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Boosting social change through social innovation labs

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ABSTRACT

In an era in which society is becoming more and more based on knowledge, and digital technologies have become indispensable for carrying out daily activities, social change becomes a problem whose solution cannot wait postponement. This paper intends to present a framework on the importance of developing social innovation labs as instruments for achieving social change, social innovation bringing countless benefits in the individuals' life. The methodology used for conducting this research is bibliographical – therefore we chose to study the research of specialists in the field, both from Romania and abroad, and empirical – achieved by constructing a case study on best practices examples of these living labs. Through social innovation labs, individuals form connections with each other, they mobilize in order to achieve a common goal – to create a better future. Research shows that social innovation labs behave like normal labs, thus they invent and experiment on finding solutions for the challenges of today's world. Often, they generate promising solutions. However, in order for those solutions to be successful, the fact that the human resource is the crucial element should not be forgotten. Hence, individuals' ability and willingness to cooperate should be considered, not only by electronic means, but also through traditional methods of participation in the process of social change through innovation.

Keywords: social innovation; social change; living labs.

Introduction

Many activity fields in the private sector have suffered changes occurred after the widespread usage of information and communication technologies and, of course, of the Internet (Bria, 2015). Thus, companies such as Google, Amazon, Airbnb and others alike are considered to be true revolutionists of the XXI century, changing the way in which individuals get informed on what is of interest to them, the way they shop and, more recently, the way they rent different locations to spend their holidays. An example in this context would be the possibility to rent, for a night, even the Bran Castle. Thus, by a simple click on Airbnb's website, two people from Canada were chosen, among 88 thousand participants in the competition, to spend the Halloween night in the famous castle of Dracula (MediaFAX).

The private sector benefited from large financial investment in order to support digital innovation, but in the public sector there is less systematic support for innovations based on the use of digital technologies focused on addressing social challenges and finding solutions to problems of this nature (Bria, 2015), helping at the same time the process of social change.

We can understand that digital technologies can easily adapt for helping civic action, through elements such as: allowing the exchange of resources, mobilization of a large number of individuals, spread of power. Thus, entrepreneurs from the technological field and civil society innovators have started to develop successful digital solutions for

social change, this being called *Digital Social Innovation*. As an example, we can mention the online platforms that allow citizens to participate in the decision-making process, which gives them access to public information, through which the level of transparency regarding public procurement etc. can increase (Bria, 2015).

Digital technologies require social change

Two elements that, over time, brought significant improvements regarding the manner in which individuals in a society can have access to the services provided by the public administration are, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, computers and, undoubtedly, the Internet (Baltac, 2011).

The new digital era is represented by a transition process, therefore the industrial society is changing into a new type of society, namely the Information one (Stoica, 2000). In such a society, information is accessed, processed, stored and transmitted in a more cheap, quick and easy way, the existing industries are changing and new ones are being created, thus appearing major effects on citizens (Stoica, 2000). Information society is therefore a natural extension of the democratic society, that requires public information in order to function, being characterized by a high level of information use by citizens in their everyday life, in most of the organizations and institutions (Hellowell, 1997). In this kind of society, the technology used is common or compatible with a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities, while having the ability to receive and transmit, in a rapid manner, digital data between parties of the process, regardless of the distance at which they are situated (Hellowell, 1997).

Because modern societies rely more and more on digital technologies, it becomes obvious the fact that these technologies require social change in order to be used successfully and for communities' benefit. This social change can be understood as change in the current way of living, derived from changing the life conditions, the cultural equipment, the population's composition or even the ideologies, whether arising as a result of changing the individuals in a group or just their inventions (Shah).

In 2015, at the Conference "Shared Prosperity and Health" held for inaugurating the Initiative of Stanford Global Development and Poverty, the World Bank's President, Jim Yong Kim, said, related to his organization's plans to eradicate poverty by 2030, that if the change of a system is wanted, it is important to set an ambitious target (Stanford Graduate School of Business). In this case, we can however refer to social change, from which there may result other major changes. Thus, an ambitious target here could be the development of social innovation labs as tools that contribute to the production of social change. But this broader concept will be discussed in the next section of the paper.

