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## **Opening the black box of social innovation in migration governance**

Melissa Moralli<sup>a\*</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy*

[melissa.moralli2@unibo.it](mailto:melissa.moralli2@unibo.it)

Melissa Moralli, PhD, is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna. She was visiting scholar at CRISES (Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada), IPK (Institute for Public Knowledge, New York University, USA), CRISES Redefined (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) and Mesopolhis (Centre méditerranéen de sociologie, de science politique et d'histoire, triple tutelle d'Aix-Marseille Université, de Sciences Po Aix et du Centre national de la recherche scientifique). Her research interests are: social innovation, migration and sustainability. She is researcher in the project “Atlas of Transitions. New Geographies for a Cross-Cultural Europe”, where she co-curated the summer school “Performing Resistance. Dialogues on Arts, Migration and Inclusive Societies” and is currently researcher in the project “Welcoming Spaces. Revitalising Shrinking Areas by Hosting Non-Eu Migrants” and in the project “Network of Excellence on Regional Liveable Diversity” (Monash University, Australia). She is the PI of the International Research project “Visualising migration and local development in European non-urban contexts: an explorative research” (Utrecht University). She is the author of many articles, chapters and books on social innovation, migration and participatory methodologies. One of her last books is “Innovazione sociale. Pratiche e processi per ripensare le comunità” (“Social Innovation. Practices and Processes to Rethink Communities”), FrancoAngeli, Milan.

# **Opening the black box of social innovation in migration governance**

The aim of this paper is to investigate the role played by social innovation in challenging exclusion and marginality in relation to migration governance. Drawing on some reflections that have emerged from fieldwork, this contribution proposes an analytical framework that considers four interwoven dimensions: intercultural relations, social infrastructures, discourses and imaginaries and forms of participation. On the basis of these dimensions, social innovation can support and implement creative solutions that bring together civil society actors and local administrators. Although social innovations originate mainly at the level of civil society, we sustain that the study of socially innovative practices can be useful to explore the growing involvement of non-state actors in the governance of migration and their potentialities in terms of collective action.

Keywords: social innovation, migration, governance, narratives, social infrastructures, participation, collective action

## **Introduction: why migration should (not) be considered a socio-political problem**

Migration is part of our daily life. We perceive migration in the neighbourhoods of our cities through an increasing semantic territorialisation (Moralli 2016) that represents cultural diversity and sometimes results in the commodification of these forms of urban “otherness” (Rath 2007). But we also experience migration in rural areas, where the demographic decline that makes Europe an ever-shrinking proportion of the world population, at just 6.9% today (down from 13.5% in 1960), is partly countered by the presence of migrant families. Finally, migration is part of our daily life because it is a constant aspect of political and media discourses that sustain distorted representations of human mobility. Such distorted images depict migration as a crisis, a conjunctural phenomenon that must be carefully managed and, ideally, stopped. Thus, in the European political debate, the inflows of refugees and asylum seekers have been often described as a challenge on a catastrophic scale and as a threat (Balibar 2003), as evidenced by the number of journalistic and scientific articles where migration is associated with the term “crisis”. As Archibugi, Cellini and Vitiello (2019) report, the topic received almost no attention until 2014. From 2015, the interest increased significantly, declining only slightly from 2017 onwards for journalistic articles and from 2019 onwards for scientific articles. Nevertheless, from the very beginning of human existence, humankind has had both the reason and the means to travel from one place to another (Castles and Miller

2009), notably as part of the need to adapt to different social and physical environments (Bacci 2010).

Although the “migrant crisis” is constructed in its historical and social essence, its consequences are real. Dehumanising migrants and asylum seekers, these narratives legitimise unequal power relations associated with the right to move and mask unjust and hegemonic treatments (Goodman, Sirriyeh, and McMahon 2017). New forms of poverty, exclusion, social desegregation and gender inequalities are emerging all around the world as a consequence of regimes of mobility (in)justice (Sheller 2018). Negative portrayals of migration influence public opinion (Ruhs, Tamas, and Palme 2019), as the gap between perceptions of the number of migrants in a country and the actual number shows. A recent Eurobarometer survey, for example, explained how 68% of respondents overestimate the real share of immigrants in the population<sup>1</sup>. Thus, information itself becomes a battlefield in the Mediterranean region (Musarò 2017), being intricately interrelated with a political dimension.

