Social Innovation Diplomacy: Connecting Social Innovation with International Affairs

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Abstract

We explore the development of networks of social innovators and entrepreneurs that aim to tackle local challenges and are interconnected globally, allowing them to scale their efforts and promote collective impact. Such innovation networks, and their members, build, most of the times, intended or unintended international collaborations. We identify this as an emerging trend that effectively connects social innovation with international affairs and term this concept "social innovation diplomacy." Moreover, we analyze the value of a social innovation diplomacy method called "shaping horizons" and use it as a case study to further explore the concept. Hence, this article lays the groundwork to advancing the research and the practice of social innovation diplomacy.

Introduction

Social innovation researchers and practitioners are aware of the increasing complexity of social challenges. This is a result of our world's interconnectivity. We find different examples of where local problems become global concerns. These examples include public health crises (e.g., COVID-19, Zika, H1N1), political crises, and increasing inequality, to name a few. In response, social innovation is developing in the form of networks with innovators working at the local level, but simultaneously having strong global connections.

Social innovation networks are an emergent collaborative form of innovation that has the potential to generate collective impact (Kania and Kramer, 2011). These networks are generally composed of local entrepreneurs, innovators, and organizations, all of which share values and work toward addressing common social challenges. They can easily support the scalability of local solutions (Starr, 2019). Examples that resemble such networks include Ashoka, Global Changemakers, Social Innovation Exchange, Global Shapers, International Youth Society, Sandbox, One Young World, We, Restless developments, among others. These networks' global actions have influenced diplomatic relations and yet, often, actors did not purposely intend to do so. We consider this to be a new form of diplomacy.

By extending the principles of science and innovation diplomacy (Leijten, 2017), we conceptualize social innovation diplomacy as a field that connects social innovation with international affairs. As such, both traditional actors (e.g., governments and multilateral organizations) and the public (e.g., NGOs, individuals and organizations, etc.) can take part via (Figure 1): 1) social innovation in diplomacy, which implies innovation practices to advance foreign affairs' goals that aim to tackle social challenges; 2) diplomacy for social innovation, which mediates international efforts

that can facilitate or advance social innovation practices; 3) social innovation for diplomacy, which implies that social innovation can effectively lead to a better understanding of cultures, mobilize international collaboration, promote values, and advance public interest
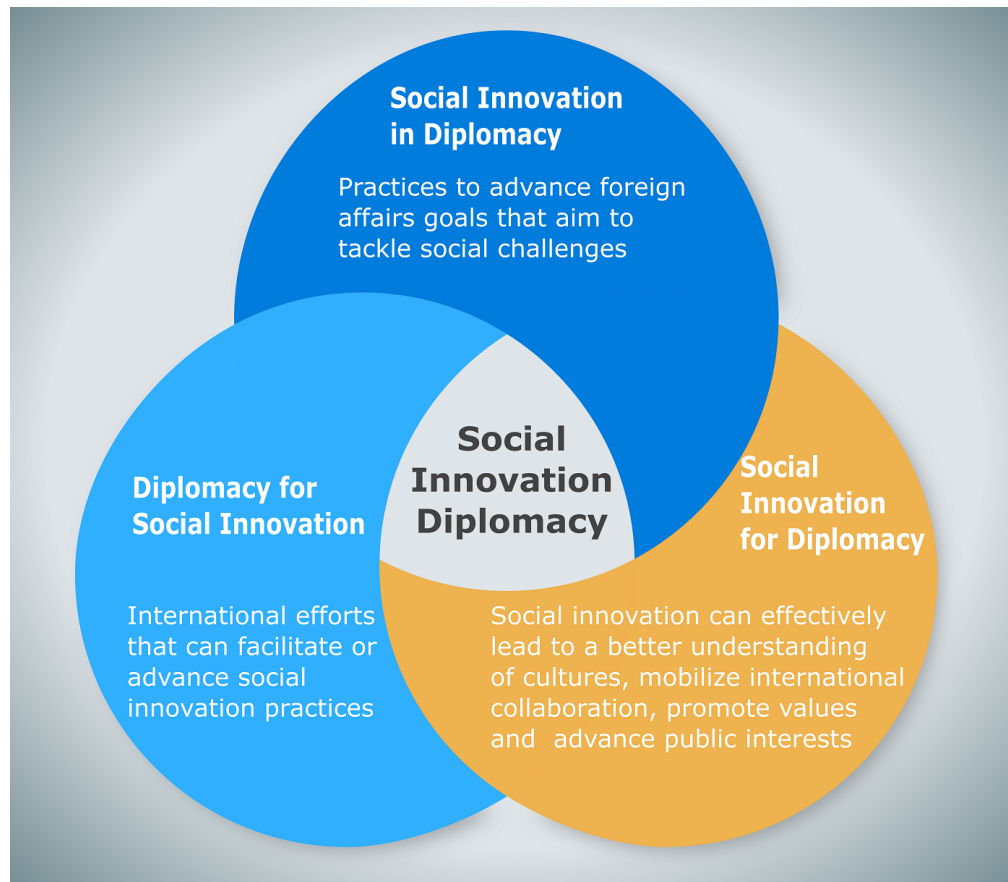

