Addressing climate challenges through social innovations during turbulent times

Supervisors: Dr Aqueel Wahga, Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, Dr Francesca Calo, Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, and Prof Edoardo Ongaro, Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University Business School.

Project Description:

We are living with disruptive changes, such as Covid-19, that go beyond the health or economic realms and invest all the spheres of society. These changes are characterised by high levels of complexity, volatility in context, and unpredictable developments (Ansell & Trondal, 2018) and they will generate new inequalities and challenges that will need solutions and answers. Alongside these turbulent events, climate emergencies represent a future turbulent event that can impact our societies (COP26, 2021). For this reason, it is crucial to develop initiatives that can respond to the issues described above and tackle inequalities and the challenges deriving from profound societal changes (van Wijk et al., 2019). Among these initiatives, social innovation responses might provide a path to an alternative future leading to transformative societal and environmental changes (Montgomery & Mazzei, 2021).

Over the last decades, social innovation has been increasingly promoted in public policy debates as a vehicle for developing innovative and efficient solutions addressing societal needs (Sinclair & Baglioni, 2014). Social innovation has been presented as a distinctive and effective response to a welfare crisis (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012). Understood as a novel way of working that promotes collaborations between citizens, third sector organisations and public actors, and a platform that enhances the design and delivery of public services (Hubert, 2010), social innovation has been harnessed by policymakers around the globe. However, due to the novelty of the concept and the challenges associated with measuring it, empirical research evidencing the effectiveness of social innovation in addressing societal needs and environmental challenges is still scarce (Pel et al., 2020; Repo & Marschoss, 2019). This scarcity becomes even more relevant in the face of crises such as COVID-19 when for example, novel approaches to governance, such as social innovation, will be scrutinised to see if they are adequate to cope with high-impact threats (Dunlop et al., 2020). In a recent systematic literature review exploring whether and how social innovation initiatives worked, for whom and under what circumstances, Calo et al. (forthcoming, under review) propose five tentative high-level statements/propositions – in a middle-range theorising fashion – that may suggest how social innovation might work in future turbulent events. Middle-range theories are

theoretical propositions about causal tendencies, which help to understand what occurs inside the "black box" of social processes (Capano, Howlett, and Ramesh 2019).

This PhD project will aim to test and refine two of the middle-range theories through primary quantitative and qualitative data collection and explore if and how social innovation initiatives to address climate change work in turbulent times. **The first middle range theory** suggests that in "turbulent times, competing interests are solved or at least overcome and collaborative advantage is achieved by existing and new actors involved in social innovation, leading to increase service quality, innovation and transformative change" Calo et al. (forthcoming, under review). In addition to that, "the individual and organisational learning, acquired in facing turbulent events, reinforce the capability of stakeholders to address, through collaboration, future crisis". **The second middle range theory** instead suggests that in turbulent times "actors involved in social innovation may react to the challenges with a proactive dynamic, characterised by resilience, adaptation and resistance, leading to improvement of service quality, innovation in services and/or products" (Calo et al., forthcoming, under review)

The PhD student will analyse with primary data collection whether the collaborative advantage gained during turbulent times is sustained over the long term or whether social innovation actors will return to struggle to collaborate once turbulent events become the norm. Furthermore, the student might look at how the learning acquired impacts the capabilities of organisations (using for example dynamic capabilities framework) to collaborate and their entrepreneurial orientations. Proactivity will instead be examined by focusing on the characteristics of organisations and individuals that are initiators and drivers of social innovation or by exploring how resilience, adaption and resistance are combined and are interrelated as a bundle of mechanisms. The supervision team is flexible in considering any country context to execute this project as long as its relevance to the project is justified. The supervision team is flexible in considering any methods to execute this project, including qualitative and quantitative, as long as its relevance to the project is justified.

About the Supervisors:

Dr Aqueel Wahga's research interests are entrepreneurship, enterprise development, enterprise policy, innovation, sustainability, dynamic capabilities of firms, SMEs and entrepreneurial universities.

Dr Francesca Calo's research interests are social innovation, non-profit organisation, and impact evaluation.

Prof Edoardo Ongaro's research interests are public management, strategic management of public service organisations, comparative public administration, and foundational issues in the administrative sciences.

References:

Ansell, C., and Trondal J.. 2018. 'Governing Turbulence: An Organizational- Institutional Agenda'. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 1 (1): 43–57. https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvx013.

Calo, F., Scognamiglio F., Bellazzecca E., Ongaro E., 2022. 'Social Innovation during turbulent times: a realist-informed literature review and research agenda' (under review).

Capano, G., Howlett M., and Ramesh M. 2019. 'Disentangling the Mechanistic Chain for Better Policy Design'. *Making Policies Work*, March. https://www.elgaronline.com/view/edcoll/9781788118187/9781788118187.00008.xml.

Caulier-Grice, J., Davies A., Patrick R., and Norman W.. 2012. 'Defining Social Innovation'. The Young Foundation.

Dunlop, C. A, Ongaro E., Baker K. 2020. 'Researching COVID-19: A Research Agenda for Public Policy and Administration Scholars'. *Public Policy and Administration* 35 (4): 365–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076720939631.

Montgomery, T., Mazzei M. 2021. 'Two Paths of Social Innovation in the Post-Pandemic World'. *Social Enterprise Journal* 17 (3): 450–58. https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-03-2021-0018.

Pel, B., Haxeltine A., Avelino F., Dumitru A., Kemp R., Bauler ., Kunze K., Dorland J., Wittmayer J., and Søgaard Jørgensen M. 2020. 'Towards a Theory of Transformative Social Innovation: A Relational Framework and 12 Propositions'. Research Policy 49 (8): 104080. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2020.104080.

Sinclair, S, Baglioni S. 2014. 'Social Innovation and Social Policy – Promises and Risks'. *Social Policy and Society* 13 (3): 469–76. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746414000086.

van Wijk, J., Zietsma C., Dorado S., de Bakker D., and Martí I. 2019. 'Social Innovation: Integrating Micro, Meso, and Macro Level Insights From Institutional Theory'. *Business & Society* 58 (5): 887–918. https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318789104.