
Evolution Towards Social Innovation - Experiences of Polish Social Innovators

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Małgorzata Skweres-Kuchta¹, Rafał Szymański²

Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to review the literature on the place of social innovations in innovation theory and to examine the social innovations implemented in Poland in recent years. The authors analyzed who the beneficiaries of the innovations are, the form in which the innovation was created, and who can disseminate it. They sought answers to the question of what distinguishes service-oriented social innovations and what conditions should be created for their development.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research used the method of document analysis and case study analysis. The analysis focused on social innovations from the Social Innovation Catalyst database in Poland. The study was conducted in 2024.

Findings: The authors demonstrated that the innovations address key problems of major excluded groups, including people with disabilities and their caregivers/parents. They also observed consistency between the processes of creating social innovations and the processes of service delivery.

Practical Implications: The consistency between the processes of creating social innovations and the processes of service delivery may be useful in developing models for assessing the effectiveness of social innovations in the long term.

Originality/Value: The topic of social innovations is relatively new in the literature. It is still too early for a thorough evaluation of the impact of social innovations implemented in recent years on society and the economy. The paper suggests the possibility of combining elements of the social innovation model with the service innovation model.

Keywords: Social innovation, open innovation, health and inequality, education and inequality.

JEL codes: I14, I24, L31, O35, O36, O38.

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¹PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Organization and Management, Institute of Management, Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland, e-mail: malgorzata.skweres-kuchta@usz.edu.pl;

²PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Tourism and Spatial Organization, Institute of Spatial Management and Socio-Economic Geography, Faculty of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland, e-mail: rafal.szymanski@usz.edu.pl;

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1. Introduction

The authors focused on the development of innovation, from the paradigm of industrial innovations, through innovations in the service sector, to social innovations. They identified the need and determinants for the development of social innovations in response to unmet social needs and unresolved social problems. Contemporary social innovations are linked to the activity and creativity of society. They are unpredictable in terms of their development directions, but also in their sustainability.

Social innovations not only respond to existing broad demands but also cause lasting changes in the functioning of their target social groups. The design and implementation of social innovations should involve a wide range of stakeholders related to the issue. These are participatory innovations. They should aim to prevent social exclusion and support the idea of a civil society.

They should have a direct effect in the form of solving a particular problem, but also strengthen social relationships, activate, and build mutual trust in the long-term perspective. These do not have to be groundbreaking solutions; it is enough if existing solutions are applied in a new context (Murray *et al.*, 2010; Olejniczuk-Merta and Miller, 2020).

The goal of the study was to review the literature on the place of social innovations in innovation theory and to examine the social innovations implemented in Poland in recent years. The authors analyzed who the beneficiaries of the innovations are, the form in which the innovation was created, and who can disseminate it. They sought answers to the question of what distinguishes service-oriented social innovations and what conditions should be created for their development.

The research used the method of document analysis and case study analysis. The analysis focused on social innovations from the Social Innovation Catalyst database in Poland. It was shown that these innovations address key issues of excluded groups. A consistency was also observed between the processes of creating social innovations and the processes of service delivery. This may be helpful in developing models for assessing the effectiveness of social innovations in the long term.

2. Literature Review: From the Paradigm of Industrial Innovation to Servitization of the Economy and Social Innovation

Economic theory links the phenomenon of the expansion of the service sector with several factors that can be grouped into three areas of discussion (Daszkowska, 1998; Rudawska, 2009):

- the theory of the three sectors – a supply-side perspective,
- Engel's law – a demand-side perspective,
- horizontal integration of agriculture, industry, and services.

The theory of the three sectors highlighted the evolution of civilization from primitive, to industrial, and finally to service-dominated stages. These processes were accompanied by a phenomenon of resource reallocation, particularly labor, from agriculture and industry to the service sector (Kasperkiewicz *et al.*, 2012).

According to Engel's law, the increasing role of services resulted from societal wealth and a shift in demand from basic goods to durable goods, and ultimately to services that enhance quality of life (Kwiatkowski, 1980). Demographic changes, new social needs, and preferences also played a role. These views have since changed—the service sector is now seen as an integrator and coordinator of economic processes occurring in each sector.

It is not industrialization that conditions the rapid growth of services, but rather services themselves shape the modern forms of agriculture and industry. Strictly production-oriented companies focus on "enriching" goods with services, using outsourcing, offshoring, and thus achieving higher production quality at lower costs. D. Czarnitzky and A. Spielkamp argue that this represents a "bridge to innovation" (Rudawska, 2009).

