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A QUADRUPLE HELIX APPROACH TO LOCAL SOCIAL INNOVATION: EXPLORING GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS AND THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

Academic paper

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Abstract text:

Purpose:

The papers aims at advancing the debate over the social innovation concept and at exploring the potential role that universities may play in social innovation practices. Social innovation is far from being an established concept in the scientific literature (Pol and Ville, 2009; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) and scholars belonging to different schools of thought have contributed to develop a wide framework concerning social innovation meanings and applications (van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). Therefore, the social innovation concept will be deepened adopting a territorial development perspective. Indeed, social innovation is able to sustain the rise of new governance arrangements at local level, acting as a mechanism through which new social relations are generated within communities, allowing actors of different nature to collectively take decisions over new local social needs (Moulaert et al., 2013). This perspective led scholars to associate social innovative practices with the concept of quadruple helix (QH) collaboration between government, industry, university and civil society (Howaldt et al., 2016; Carayannis et al., 2019; Domanski et al., 2019). What emerges from these contributions is that QH partnerships could be useful governance arrangements to manage social innovation projects addressing pressing societal challenges or wicked problems. Nonetheless, there is a lack of empirical evidence since very few studies have addressed this issue (Carayannis et al., 2019). At the same time, a growing number of scholars are putting their efforts in disentangling the role that universities may play in social innovation (Benneworth and Cunha, 2015; Bayuo et al., 2020). Indeed, universities have mainly been considered as crucial actors in sustaining technological innovation through technology transfer practices within traditional third mission objectives (McKelvey and Zaring, 2018); therefore, further understanding is needed on universities' potential contributions in social innovation especially when they engage in QH coalitions (Domanski et al., 2019).

Originality and Value:

The value of the paper lays in the new insights provided concerning two gaps identified in the aforementioned literature. Indeed, i) the relationship between social innovation and the QH concept needs to be deepened, especially in its governance dimension and ii) the role that universities play in QH partnerships for social innovation deserves to be further investigated. The paper contributes in filling these gaps by relying on original data stemming from the novel European program "Urban Innovative Actions" (UIA). UIA aims at sustaining projects developed and led by European municipalities in partnership with actors that could belong to the QH spheres and which tackle urban-based wicked problems and societal challenges.

Design and Methodology:

The paper adopts an exploratory case study method (Yin, 2003) which addresses a subset of 10 UIA projects based in different European countries. The empirical design has been guided by the principles of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt 1989) since the selected projects are meaningful examples representing cross sectoral partnerships for social innovation which allow to investigate if

and how QH coalitions have intervened and which role has been enacted by universities. Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources and coded through the NVivo software (Version 12).

Results and findings:

Results show that partnerships composed by actors pertaining to QH spheres are not easy to manage as multiple agenda, interests and objectives sometimes conflict, creating barriers and misalignments. In this context universities play a multiplicity of roles and pursue different objectives. Indeed, they may act as provider of a certain technology, following traditional technology transfer principles or they can support partners in mediating conflicts, pursuing community-engagement objectives.

Limitations and implications:

The paper has relied primarily on secondary data: primary data would have been beneficial to strengthen the results. However, the methodology adopted has allowed avoiding any subjectivity bias due to the direct contact with projects actors. This has secured a certain degree of results reliability. The paper has also some useful policy implications: caution should be paid when designing policies to sustain social innovation at local level. Municipalities could lack effective leadership to manage and implement challenging projects as requested by the UIA program. A multi-level governance (e.g. with regional government) would be beneficial. Furthermore, universities seem to be engaged well beyond technology transfer practices, therefore university's managers should carefully recognize the emerging potentiality of university's community-engagement activities within the wide framework of university's third mission.

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