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# From Impact to Quality: Towards an Integrated Framework for Assessing Social Innovations Across Organizational Contexts

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**Abstract:** While social innovation is increasingly recognized as a driver of sustainable development and systemic transformation, existing evaluation approaches remain fragmented and largely technocentric, limiting their practical applicability. To address this gap, the study applies a design science research approach, consisting of systematic literature reviews and qualitative content analysis to identify and consolidate more than 400 variables into a validated set of 100 quality criteria. The framework is structured along four interrelated dimensions: delineation, impact, process, and maturity. It enables a differentiated understanding of social innovations by capturing their characteristics, societal value creation, development processes, and levels of institutionalization. The framework improves transparency, comparability, and strategic decision-making. Validation through expert interviews and case applications demonstrates the tool's usefulness for academic research and managerial practice.

**Keywords:** Social Innovation, Assessment, Evaluation, Framework

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## 1 Problem

Social innovations are increasingly recognised as essential instruments for addressing complex societal challenges such as inequality, demographic change, poverty, and social exclusion (Wittmayer et al., 2024). They emerge in diverse organisational settings, including social enterprises, public organisations, non-profit initiatives, and cross-sector partnerships, each characterised by distinct governance arrangements, accountability structures, and resource conditions (Logue, 2019). While this diversity enables context-sensitive problem solving, it also creates significant challenges for innovation management when comparing, assessing, and developing social innovations across settings.

Innovation assessment frameworks remain largely shaped by technological or economic perspectives, emphasising market performance, efficiency, or diffusion success. In contrast, social innovations typically involve multiple and evolving objectives, heterogeneous stakeholder constellations, and strong contextual embeddedness. Their success often depends on collaboration across organisational and

sectoral boundaries as well as their contribution to social value creation (Bezerra-de-Sousa et al., 2022). As a result, established innovation concepts such as novelty, maturity, and performance only partly capture the specific characteristics of social innovation processes.

Existing assessment approaches also remain fragmented. Many focus narrowly on single dimensions such as social impact, accountability, public value, or organisational sustainability. Others are designed for mature organisations with stable goals, formal structures, and measurable intervention logics. Tools such as certification or scorecard approaches can provide useful guidance for advanced actors, yet they often require considerable resources and are less suitable for early-stage initiatives in phases of ideation, experimentation, or initial implementation.

This creates a practical gap for innovation management. Organisations frequently lack integrative and development-oriented tools that allow them to assess social innovations across different stages of evolution while considering multiple value logics simultaneously. Without such instruments, prioritisation, coordination, resource allocation, and strategic learning remain difficult. Therefore, there is a need for a structured framework that combines relevant theoretical perspectives and enables the assessment of social innovations across ideation, invention, and innovation stages in diverse organisational contexts.

## **Current understanding**

Related to a social problem a new solution represented by products, services, means, interaction, etc. is created in a process leading to improvement for affected people and can have impact in their community and society (Mulgan et al., 2007). These social innovations are typically embedded in complex social systems and involve multiple stakeholders, making their development non-linear and context-dependent, the value creation pluralistic, and legitimacy dynamics meaningful. Social innovations are a delineable type of innovation with several sub-categories like open social innovations and digital social innovations.

However, social innovations vary according to the domain in which it is investigated or accomplished, namely civil, public, private, and hybrids between these domains. Grasping social innovation, hence, require understanding the specific underlying logics, assumptions as well as terminology and ways of investigations (Logue, 2019). Moreover, current concepts like social entrepreneurship or private-public partnerships act domain-overarching and combine different logics. The boundaries are blurred and hence, the combination of logics is a timely challenge to grasp social innovations.

