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Support Networks for Social Innovation: Insights from Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the support structures for social innovation from a network perspective, applying a qualitative enriched Social Network Analysis (SNA) to investigate them. The analysis draws on a survey distributed among three hundred and twenty-one (321) social innovation organisation in Ireland, of which sixty-two (62) valid responses were included in the analysis. This is complemented with sixteen (16) semi-structured interviews with key informants. The current findings identified the strong bridging capacity of the Irish public sector in supporting social innovation, specifically in the start-up phase of social innovative initiatives. At the same time, the findings signal a mismatch between the hybrid nature of social innovation and the unilateral approach of public institutions. It points to the need for blended and cross-sectoral supports in order to scale-up and enable more diverse pathways for systemic change.

KEYWORDS

Ireland; networks; social innovation; social network analysis; support structures

Introduction

Social Innovation, broadly defined as 'innovation in social relations, as well as in meeting human needs' (MacCallum et al. 2009, p. 2) has been increasingly identified by academics, practitioners and policymakers as a significant element when addressing complex societal challenges. Despite the broad consensus on its importance (Bock 2012), how social innovation emerges remains an open question for both academics and practitioners. Although the role of institutions in this emergence has not been sufficiently explored, an intuitive assumption is that institutions and innovations are, by definition, antagonistic concepts; when innovative practices become established – through institutionalisation – they tend to lose their innovative aura (Gillwald 2000). On the contrary, research indicates that supportive institutions often provide a more conducive milieu for social innovation to flourish (Korosec and Berman 2006;

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Zahra and Wright 2011) and even become catalysts for social innovation (Stephan, Uhlaner, and Stride 2015). In this context, institutional support networks seem particularly important for the emergence of social innovation (Chatzichristos and Hennebray 2021; Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005; Oeij et al. 2019), as well as for its embeddedness (van Wijk et al. 2019).

This article dwells on this context and responds to the call for more grounded empirical research to explore the networks that support social innovation (Neumeier 2017), as well as the stakeholder constellations that are most promising for this. Such an institutional approach moves away from the functionalist understanding of social innovation that has dominated much of the related literature (van Wijk et al. 2019). More specifically, the article explores the following questions. What are the main networks supporting social innovation and what are their main characteristics? To address these questions Ireland was selected as a case study. At time of research, significant efforts were underway to develop a national multi-stakeholder's Competence Centre for Social Innovation and a national blueprint for Social Innovation. To inform these endeavours, research has been conducted on the characteristics of support structures for social innovation within the country. The novel contribution of this article lies in its focus on exploring the support structures for social innovation from a network perspective and applying Social Network Analysis (SNA) to investigate them. While networking capabilities have been recognised as crucial for social innovations, social network research is rarely used to analyse these formations (Richter 2019). Parallel to that, the article has an important methodological contribution since it introduces an innovative method for a qualitative enrichment of SNA (Crossley 2010).

The article is structured as follows. It begins with a discussion of the social innovation and SNA theoretical frameworks. The second section introduces the design and methodology of the mixed-method research that was conducted in Ireland. The third section of the article presents the research results. Finally, the discussion section draws meaningful insights that lead to the concluding remarks of the article.

Networks of social innovation

There is still an open debate about whether social innovation thrives in a supportive public institutional environment (Korosec and Berman 2006; Stephan, Uhlaner, and Stride 2015; Zahra and Wright 2011) or, when there is less active governance, abundant social problems and thus greater demand for change (Dacin, Dacin, and Matear 2010; Estrin, Mickiewicz, and Stephan 2013). What is less debateable is that some kind of support networks are crucial for social innovation (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005), providing a certain 'room for manoeuvre' for socially innovative initiatives to take root and flourish (Neumeier 2017). In this sense, social innovation support structures -within and beyond public institutions- are mostly reactive rather than proactive (Mehmood 2016), in the sense of removing barriers to social innovation.

These barriers range from closed institutional structures of insufficient collaboration (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008; Dro, Therace, and Hubert 2011) and high centralisation (Chatzichristos and Hennebray 2021), to organisational issues of path dependency (Dro, Therace, and Hubert 2011) and high volatility that creates precariousness for

organisation members (Chatzichristos and Hennebry 2021). At the same time, in the absence of a minimum common policy agenda between different levels of government and institutions, stakeholders often block each other's actions (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005). Therefore, to remove these barriers, it is not enough to develop networking, but the latter must be further coordinated with changes in the dynamics of the underlying governance culture and perceptions (González and Healey 2005).

Social networks influence the recognition and exploitation of opportunities; characteristics that seem crucial for the emergence of social innovation (Alcaide Lozano et al. 2019; Datta and Jessup 2009; Monllor 2010). The idea of networking seems to be at the core of the social innovation framework. Neumeier brings this dimension to the fore by arguing that social innovations are defined as 'changes in the attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people connected in a network of aligned interests' (Neumeier 2012, p. 55). Such networks could not be understood as ad hoc formations, but rather reflect specific types of institutional arrangements (Carlsson 2000), organised in such a way as to implement a set of ideas (Hjern 1987). Social innovations thrive in the context of networked and collaborative institutional structures between agencies that align their interests to address some of the major challenges of the 21st century, such as demographic ageing, global security, climate change, resource scarcity among others (Benneworth et al. 2015; Neumeier 2017). Understanding the arrangements of those support networks is substantial for improving their effectiveness (Agranoff and McGuire 2001). There have already been several calls for research on social networks in the context of social innovation (Dufays and Huybrechts 2014; Mair and Marti 2006). Nonetheless, with some notable exceptions (Alcaide Lozano et al. 2019; Dal Forno and Merlone 2009; Haugh 2007; Richter 2019) the social network approach to exploring support structures for social innovation is surprisingly absent from the relevant literature.