In order to maintain the discussion within a technological perspective, it is necessary to mention why the concept of digital social innovation has such a great importance when it comes to social change. Digital tools can help citizens, communities and social entrepreneurs in finding solutions to the problems of social kind. Thus, the services offered to citizens through information and communication technologies can benefit from the network effect that the Internet creates, and we can give as example the fact that the advantage of a network and of its critical mass of users is that they are increasing more than the costs for using the network (Bria, 2015).

The rapid manner in which digital technologies and networks have evolved developed the ability to accumulate knowledge and to manage creative interactions, this being considered one of the main issues of socio-economic policies (Bria, 2015). Therefore, in the digital age in which we find ourselves, new forms of innovation are needed that can combine social and technical perspectives, creating new types of values that have widespread social impact. In this context, the Internet enhances the environment beneficial to the development of collective intelligence (much needed for social change) through its use in every activity field and the huge amount of data that it provides in order to transform it into collective knowledge. We mentioned collective intelligence because, for certain social problems, solutions can be found only through well coordinated collective actions that citizens cannot carry on individually (Bria, 2015).

Thus, the key to using digital technologies in order to produce social change is for the public administration to ensure not only that it uses and provides citizens with quality technologies, but also that these technologies are “packed” properly (Stanford Graduate School of Business). In addition to these conditions, individuals (citizens, civil servants and private sector’s employees) must be trained for using these technologies properly, they being so indispensable in carrying out daily activities (Vrabie, 2014).

Developing social innovation labs for stimulating social change

In 1994, the Czech president at the time, Vaclav Havel, argued, in a famous speech of his, that “we live in a postmodern world where everything is possible and almost nothing is safe” (Havel, 1994 cited by Torjman, 2012). This statement applies today also because, although progress has been made in many areas of activity, mankind is still hardly coping with global challenges, such as: climate change, poverty, inequalities that occur in the individuals’ growth process, health threats, food and water supply unstable systems and also inadequate elderly population care systems (Torjman, 2012).

In this context, scientists and practitioners concerned by the future of human society and of our planet have started to highlight the need for more sustainable transition processes (Raskin, 2002). The current problems therefore need new kinds of solutions and individuals must think differently and collaborate in new and strategic ways. They need to better understand the systems in which they coexist, thus managing to identify and generate the necessary conditions for social innovation’s implementation and development (Westley, 2015).

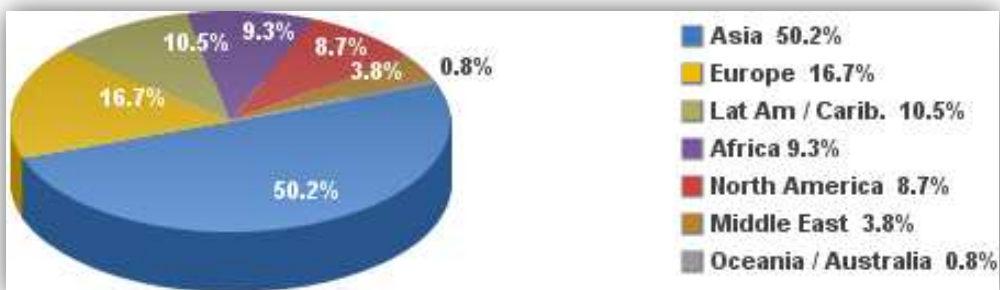


Fig. 1. Internet users worldwide (June 2016)¹

According to *Internet World Stats*, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed on January 2017.

We can see the progress that mankind has made, over time, in these directions by the simple fact that individuals have achieved a higher degree of connectedness, today more than half of the planet's population is using the Internet (see Fig. 2), for 2017 the number of mobile users being expected to reach 4.77 billions (Statistica – The statistical portal).

