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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL EDITION SOCIAL INNOVATION: RESEARCHING,
DEFINING AND THEORIZING SOCIAL INNOVATION

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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL EDITION SOCIAL INNOVATION: RESEARCHING, DEFINING AND THEORIZING SOCIAL INNOVATION

Societal problems represent both opportunities and challenges for organizations. Issues such as poverty, climate change, and inequality can be seen either as a burden or as a source of innovation. Multinational Corporations, Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs), Cooperatives and Social-Purpose Organizations have engaged in projects that can tackle some of these major societal issues. As consequence, a debate around social innovation has emerged.

Social innovation is broadly defined as the emergence of new social, organizational and institutional arrangements or new products and services designed to address aspirations, to meet needs, or to bring about a solution to a social challenge. Social innovation aims to change social relations and may lead to social transformation (Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales, 2016). Although it has long existed as a field of practice, the theoretical aspects of social innovation still lag behind the practice, a situation that may keep academia and organizations from making the best of it (Nicholls, Simon, & Gabriel, 2015). More recently, centers dedicated to the study and the practice of social innovation have been created all around the world and represent now an active source of knowledge on the topic. As an emergent field, scholars from multiple disciplines have been trying to define and theorize social innovation from different perspectives, generating a prolific, and sometimes confusing, literature on the topic.

When proposing this special issue, our aim was to invite scholars to engage in this debate and connect with authors and literature internationally developed. Our intention was not to stand for one specific view on social innovation, but instead, to encourage diversity. We sought to stimulate cross-fertilization between the Brazilian context and the international advances in the field. In response to our call for papers, authors from Latin America (Mexico, Brazil), Europe (Portugal, Germany, Italy, France) and India submitted their manuscripts. We considered that nineteen out of thirty papers received fitted the scope of the special issue and presented the minimum standard of quality required by RAM. These papers were submitted to double blinded review. When the first

reviewing round ended, one paper was accepted by both reviewers, four were fully rejected and other fourteen papers were sent back to their authors with requests for minor or major revisions. Finally, after the second round of review was closed, six papers were selected for publishing. Because of their pronounced contribution to the field of social innovation, Howaldt and his colleagues were invited to write a special manuscript to this special issue, which then counts seven papers in total.

The papers accepted provide interesting insights about trends and opportunities on the three main areas highlighted in our call for papers: theories, methods and organizational aspects. In a first area, we wanted to know which theories have been influencing social innovation. In the papers approved, we mostly see the use of internationally recognized organizational theories such as institutional theory to analyze cases of social innovation. It is also worth noting that technological innovation still draws much more attention than social innovation. Probably this is the reason why, even if not explicitly, the majority of studies about the latter approaches social innovation using economical-technological rationales. They borrow the same mindset and many of its tool to explain the ‘mechanics’ of social innovations: how it takes place; how it is disseminated, etc.

We still see particular opportunities for future research in two directions that were less developed here. First, the politics involved in social innovation. The dynamics of power among actors and the influence they have on the creation and maintenance of social innovations is a promising area for theorization. Second, a social constructivist view could allow the understanding of social innovation from different aspects. Unveiling the performativity aspects of social innovation and the intentionality of actors involved may open the doors for new theories and new conceptualizations in the field.

In a second area, we asked for an examination of the research methods mainly mobilized to study social innovation. In this regard, papers in this special issue point out to the predominance of a qualitative orientation through the use of case studies. Just one paper adopts an orientation that resembles a quantitative methodology, proposing a meta-analysis. Here, we see two opportunities for future research. First, ethnographic studies allow data gathering about the micro-practices and the micro-foundations involved in social innovation projects. Second, more quantitative-oriented studies can be encouraged to understand better some key variables, relations, and causalities involved in social innovation.

In a third and final area, we encouraged a debate on the organizational aspects and its relations to the context, when developing research on social innovation. This is the area where we received most contributions. Regarding the scope, some authors centered their analysis on social problems and the intended social transformation, while others targeted more specific issues, such as stakeholders’ rela-

tionship in a coffee value chain in Mexico or the central role of an NGO in the Northeast of Brazil in promoting social innovation. Regarding the role of actors, the papers selected highlight the importance of social entrepreneurs and other stakeholders. Papers also highlight organizational challenges involved in social innovation, such as the process of scaling up operations. We still see opportunities for future scholars that want to explore the challenges associated with traditional managerial functions, such as marketing, accounting, human resources, logistics, and others when developing social innovation research.

Under these lines, we are glad to introduce each of the seven papers that compose this special issue and how they allow further development in the field.