These relevant studies highlight that there are multi-scale reasons to approach social innovation support structures through the prism of social networks. At the local level, social networks are a prerequisite for the exchange of knowledge and ideas (Alcaide Lozano et al. 2019), as well as for anchoring socially innovative solutions in local realities (Olmedo, van Twuijver, and O'Shaughnessy 2021a). At the same time, through a process of local networking, social innovations can penetrate the institutional framework, introducing new institutional logics and support schemes (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos 2020; Richter 2019). Second, the combination of local and interregional character is rather important for the development and implementation of innovative ideas, because these networks provide access to individuals with knowledge and ideas (Hervieux and Turcotte 2010; Leadbeater 1997), as well as to resources that are not available at the local level (Avelino et al. 2020). The interregionality of a network is often more important than its local impetus for the sustainability of social innovation (Chatzichristos and Hennebry 2021; De Noni, Orsi, and Belussi 2018).

These studies extend Granovetter's (1973) seminal theory of the 'strength of weak ties', which emphasises that the diversity of the network is more important than the thickness of the ties between nodes. The combination of local integration and extra-local linkages can again provide an arsenal for transformative actors to replace

dominant institutional logics (Avelino et al. 2020). Finally, based on a combination of local and extra-local factors, social networks can help marginalised, less connected communities overcome barriers (Olmedo, van Twuijver, and O'Shaughnessy 2021a; Avelino et al. 2020) and spur the development of innovative solutions (Richter 2019). Through these connections, social networks can improve access to critical resources such as credibility, power, and economic means for these areas (Shaw and Carter 2007). For the aforementioned reasons, social network analysis can have epistemological advantages in capturing the local and extra-local dynamics of social innovation support structures, as well as a realistic impact on further cultivating social networking resources.

The SNA is an interdisciplinary method that has recently gained momentum for the analysis of social phenomena (Dobbie, Reith, and McConville 2018; Luxton and Sbicca 2021; Yousefi Nooraie et al. 2020). The method builds on the fundamental assumption that social life is primarily and mainly created by relationships and the norms shaped by those relationships (Freeman 2004). It approaches institutions as norms, values or rules at the structural level that emerge as recurrent interactions within networks (Sandström and Carlsson 2008). Within a network, a 'node' is a device or a point capable of creating, receiving, or transmitting data. In SNA nodes most commonly represent individuals or organisations which are connected by one or more relationships (Marin and Wellman 2011). Most importantly, nodes share 'meanings, purposes, knowledge, perceptions, and identifications' that affect which of those nodes are connected and how these connections are materialised (Crossley 2010, p. 7).

In the framework of SNA, one of the most important aspects is exploring the overall qualities of the network: a network could be characterised as 'cohesive' based on the extent and strength of its relations (Alba 1973), or "weak" or "strong" based on various qualities of the relationship of the nodes (Granovetter 1973). Another important index to be considered is homophily, and its reverse, heterophily (Alcaide Lozano et al. 2019). Homophily refers to the similar attributes of the connected nodes, i.e. size, activity or legal form of the organisation among others. A high level of homophily indicates a high level of homogenisation between nodes and therefore a high volume of solidarity and cohesion. Nonetheless, it also indicates an introversion that can lead to closure and stagnation (Alcaide Lozano et al. 2019). In the present study of social innovation support structures, where a highly heterogeneous group of institutional stakeholders is the focus of interest, the homogeneity and cohesion of the network is very low from the outset. In this context, emphasis should be placed on those critical parameters that make an organisation-node important in order to expand its role and replicate its practices.

This is not always an easy task, since there is more than one way to identify the most prominent actors within a network (Yousefi Nooraie et al. 2020). Despite its rising prominence, SNA still lacks a conceptual clarity due to the multitude of centrality concepts and techniques (Kolaczyk 2010), what Freeman characterised during the 1970s as an 'embarrassment of intellectual riches' (Freeman 1978, p. 237). Accordingly, when trying to identify a node's significance for a social innovation support structure the researcher could focus her attention on how many organisations turn to the specific node ('degree centrality'), how influential it is in connecting unconnected pairs

(‘betweenness centrality’), or even how accessible it is by other network members (‘closeness centrality’), among other criteria. Against this background, the organisations under investigations could be labelled ‘central’ or ‘peripheral’ based on the centrality of their positions (Freeman 1978), or ‘bridging’ or ‘constrained’ based on their roles in connecting unconnected clusters (Burt 2000). These are just a few of the many useful indicators and parameters of social networking theory.