World Regions	Population (2016 Est.)	Population % of World	Internet Users 30 June 2016	Penetration Rate (% Pop.)	Growth 2000-2016	Table % Users
Asia	4,052,652,889	55.2 %	1,846,212,654	45.6 %	1,515.2%	50.2 %
Europe	832,073,224	11.3 %	614,979,903	73.9 %	485.2%	16.7 %
Latin America / Caribbean	626,119,788	8.5 %	384,751,302	61.5 %	2,029.4%	10.5 %
Africa	1,185,529,578	16.2 %	340,783,342	28.7 %	7,448.8%	9.3 %
North America	359,492,293	4.9 %	320,067,193	89.0 %	196.1%	8.7 %
Middle East	246,700,900	3.4 %	141,489,765	57.4 %	4,207.4%	3.8 %
Oceania / Australia	37,590,820	0.5 %	27,540,654	73.3 %	261.4%	0.8 %
WORLD TOTAL	7,340,159,492	100.0 %	3,675,824,813	50.1 %	918.3%	100.0 %

Fig. 2. Global Internet use and population statistics (June 30, 2016)

According to *Internet World Stats*, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed on January 2017.

These results show that individuals develop increasingly more their interconnection relationships, calling upon different social technologies, thus having both access to public information, and to data about the persons with which they are connected, the result being the creation of an environment that boosts cooperation, innovation, entrepreneurship and development (Schaffers & Turkama, 2012). In other words, a social innovation lab is an emerging part of laboratories created globally, which is based on an experimental and collaborative approach for generating solutions regarding social and environmental challenges that the states are currently facing (Social Innovation Lab.net). These kinds of laboratories provide the beginner entrepreneurs with a testing ground in order for them to improve their ideas and for supporting them to combine humanistic knowledge with sustainable business practices (Social Innovation Lab.org).

¹ There were 3.675.824.813 Internet users on June 30, 2016.

Traditional organization	Lab
Hierarchy	Collective
Static	Dynamic
Singular (expert) focus	Multi-disciplinary
Risk-averse	Open to failure
Operations-oriented	Systems-approach
Market-driven	User-centric
Production outcomes	Social change outcomes
Linear	Iterative
Prescribed success	Conditional success

Fig. 3. Traditional organizations vs. social innovation labs

According to Torjman, L. (2012), *Labs: Designing the Future, MaRS Solutions Lab, MaRS Discovery District*, p. 10.

One major difference between traditional organizations and the new types of “laboratories” consists in the emphasis that is put, in the case of the latter, on the diversity of perspectives and skill sets. The team responsible for initiating the process presents convergence in terms of projecting, ethnography and business field, so it can effectively support both the theoretical part and the implementation of ideas. These labs are not structured following a hierarchical model, thus each participant has equal rights to contribute to the process of cooperation beneficial for finding solutions to problems and/or social needs (Torjman, 2012). Rather than being defined by a set of already existing values, the success of the projects created in these laboratories is achieved by updating the aspirations, wishes and needs of their end users (Torjman, 2012).

In the context of solving the problem mentioned in this paper, namely that digital technologies require social change, innovation is of great importance in social systems because it requires that changes take place at different levels or scales in such a way that their impact will be strong and long-lasting (SIG Knowledge Hub). Therefore, a social innovation is seen as any initiative that contributes to changing the routine activities that do not produce results anymore regarding the improvement of social systems. In other words, successful social innovations reduce vulnerability, enhance the character of elasticity, are durable, have scale, their impact being of transformative type (Westley, cited by SIG Knowledge Hub).

One of the basic principles of social innovation labs is represented by the open innovation (Guzmán, 2006). Public sector’s organizations have started to adopt open innovation approaches in order to provide a useful supplementary portal for creating innovations, through which citizens can deliver suggestions on solutions to problems regarding public management (Mergel, 2015).

The private sector was the first to adopt the concept of open innovation, which consists of inviting the actors in charge of solving problems to contribute to the transformation of services, products or business models that can help the existence and proper functioning of organizations (Chesbrough, 2003).

An important role in this context is played by the intermediaries of social innovation, which are represented by individuals and external organizations that support companies in order to undertake innovative activities, collecting, developing, monitoring and disseminating external knowledge through the provision of various resources and

regulatory innovation networks. There is a variety of innovators, starting from the incubators both private and public, to top technology institutes (Bakici, Almirall & Wareham, 2013). In this category are included social innovation labs (Almirall & Wareham, 2011) because they too have the purpose to be involved in supporting the innovation process (Howells, 2006).