Several research streams address aspects relevant to assessment but remain fragmented. Impact-oriented research distinguishes inputs, outputs, outcomes, and societal impact, yet faces challenges regarding attribution, standardisation, and managerial usability (Cunha & Benneworth, 2020). Process-oriented research describes social innovation as an iterative journey shaped by learning and institutional contexts (Oeij et al., 2019). Regional development assessments focus on the fitness of the system to support social innovation on macro levels (Krlev et al., 2014). Newness and maturity models focus on the ability the frame uniqueness of a social innovation and increasing

professionalizing performance (Chen et al., 2024). Often approaches implicitly assume that awareness, conceptual clarity, and implementation capacity about the relevant aspects of assessment already exist. They rarely examine whether these conditions are present or how they evolved over time.

## **Research question**

How can a social innovation assessment framework be designed to align with theoretical understandings of social innovation while meeting practical requirements of innovation management across organizational contexts?

## **Research design**

The study follows a design science research (DSR) approach (Hevner, 2007) to develop an assessment artefact that is both theoretically informed and practically useful. The project started with a systematic literature review across social innovation. This review identified more than 400 variables related to delineation, impact, process, and maturity, which were synthesised using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). The term social innovation quality is established and used to stress the integration of the existing approaches and the assessment against a theoretical base.

A first version of the assessment instrument was developed from this theory base, which included about 120 of 400 variables because of duplicates and non-assessable aspects. This version reflected four theoretical topic areas and was applied in 25 qualitative interviews with social innovation practitioners. During these interviews, it became clear that the theoretical structure did not always support a natural conversational flow. Interviewees explicitly asked for clearer feedback and a more intuitive structure.

Based on this feedback, the question order and thematic structure were revised to improve narrative flow. The original four-topic logic was restructured into five practice-oriented themes to discuss 1) the social problem to be addressed, 2) the innovation (services or products addressing the problem), 3) goals and targets, including outputs, outcomes, and impact, 4) the time, structure, and organisational realization, and 5) collaborations and the embedding in the environment.

This restructuring maintained theoretical grounding but improved usability. A further 15 interviews were conducted to demonstrate and evaluate the revised artefact (DSR demonstration step). During this phase, a scoring logic was developed to provide clearer feedback to interviewees. This responded directly to the expressed need of earlier participants for more tangible assessment results. Data collection thus comprises approximately 40 interviews across organisational contexts. Ongoing analysis informs further refinement of the assessment logic.

## Findings

Preliminary findings indicate that social innovation quality can be meaningfully assessed using the theoretical framework when reorganized according to the narrative logic of practitioners. Translating theory-based criteria into practitioner-oriented language and sequences appears to improve usability, relevance, and interpretation in applied settings. Rather than following an abstract academic logic, respondents were able to relate more easily to an assessment structure that mirrors how initiatives are typically described in practice, beginning with the social problem, followed by the proposed solution, implementation processes, organizational conditions, and broader effects. This suggests that the practical value of assessment frameworks increases when conceptual rigor is combined with accessible and experience-based application formats.

The results further suggest that social innovations often develop unevenly across dimensions rather than through a linear or synchronized progression. For example, initiatives may demonstrate strong clarity regarding the addressed social problem, target groups, and intended societal value while still lacking formal structures, stable financing, collaboration mechanisms, or implementation capacity. In contrast, some initiatives may already operate established activities despite weak strategic conceptualisation or limited evidence regarding outcomes. This indicates that social innovation quality is better understood as a multidimensional developmental profile composed of strengths and weaknesses across several areas rather than as a single overall score. Such profiles provide a more differentiated understanding of where an initiative currently stands and what kinds of support may be required.

A central finding is that the integrated assessment logic helps distinguish between different categories of development needs. By combining a creation loop with an institutionalization loop (Oeij et al., 2019), the framework enables differentiation between missing conceptualisation and missing realization. Missing conceptualisation may involve unclear goals, insufficient problem framing, weak stakeholder understanding, or limited innovation logic. Missing realization may involve deficits in structures, resources, governance, partnerships, communication, or structural embeddedness within relevant systems. This distinction appears highly relevant because similar performance symptoms may stem from very different underlying causes. Consequently, the framework can support more targeted strategic interventions and reduce the risk of misinterpreting low scores as general failure.