Figure 1. A definition of Social Innovation Diplomacy.

We advance our understanding and practice through "Shaping Horizons," which is an organization that developed an innovation methodology with the goal of igniting local entrepreneurial initiatives aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This innovation methodology is used as a vehicle for creating a network that advances the understanding of cultures and builds international collaboration.

Shaping Horizons' methodology could be considered an extension of hackathon initiatives which, in fact, have recently been considered a means for diplomacy (Ramadi, Srinivasan and Atun, 2019). The methodology consists of three stages that promote the generation and implementation

of social innovation projects. It starts with a digital pre-incubation stage that brings social innovators from multiple countries to together to work and reflect on a social problem that is common to all members in their team. To achieve this, the members of each team meet online, on a regular basis, to identify common social challenges and single out one to analyze in detail, which also includes mapping the actors directly involved and affected by it. The second stage is an in-person ideation in which the participants connect with other practitioners and mentors through sessions designed to ignite ideas. For the last stage, teams take part in online acceleration that begins with prototyping and engaging in business planning. Participants of different countries intent on implementing their initiatives in different location (i.e., innovation in multiple locations).

We identify the value of Shaping Horizons and its methodology using a value mapping tool (Bocken, Rana and Short, 2015). We present this analysis in Figure 2 to inform practice and research in the field of social innovation for diplomacy. We analyzed the value captured; how it affected the social innovators and traditional actors in international affairs; and the value missed out on, which we assume that the organization failed to capitalize on. Furthermore, we evaluated the value destroyed, which implies negative, indirect outcomes that may have resulted from the early implementation stages. We complement our value analysis by including concepts on how the methodology evolves into a consolidation stage (Busch and Barkema, 2019), with input from 27 participants.

Creation of Value
Identification of common social challenges and solutions
Social innovators have new interests and develop a network
Professional development and teamwork spirit
Better understanding of cultures and diversity
Novel multilateral work with traditional stakeholders

Missing Value
Standardized innovation method: tools and mentorship
Broadly-defined challenged: general solutions
Strategies for an active network: cultural exchange
Foreign affairs involvement: international collaboration

Destroying Value
Carbon footprint of travels

Figure 2. Value map for Shaping Horizons social innovation diplomacy

Shaping Horizons' methodology creates value aligned with innovation and international affairs. Teams must discuss challenges and ideas among diverse team members who may provide enriched views to formulate solutions (Hofstra et al, 2020). In order to define the common challenge and a potential solution, participants need to negotiate, advocate, and reach agreements with the other members, which effectively develops participants' soft "diplomatic" skills. They also gain teamwork experience and learn from other cultures, discussing the challenge in a professional setting using English as a lingua franca. This is an opportunity to immerse participants in new professional and knowledge-based interests.

Shaping Horizon's participants become part of a network that encourages interaction with actors from different backgrounds and places. This is an opportunity to engage in international affairs with traditional actors from governments and multilateral organizations. For example, some of the participants had the opportunity to interact with their embassies and discuss foreign affairs' matters, or, owing to newfound interest, others became involved in multilateral affairs by participating in a forum of the United Nations' Major Group for Children and Youth.