Through the main results of a global research project on social innovation – SI-DRIVE – involving over a thousand initiatives Howaldt, Domanski and Kaletka propose that social innovation is a new paradigm in its right, rather than only a part, or an offspring, of the traditional paradigm of technological innovation. For them, the innovation paradigm is changing fundamentally, and technological and social innovations can be completely understood only when seen in interaction with one another. These authors also underscore the social foundations of social innovations by bringing in the contribution of Gabriel Tarde's social theory to the discussion of this still emerging concept. Thus, a strong contribution of the authors' work is to take on social innovation from the perspective of social theory, rather than as an economic-technological theory. The main result of the paper is the proposal of a theoretically sound concept of social innovation that allows for a better understanding of its relationship to social change.

Gregoire also works on the concept of social innovation. However, she does such by an action-research study developed in France supported by an investigation of the francophone literature – France and Quebec – about the topic. By exploring the different meanings attributed by previous works to the word 'social', various approaches to the subject (the public, the social entrepreneur, the participatory dynamics and shareholders' implication), and the Francophone literature she proposes a new working concept for social innovation. Her definition of social innovation stresses the centrality of the social dimension and its ambition for social transformation, characteristics that are also present in the Howaldt *et al.* concept. This allows for its differentiation from other, more traditionally studied, types of innovation (e.g. technologic). Finally, Grégóire questions and discusses the ambiguous role of social innovation within capitalist societies.

Agostini, Marques and Bossle explore social innovation as a response to institutional voids, a reality from which severe social distress springs. A common phenomenon in poor regions of developing countries' institutional voids – such as Brazil – is the lack of functional institutions that should support the market or the complete failure of existing institutions. Using the theoretical lens

of the institutional theory, the authors discuss the particular nature and dynamics of institutional voids. Then, after analyzing the dimensions of social innovation, they propose a theoretical framework to show how the latter can be mobilized as an instrument to engage multiple stakeholders – including social entrepreneurs – and ultimately overcome generalized institutional failures.

Correia, Oliveira and Gomez turn their attention to the role of the organizational actors in producing and disseminating social innovations. More specifically, these authors propose a theoretical framework to specify how these actors relate to and interfere in each dimension of social innovation: identification of social needs, processes, innovativeness and creation of social improvement. This theoretical framework was put under test and then expanded by its application in the case study of ASA (Articulação do Semiárido Brasileiro), a Brazilian organization focused on the management of social innovations in the Northeast part of the country. Their framework may serve as a roadmap for other organizational actors – e.g. private companies, social economy organizations, collective enterprises and State agencies – interested in supporting or producing social innovations.

In their paper, Morais-da-Silva, Takahashi and Segatto tackle a major challenge of social innovations: the difficulty that organizations promoting social innovations face in scaling up their operations in order to produce benefits for a crescent number of people. Although the varied benefits of social innovations are widely recognized, it is also known that many, if not the majority, of attempts to improve social conditions through the deployment of these innovations produce a rather short-range impact. Using a meta-synthesis methodology, Moraes-da-Silva *et al.* draw some factors from the literature that may help such initiatives to grow and reach wider sectors of society. Describing what they regard as an environment favorable to the scalability of social innovation, they identify both internal and external organizational factors contributing to the scalability of social innovations. Thus, their study can be particularly interesting to practitioners striving to grow enterprises focused on social innovations.

Maguirre, Ruelas and La Torre show how a social innovation enacted by a Ixtán Group, a social enterprise in a highly marginalized indigenous community in Mexico, can promote local development and emancipation of women. The authors explore many dimensions of Ixtán Group – economic, democratic, political, environmental and cultural – from a gender perspective to unveil the key mechanisms and social innovations that help to empower local women: job stability, low-interest microcredits which booster female entrepreneurship, and gender-equality policies in the organization are some examples of concrete gains achieved by local women working within the Ixtán Group.

Finally, Patias, Bobsin, Gomes, Liczbinski and Damke explore the family agro-industry clusters using a social innovation's perspective. After investigating

a cluster of this type in terms of process, network formation, planning, governance, and results, these authors conclude that it fits the concept of social innovation. This study may be particularly interesting to scholars and practitioners who face the challenge of defining whether an organization, group of organization or others social phenomena can be considered a social innovation.

We hope that these seven papers add to the emerging debate on social innovation in the Brazilian academy. We acknowledge here the generous contribution of all reviewers involved in this special issue effort, and we thank Revista de Administração Mackenzie – RAM (Mackenzie Management Review) for the opportunity of running an issue dedicated to such relevant topic.

Enjoy the reading!

INTRODUÇÃO À EDIÇÃO ESPECIAL INOVAÇÃO SOCIAL: PESQUISA, DEFINIÇÃO E TEORIZAÇÃO DE INOVAÇÃO SOCIAL

INTRODUCCIÓN A LA EDICIÓN ESPECIAL INNOVACIÓN SOCIAL: INVESTIGACIÓN, DEFINICIÓN Y TEORÍAS DE INNOVACIÓN SOCIAL

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