Social innovation theory guides us through these indicators, highlighting the importance of bridging relationships for the implementation of social innovative solutions. In general, bridging is supposed to favour external ties, while bonding promotes social closure (Taylor 2004). In supporting socially innovative ventures, the most influential organisations appear to be those ‘bridging’ organisations that connect other socially innovative initiatives, as well as resource providers. More specifically, the so-called ‘bridgers’ can influence communication and resource sharing and acquisition (Crossley 2010; Olmedo, van Twuijver, and O’Shaughnessy 2021a), as they have the highest control over the resources that flow between others (Hanneman and Riddle 2005). They can be formal organisations-institutions (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos 2020), or even social innovators that tend to act as embedded intermediaries (Richter 2019), in order to develop local credibility and to trigger support for the network (Shaw and Carter 2007). One way or another, bridging capacity is an important parameter in social innovation support networks. Therefore, the analysis in this article focuses on those formal and informal ‘bridgers’ who act as embedded intermediaries within these networks.

Research design and methodology

While traditionally, SNA has been associated with quantitative methods (Freeman 2004), i.e. measurements of formal network properties, such as their strength, direction, composition and density (Heath, Fuller, and Johnston 2009), a strictly quantitative approach may not be enough to reveal the mechanisms through which social networks shape, emerge and influence social and organisational processes (Dubini and Aldrich 1991). Networks are not just structures to be measured but also have social and cultural underpinnings that need to be explored (Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006). Against this background, scholars are increasingly pushing for a qualitative enrichment of SNA (Crossley 2010), analysing the content and structure of networks with both quantitative network analysis and qualitative methods (Crossley 2010; Freeman 2004; Luxton and Sbicca 2021; Marin and Wellman 2011). Such a conjunction provides the tools to capture both interpretive and structural dimensions of social networking (Luxton and Sbicca 2021). Qualitative tools can contextualise quantitative measurements to understand the significance of nodes, and the content of ties between them, namely ‘the *structure* and the *story* of the network’ (Luxton and Sbicca 2021, p. 165). To this end, this study used a triangular SNA: a survey of socially innovative organisations was triangulated with key informant interviews and document analysis of social innovation reports in Ireland.

At this point it should be emphasised that the analysis of social innovation networks can mean an analysis of networks of socially innovative initiatives or socially

innovative networks. The current research explored the first dimension - networks of innovative initiatives - while the question of whether the formations themselves were innovative remains under consideration.

Initially, a survey targeting social innovative organisations was developed, which asked organisations to identify other organisations/institutions they considered important for their work and to rate their collaboration with organisations/institutions from a specific list. In the absence of a census and/or repository of social innovative organisations in Ireland, an alternative sampling procedure had to be established. In SNA, there are many challenges related to identifying the proper sampling approach of a networked population (Scott 2017). The major limitation with SNA sampling is that 'there is no reason to believe that the relations identified among the agents in the sample would themselves be a random sample of all the relations of these same agents' (Scott 2017, p. 52). Because of this, random samples do not tell us much about the overall properties of social networks and should perhaps be abandoned. A response to this sampling problem is the use of a snowball sampling, in which the researcher has, or acquires, knowledge about the network, in order to assess the sample's representativeness. Nonetheless, snowball sampling doesn't come without its own challenges, the most important being that such a type of sample is most likely to be organised around the links of the starting individuals (Scott 2017). This makes it 'scarcely informative to learn that a network constituted by a snowball sampling procedure is well-connected' (Laumann, Marsden, and Prensky 1992, p. 22). To address this problem the analysis introduced an extended snowball sampling, where all the contacts of the initial sample individuals are embodied in the network analysis regardless of whether they were included in the initial sample (Frank 1979). In this way the network is extended beyond the initial individual-centred network (Scott 2017). Following this sampling line, an initial set of socially innovative organisations indicated their connections, which were themselves included in the SNA.

A total of three hundred and twenty-one (321) organisations constituted the sample of the survey. All social innovative organisations included were contacted via e-mail. This e-mail included a brief explanation of the research project and the aim of the survey. Respondents anonymity was explicitly assured and the contact e-mail of one of the authors was included to discuss any aspect of the survey. The online survey was hosted in EU Survey, the official software for survey creation and distribution from the European Commission. Data was stored within the EU Survey site, which is password protected and conforms with EU GDPR regulations. All organisations were contacted at the beginning of November 2021 and a friendly reminder was sent after three weeks. The survey was opened for 4 weeks, and closed at the beginning of December 2021. A total of 62 valid answers were gathered, bringing the total response rate to 19.63%.

The relatively small sample reflects the difficulties of gathering data online, especially amidst an era of social distancing instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This might be partially caused by survey fatigue among the research population. Socially innovative organisations and social enterprises are receiving growing research attention in Ireland in the past years (Olmedo et al. 2021b; O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy 2021), limiting willingness (and ability) for participation. This, in combination with