Distorted representations of migration have generated a “moral panic” (Stanley 1973), which has been concretised in hate speech and in a series of direct and violent attacks on “newcomers” and hate speech (ECRI 2019). This fear of “the other” gradually transforms into a “fobocracy” (Di Cesare 2019), intended as the power exercised through the domination of fear, generated by the idea of “strangers at our door” (Bauman 2016). Fear becomes a phenomenon exploited by European political leaders, from Hungary to Poland and populist parties in Italy, France and Austria. Such parties and movements, sometimes xenophobic, formulate their political debate by riding the wave of general discontent arising from the negative effects of economic globalisation and distrust of the so-called establishment. In so doing, they fuel hatred for others and profit from fears in the name of a (socially constructed) national identity. Austria’s proposal to build a wall at the Brenner border in 2016 was only one such concretisation of this trend, recently confirmed by Emmanuel Macron’s move to tighten Italian border controls following the 2020 terrorist attacks in Nice. Beyond national borders, “Fortress Europe” has invested massively in border controls and concluded bilateral agreements for the externalisation of borders (e.g., the EU–Turkey agreement in March 2016, the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya in February 2017, ratified in 2020 and the Italian-Tunisia Memorandum signed the first time in 2021). The “migration crisis”, instrumentally amplified by those who politically benefit from it, feeds on and reinforces the fears of citizens and presumes to provide simple (static) and exclusive answers (Kymlicka 2016). Hence, migration becomes a “weapon of mass distraction” for political leaders with respect to other issues and to protect particular interests (Scavo, intervention during the seminar “Verità Scmode”, 21 November 2020)

In light of these facts, can migration be considered a social and political problem to be solved? The answer is both yes and no. Migration cannot be considered a contemporary social problem because it is a historically permanent socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental phenomenon that mutates with society and influences it. However, by being narrated as a problem to be solved, migration becomes a problem itself. Hence, the European political agenda should find new solutions that go beyond the vision of solidarity defined only in terms of “migration quotas” to be split among member states, as the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum showed, instead embracing a vision of “egalitarian reciprocity” (Benhabib 1992). On an international level, this could entail what Wihtol de Wenden (2013) defines an “international migration governance”, which would reconcile “important and typically contradictory goals and interests, such as those

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<sup>1</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/special-eurobarometer-integration-immigrants-european-union\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/special-eurobarometer-integration-immigrants-european-union_en).

of countries of origin and destination, businesses/corporations, unions, churches, IGOs and NGOs, migrant and human rights associations and the fears of public opinion” (Wihtol de Wenden 2013, 85-86).

On a regional and local level, this means considering how local processes and dynamics can influence and are influenced by migration. It is precisely at the regional and local level that social innovation can have the most potential when intervening in the field of migration. In particular, I argue that social innovation (SI) should be considered a transformative process and practice that can positively impact the social inequalities and marginality that pervade the phenomenon of migration (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019) by identifying innovative and creative solutions that bring together civil society actors and local administrators.

Accordingly, in the first part of this paper, I will propose a specific conceptualisation of SI consisting of processes and practices of empowerment and the direct participation of marginal groups, often adopting unconventional and creative strategies for collective action. In the second part of the paper, some initiatives of social innovation encountered in different research projects will be analysed. In particular, my analytical proposal will critically reflect upon how SI can play a role at four different levels when engaging with migration: the field of narratives and representations, the relational aspects, the spatial dimensions and the participatory dynamics. Drawing upon this analysis, I will propose how policies should consider SI when thinking about migration governance at the local level. At the same time, it is crucial that such policies challenge any abdication of accountability of public actors in the face of these new forms of collective action and avoid a functional perspective to collaborative initiatives.

## **Disentangling social innovation**

SI is not a universally defined concept. Indeed, far from being a “quasi-concept” (Jenson and Harrison 2013), it can be studied by means of different approaches. The approach that focuses on culture and creativity, for example, describes SI as the ability to achieve certain common goals through creative tools (André, Brito, and Malheiros 2009). Although SI can be looked at from other viewpoints, from social economy to social movements (Moulaert *et al.* 2013), the approach adopted within this contribution is that of governance (Lévesque 2014), which is centred on the paradigmatic shift towards more sustainable models of development capable to engage different stakeholders. This approach particularly focuses on critiquing the hierarchical nature of bureaucratic and decision-making systems (Jessop *et al.* 2013), to support a broader vision of governance, including a variety of actors. According to this perspective, SIs would be connected not only to the democratisation of decision-making processes but also to a streamlining of the bureaucratic system aimed at their dissemination and implementation (Swyngedow 2005). The potential of social innovation to guide governance studies, therefore, concerns the broadening of the sphere of actors participating in decision-making processes and the development of services, framed as “co-production”. This term refers to the broadening of the creation of social and welfare services to their beneficiaries so that they respond more efficiently and effectively to emerging social problems (Campomori and Casula, 2022). This widening of decision-making with respect to the actors involved, however, should not lead to a decrease in the accountability of public actors. On the contrary, the role of the state should be that of an enabler of participatory political processes, within which the third sector, and civil society organisations in general, can also intervene

(Cheng, 2019). Fraser (2007) introduces in this regard the category of “representation”. For the author, representation coincides with “participatory equality”, which the philosopher describes as the right of citizens to participate in public discussion, referred to as “normative legitimacy”, and the ability of the public sector to actually consider the will of civil society, called “political efficiency”. Therefore, “the relationships between governance and SI reveal the potential of consolidated SI initiatives to scale up their ‘organizational structure’ as well as implement a hybrid governance model” (Galego *et al.* 2022, 281).

