For example, a collective process focused on the future, with social innovators from different contexts offers insights into different future scenarios, and a learning framework defining key competencies, skills, and knowledge to support the pioneers in the field.



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