The potential for the development of the service sector stems from several factors:

- it absorbs new technological solutions as much as, if not more than, industry;
- it is subject to globalization processes, which amplify opportunities for change;
- its diversity creates ample space for creativity;
- a "service economy" is defined when service costs exceed 50% of the cost structure of production (Szukalski, 2001).

The higher a society is on Maslow's pyramid of needs, the more services it consumes relative to goods (Van Looy and Looy, 2003). Ph. Kotler distinguished five types (levels) of market products: pure material goods, material goods supported by services, hybrids, services supported by material goods, and pure services (Kotler, 1997). S.L. Vargo and R.F. Lusch stated that business is subordinated to two logics:

the so-called goods-dominant and service-dominant logic.

In the first case, value is created at the production site and delivered through the distribution process, while services play a secondary role. The second option assumes that all companies exchange services, with products merely serving as carriers, meaning all companies are service-oriented (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). "The market is a conversation," and services as relationships perform three functions (Athanasenas, 2015; Levine, 2009; d'Alcantara, 1987):

- access – enabling the establishment of relationships;
- regulation – the point of balance between the interests of the parties;
- creation of identity and differentiation – establishing a unique character, arising from the involvement of a creative human factor and technological progress.

The development of the service sector can be divided into four phases (Flejterski *et al.*, 2005):

- the initial phase, dominated by low-skill services (e.g., cleaning, cooking);
- the growth phase, where specific qualifications are required (e.g., shoemaking, plumbing services);
- industry service (e.g., accounting, transportation) and the growth of service consumption (e.g., tourism);
- the development of services based on high technologies (e.g., telecommunications, the internet).

Currently, there is a growing focus on social services, implemented as social innovations, which are important in the innovation ecosystem (Olejniczuk-Merta and Miller, 2020).

The precursor of innovation theory, J.A. Schumpeter and his concept of creative destruction, serves as a starting point for discussions on innovation processes in the economy. Schumpeter identified innovation with breakthroughs and radical changes (Schumpeter, 1960). Some researchers considered innovation in a narrow sense, limited to product and technological process innovations (e.g., Begg *et al.*, 2014; Freeman and Soete, 1997; Jasiński, 2018; Kuznets, 2017; Mansfield, 1968; Stawasz, 1999). Others thought more broadly about innovation in the areas of organization, management, and marketing (Drucker, 1992; Kotler, 1997; Porter, 1990). There was also a discussion on the scale of innovation (Janasz and Koziół-Nadolna, 2011).

Innovation is also seen as a process of solving emerging problems, pointing to the creative role of people in shaping innovation processes (Griffin, 2017; Whitfield P.R., 1979). The issue can also be analyzed through the lens of value and quality of the achieved goals and the value of innovation for the recipient. Innovativeness can be seen from several levels (Matusiak, 2011):

- individuals with specific innovative competencies and abilities, skills for learning, adaptability, and innovative motivation shaped by three driving mechanisms: fear, personal or social benefit;
- organizations with specific innovative potential, i.e., the ability to generate ideas, implement and diffuse innovations, stemming from innovation maturity – the skillful use of available resources (especially people) in conditions of favorable structure and organizational culture;
- macroeconomics, where the predispositions of the entities in the economy to continuously search for and apply research and development results, new concepts, ideas, inventions, technological advancements in material and immaterial production, and new methods in organization and management, as well as infrastructure and knowledge resources, are taken into account.

Innovation at the individual level determines the outcomes at higher levels, and vice versa – the innovation climate at the macro level motivates or discourages entities functioning within it, while an organization's innovation policy triggers or hinders the creativity and effectiveness of its employees. Therefore, modern society requires innovative personalities rather than authoritarian ones (Hagen and Everett, 1963).

K. Pavitt and R. Barras emphasized that innovation is initiated by industry. However, the 1990s saw a shift in this regard (Barras, 1986; Kubielas, 2009). The growing interest in the innovation of services can be attributed to the increasing potential of the information society, which, along with rising wealth and living standards, created a creative environment for new services and service-production hybrids (Bullinger and Scheer, 2003).

