transformative social innovation theory

Insights on Social Learning for Transformative Social Innovation Practice (input for practice brief and learning tool)

DELIVERABLE 2.3. SOCIAL LEARNING FOR TSI

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5.1. Insights on social learning for transformative social innovation

The TRANSIT project aims at developing a middle-range theory of transformative social innovation (TSI), through a combination of interdisciplinary theoretical development and empirical research on a series of case studies of social innovation initiatives. To achieve an understanding of how the phenomenon of social innovation contributes to transformative change, we combine a systemic perspective with a micro-theory of change, informed by social psychological perspectives that can bring an understanding of human agency and processes of individual and collective empowerment that are key to understanding how societal change comes about. In TRANSIT, we define social innovation as "changing social relations, involving new ways of thinking, doing, organizing and framing" (Haxeltine *et al.*, 2015). But how do these changes happen, what drives them, and what is the role played by different actors in these processes? In order to answer such a question, a psychologically-informed understanding of processes of change within social innovation initiatives and in their interaction with the wider social context is needed.

Learning in general has become a buzzword within academic, practitioner and policy-making circles. The literature on social learning currently spans several academic disciplines (e.g. philosophy, psychology, sociology, educational sciences, organizational studies, environmental management etc.), and there has been a proliferation of overlapping and sometimes contradictory definitions of the concept (Reed et al., 2010). However, in spite of such proliferation of analyses of social learning, a critical review of the literature permitted identified three key problems that impede conceptual clarity: confusions between the concept of social learning and the methods or conditions necessary to facilitate it; between the process and the outcomes of social learning; and little distinction between individual and wider social learning (Reed et al., 2010). In order to differentiate between the processes or mechanisms of social learning and their effects, and to bring further conceptual clarity, the authors propose a definition of social learning as "a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social networks" (p.4-5). This definition provides a good starting point for explorations of social learning processes in contexts of social innovation. However, we further argue that in the context of transformative social innovation, social learning goes beyond a change in understanding that becomes situated in wider social units, to include a change in the quality and type of relations among actors, which encompasses changes in collective meanings/understandings, the reshaping of identities, and new rules and norms of interaction.

Embedding social learning as a key area of questions and research in TRANSIT case studies

In TRANSIT, our interest is to focus on how social innovation initiatives and networks engage in efforts to bring about radical societal change. Social learning is thus approached within the context of such efforts, with two different foci: first, understanding how SI initiatives and networks come to know what they need to know to effectively engage in efforts toward transformation, or, said differently, the nature, characteristics and consequences of social learning processes that lead to transformative agency; and secondly, the ways in which they attempt to promote social learning for wider societal change, beyond their immediate membership, and the understanding of processes through which wider social learning leads to the diffusion of social innovations and thus to the transformative impact of SI initiatives/networks.

The TRANSIT project develops an analytical framework for the study of social learning in the context of transformative social innovation that is grounded in the literature and enhanced through the analysis of empirical research carried out in WP4 of the project. A deductive-inductive approach was adopted to the analysis of the empirical data gathered in the 20 case-studies (leaded in the WP4) conducted in two phases: Batch I (12 case-studies were conducted in 2014) and Batch II (8 case studies conducted in 2015). Research work included a transnational social innovation network and at least two local social innovation initiatives (Jørgensen et al., 2015). The analysis of the empowerment of (networked) actors, the processes through which they gain the capacities towards influencing the co-evolutionary process of transformation revolves around four crosscutting themes: governance, social learning, resourcing and monitoring (Jørgensen et al., 2014, chap. 6).

TRANSIT analyses the relationship between social learning and transformative agency in social innovation, thus also connecting to and supporting the process of theory development carried out in WP3 (Haxeltine et. al., 2016). This was done through a working paper on "The role of social learning in transformative social innovations", in which the following specific questions were explored: what types of social learning are necessary and through which methods is social learning achieved, in order for SI initiatives and networks to exhibit effective agency; and what are the mechanisms through which social learning contributes to the construction of transformative agency?

Exploring the role of social learning in individual and collective agency in the Third Integration Workshop

The relationship between social learning and transformative agency was also explored through the Third Integration Workshop on "Motivations, relations and transformations: the role of social learning in individual and collective agency for social innovation". The workshop (held in the University of A Coruña, the 8th and 9th of June 2016) focused on the question of what drives the quest for social innovation and how social learning contributes to the creation of new social relations (involving new ways of thinking, knowing, doing and framing). Three main themes were introduced for discussion: 1) **the role of social learning** in achieving transformative impact; 2) Processes through which **new social relationships** are established and contexts that foster satisfaction of basic psychological needs; and 3) **the quest of motivations** in transformative social innovation ambitions.