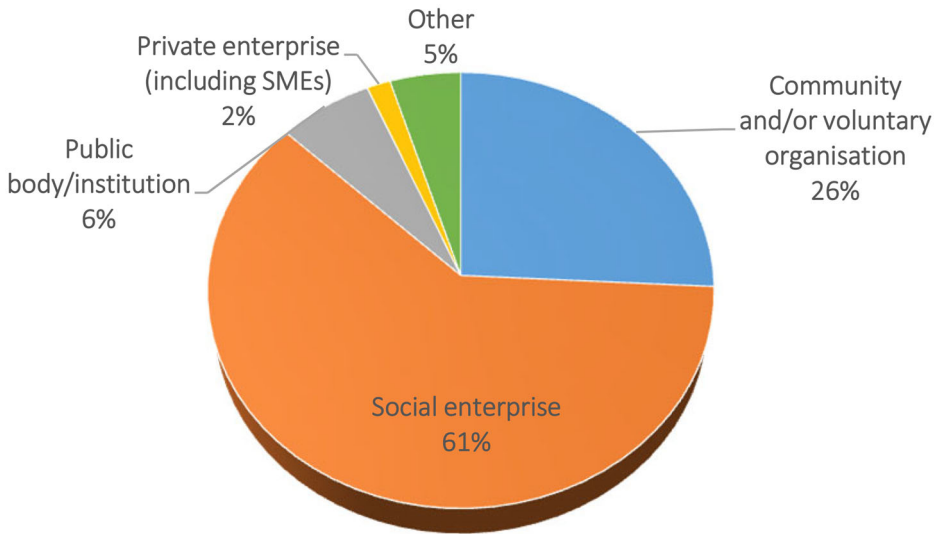


Figure 1. Types of respondent organisations. *Source:* author's own elaboration.

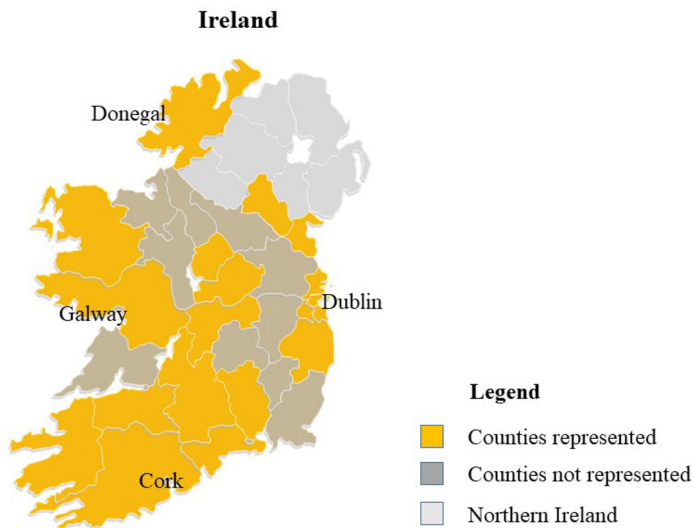


Figure 2. Location of headquarters of social innovation organisations' surveyed, by county.

resource and time constraints experienced by these type of organisations, that often operate with a limited resource base, could also have influenced the participation rate of the current study. Due to the small sample, there are legitimate concerns about future comparative research in an inherently unstable field; we will address these concerns further in the discussion section.

Respondents to the survey mainly identified themselves as social enterprises (61%), however community and voluntary organisations (26%), public bodies (6%) and private businesses (2%) also completed the questionnaire (Figure 1). Respondents were spread across 16 different counties of Ireland (Figure 2), including the four provinces of the Republic of Ireland. Dublin-based organisations represented 45% of respondents,

Table 1. Number of respondents per county.

County	<i>N</i>	%
Cork	6	10
Donegal	5	8
Dublin	28	45
Galway	6	10
Kerry	1	2
Kilkenny	1	2
Limerick	3	5
Longford	1	2
Louth	1	2
Mayo	1	2
Monaghan	1	2
Offaly	2	3
Tipperary	2	3
Waterford	2	3
Westmeath	1	2
Wicklow	1	2
Total	62	100

followed by respondents based in Cork and Galway, who represented 10%, and Donegal (8%). 31% of respondents are based and operate in an urban area, while 19% are based and operate in rural areas, 50% stated they operate in both urban and rural areas (Table 1).

The SNA was used for data analysis to identify the ‘bridger’ organisations. In SNA terms this property is specified from the ‘betweenness centrality’ measurement, i.e. the position of a node in the network with respect to how the node connects other nodes. In other words, betweenness centrality measures which organisations have the most influence on the network, through the number of times those nodes are on the shortest path between other nodes (Hanneman and Riddle 2005). The parameter of betweenness centrality thus indicates the distribution of network resources and the network’s connectivity capabilities (Luxton and Sbicca 2021). In this context, the analysis focussed on measuring betweenness centrality as a central indicator for identifying important nodes in the social innovation ecosystem. As a secondary index the ‘degree centrality’ was used to measure the volume of connections of each node. The SNA was developed using the Gephi software, in order to represent the main network characteristics by sociograms as a visualising technique (Dobbie, Reith, and McConville 2018).

Sixteen (16) semi-structured interviews with key informants informed the analysis, by identifying the attributes that render a node central (for a methodological example see Luxton and Sbicca 2021). Interviewees were selected using a purposeful-theoretical sample according to their potential capacity to provide relevant information related to the research objectives (Brinkmann 2013, pp. 57–58). Interviewees were contacted via e-mail, explaining the overall objective of the research project and the specific purpose of the interview. Interviews were scheduled at the most convenient date and time for the interviewee.

Eleven of the interviewees participated in a multi-stakeholder national advisory group for social innovation in Ireland. The interviewees represented different sectors (Table 2), including public sector (civil servants from government departments and

Table 2. Interviewees sample.

Interviewee category	N
Public sector	6
University	2
Industry/for-profit business sector	3
Civil society/third sector	5
Total interviewees	16

state/public organisations); academia (university lecturers and researchers); industry/-for-profit business sector (representatives from business intermediary network, impact investment and philanthropy) and; civil society/third sector (representatives from social innovation intermediary organisations/networks).