Interview feedback indicates that the combination of structured scoring and descriptive qualitative feedback supports reflection, organizational learning, and prioritisation. Participants reported that the assessment helps clarify the current state of development, identify blind spots, and structure internal discussions on future priorities. The scoring component offers orientation and comparability, while the descriptive component provides contextual explanation and nuance. Importantly, lower scores should not automatically be interpreted as low quality. They may also reflect early-stage development, deliberate experimentation, limited resources, institutional barriers, or highly challenging problem contexts. This reinforces the need for developmental and context-sensitive interpretation of assessment results.

The demonstration and evaluation cycles also suggest that the framework can be applied across public, private, nonprofit, and hybrid organizational contexts. Because it is

grounded in broad theoretical dimensions rather than rigid benchmarks or sector-specific indicators, the tool allows comparability while remaining sensitive to contextual differences. At the same time, it helps reveal shared structural characteristics of social innovations that may otherwise remain obscured by domain-specific language and varying institutional logics. This creates a common vocabulary for dialogue between practitioners, funders, intermediaries, and policymakers.

Overall, the findings indicate that social innovation quality can be assessed as a multidimensional, developmental, and context-sensitive construct. The framework appears particularly useful for diagnosing heterogeneous development patterns, supporting strategic learning, guiding resource allocation, and enabling comparison across diverse organizational and societal contexts without oversimplifying the complexity of social innovation processes.

## **Contribution**

The assessment tool for new solutions to social problems was developed through a combination of literature-based analysis and expert evaluation. Although the original objective was to design a practical assessment instrument, the results point to a broader conceptual contribution. By integrating insights from systematic literature reviews, expert interviews, and case applications, the study advances a general framework described as social innovation quality.

This concept responds to persistent challenges in research and practice, including fragmented definitions, the dominance of single indicators such as impact, and difficulties in assessing social innovations across different stages and contexts. Rather than introducing entirely new criteria, the findings show that existing perspectives can be systematically combined within a coherent multidimensional framework.

The assessment structure is organised into five domains derived from theory and refined for practitioner-oriented interviews. This indicates that assessment should not be understood solely as a technical measurement exercise, but also as a communicative and interpretative process in which meaning is jointly constructed. Accordingly, the tool combines a common overarching terminology with flexibility for domain-specific language and contexts. In this way, social innovation quality functions as a translation mechanism between actors operating under different institutional and evaluative logics.

The final framework consists of five interrelated dimensions: the social problem context, goals/outcomes/impacts, the solution or innovation itself, the organisational setting, and embeddedness within the wider environment. These dimensions should not be seen as isolated categories, but as connected elements of an evolving configuration. This shifts attention from isolated results toward the broader relationships and development patterns that shape social innovation quality.

The study contributes to innovation management by advancing an integrative perspective on social innovation quality as a multidimensional and developmental concept. It brings together fragmented research on social innovation, evaluation, and innovation management into a coherent framework that captures outcomes, processes, organizational embeddedness, and maturity. Rather than focusing on a single

performance indicator, the framework enables a broader assessment of how social innovations are configured and how they develop in addressing societal challenges.

In addition, the study provides a design science artefact that operationalizes this concept in a structured and theory-based assessment tool. The tool supports the description, comparison, and evaluation of social innovations across contexts, while helping to identify strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and development opportunities. It thereby strengthens organizational learning, strategic decision-making, and system-level coordination in innovation ecosystems.

### **Practical implications**

For practitioners, the framework offers a structured tool to assess social innovations and identify development needs. It supports strategic prioritisation, coordination, and resource allocation. Funders and intermediaries can use assessment profiles for comparison and support decisions without relying solely on impact metrics. The approach facilitates communication and shared understanding across stakeholders and societal domains.

### **Feedback**

Feedback is appreciated about further research in quantitative settings. A long-term aim is to reach statistical significance about the assessment aspects in respect of theory development. Feedback is sought on possible applications for self-assessment because this assessment framework requires an expert to discuss the questions and to receive value feedback.

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