The workshop consisted of a combination of invited lectures that nourished TRANSIT discussions with novel perspectives; a number of paper presentations by TRANSIT researchers and two invited European researchers from the European projects GLAMURS and BIOMOT; and a series of group discussions that aimed to provide useful practical insights on social learning.

The first session started with the inspirational lecture of Pedro Manuel Sasia (leader of the creative movement in Spain) on agency in processes of personal and collective change. TRANSIT researchers then presented empirical results from the study of social innovation initiatives and

networks in three different paper sessions on social learning for TSI, individual and relational transformations in social movements and motivations for social change. Paper presentations were enriched with contributions of researchers from projects focusing on intrinsic motivations for environmental activism (Ferdinando Fornara, University of Cagliari, Italy) and the role of temporal autonomy in wellbeing (Tony Craig). Finally, we invited Professor Kennon Sheldon (University of Missouri, USA), an expert on the topic of motivations and satisfaction of basic psychological needs, to provide input on psychological processes explaining motivations in organizations and initiatives striving for social change.

The workshop was also designed to provide answers to practical questions and thus also further understanding on what types of learning tools SI initiatives would find useful. With this aim, we also invited a number of social innovation practitioners and local activists to participate in the sessions and introduce – in the discussion forums- their own questions based on their practical experience in social innovation projects. The first discussion forum focused on strategies to enhance learning for transformative agency. The second session provided input on the topic of social relations and new societal arrangements in TSIs. Dialogue between different TRANSIT researchers and SI practitioners enhanced understanding of how social learning fosters new social relations, contributes to feelings of empowerment and leads to SI initiatives creating contexts that support satisfaction of basic psychological needs.

The workshop generated insights into the types of motivations that members of social innovation initiatives display and ways to promote autonomous forms of motivation, which in turn lead to persistence, creativity and wellbeing. Participants also reflected on the types of relational transformations SI initiatives pursue and through which means. Researchers analysed the role of theories on and processes of internal transformation that would generate the conditions for new ways of being in the world and in relationships, thus contributing to behaviour and systemic change; and the relationship between social learning and empowerment. The workshop also provided insights into the role of inner transformations in transformative social innovation, as theorized and facilitated by SI initiatives.

The exploration of the relationship between social learning and transformative agency will further be pursued in TRANSIT through an analysis of how the database of critical turning points built in WP5 (see deliverable 5.3) can contribute to deeper understanding of these issues. WP5 qualitative meta-analysis will provide extended knowledge about how TSI initiatives deal with internal and external difficulties as well as take advantage of new circumstances or contextual changes.

Insights into shaping social learning in ways that are conducive to conditions for effective agency

Shaping learning environments to promote motivation

Understanding how agency is constituted in social innovation initiatives requires an account of what motivates the search for societal change and how alternative ways of knowing, doing, framing and organizing are co-produced in TSI. Such understanding can also provide tentative explanations of how successful social innovation initiatives in different contexts, and contribute to explaining the trajectories taken by different social innovation phenomena. Recent research on self-determination theory (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000) has brought substantial empirical support to the existence of three basic psychological needs universally shared by human beings (relatedness, competence and autonomy) and the relationship between their fulfilment and wellbeing, on the one hand, and human growth processes (or self-actualization) on the other. We have argued elsewhere that autonomous forms of motivations are maintained if basic psychological needs are satisfied in a social innovation initiative (Haxeltine et al., 2016). It has been previously signalled that SI initiatives learn to shape their contexts in ways that support such need satisfaction (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2016; Zepeda, Reznickova and Russel, 2013).

One of the main insights on the motivations to participate and to start an initiative we find is the underlined need for relatedness, for connectedness with equals. In order to favour this relatedness, initiatives strive to create good climates that promote camaraderie and friendship, enabling in many cases spaces for celebration and driving pleasant sharing activities that serve to keep the project alive, attract new members, maintain motivation and reinforce group cohesion. Besides, spaces/contexts that enable physical encounters, the sharing of meaningful experience with like-minded others confronting the same difficulties in other places and the establishment of trust, also seem to be conducive to social learning.

Our findings indicate that a search for higher autonomy, understood as the need for coherence or alignment between one´s values and interests and one´s actions, is definitely a motivating factor for SI practitioners to join the initiatives and maintain high levels of commitment. SIs constitute a facilitating context for autonomous living when they are able to create spaces where practitioners feel free to start, conduct or participate in meaningful projects that make a difference and contribute to them developing a sense of mastery, thus bringing satisfaction to both the need for autonomy and the need for competence. Successful initiatives provide spaces where members can "bring their skills and talents out" including leadership, thus experiencing a high degree of autonomy.