The interviews were structured around three main axes. First, interviewees were asked about the work of their organisation/institution and the types of supports their organisations offer to social innovative organisations/initiatives. Second, interviewees were asked about the support that actors within different sectors (public, business/for-profit, academia, civil society/third sector) provide to social innovative organisations and about their role in the Irish social innovation ecosystem. Third, interviewees were asked about their understanding of social innovation and about the strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement of social innovation support structures in Ireland. Interviews were conducted online, between October 2021 and January 2022. The interviews were audio and video recorded, with previous written consent secured from the interviewees. A total of 835 minutes of audio and video records were gathered, interviews ranging from 36 to 65 minutes with an average length of 52 minutes. Interviews were securely stored in a university cloud service and password protected. Thematic analysis (King and Brooks 2018) of the data from the semi-structured interviews was performed using the CAQDAS NVivo 12. In first instance, provisional (a priori) codes drawn from the conceptual framework and research objectives were agreed by the authors (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). One of the authors analysed the data from the interviews. Besides the agreed codes, further codes (themes) emerged from this data analysis. In a later stage, all authors reviewed the codes (a prior and emergent) against the interview data and reached consensus (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015) .

Support structure for social innovation in Ireland

Contextualising social innovation in Ireland

Social innovations in Ireland are embedded within a wider institutional and socio-economic context which influences their emergence and development. Outlining the basic socio-economic parameters of this context, Ireland presents one of the highest GDPs per capita within the EU, 62.980€, which is clearly above the EU average (26.370€). Ireland’s economy is characterised as ‘innovation-driven’, being placed in the 24th position in the ranking of most innovative countries according to the World Economic Forum (2019).

In terms of government, analysis of data from the World Bank on indicators such as ‘regulatory quality’, ‘rule of law’, ‘voice and accountability’, ‘government effectiveness’

and, 'control of corruption' shows that Ireland scores above the 90 percentile in each of these indicators, denoting Ireland's high quality and mature public institutions. However, Ireland's public expenditure in areas such as education (3.10% of GDP), health (6.9% of GDP) and R&D (0.78% of the GDP) are below the EU average (4.7, 9.9 and 2.19%, respectively). This denotes a low direct public investment in public services leaving room for private sector and third sector initiatives. Ireland has a large workforce within the third sector, representing about 7.3% of the total Irish workforce, with also significant levels of volunteers and diverse-heterogeneous organisations operating within the sector (Benefacts 2018). Public government is highly supportive of the third sector with about half (43%) of Irish non-profits receiving public funding. Public funding is the largest source of income, in particular through service contracts, for third sector organisations (Benefacts 2018, pp. 14–17).

Examples of social innovation in Ireland can be found within a wide range of sectors such as: eldercare services, agriculture, employment, children with special educational needs, gender equality/empowerment, ethnic minorities, migrants, physical and mental well-being, rural development and recycling. Support structures for social innovation in Ireland include statutory/public and semi-public bodies with competencies in the development of policy frameworks, strategies and programmes related to social innovation, launching calls for funding and providing support to social innovation initiatives. Ireland does not have a specific social innovation policy/strategy yet, however, measures towards social innovation are included in different policies and strategies, e.g. 'National Social Enterprise Policy (2019–2021)', 'A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland (2019–2024)', 'Our Rural Future. Rural Development Policy (2021–2025)' and 'Impact 2030. Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy'.

Irish third sector intermediary organisations and networks provide different types of support and advocacy for social innovation organisations/initiatives. Some of these organisations are specifically focussed on the field of social innovation while others are specialised in other fields such as social enterprises, social entrepreneurship, local development, the community and voluntary sector, social impact initiatives, young impact and social entrepreneurs but include within their programmes measures directed to social innovation. With regards to research and higher education, some Irish universities have developed learning programmes and courses addressing social innovation at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Despite the lack of a formal constituted network of research for social innovation at national level, an important milestone for social innovation in Irish academia was the establishment of the Centre for Social Innovation at Trinity College Dublin in 2018.

Additionally, there are a range of established financial intermediaries including social finance lenders, philanthropic foundations and impact investment agencies which can support social innovation, of through the provision of funding for the implementation, consolidation and/or scaling up of social innovations. It is also important to note that Irish social innovative organisations/initiatives often rely on the community for financial support, either in traditional ways such as organising community fundraisings and/or using IT tools such as in the organisation of crowdfunding.