Customers' attitudes and expectations, who often actively participate in the creation of innovations, have also changed. The value chain model by M. Porter, which had previously focused on the material product, needed to be re-evaluated. For customers, as P. Drucker emphasized, usability is generally more important than the mere possession of a product. This led to the adoption of an alternative model of customer approach, especially in the context of services, where value creation is based on shaping the service recipient's experience (Ropęga and Trzmielak, 2013).

C. Krupper defines innovation in services as a process of change (its effect) related to a product with a high degree of intangibility, requiring direct contact between the service provider and the recipient (Krupper, 2001; Randhawa and Scerri, 2015). Tyagi and Gupta argue that service innovation is the process of improving the service delivery system and enhancing its customization to meet the needs of customers from different segments. These are changes that affect the increase in sales or productivity of a service company. They note that such innovations can occur at three levels: strategic, process, and service offerings.

The process level relates to the efficiency of operations, including costs and productivity. Achieving operational excellence requires engaging the so-called back-

office, which is invisible to the customer. Innovations in the front-office, in turn, improve the customer's perception of the service. Innovations in the service offering influence sales growth (Rudawska, 2009; Tyagi *et al.*, 2010).

According to the value chain concept, four dimensions of service innovation can be distinguished:

- service concept, i.e., adapting to market demands, including competitor behavior – not all service innovations are tangible and measurable; they should be interpreted as creating a new approach to a problem;
- customer interface (distribution channels), i.e., adapting the service offering and delivery method to the specific needs of the recipient, direct contact, and no rigid boundary between the roles of customer and service provider (this interaction can be a source of innovation);
- the service delivery system is the internal procedures and organizational infrastructure of the entity, providing employees with opportunities to perform their tasks and grow, requiring integration of organizational, logistical, and personnel changes (tools, skills, and responsibilities);
- technological options related to the implementation of new technological solutions for development.

The creation of a new service often requires innovation across all the aforementioned areas. The source of these changes may stem from both organizations and initiatives originating from recipients, which are skillfully recognized by the innovator. The customer (service recipient) becomes a prosumer – engaging in the service production process, creating added value, and thereby generating both monetary and non-monetary benefits. In the literature, service innovations are often aggregated into three categories: new business model, new method of communication with the customer, and new service. Differences in the innovation processes between the service and industrial sectors arise from their systemic characteristics, which translate into (Filipiak and Panasiuk, 2008; Tether, 2005):

- High interactivity in services and a tendency toward the implementation of soft innovations;
- Service innovations are most often based on externally sourced knowledge, while industry is the creator of new, typically technological, solutions;
- In addition to demand-driven initiation of the process and customer participation in it, an important source of service innovations are the employees themselves, their creativity, knowledge, and qualifications;
- In industry, there is a phenomenon of "pushing" technology and a relatively strong dependence on scientific advancement, while in services, technology is "pulled" to most effectively meet customer needs – this process is also more complex, with services characterized by numerous incremental innovations aimed at achieving high-quality service;

- The market expansion of innovations in services often begins at the regional level, whereas innovations from manufacturing sectors can immediately function in the national market; • Services exhibit a longer innovation cycle (except for the IT industry);
- There are challenges in the formal protection of intellectual value in services (copyrights, trademarks in services vs. patents in industry);
- There is a convergence of the manufacturing and service sectors in terms of innovation.

Within innovation theory, increasing attention is being devoted to social innovations. These represent elements of social change, while simultaneously driving such changes (Social Innovation Concepts, Research Fields, and International Trends, 2010). The target of social innovation is the individual/group whose needs have not yet been sufficiently met (Beinart and McCarthy, 2012; Loogma *et al.*, 2013; Olejniczuk-Merta and Miller, 2020). The results of social innovations are often services.

Moreover, service innovations are becoming increasingly social in nature. Co-creation and the empowerment of users are key processes in these innovations. A distinctive feature is the "bottom-up" pressure to define, develop, and implement new innovative solutions. Researchers observe coherence between services and social innovations in the form of a multi-agent model.

This model portrays the co-creation of innovation as an interaction between the competencies and interests of multiple providers, users (citizens), and decision-makers (Gallouj *et al.*, 2018; Windrum *et al.*, 2016). Formal or informal networks encompass social actors, politicians, NGOs, associations, and other stakeholders, aiming to achieve social, political, institutional, cultural, and economic transformations (Jessop *et al.*, 2013).

