

Abstract

Social Innovation (SI) is considered a pragmatic strategy for addressing environmental, social, and economic challenges and fostering societal transformation. However, it remains controversial how and to what extent could (i.e., the potential of) a single SI at the micro level transform its embedded society at the macro level. SI should not be merely regarded as an initiative but as a whole ecosystem. The potential of any SI for societal transformation depends on two considerations from a dynamic ecosystem perspective (Terstriep et al., 2015; Sano, 2020; Aoo, 2018, 2022) based on the “structure-agency” theory: 1) the interdependence, interaction and co-development of SI and the economic and socio-political environments in which SI is embedded; 2) to what extent SI stakeholders could exert their “agency” to transform society through the implementation of strategies of “scale out, scale up and scale deep” (Moore, Riddell & Vocisano, 2015). This study investigated the bottom-up SI initiative in rural Japan through the author’s refined “dynamic process SI ecosystem framework”. This research employed a case study method based on interviews, participant observation, a questionnaire, and grey literature reviews. Three selected successful cases are the Kagoshima Organic Farmers Association, Time for Agri of Kyoto and Wakayama and the Shiga 100 Agri-girls project.

The results suggest that often the bottom-up SI has the primary motivation of sustaining itself and has few ambitions to transform the whole society while its potential for transformation indeed increases during the process of practice. The practice results in an SI developer or operation organization-centered ecosystem. SI stakeholders in the successful cases showcase their open minds, mastery of external knowledge, ideas, social capital and resources, leadership, entrepreneurship, “nomadism” lifestyle, reflections of their lifestyle, and preference for environment-friendly and ethical farming methods. The potential of the bottom-up SI for rural development is determined by both the facilitations and hindrances. The facilitations are SI’s adoption of competitive business models, favorable socio-economic and socio-political environments for new initiatives and SI principles, well-cultivated social capital, SI’s great socio-economic performance, public recognition and influence, “proactive compromise” and “strategic deviation” from SI’s initial principles, active use of social media platforms, and the beneficial influence of past SIs in the regional ecosystem. On the contrary, the main hindrances for bottom-up SI to bring about transformations are overreliance on market rationality, severe competition in the market, prevailing neo-liberal political framework, unequal power dynamics between civil actors and political actors, lack of accessible means for political advocacy and financial support systems in civil society, inconsistency of SI principles with current socio-political norms, lack of funding for and know-how of dissemination such as the use of social media platforms.