Support networks for social innovation

The close interconnection between Irish public sector and the non-profit/third sector, particularly through the procurement of services (Benefacts 2018, pp. 14–17) suggests an important link between socially innovative initiatives and the public sector. The SNA showed that Government Departments and Local Authorities were indeed the most important nodes for bridging the different stakeholders in the social innovation support network: both nodes are quite predominant both in their degree of centrality (colour of the nodes), as well as their size and location (betweenness centrality) (Figure 3). This was related to the direct regulatory capacity of the Government to develop policies around social innovation, as well as its indirect interventions through public agencies and/or services (HSE, Pobal). Either way, the Irish Government remains the largest budget holder and this was critical for social innovation ventures. In the words of a key informant:

The Government can play a very important role in creating an environment which is conducive to the development of social innovation, so the regulatory role of Government is key. [...] The other side is, you know, I can't think of any social challenges facing our



Figure 3. Sociogram: Irish support structure for social innovation, figuring betweenness centrality (size and location of the nodes) and degree centrality (colour of the nodes). *Source:* authors' own elaboration.

country where the Government isn't the biggest budget holder, so they have both the money and the mandate to make change [Interview_10_Representative Civil Society/Third Sector]

In principle, strong connections with central government are argued to be important for the success of networking (Witkamp, Royakkers, and Raven 2011). The involvement of support networks, including public institutions appears vital for socially innovative ventures (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005), since innovation on the local level can only work in concordance with innovation in national and global scales (Moulaert 2000). While the current research aligned with the argument that central public authorities are quite important for network maintenance, the term 'success' of networking had to be brought under the spotlight. High centralisation of a network - such as that of Ireland - points to high hierarchy, which in turn suggests high levels of integration (Sandström and Carlsson 2008), but at the same time higher levels of closure (Burt 2000). The balance between integration and innovation seems to be at stake: 'old and well-established policy structures containing actors with similar ideas, values and approaches might in fact be effective in achieving desired goals; however, they may do so at the cost of innovation' (Sandström and Carlsson 2008, p. 510). Related research has shown that effective and established policy structures are usually attached to the status quo and this can work against innovation in the long run (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos 2020).

In the case of the Irish support structure, this weakening of innovation was related rather to the scaling of social innovations, as stakeholders stressed that public support was mostly focussed on early-stage social innovative organisations rather than for scaling social innovations.

Providing capacity building and a little bit of finance at the early stage is an easier thing to do and it's where we [Ireland] are strongest [...] so we are relatively strong in small scale support for small scale innovations [Interview_10_Representative Civil Society/Third Sector]

While start-up is a major stage for social innovation initiatives, key informants realised that it is equally important for 'those ideas to be scaled up to a systemic level' [Interview_13_Representative Civil Society/Third Sector]. In the context of Ireland, the hierarchical/centralised support structure seemed to lack the multiplicity of 'institutional pathways' for social innovation to scale up. Stakeholders interviewed pointed towards the mismatch between the hybrid (blended) nature of social innovation and silo support structure.

The world of social innovation is a world of hybridity and blurring boundaries... [while] regulation isn't blended, isn't hybrid, beyond the notion of for example public-private partnerships, and it tends to view that activities are falling into a clear box [Interview_5_Representative Academia].

However, to support the scaling up of social innovation and tackling systemic challenges stakeholders highlighted the need for hybrid institutional forms. In this regard the process of social innovation was associated with the shift from the idea of 'government' to that of 'governance' (Shucksmith 2010, 2), i.e. with the emergence and development of new, hybrid institutional forms, involving public institutions, industry/business and civil society stakeholders (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005).

Nevertheless, our findings did not suggest the need to limit the public sector, but rather to adopt other aspects to enhance institutional hybridity. More specifically:

- a. strengthening cross-Departmental (Government) linkages/collaborations and
- b. extending cross-sectoral multi-stakeholders cooperation and engagement.

Regarding the first aspect, key informants agreed on the need to break/reduce the (usual) silo work between government Departments in Ireland since 'they [Departments] don't encourage collaboration or cooperation or joint development policy or interconnection' [Interview_12_Representative Civil Society/Third Sector]. According to stakeholders, there was not a 'perfect fit' for social innovation within a single Government Department, which was manifested in the lack of agreement between stakeholders about which Government Department should have the main responsibility (in policy terms) for social innovation in Ireland. Different key informants suggested the DRCD (currently with core competencies in social innovation and social enterprises), DFHERIS (Management Authority for the European Social Fund + and with core competencies in innovation) or DETE (with core competencies in employment and entrepreneurship) as the most suitable Departments where social innovation policy/strategysit. . Despite the different views, all interviewees agreed that there is a need for more joined-up thinking and action between Government Departments to enhance social innovation.

There has to be better cross-departments communication and collaboration, social innovation should be set up as a structure and then relevant Departments feeding into it. Because obviously it belongs to different Departments [...] I think it needs to seat (sit) across Departments [Interview_03_Representative Academia].

Regarding the second path to institutional hybridity, enhancing cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder's cooperation and engagement was also stressed as key for social innovation,

Multi-stakeholder approach is absolutely fundamental to social innovation working, the engagement of those with the ideas, those helping to scale or who support the ideas and those who have public policy or political responsibility to create a framework where those ideas can be put in practice [Interview_13_Representative Civil Society/Third Sector]

The claims on strengthening institutional hybridity were related to the fact that the capacity for innovation is higher in less hierarchical structures, in which more stakeholders are involved (Newmann 2010). The relational processes that underpin social innovation within cross-sectoral partnerships is a quite interesting topic that still requires further investigation (Le Ber and Branzei 2010). In order to map the dynamics of the secondary, underlying support structures we ran an alternative SNA model in which public authorities (Government Departments and Local Authorities) were removed from the analysis. Our findings show that when public authorities are removed from the SNA analysis, a more dispersed/decentralised network of support for social innovation emerges: the graph density is reduced from the original 0.021 to 0.016 (both quite low due to the sampling of the network) while the average path length to connect two nodes is increased from 3.79 to 4.54, indicating the bridging importance of the public authorities. Similarly, the network diameter (longer path

length) increases from 8 to 10, indicating that networking becomes more difficult for nodes at the edge of the network. However, successful networking for these fringe organisations would include two more nodes in the process, indicating that a more decentralised network may be less effective, but when deployed it can include more stakeholders and broaden its reach. The framing of such an alternative network stresses the role of organisations/institutions (e.g. Rethink Ireland, Universities/ITs, Local Development Companies, Pobal, HSE) from different sectors, i.e. civil society/third sector, academia, public sector agencies, that represent support structures for social innovation in Ireland (Figure 4).