However, to understand which actors can intervene in these new governance models enabled by social innovation, it is important to consider the presence of two theoretical approaches to social innovation. Understanding these two approaches is important because they refer to two different ways of conceiving social innovation. Moreover, the actors involved and SI effects on society also change (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019). The first tradition is more entrepreneurial, while the second one focuses on empowerment and collective movements.

The first tradition finds its theoretical origins in Schumpeter’s work (1911) on economic development. In his theoretical proposal, the Austrian economist argued that social innovations were “new combinations” facilitated by creative entrepreneurs, capable of leading to socio-economic changes. His approach led to the strand of studies concerning management sciences and social entrepreneurship that analyses SI in terms of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of businesses and the third sector, mainly through improvements at an organisational level (Jessop *et al.* 2013). In this case, the “changemakers”, one of the neologisms introduced by this approach, are creative entrepreneurs who propose useful solutions to social problems, supporting collaboration between the private sector, social economy and public sphere with a view to raising the standards and quality of companies or social enterprises. In international research, such initiatives are explored in particular by the Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR), which analyses SI in philanthropic and third-sector organisations. The SSIR defines SI as “a new solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable or fair than an existing solution and whose value primarily enriches society as a whole rather than individuals” (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008, 36).

The second tradition conceives SI as processes and practices that aim to support a more equitable and democratically inclusive world. In this sense, SI nurtures empowerment and the direct participation of marginal groups, which could lead to broader processes of social transformation, both at the relational (micro) and systemic (macro) levels - although this happens more rarely. The origin of this second perspective dates back to the 1980s, when Chambon, David and Devevey (1982) conceptualised SI as a process arising from civil society, moving beyond the vision of Schumpeter, who previously described social innovations as new combinations in economic systems. Chambon and colleagues (1982, 29) suggested that “a distinction must be made between social innovation conceived as a particular practice and social innovation as social change, and therefore called upon to be a model for action”. According to this perspective, SI would be closely linked to the social transformations that characterised the 20th century – including the transformations that affected households, the relationship between urban and rural areas, and the expansion of the market economy. According to this second approach, “when we talk about social innovation, we are referring to a type of innovation that improves society – in terms of equity, inclusion, and opportunity, among other things – rather than only that which accelerates economic growth, productivity, and profit” (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019, 11). Thanks to this new vision, therefore, SI has finally shaken free from the constraint of being linked to the achievement of organisational and economic

efficiency and effectiveness, to become a concept that refers generally to more equitable, sustainable and inclusive social changes and policies.

In this paper, I have chosen to focus on this second approach, which is closer to the role of SI in combating exclusion and marginality, as discussed by several scholars (Godin 2012). According to this approach, SI can be defined as “a service, a product, a process, a way of acting that comes from below on a local basis and is spread collectively, in order to produce benefits for society and the territory where it is generated. Such actions arise from the need to respond to an emerging or not yet satisfied problem, and presupposes a shared cultural horizon, which is expressed through the creative capacity of the subjects participating in it” (Moralli 2019, 35). Hence, SI can represent a process of collective action and mobilisation. This process is explained by Klein (2014) when he speaks of the direct participation of civil society resulting from instances driven by collective aspirations and from shared learning processes, which transform collective action into outright mobilisation for social change. Such change draws its power from collective processes (of learning and mobilisation) but needs to be recognised, over time, through enabling local and national policies which support the creative capacities of local communities.

Drawing on these reflections, I argue that SI does not necessarily refer to new ways of solving social problems, but to transformative processes and practices that, thanks to the creative capacity of social actors, act through the relational-participative dimension and support empowerment while remedying social inequalities and conditions of marginality. As a consequence, the acknowledgement of the transformative power of social innovation also means understanding how it could be supported by adequate institutional strategies and policies.