In the case of social services, the key criteria for a comprehensive assessment of the three fundamental dimensions of social innovations (meeting human needs, empowerment, and changes in social relations) are whether the innovations also ensure: (a) the maintenance or increase of universal access and (b) the social sustainability of innovations (Martinelli, 2012).

3. Research Methodology

The article presents a review of the literature on the directions of innovation development, from the paradigm of industrial (hard) innovations, through innovations in the service sector (soft), to pro-social (cooperative) innovations. The authors based their review on publications available in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. The literature review was not of a systematic nature. Against the backdrop of the gathered literature, the authors highlight the need and determinants for the development of social innovations in response to unmet social

needs and unresolved social problems.

The research problem addressed by the authors concerns the experiences in creating social innovation processes in Poland. The aim of the study was to review Polish social innovations dedicated to marginalized social groups. These are unpaid products and services.

The authors sought answers to the following questions:

- *What kind of social problems are addressed by the implemented social innovations?*
- *Who is the final recipient of the implemented solutions?*
- *What form do social innovations take?*
- *What is the vehicle of social innovation?*
- *Who can disseminate the implemented social innovations?*
- *What distinguishes service-based social innovations?*

The research subject was a database of 259 social innovations disseminated in Poland. To this end, the publicly available Social Innovation Catalyst database (<https://innowacjespoleczne.pl/>) was used. The social innovations were created within the framework of competitions organized by institutions that supported ideas throughout the incubation process, providing financial, training, and advisory assistance. These institutions operated in the following areas: accessibility, social inclusion, labor market activation, education, and quality of life for seniors.

The research was conducted from June to October 2024. The research methods used were document analysis and case study analysis.

4. Research Results and Discussion

The activities of social innovation incubators initiated, on a large scale, the processes of social innovation creation in Poland. The incubators transferred financial resources from the European Social Fund to idea creators in the form of organizations or informal groups. The funds were used for the creation of innovative solutions, their testing on a small scale, and the development of a model for the potential widespread implementation of these solutions.

The innovations were grassroots initiatives, hence the assumption that they responded to well-diagnosed problems. The testing phases indicated to what extent the proposed solutions were the appropriate response to the identified problems and to what degree they satisfied previously unmet needs.

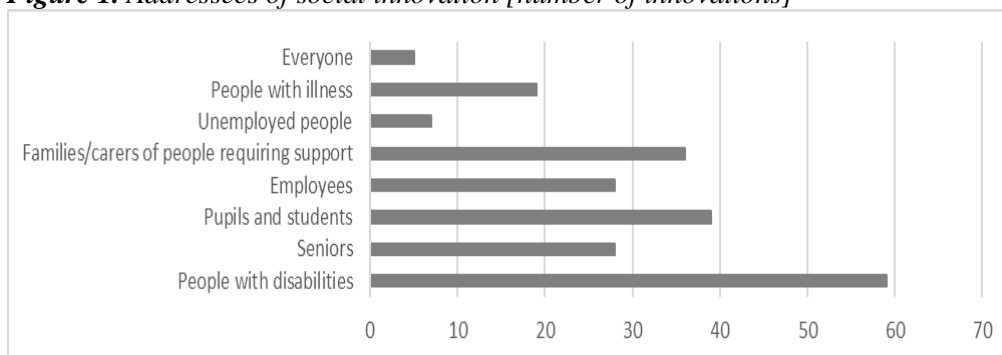
The innovations cataloged in the database were analyzed in terms of their target recipients (Figure 1). Some solutions could support several target groups. The most were dedicated to people with disabilities. Innovations were also similarly targeted

at students and pupils, as well as families and caregivers of people with special needs. Specifically, only 8 solutions were directly proposed for parents or caregivers, including:

- "Powitalnik" (a guide for parents dealing with the diagnosis of their child);
- "And You Have the Right to Be Yourself" – comprehensive support for caregivers of people with ASD.

The remaining solutions provided mutual benefits (a series of author-led workshops encouraging the creation of self-help groups for families of individuals on the autism spectrum). A similar number of innovations addressed the needs of seniors and workers (28 each). Nineteen ideas were aimed at people with illnesses. Several innovations were directed at unemployed individuals. Five innovations can be used by anyone.

Figure 1. Addressees of social innovation [number of innovations]



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from *Katalizator Innowacji Społecznych*, <https://innowacjespoleczne.pl>.