Social learning also leads to initiatives developing expertise on how to create the conditions for the satisfaction of the need for competence, emphasizing local knowledge and expertise, which in turn generates possibilities for action that are experienced as empowering. For instance, SI initiatives create environments that enable active engagement and provide opportunities for experimentation. SI initiatives are presented as placeholders for attempts to transform utopia into reality (e.g. creating heterotopias of new ways of living, doing, organizing, etc.), thus counteracting helplessness feelings and encouraging collective efforts and efficacy, Motivation is sustained by experiencing challenge and the impact of actions (collective competence), which in turn leads to feelings of empowerment.

However, beyond these important learnings, a series of difficulties still remain and are shared by many initiatives in their efforts to attract members and ensure high levels of motivation for involvement:

- Difficulties to achieve wider participation in management and decision-making processes of a majority of members. Many initiatives confront the fact that even when their membership is substantial, many members participate only in limited ways. Intensive participation leads to burn-out for some of the volunteers and undermines motivation.
- Difficulties to reach wider proportions of the middle class and youth, and changing cultural models/lifestyles: gaining public support (increasing the number of members, associates or supporters); and gaining social influence.

Shaping learning contexts to promote relational changes

We have argued that agency relies on the capacity for purposive action and the capacity to imagine new ways of being, new relationships and new ways of doing. Changing social relations is at the core of social innovation and social initiatives have developed insightful learning on how to create appropriate learning contexts for experimenting with the creation of relations of a different quality. They create experimental spaces for developing new kinds or modes of social relations (e.g. proposing new forms of community living; the "humanization" of economic relations, egalitarian decision-making processes, etc.). Also, SI initiatives facilitate new types of relations through the experimentation and co-shaping of the rules governing the organizations. These new governing relations are based on democratic principles, mutual understand, empathy and individual learning.

New social relations are forged in contexts and spaces (e.g. collective projects, learning activities, physical encounters) that permit or intentionally promote free interaction and interchange of ideas, as well as common reflection on values, goals and strategies. Enabling spaces that facilitate face-to-face encounters contributes to the experience of empathy, which leads to more egalitarian or collaborative relations between actors (re-framing existing relations). Such collaborative relations involve trust-building and sustained cooperation which are supported by strategies to develop new identities that unite rather than divide.

As we observed in the case of Slow Food, the SI initiative facilitates the creation of experience of emotional connections between different community members, of solidarity around a set of commonly-shared goals and of trust which supports collective action. Such "conviviality" enables the shaping of ideas and agreements and the creation of affective bonds which reinforce the pursuit of common good. These emotional experiences occur in both internal and external contexts, such as the (international) networking spaces that transnational networks organize (conferences, forums, meetings). Social learning in these inspiring contexts leads to the conception of common identities fuelled by a sense of communion with others sharing the same values.

Social innovations are grounded on personal relations and "face-to-face communication" that contribute to the building of group identities and consolidate national and international networks. Besides, in order to achieve their goals (e.g. change the economic or financial systems) SI initiatives intentionally forge new relations with external organizations and institutions through the creation of networks and alliances. In order to pursue their goals, social innovation initiatives learn that they have to effectively engage with public institutions. However, the challenge is how to do that "without losing their identity", in terms of not compromising their principles and core values.

However, there are significant tensions and barriers that often compromise relational transformation. Internally, communication barriers, individual attitudes or behaviours (self-interest/egoism), conflictive leaderships, unrealistic ego-expectations are aspects to take in consideration. Externally, societal conditions sometimes pose significant challenges to the normalization of these new relations Practical knowledge and tools on developing inclusive

learning environments that enhance trust-building, common identities, solidarity, empathy and collaborative attitudes among members are regarded as useful by practitioners.

Strategic/political learning and its relationship to effective adaptation to a dynamic socio-material context

Strategic/political learning contributes to the initiatives´, ability for effective action in their efforts to pursue their goals. Strategic learning for transformative agency includes the capacity for strategic relationship building in terms of shaping alliances with a wide range of actors and playing an intermediary role in bringing together previously divided actors (e.g. bringing new impulse to common sustainability projects, mediation, etc.).

Strategic/political learning also leads to the refinement of effective strategies for influencing existing institutional relations. One important learning for social innovation practitioners is related to the need for <u>gaining reputation and legitimacy</u>, by maintaining a certain level of purity of their principles. Credibility involves being coherent, maintaining a consistent discourse and demonstrating viability of proposed alternatives. It also means establishing strategic relations with actors such as mass-media in ways that contribute to gaining reputation and, on occasions, political impact.

SI initiatives also develop <u>lobbying capacities</u> in order to become a relevant actor in the political sphere. For example, SIs have learned to launch political campaigns to appeal to politicians´ commitment to ethical/sustainable practices or have gained expertise in lobbying institutions in order to include their demands in the development of new legal frameworks.