By doing a critical analysis, however, our map also shows the possibility of missed value. We recognize that systematizing an innovation methodology is important because it can help to accelerate innovation processes and simultaneously meet foreign affairs' objectives. Shaping Horizons' first cohort of participants used a methodology for social innovation and diplomacy that did not have a systematic approach. This proved an added challenge for ideating and implementing innovation, under a multiple location model across country borders.

A response has been to start systematizing the complete methodology by means of innovation tools that take into consideration the particularities of the program, including the digital and in-person ideation stages, as well as supporting the formation of diverse teams. Thinking about systematization of Shaping Horizon's methodology means looking to overcome generalizing solutions that do not fit local contexts, that are not failsafe, or that are myopic.

There is an opportunity to use standardized innovation methodologies and assess how they promote collaboration among countries. An example of a standardized innovation methodology also promoting multilateral collaboration is the UNDP's Accelerator Labs network which focuses on an innovation methodology consisting of exploration, solutions mapping, and experimentation phases. Restless Development is another example in which a recently improved innovation methodology supports the advancement of a youth innovation network operating locally, in 78 countries, and facilitates connectivity among them. Y-Combinator uses a standardized methodology to support start-ups and an entrepreneurial ecosystem that scales beyond countries.

We identified that the participants face difficulties in successful business planning and implementing their social innovation projects. Teams who were in the initial prototyping stages faced common challenges around balancing their projects with other full-time commitments; coordinating their work across geographical boundaries; and benefiting from the mentoring

program. For teams that advanced to implementing their innovations, we found that the different organizational practices and regulations of countries were an impediment. Therefore, it led to less activity within the network. We understand that supporting implementing strategies for building alliances and integrating missions (Moizer and Tracey, 2010), with local organizations in different sectors, can help to overcome such challenges. Hence, the innovation process should also consider a systematization that includes local cross-sectoral collaboration to support implementation (Becker and Smith, 2018).

The value map offers the opportunity to evaluate whether there are negative outcomes from innovation practices, in other words, whether value is destroyed. Shaping Horizons' in-person ideation stage brought together the first cohort of participants at the University of Cambridge. Shaping Horizons' organizing committee followed strict rules to minimize the carbon footprint of the in-person stage. Active recycling and sustainability measures were implemented. However, we do recognize that value was destroyed by not being able to compensate for the carbon footprint of all the travels to the in-person ideation stage.

Additionally, involving traditional foreign affairs actors is of key importance for the long-term perspectives of social innovation diplomacy. During the first two years of Shaping Horizons, for instance, there has been official involvement of foreign affairs' departments of the United Kingdom and some Latin American countries. However, we have noticed that engaging with international affairs through social innovation is an incipient practice and a challenging one. We consider that focusing initially on existing actors working in innovation diplomacy could be crucial to expand to other stakeholders that have not yet been involved with the concept. For instance, the Danish Office for Technology Diplomacy could be an entry point for social innovation diplomacy involving China, Denmark, and the United States. The science and technology division of embassies could also prove useful partners for establishing collaborations and bringing forward best practices.

Social innovation for diplomacy is currently and primarily driven by flourishing social innovation networks that act locally but have global connections. This emerging field is proving and will keep on proving critical for tackling the increasingly complex social challenges of our interconnected societies. It can further promote diverse actors to come together and build international collaboration in the process. We see a timely opportunity to explore this concept and bring its practice forward.

Author Biographies
Ana C. Aranda-Jan is a Teaching Associate at the Centre for Social Innovation at the Cambridge Judge Business School. Her research interests are an innovation in the public sector and public policy. She also studies models for organizing innovation. She is a Mentorship Officer at Shaping Horizons and has been in multiple roles, including as the Co-Director of the Shaping Horizons Mentorship Program in 2019.

Matias Acosta is a Fellow at Centre for Latin American Studies, University of Cambridge; and founder-CEO of Shaping Horizons, an initiative developed to foster social innovation diplomacy for sustainability. Matias has worked actively in materials and devices for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as sensors and energy devices, as well as in several projects at the interface between science, innovation, policy and diplomacy.

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