**IST 21– Paper Abstract**

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**Experimenting social innovation for transformative change: comparison between six Portuguese initiatives**

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**Abstract:**

This paper presents the preliminary results of a research project (TRUST) on sustainability transition (ST) initiatives supported on social learning and innovation. TRUST aims to explore forms of social innovation (SI) that have the potential to drive community change and create locally based transition processes, through strategies that enable change in approaches, routines, practices, systems, and mind-sets. The aim of this paper is therefore to share the results of an empirical investigation on how to enable social innovation for transformative change. For this, we explore the extent to which innovative initiatives promote social innovation and if they are capable of leading transformation processes. Specifically, we intend to explore a) What role can SI play in initiative processes for sustainable transition processes? and b) How can innovative initiatives promote (or create) transformative change?

“The ultimate manifestation of transformative change is systemic change” (de Haan and Rotmans, 2018: 285); We therefore aim to understand the pursuit of systemic change (instead of marginal or incremental), which implies dynamic interactions between social, environmental, institutional, political and economic goals and underlying values, ultimately ‘transforming’ social values in an irreversible and persistent way. One possible way to study such processes of social change is through the lens of SI. This prompts us to question, as others, “how SI [social innovation] interacts with systemic and transformative change processes” (Murray et al., 2010; McGowan and Westley, 2015; Avelino et al., 2019), considering that the basis for any innovation are the underlying values of the actors involved.

We have selected six innovative initiatives in three different Portuguese regions (Centre, Alentejo and Lisbon Metropolitan Area). The six initiatives act as knowledge producers containing people's stories and empirical based experiments. To understand the extent to which the initiatives promote social innovation, and if they are capable of leading transformative change, a qualitatively driven approach is adopted, using exploratory work through a mixed method case study. The methodological strategy in this paper is grounded in four spheres of transformation: the personal (the individual(s) within the initiative), the interactive (the initiative’s network as constituted by relationships), the practical (the action-oriented model of the initiative), and the institutional (the collective formal and informal structures of relationships and norms).

Comparative results between the innovative initiatives are presented. We discuss the potential transformative role (and impact) of SI and opportunities for SI to lead transformational change, the capacity of the initiatives context to foster SI, and how the initiatives influence (and are influenced by) the environment they are inserted, the actors network dynamics of the initiatives and within a broad social sphere. Lessons are shared on how we are building the understandings of the people’s values, motivations and behaviours driven by contextual dynamics, the governance system capacity to foster SI for transformative change and the overall contextual system patterns for transition.

**References:**

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