However, initiatives struggle with identifying the best ways to gain political influence. Achieving relevance and consolidating their position as an alternative is a desirable ambition for most of them. However, this cannot involve compromising their principles and core values (e.g. becoming "too big"). Supporting strategic/political learning with examples of different pathways to achieve it and the benefits and disadvantages of each path could be a worthwhile pursuit.

Social learning and empowerment

Within TRANSIT, we have adopted the view of empowerment as the instrumental subset of agency (Alkire, 2005) and have argued that it relies on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, which supports the development of autonomous motivation and thus the carrying out of behaviour that is self-determined, as well as outcomes such as wellbeing, creativity and commitment, which are essential for innovative ideas to arise in SIs (Haxeltine et al., 2016; Reznickova & Zepeda, 2016; Zepeda, Reznickova and Russel, 2013). Empowerment can be considered the actual ability to carry out effective action towards goals that are freely chosen and are important to a person or a group. Such ability relies on the sense of individual or collective power to carry out goal-targeted actions, and is supported by the experience of achieving impact. This entails the capacity to reflect upon and adjust courses of action as well as to persist in front of obstacles and failures.

Empowerment can be considered the actual ability to carry out effective action towards goals are freely chosen and are important to a person or a group. Such ability relies on the felt sense of individual or collective power to carry out goal-targeted actions, and is supported by the experience of achieving impact, which entails the capacity to reflect upon and adjust courses of action as well as to persist in front of obstacles and failures.

Our findings indicate that SI activists experience a sense of personal power when they contribute to their communities in meaningful ways, when they experience they bring change to the places where they live, or feel they can make the difference. The projects carried out within the framework of SI initiatives, are considered laboratories of empowerment. Experimenting and

learning how to achieve impact is seen as a key source of empowerment or, alternatively, as a way to counter helplessness or disempowerment.

Enhancing transference of ideas between multiple actors

TRANSIT findings point to the relevant role of certain learning actors -called "inspirational leaders and visionaries"- in contributing to social learning both within and outside the initiative. Those actors contribute to the transference of ideas and practical knowledge between different projects and initiatives.

Empirical research allowed us to identify a second type of social learning actors: those experienced activists that travel to or visit other projects, or start a new one, carrying their knowledge and experience with them, enabling the interchange of experiences. Both key learning actors also generate new sources of knowledge such as books, handbooks, Webs/blogs, "Ted Talks" or documentaries who bring forward their discourses of change or visions of the future and assume an educator role in wider communities.

The importance of leaders (and pioneers) in motivating, engaging and learning processes has been also discussed in the third integration workshop held in A Coruña. Practitioners consider that social innovations are led by highly committed volunteers that sometimes seem to be "superheroes" that assume personal responsibilities and sustain the project over their shoulders. However, practitioners and researchers also perceive as a risk the fact of making the innovative project unsustainable in the long term if organizational conditions do not evolve over time and projects renovate their structure and leaders.

Participants also highlight the importance of analysing the different types or styles of leadership in SI initiatives, and how this influences the culture of the initiative. TRANSIT case studies seem to suggest that two types of leadership styles tend to be successful: the inspirational type and the facilitator type. Although initiative members sometimes feel uneasy when talking about leadership, the relationship between styles of leadership and initiative culture is worth exploring further.

Shaping social learning contexts to promote inner transformations

SI initiatives purposefully promote an attitude of constant reflexivity regarding one's values and behaviours, and their relationship to transformative change. Some of them endorse a vision of internal individual transformation as a stepping stone towards the generation of a new society. The Slow Food movement, Transition Network and the ecovillage movement are examples of social innovations that propose a "cultural inner transformation" from individualism to more cooperative and convivial lifestyles. Collective transformation towards a new 'we-culture' also includes the ongoing transformation of every single member 'from a rough to a gentle individualist' (Peck 2005). The importance of the inner dimension of change is fundamentally related to the ability to take responsibility for others and the world and to step beyond re-enacting patterns of domination and destruction. Such personal changes also involve changes in organizational practices (e.g. consent process to make decisions, seeing objections as a gift, dealing with internal conflict etc.).

Reflexive learning needs adequate environments. Many of the SI initiatives we studied integrate various kinds of practices or processes into how they work within their organization, to integrate learning in the form of inner transformation in their efforts. Inner transformations seem to occur in learning emotional spaces imprinted by atmosphere of trust and openness *that contribute to* emotional and personal growth (e.g. Ecovillages and Transition Towns "forums" to work on emotions appear as a fundamental precondition for social learning). A number of SI initiatives have

created intentional spaces for the facilitation inner transitions, organizing meeting for dealing with conflict, assigning specific functions to actors (e.g. "inner transition coordinator" or "keeper in the heart" roles in Transition Towns).