This more decentralised (second level) network stresses the relevance that, besides/beyond the state, organisations from different sectors have as 'bridgers' for enabling social innovation, providing a suite of supports to social innovative organisations. In general terms, this network is diverse in terms of organisations from different sectors, nevertheless, the network also shows the greater relevance of civil society/third sector support structures (e.g. Rethink Ireland, NGOs, LDCs). Universities/ITs and state agencies (e.g. HSE, Pobal, Enterprise Ireland) over private (for-profit) actors (e.g. multinationals, philanthropies). In this regard, the private sector is largely acknowledged by social

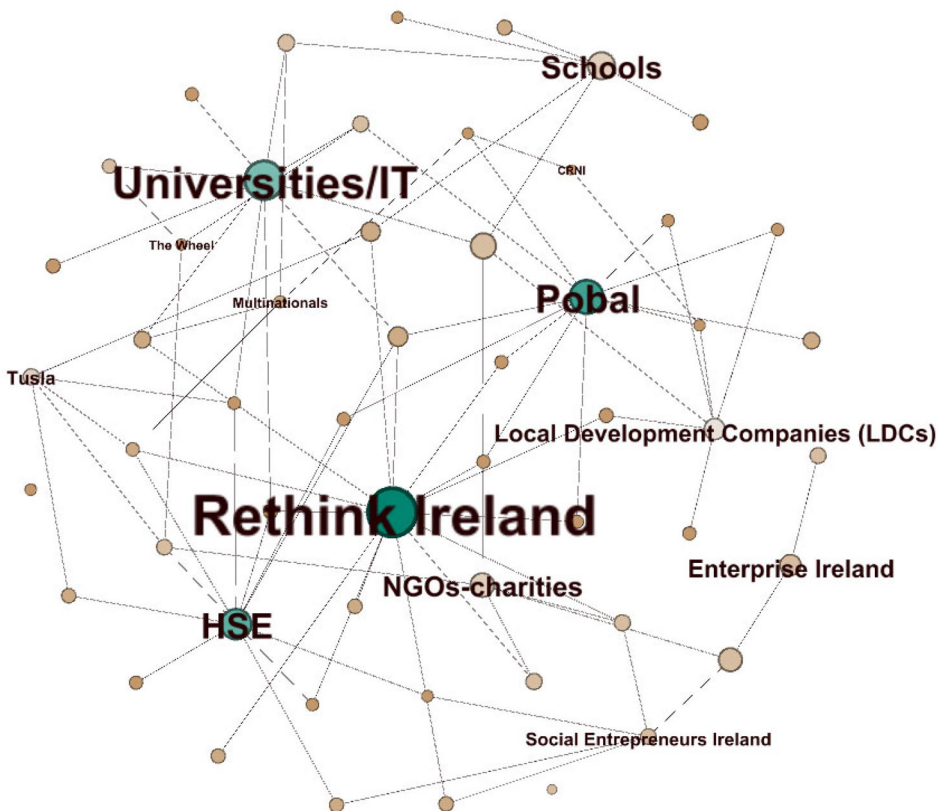


Figure 4. Sociogram: Irish support structure for social innovation, excluding government institutions, figuring betweenness centrality (size and location of the nodes) and degree centrality (colour of the nodes). Source: authors' own elaboration.

innovation stakeholders as greatly underdeveloped when referring to their support and enabling of social innovation.

I don't think social innovation projects really figure for them [corporates, for-profit businesses] [...] I would not be convinced they are under their radar in any real, significant or substantive way. Do I think there is opportunity? Yes, I do [Interview_8_Representative Industry/Business]

Philanthropy is underdeveloped in this country, very significantly underdeveloped I would say [Interview_13_ Civil Society/Third Sector]

However, as already mentioned, our findings suggest that weakening state institutions is neither desirable nor effective for social innovation. Instead, in this broader governance context, the analysis suggests the state plays a central and critical role as 'co-ordinator, manager or enabler, rather than as provider and director' (Shucksmith, 2010, 4). The coordinating and enabling role of Government/public authorities can be complementary to this second level decentralised networks in which multiple bridging hubs develop as support structures for social innovation. The interviewees explained how examples of 'best practices' socially innovative programmes, rolled out across Ireland, are fundamentally coordinated by the state/Government, with the involvement and collaboration of different Departments but also other stakeholders such as Local Authorities, NGOs, social enterprises, state agencies and private employers.