## **Social innovation for migration governance and its implications**

### ***Methodological note***

The reflections contained in this paper are the result of diverse research activities carried out at different times. In particular, the theoretical framework was developed during my PhD research conducted in 2014–2017 at XX and a visiting research conducted at XX at the XX. The first part of the study consisted of a theoretical investigation of the concept of SI, its origins, embedded in both economic and social studies, and its main characteristics. The aim was to dismiss the idea of SI as a “buzzword” or “quasi-concept” (Jenson and Harrison 2013), in order to better understand the reasons why SI should matter in contemporary social sciences. The second part of the research was an empirical study on the relationship between SI and local development in the city of Bologna, Italy, with a particular focus on the valorisation of local resources and social relations. During the research, many of the initiatives of SI I studied were linked to migration and inspired some of the reflections contained in this paper. In particular, the initiatives that have been investigated concern associations, NGOs and other civil society organisations working in Bologna on various issues, from urban regeneration to cultural production. Some examples include Next Generation Italy, an association which promotes interculturality through cultural events and digital knowledge, or the Festival IT.A.CA’ on the intersections between tourism and migration as forms of mobility justice. Another source

of data and inspiration was an ethnographic research (2013–2014 and 2014–2015) I conducted on a specific initiative of SI in the field of migration, called “Migrantour”, which consisted of urban itineraries in ethnic neighbourhoods accompanied by migrant guides. The 25 semi-structured interviews and the 10 participant observations threw up a series of thoughts about four examples of Migrantour itineraries in Milan, Turin, Florence and Bologna<sup>2</sup>, in relation to the role of responsible tourism as a vehicle for fostering social, economic and cultural equality and interculturality. These two studies were therefore very useful both for drawing my attention to SI as a transversal concept through which to observe these practices and as a first collection of original data to be analysed through the lens of social innovation. Other data come from my participation in two international research projects in the field of migration where I conducted ethnographic research. The first project, XX, focused on the relationship between performing arts and migration and on the role played by cultural organisations in promoting urban conviviality. The second project studied the connection between migration and local sustainable development of European shrinking areas, with a focus on innovative reception initiatives.

Accordingly, this paper draws upon the analysis of qualitative data collected during participant observations and interviews (with project coordinators, social workers, artists, and citizens) related to 35 different initiatives of SI, which were migrant-led or included migrants as participants/beneficiaries. Among these initiatives, nine were developed in the field of culture, creativity and arts, nine in tourism and mobility, seven in social and economic integration, six in environment/environmental sustainability and four in the field of media and communication.

### ***The intersections between social innovation and migration: an analytical proposal***

The SI approach can represent an interesting perspective for understanding the ways in which both civil and institutional actors mobilise different types of resources to play a part in tackling social injustice and marginality, which often affect the dynamics of migration. But what are the main processes that characterise social innovation? Moolaert *et al.* (2013; 2019) identify three major dynamics: 1) SI responds to needs hitherto unanswered by the state and/or the market or to emerging needs; 2) SI creates new forms of relationships; 3) SI encourages individual and collective agency and processes of empowerment.

Although this definition allows us to reflect on the objectives of SI and its consequences on a relational level, it seems only partially able to explain the spaces and cultural horizons within which it acts, as well as its political consequences on a collective level. Indeed, it is clear that SI emerges from collectively perceived unanswered needs and that the relational dimension is crucial. Explaining the importance of social relations developed on a local basis, Klein (2014), for example, suggests that social innovations emerge from a collective consciousness that originates on a local scale and promotes change through institutional and organisational effects. What are the conditions that allow

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews engaged migrant people who developed and planned the Migrantour initiative in the four cities, as well as with local associations and the citizens living in the neighbourhoods where the tours take place. The participant observations were conducted during the activities connected to the Migrantour initiative.

SI to spread? And what role do the political, spatial and cultural dimensions play in these processes? Finally, albeit it is clear that SI arises from the agency of individuals and groups, sometimes supporting processes of empowerment, little is known about the participatory processes that structure these dynamics and the consequences on a broader political level. It follows that these three criteria of analysis, if not integrated with other dimensions, fail to take into account the preconditions (e.g., institutional, spatial and cultural) that facilitate social relations and processes of empowerment, as well as their wider societal effects.

Hence, in order to understand the role played by SI in migration governance, I propose to enrich this analytical framework with four other categories, as shown in Fig.1, namely 1) discourses and cultural imaginaries; 2) social infrastructures and emplacement; 3) intercultural relations; 4) participatory and political practices.

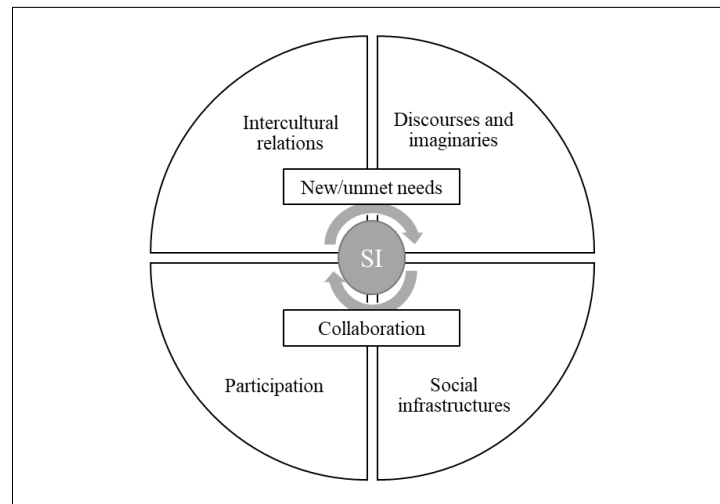


Figure 1. An analytical framework for SI in migration, author’s elaboration.