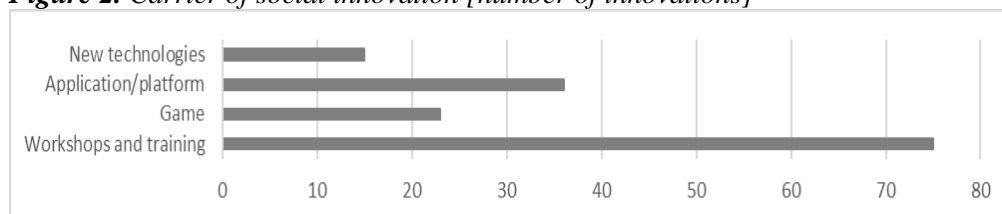
The innovations cataloged in the database were analyzed in terms of their format and medium. Sixty-four innovations were educational and awareness-raising activities (e.g., Conversation Training, Job Game, Collective Intelligence Training for Polish enterprises, Simple Style Administration). Twelve new institutional solutions were created (e.g., Caffè Aktywni, Support Trainers, Generations Relay).

The most common medium for the created innovations (Figure 2) was workshops. Thirty-six applications or platforms were developed. Games also garnered interest. Additionally, 15 new technologies were created (e.g., Accessible Station, Publishing with Gesture, Touch of Music).

The innovations cataloged in the database were analyzed in terms of the organizers of their dissemination (Figure 3). The primary potential for dissemination lies with support, social, and educational institutions. To a lesser extent, but still significantly, innovations can also be disseminated by local governments or the business sector.

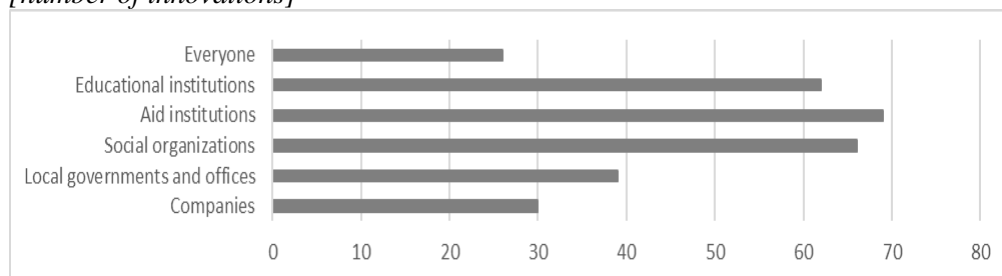
A key issue is ensuring financial resources for organizing additional workshops, providing services according to the developed model, or producing further products for excluded groups.

Figure 2. Carrier of social innovation [number of innovations]



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from Katalizator Innowacji Społecznych, <https://innowacjespoleczne.pl>.

Figure 3. Potential organizer of social innovation in the dissemination process [number of innovations]



Source: Author's calculations based on data from Katalizator Innowacji Społecznych, <https://innowacjespoleczne.pl>.

Social innovations are directly linked to political contexts, and the analysis of innovations implemented in Poland confirms this. There are three broad areas of political intervention aimed at increasing and contributing to welfare that seem particularly suitable for social innovations (Gallouj *et al.*, 2018; Wanzenböck *et al.*, 2013):

- Enhancing service-specific innovations and innovation capacities;
- Facilitating cooperation and networks involving service companies;
- Strengthening the public sector and the “third sector” in terms of collaboration.

Social innovations appear to be particularly effective in sectors where systemic solutions are insufficient in meeting needs, especially in the healthcare, public, social services, and education sectors (Loogma *et al.*, 2013). Social innovation becomes a substitute for the state's responsibilities in providing social services (Fougère *et al.*, 2017). Social innovation can be the result of actions by the public, private, or non-profit sectors, as well as local communities or individual entities.

These innovations improve society in terms of equality of opportunity and integration, without focusing on productivity, economic growth, or rational market behaviors. The greatest chance of success is when they are territorially and socio-culturally embedded and combine local political opportunities with organizational strategies. These are significant determinants of the success or failure of social innovations (Harris and Albury, 2009; Olejniczuk-Merta and Miller, 2020). They are transdisciplinary solutions (Moulaert *et al.*, 2014; Peres *et al.*, 2018).

