

Renewal and Resilience: the role of social innovation in building institutional resilience

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Society faces a number of ongoing and seemingly intractable problems – poverty, homelessness, environmental degradation, and disabilities among others – which governments and NGOs struggle to address. When efforts fail, it could be said that the system is caught in a trap, unable to respond to “chronic disasters” (Erikson, 1994) or immediate crises. On the other hand, social innovation, generally associated with creative initiatives on the part of one or many individuals, can at times transform such trapped systems. How and why does this happen? This abstract draws on a framework developed by a group of interdisciplinary scholars known as the Resilience Alliance (www.resalliance.org). This group, initially led and created by C.S. Holling focuses on linked social and ecological resilience, defined as follows:

Ecosystem resilience is the capacity of an ecosystem to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state that is controlled by a different set of processes. A resilient ecosystem can withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary. Resilience in social systems has the added capacity of humans to anticipate and plan for the future. “Resilience” as applied to ecosystems, or to integrated systems of people and the natural environment, has three defining characteristics:

- * *The amount of change the system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure*
- * *The degree to which the system is capable of self-organization*
- * *The ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation*

This definition of resilience relies on a particular model of ongoing and dynamic change, called the “adaptive cycle” and the introduction of novelty through “bricolage” and through cross scale interactions across all phases of this adaptive cycle (Gunderson, Light and Holling, 1995; Gunderson and Holling, 2002).

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This abstract will focus on social innovation as a particular dynamic that increases the resilience of social systems and institutions, through introducing and structuring novelty in apparently “trapped” or intransigent social problem areas. We define social innovation as:

A process of alteration of what is established by the introduction of new elements or forms (including new ideas, practices and policies, or resource flows). In particular the alteration of patterns of social action and engagement to allow for an improvement in or transformation of intransigent and broadly based social problems (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton, 2006).

We will first use the adaptive cycle to explore the particular phase specific dynamics of social innovation. We will then look at three cases – the introduction of new approaches to saving endangered species, the creation of the micro-credit and the Grameen Bank, and changing the institutional dynamics of the disability agenda in Canada. In each of these cases, we will focus on the role of the social/institutional entrepreneur, as a *manager of emergence*, someone capable of using the dynamics of complex systems to address intractable problems. In particular we will link their strategies to the management of cross scale dynamics (or “panarchy”). We will highlight the capacity of the social/institutional entrepreneur to a) manage meaning through the identification and clarification of social purpose and vision b) manage power dynamics both horizontal (“finding flow”) and vertical and c) managing the dynamics of both success and failure. We will conclude by linking our research on social innovation with the elements of the resilience index - comprehensibility, meaningfulness and manageability- and argue that the social/institutional entrepreneur enhances social system capacity for all three.

References

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