### *Discourses and imaginaries*

This category concerns the cultural/discursive dimension of SI, and in particular those “preconditions that give shape and content to ‘thinking’ and ‘saying’ that orient and justify practices” (Kemmis 2009, 467). Therefore, it refers to the ways in which narratives and representations developed around these practices can change through processes of SI. In the first part of this section, I explained how the representations on migration contribute to frame it as a political problem to be solved, often avoiding any forms of reflection on the geopolitical and economic aspects that contribute to human mobility. Migrants are dehumanised and presented under the same conceptual umbrella that simplifies the complexity of the migration phenomenon for a wider audience. Words such as “invasion”, “migratory crisis”, “*sans-papiers*” thus erase the plurality of personal paths and motivations that lead hundreds of thousands of people to leave their country to try to reach a (not always) welcoming Europe.

By recognising that narratives are instrumental for organising human cognition (Boland and Tenkasi 1995), and that representations have a performative role (Brown 2006), SI can intervene in “the ways in which a given social phenomenon or practice is perceived and represented” (Wittmayer *et al.* 2015, 2). In this regard, Avelino *et al.*’s

(2017) suggest the need to adopt a distinction between two types of “narratives of change”. The first type refers to those narratives that actors construct to make meaning of specific phenomena. The second type concerns, in a more general sense, those narratives that are capable of challenging dominant frames and rhetorics, producing new representations of social phenomena. In this sense, one of the modes of action of SI is to struggle “against pre-existing cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power they convey” (Davies 2012, 25), stimulating counter-narratives.

In the last decades, many projects were developed to fight against these distorted representations of migration, often through the direct involvement of migrants and asylum seekers. #CiakMigrACTION, for example, is a European project co-financed by the European Union’s Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), which aims to promulgate a balanced and less stereotyped narrative of migration, in order to counteract the increase in manifestations of hatred, intolerance and fear of diversity. Sustaining the voice of young people and migrants, and engaging journalists and institutions, #CiakMigrACTION builds just information on migration with the aim of challenging prejudices and promoting coexistence. Another interesting project financed by the AMIF is MAX , which aims to change public attitudes towards migrants through training for journalists and the diffusion of success stories about migrants’ outstanding achievements and contributions to European society, economy and culture.

Socially innovative projects from the grassroots have also arisen in these last decades. These projects were directly created by migrants and asylum seekers to challenge conventional imaginaries on migration and promote empowerment in the sense of improving their power “over the discourse”. As van Dijk (1993, 257) suggests, discourse control is not merely a form of social action but also and primarily, it implies the conditions of control over the minds of other people, that is, the management of social representations. An example is “Are you Syrious”, a grassroots movement which broadcasts daily news directly from the field, mainly for volunteers and refugees on the route, but also for journalists and other parties. The collective’s mission is to spread updated news about the Balkan route (weather conditions, border closures, departing trains etc.) but also asylum and reception updates from EU countries on social media. Another interesting project is proposed by the AMAD association (Associazione Multietnica Antirazzista Donne) in collaboration with 17 refugee women, to work at the level of news-making in local Italian television, creating a talk show based on stories about the individual experiences of refugees and debate with representatives of the local community, journalists and experts in the field of migration.

Such initiatives have contributed to presenting counterhegemonic imaginaries on migration through different cultural and communicative devices. Hence, looking beyond the interpretive mechanics typical of everyday practices and working at the level of the imaginary, these projects are not limited to the representative sphere of migration. As “socio-narrative representations”, a term proposed by Di Fraia (2004), they can shape our vision of the world, becoming a transformative tool to affirm new perspectives that come from those who usually do not have the right to express their *voice* (Couldry 2010). A similar idea is endorsed by Castoriadis’s “theory of the imaginary” (1997), which argues that imaginative processes and reality are deeply interconnected. The narrative dimension, therefore, is not only crystallised on a symbolic and cognitive level but becomes also a transformative agent, capable of affecting everyday practices and playing a part in meeting those needs that have driven the development of SI itself (Taylor 2003). However, while recognising the transformative potential of these imagery-transforming initiatives, many of them only have an effect on a small scale, while others struggle to intercept audiences not already engaged in the topic. It is therefore important that their

importance and transformative potential be recognised at the policy and governance level in order to amplify their social outreach (Kawashima, 2006).