In summary, our findings demonstrate the strong role of public authorities as the main support structure for social innovation in Ireland, fostering a strong and effective social innovation network in Ireland. However, it is argued that these supports are mainly targeted at the early stages of social innovation to achieve scale and enable systemic change, and that there is a discernible disconnect between the hybridity and cross-sector nature of social innovation and siloed support structures, especially referring to finance and policy/programmes, which do not usually understand and recognise the blended and cross-sectoral nature of social innovations. Accordingly, the scaling up of social innovation in a systemic level requires stronger cross-Departmental linkages/collaborations and an extended cross-sectoral multi-stakeholder cooperation and engagement. The analysis of a second level network of support structures for social innovation in Ireland shows a more decentralised network in which organisations/institutions from different sectors act as 'bridgers' of socially innovative organisations. This second level decentralised network is complementary to the first level centralised network in which the public authorities occupy a predominant/central role. This supports the notion that the social innovation support network should echo the idea of an ecosystem (Domanski and Kaletka 2018; Pel et al. 2020) rather than a structure.

Discussion

The literature highlights the fact that a strong public institutional environment can provide social innovation with 'room for manoeuvre' (Neumeier 2017), thus triggering its development (Korosec and Berman 2006; Zahra and Wright 2011). However, the properties of this space remain largely uncharted. This research critically engaged with Irish social innovation support structures and in the process identified a strong public

sector and its role in supporting social innovation. The integrated SNA showed that central government – and public authorities more generally – were the most important hubs for bridging the various socially innovative initiatives. This had two further implications. On the one hand, it shaped a strong network of socially innovative ventures which were supported in their early stages by a highly hierarchical network. At the same time though, it covered a mismatch between the hybridity and cross-sectoral nature of social innovation and the unilateral approach of public actors. This phenomenon had implications mainly for the scaling up of social innovation, as the ‘institutional pathways’ for scaling up were limited.

From this, some scholars and policy-makers jump to the conclusion that the traditional state forms are sclerotic, hierarchical, and bureaucratic and thus unable to meet the requirements of social innovation. Such arguments do indeed undermine the public welfare system and act as trojan horses for neo-liberal assumptions (Swyngedouw 2005). This article shows that in order to further support the scaling up of social innovation and tackling systemic challenges there is a need for hybrid institutional forms that would act as complementary to the public institutions. What seems to be at stake is that social innovation in Europe still lacks an intermediate space between the market, the state and civil society and often ends up being embedded either to the public or to the private spheres (Defourny and Nyssens 2013). Although full assimilation does not apply in the Irish context, there is a strong attachment to the public sector.

The research indicated that a transition from the narrow concept of government to a wider notion of governance could benefit social innovation. This implies better linkages and cooperation within and beyond the public authorities. Developing a second-level support network of hybrid institutions, by strengthening the role of different organisations, could benefit social innovation projects in finding their institutional pathways to scale-up; greater involvement of development agencies, NGOs, Universities and Schools, could thus benefit initiatives. Cross-sectoral partnerships generate a quite fruitful environment for social innovation but still require further investigation (Le Ber and Branzei 2010).

There is a rather scathing criticism that the concept of the network is rather technical, indifferent to the social, political and spatial context, with the result that political issues remain absent from the relevant literature (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2006). Our analysis re-politicises the debate on social networking, emphasising that public institutional support has to be complemented by grassroots support organisations in order for social innovation to expand; space, society and politics came back into the equation. In this respect, the process of social innovation should be understood as an unbroken chain of multi-scale innovation (Moulaert 2000), which requires homologous multi-scale support structures. Such a perspective would further settle a long-term critique, which stresses that a network can widen the gap between those who have access to resources and those who do not (Dufays and Huybrechts 2014). A dispersed network of social innovation can better allocate existing resources.

While there is an already strong Irish network of support, developing a more dispersed, multi-layered ecosystem might be a very time-consuming activity, since a large number of more distant contact could only be attained after a considerable amount of time (Ge, Hisrich, and Dong 2009). However social innovation is relative, since it

inevitably loses its innovative spirit over time (Gillwald 2000). This raises an additional ontological problem for the effort: by the time such an ecosystem is developed its nodes may have already lost their innovative momentum. Additionally, in the process of scaling up, new organisational concerns and challenges arise, which often lead to a shift in the mission of social enterprises, i.e. what is generally defined as the challenge of 'scaling up' (Ometto et al. 2019). In this context, 'spaces of negotiation' (Battilana et al. 2015) and 'herding spaces' – spaces that connect social enterprises to institutional environments (Ometto et al. 2019) – are valuable means that can achieve a long-term balance and avoid mission drift. Although these issues are outside the scope of the current limited research, they do suggest future research that needs to be done. Research into the dynamics of these networks in the long term seems important. For now, what we expect is that the dialectical interplay between agency and structure would raise new constraints and opportunities (Hay 1995), thus redefining modes of networking per se and promoting new social innovations. Thus, instead of talking about networks of social innovation future research could shift its focus towards a deeper exploration of socially innovative networks.

Finally, in terms of the methodology used in this paper, the small number of survey respondents once more highlights the sampling problems of the SNA, by raising questions about how future data comparisons will evolve. To resolve these sampling problems, future research should aim for a more representative sample (although not primarily representative, as noted in the Methodology section) of the overall population of socially innovative organisations. In this study, we have included qualitative interviews to contextualise the survey responses and deepen our understanding of the SNA. Based on our experience, we propose qualitative data to remain a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of network properties and a useful complement to quantitative methods of data collection in SNA.

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