Social innovations emerge within an open model of innovation processes. We observe crowdsourcing – a method of creating innovations by users. Openness primarily refers to the way knowledge is shared and can be realized in two ways: "outside-in" (using external ideas and technologies) and "inside-out" (sharing one's own ideas with partners). Literature also emphasizes that the production of standardized, global industrial products is easier and carries less marketing risk than the distribution of global services – service providers must adapt their offerings to local culture (Tyagi *et al.*, 2010).

A review of research on social innovations over the past decade highlights three main paradigms: instrumental, strong, and democratic. For a social innovation to truly transform society, it must focus exclusively on the needs, experiences, and power of marginalized communities. This requires a democratic paradigm (Phillips *et al.*, 2024).

Interest in social innovations in the fields of business and management is growing. Entrepreneurs and organizations are dissatisfied with existing solutions to social problems. Their potential ideas can serve the public good. This can be seen as a decline in the dominant profit-driven logic in organizations (Foroudi *et al.*, 2021). Social innovations are perceived as solutions aimed at achieving the SDGs (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2022).

However, researchers emphasize that studying the performance and impact of social innovations requires new methodologies (Krlev *et al.*, 2020). The impact of social innovations can be evaluated in the long-term perspective (Olejniczuk-Merta and Miller, 2020).

Table 1. Social innovation can be a product or a service - what makes it different?

Industrial innovation	Service innovation	Social innovation
Creation of new/improved products	Creation of new/improved services	Solution to a social problem, Prompts
New/improved production technology	New/improved method of providing a service	Social co-creation, Proposals, Prototypes
New method of selling/purchasing	New method of interacting with customers and suppliers	Empathetic relationship

Opening of a new market for selling products	Opening of a new market for providing services	Dissemination of innovation, Scaling
Use of new resources (raw materials/semi-finished products, sources and methods of financing)	Use of new resources (materials/tools, sources and methods of financing)	New sources of financing, Sustaining
Changes in the organization of production	Changes in the organization of the service provision process	Systematic change

Source: Authors' work based on Filipiak and Panasiuk, 2008; Murray *et al.*, 2010.

Social innovation can be a product or a service. It can also be a product whose use additionally requires a service process. Social innovations have several distinctive features. The authors highlight these distinctions in comparison to the characteristics of industrial and service innovations (Table 1).

In social innovations, the concept of service-dominant logic is particularly emphasized (Barrios *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, the authors suggest that the social innovation model (Murray *et al.*, 2010) should incorporate elements specific to services: immateriality, heterogeneity, inseparability, impermanence, and the need for information (Tyagi *et al.*, 2010). This, in turn, will highlight the need for continuous relationship-building with the user of the innovation, which will enhance the effectiveness of the social innovations undertaken.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

In the history of innovation development, periods of focus on industrial innovation, followed by service innovation, and now social innovation, can be observed. Social innovations aim to solve problems that have been neglected, forgotten, or inadequately addressed, which have led to social exclusion. Addressing social exclusion and effectively solving social problems resonates with the goals of sustainable development.

The response to these problems is social innovation. This applies to various areas: education, healthcare, care services, and infrastructure. For innovation processes to be effective, societal engagement is required. The continuous need for social relationships means that social innovations share many commonalities with service delivery processes (service-dominant logic). Social innovations are created for society, with society, and require continuous improvement.

In innovation development policy, it is important to:

- Understand and utilize social potential.
- Strengthen society's ability to co-create innovation.
- Facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders (actors) in the social, public, and private sectors involved in social innovation.

- Create conditions for the dissemination (scaling) of social innovations.

Stimulating the development of social innovations yields results. Emerging innovations are grassroots initiatives that support the most in-need groups, with a particular focus on people with disabilities and illnesses, followed by beneficiaries of the education system and parents/caregivers of individuals with special needs. However, it should be noted that parents are often indirectly supported through the improvement of the situation of the individuals they care for. Only a few innovations are specifically targeted at parents, a social group that often places itself last in terms of attention.

Future research should focus on assessing the long-term effects of social innovations. The challenge lies in maintaining their potential and taking further actions to ensure that these new solutions continue to thrive within society. Some researchers argue that social innovations should only be disseminated by social organizations or social enterprises. However, such an approach may limit their scope (Olejniczuk-Merta and Miller, 2020).

The limitations of this study are related to the limited sample of analyzed social innovations. These were selected innovations in a single country, meaning that the authors may have overlooked certain problems being addressed, certain groups of recipients, and some forms of social innovation.

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