### *Intercultural relations*

As illustrated above, Moulaert *et al.* (2013) identify collaboration between different social actors and the reconfiguration of relations as two crucial points of SI. Since it promotes novel collaborations between people and groups, SI can therefore lead to the development of new forms of trust and social capital, the latter being one of the most relevant aspects of SI. Even in cases where it is created by an individual, SI must be shared by the local community in order to be spread and institutionalised. Thus, “social innovation strategies that are governed by a democratic approach can allow the constitution of social, cultural and economic forms of capital” (Hillier, Moulaert, and Nussbaumer 2004, 151). It is exactly by drawing on these forms of capital that they can generate an influence on policies (Klein 2014) This vision frames SI as a form of enhancement for social cohesion, since, in this case, social capital makes it possible to rebuild ties that have been damaged by neoliberal policies. Indeed, as Vicari and Moulaert (2009) explain, through the encouragement of stable and constant interaction between local actors, SI can facilitate social cohesion by breaking down the motivations behind exclusion. In this context, SI can improve relations between “privileged” and “marginal” groups, create channels of intercultural dialogue and improve the social and sometimes the professional role of individuals.

The intercultural approach to social relations is crucial here (Pöllmann 2014), as it enables both a multicultural approach and a vision based on the concept of “integration” to be dispensed with. First, the choice of the term “intercultural” instead of “multicultural” helps to correct a vision of cultures as homogeneous aggregations in favour of a more dynamic vision. One of the errors of the multicultural perspective is precisely that it places the emphasis once again on differences, rather than on the fact that each culture is already multicultural in itself. This kind of approach tends to risk limiting individual processes of social mobility, promoting division and estrangement. Second, as Çağlar suggests (2016, 7) “framing migrants through an integration perspective means situating migrants in time in a particular way. Integration refers to a linear and a sequential process, in which migrants are expected to ‘uproot’ themselves from their ‘home countries’ in time and integrate themselves into the countries of settlement.” Hence, integration policies and theories often operate with a normative understanding of the future. By contrast, weighing the relational dimension in intercultural terms allows attention to be focused on the dimension of relationship – as suggested by the use of the prefix “inter”, which implies to rely on dynamics of reciprocity, negotiation and exchange. According to this perspective, differences are reframed and considered beyond the hegemonic practices that essentialise differences (Yildiz 2010). The paradigm of interculturalism describes interpersonal contact as a tool for nurturing a stronger sense of belonging (Meer, and Modood 2016; Zapata-Barrero 2017). By supporting the creation of social capital, SI practices enhance an intercultural-based perspective, expanding the possibilities of exchange and relationships. One example is the Atlas of Transition project, which investigated the potential of the performing arts in creating new spaces for urban conviviality. Despite the fact that the performances and shows realised were transitory, the creation of lasting social ties over time between people with different backgrounds,

genders and ages through the performing practice made it possible to go beyond the ephemerality of the project (Moralli 2020).

### *Social infrastructures*

For innovation to be able to respond collectively to an existing or emerging problem, the intention to stimulate intercultural relations is not enough. Social relations, in fact, are not to be considered as the result of a collaboration that takes place in a neutral and abstract space but they are closely linked to the context in which they are created.

In this sense, some authors have introduced the concepts of *path-dependency* and *path-building* (Fontan *et al.* 2008). The first indicates that social innovations are rooted in a given territorial context and are bounded by it. The latter refers to the possibility for local actors to find and use local resources to build innovative paths in a specific context. The context of SI, therefore, presents itself as a set of opportunities and limits. There are various types of enabling contextual elements that can enhance social innovation. Some examples are bridging social capital, the presence of an institutional context favourable to participatory dynamics, a long tradition of political contestation, social cohesion, and the presence of entrepreneurial know-how. Similarly, limits can also be of various kinds, for example relational – the creation of exclusionary social capital, poor social integration or gender inequality; economic – the lack of financial resources that can influence the development of innovation; or political – such as misunderstanding the scope of innovation or lobbying interests (Alberio 2016). In my research about social innovations in the city of Bologna, for example, I explained how specific characteristics of the local and regional context – the presence of a number of social cooperatives, the geographical centrality, a political asset based on participation, a specific entrepreneurial environment, etc. – have supported the creation and diffusion of different types of SI, some of them in the field of migration (Moralli 2019)

Second, SI is related to the spatial dimension also in terms of particular social practices. Here, the concept of *social infrastructure* can be useful to emphasise how specific spaces can facilitate forms of sociality. In short, social infrastructure refers to the networks of spaces, structures, institutions and groups that create opportunities for socialisation (Latham and Layton 2019). Social infrastructures can lead to the amplification of connections within groups, as well as openness to cultural systems perceived as different (Blommaert 2014). In developing the term social infrastructure, for example, Kleinenberg (2018) draws both on Putnam's (2000) concept of "civicness" and Oldenberg's (1989) concept of "socially inclusive spaces", which are useful in facilitating trust and a sense of belonging to a community. Among the various projects analysed in my research, the case of the theatre collective Cantieri Meticci (Bologna) is an interesting example, from the point of view both of the originality with which the theme of intercultural encounters is addressed and of how the space is involved in the artistic production process. This socially innovative practice supports the idea of theatre as a space to promote social and political change. The creation of workshops and performances is largely based on the importance of dialogue and interaction between audiences and performers, thus rebuilding a sense of community and amplifying the voices of migrants and asylum seekers. By organising performing workshops and spectacles in the centre as well as in the periphery of the city of Bologna, Cantieri Meticci invites inhabitants to explore the city from the point of view of "new citizens", making the public space more open to intercultural dialogue. Moreover, the artistic collective regenerated an abandoned former warehouse on the outskirts of the city, thus helping to

offer opportunities for socialisation in a marginal neighbourhood. The warehouse now hosts exhibitions, shows, intercultural evenings and concerts.

### *Participation(s)*

The last category of analysis that I propose is that of participatory and creative practices intended as forms of participation. This category draws on the observation that, in contemporary societies, the role of great ideological narratives typical of early modernity is weakening in favour of new modes of political participation. In this sense, SI often supports forms of participation that no longer are available only through traditional party affiliation or delegation to leaders of political organisations, but in less conventional ways, as suggested by Beck (1997), with the concept of “subpolitics”, or by Holzer and Sørensen (2003), with the term “active subpolitics”. Accordingly, since SI promotes collective action, it can become a device to support new forms of participation, which Bennett (2003) defines as “self-determined”, which permeate society thanks to relational capital and a network structure aimed at community action (e.g., local activism, critical consumption, attention to social justice and sustainable lifestyles). It is within such a context that policies can intervene to support social innovations intended as a form of collective action and alternative political participation.

In this sense, the Migrantour network, developed in different European cities by local associations and cooperatives, represents a good example of migrants and asylum seekers being enabled to participate in the urban public sphere. The network includes different subjects (e.g., tour operators, NGOs, associations, individuals) that work to develop and promote responsible tourism in ethnic neighbourhoods through urban walks, which offer moments of dialogue and intercultural exchange (e.g., eating together, sharing experiences, trading stories of different traditions). Albeit such urban itineraries existed at the beginning of the last century, as shown by the “touristification” of different Chinatowns all over the world (Rath 2007), the Migrantour initiative tries to escape the commodification of ethnic neighbourhoods by directly engaging migrant communities (Musarò, Moralli 2021). The migrant guides are not only trained and paid professionals who accompany tourist groups, but they are also involved in the mapping of local resources and the organisation and structuring of urban itineraries, becoming cultural mediators between local associations and entrepreneurs from the neighbourhood. Thus, Migrantour represents an experience that supports cultural participation (Paltrinieri *et al.* 2020) and triggers a process of individual enrichment and empowerment (Friedmann 1992). The project generated among the participants a high degree of satisfaction, autonomy and involvement in the project, thanks to the constant relationship with a flexible, changing context, where cultural diversity is valued and not stigmatised. Participation in this cultural activity thus opened a new window of possibilities to resist, rework and disrupt the lines between “possible” and “impossible” citizens (Vora 2013).

By encouraging alternative forms of participation, SI can therefore enhance individual and collective agency (Appadurai 2004), both through creative modalities and by enabling social capital (Granovetter 1973) and the creation of networks. Furthermore, it can generate processes of dynamic negotiation, working towards redefining the norms and values at the root of exclusion and supporting migrants’ voices (Couldry 2010). In this sense, SI can support unconventional forms of political “recognition” and “normative legitimacy” (Fraser and Honneth 2004). In other terms, social innovation can play a role

both in the dynamics of mutual understanding of individual and collective differences and in access to participation in public discussion.

### **Conclusion: new pathways for migration governance through social innovation?**

This paper illustrates how SI can counter situations of vulnerability, promote access to decent work, support forms of social and cultural participation and facilitate collaborative actions that valorise cultural diversity and challenge stigmatising narratives on migration. The first part of this contribution problematises migration as an emerging social problem, and introduces a theoretical and analytical conceptualisation of SI. In the second part of the paper introduces the dynamics through which collective action can contribute to combating social exclusion and the representational distortion of migrants within European societies. In this sense, SI sustains *emplacement*, which can be defined as the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific context (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013), using different types of resources (relational, spatial, cultural, etc.). In particular, SI is able to act on four levels, which are inevitably interconnected, namely the relational, narrative, spatial and participatory dimensions. This underlines the importance of the role of civil society in stimulating, supporting and implementing emplacement and the inclusion of migrants and asylum seekers, opening innovative spaces for policymakers to sustain the mechanisms of SI. From a symbolic/cultural point of view, social innovation can stimulate new frames on the migration phenomenon, counteracting the widespread stigmatisation and dehumanisation of migrants carried out by the mainstream media and political discourses. By intervening in the narrative dimension, some initiatives are able to promote alternative perspectives on migration through artistic (e.g., CiakMigration, Amad) and media (e.g., Are you Syrious, Max) production. From a social and spatial point of view, moreover, this kind of innovation can stimulate the creation of relational spaces capable of enhancing connections between people with different backgrounds. It thus activates unconventional spaces of urban conviviality, based on the exchange of everyday practices and interaction, capable of lasting in the long term, as in the case of Atlas of Transition or Cantieri Meticci. Finally, from the perspective of participation, social innovation can support the creation of different spaces of expression for migrant people, who often cannot access traditional forms of political participation. This type of participation passes, as in the case of the Migrantour network, through forms of recognition as legitimate citizens and devices for expressing migrants' voices on an individual but also collective level.

These levels are interconnected because, for example, SI cannot sustain the creation of social capital without the configuration of social infrastructures that create relational spaces. At the same time, access to alternative forms of political participation supports, at least symbolically, different imaginaries of the migration phenomenon.

Taking into account the added value that IS can bring with respect to a phenomenon as controversial as inevitable as migration, therefore, public institutions should re-frame governance processes with respect to two aspects.

First, it would be crucial to broadening decision-making processes based on processes of co-production of services and public policies with those civil society actors

that are already moving to counter the mechanisms of social exclusion that affect migrant people. The interconnections between grassroots and civil society actions together with the support of administrators and policymakers have been studied in terms of *bottom-linked governance* (Garcia, Pradel, and Eizaguirre 2013), combining grassroots resources with institutional support. This theme leads back to the concept of governance in migration studies: “the dynamics between social innovation and governance are twofold. Firstly, the development of socially innovative practices influences governance through the creation of new mechanisms for the provision of resources, the creation of new collective actors and the influence exercised by actors on formal mechanisms of decision-making. (...) Secondly, governance structures and dynamics have an influence on the capacity of different actors to develop socially innovative practices” (Garcia, Pradel, and Eizaguirre, 2013, 155). Concerning the first point, social innovation can enhance flexible governance of migration by supporting forms of co-production of services and co-construction of local policies (Klein 2014). The latter concerns the direct participation of social actors and the elaboration of public policies, while the former refers to the creation and implementation of services at the level of organisations.

Second, once decision-making processes have been extended to actors who are working in the field of SI and migration, public institutions could act as facilitators and enablers of the social impacts created by SI. Some examples could be the increase of funding possibilities for projects that intervene in the mainstream media to counter hate speech and media distortion on migration. Another example could be to broaden forms of listening to migrants in local policy-making. Another important point concerns the support of urban regeneration projects that take into account the right to the city of both longer residents and newcomers, starting from the experimentations that have already been made by innovative projects.

However, while highlighting the positivity of a plural public space, as well as the potentialities of political recognition of the role of migrants and asylum seekers beyond traditional forms of political participation – to which they do not always have access – policymakers dealing with SIs should not underestimate some critical issues. Swyngedouw (2005), for example, lists some of the potential limitations of SI at the level of public governance, defining it as “Janus-face”. Among the main criticisms, the author mentions the tendency to always include the same actors in the participatory process, with the possibility of creating new marginalities. Furthermore, he illustrates the risks of abdication of accountability by the public actor. Indeed, the opening up of decision-making processes to civil society actors should not be matched by a gradual disengagement of the public component and a progressive privatisation of social services (Baker and Mehmood 2013). In order to overcome these critical issues – on the one hand, the risk of abdication of accountability by the public actor, and on the other a functionalistic perspective to collaborative dynamics – policies should propose new and original modalities of support to collective action and SIs. Some examples could be the financial support for the regeneration of disused spaces, in cities as well as in suburbs, specific rewards for cultural and social activities proposed by civil society, transparency and access to these policies for the whole community (e.g. the translation of legal and administrative documents into different languages), the implementation of platforms for labour demand/supply, also facilitating the use of digital tools, the fight against labour exploitation and the support of networking activities for migrant-led initiatives.

To move the debate forward concerning the role of SI in migration governance, future research could explore further insights drawn by combining the growing body of work on social innovation with work that explicitly focuses on the increasing involvement of non-state actors in the management of migration and diverse cities. Moreover, it could also

investigate the specificities of migration policies on one hand, and migrants' participation in public life on the other, especially in those countries with migration backgrounds and diverse ways of regulating mobility.

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