Case study: European living labs

Living labs are present globally, they being understood as open innovation ecosystems, focused on users and based on a systemic approach of co-creation with users, with the aim of integrating the research and innovation processes within communities and real life situations (ENoLL). We mention these ones as being interconnected with social innovation labs because both have the same objective, namely the creation and development of innovations that can help improve the quality of individuals' life.

The most notable example in this context is represented by The European Network of Living Labs – ENoLL, which is the international federation of living labs calibrated at European and global level. It was founded in 2006 and until now it has reached a number higher than 170 “living labs” members spread around the world. Thus, ENoLL deals, both directly and through collaboration with its members, with the provision of facilities for co-creation, user engagement, testing and experimentation, these actions having innovation in various fields as a target, such as: media, healthcare, mobility, energy etc. This non-profit association aims to act as a useful platform for sharing best practices, learning and support, while dealing with development projects regarding living labs at the international level (ENoLL).

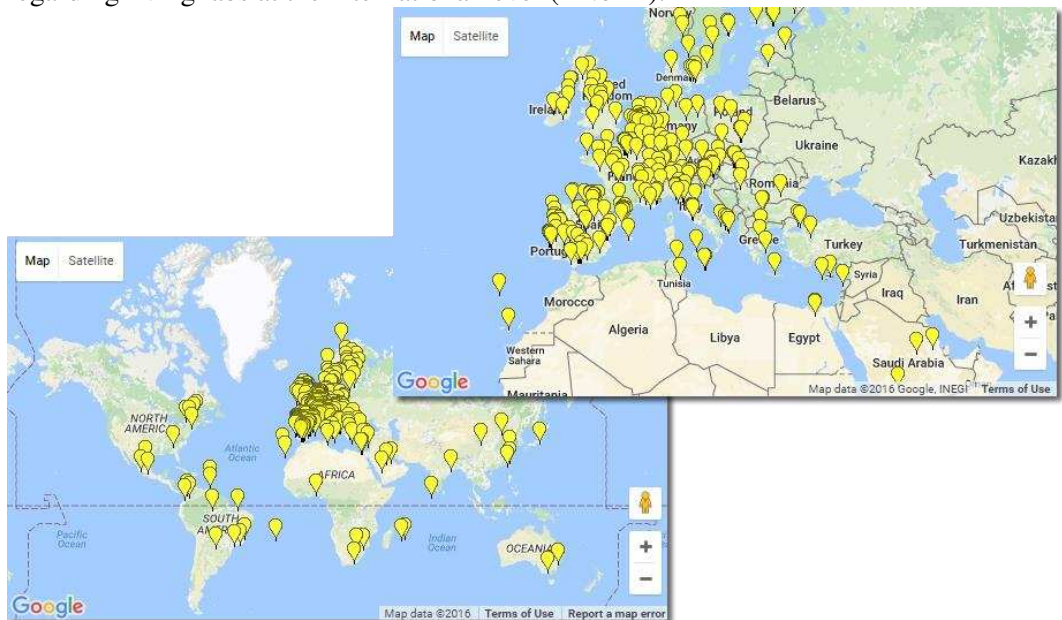


Fig. 4. Living Labs in ENoLL member states

According to *The European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL)*, <http://www.openlivinglabs.eu/livinglabs>, accessed on January 2017.

As can be seen in Fig. 4, Romania (being an adherent member of the association) has also received support for the development of such a lab (in Bucharest, more precisely). This lab was named *ARCHES*², and it was launched by University Politehnica Bucharest with the aim to create the first platform in Romania oriented on the synergy domain. More than that, SIG-RO³ developed *ARCHE3S*, this being a lab whose attention was focused on Bucharest metropolis, described as an initiative resulted through the collaboration between the public and the private sectors, centered on: automation, robotics, computers, science, healthcare, energy, efficiency, environment sectorial activities, based on coherent, consistent and competitive system of systems approach (Stanescu, 2009).

This laboratory's aim was to make a rigorous selection of high priority and complex issues for which solutions must be found during their life cycle; to find ways, based on interoperability, for supporting e-democracy, e-government and decision-making; to stimulate young students' generations to develop their innovative thinking and access to entrepreneurial education; to support its Romanian citizens living in the capital in order to develop a conscious thinking related to the use of public complex services, based on the Internet use (Stanescu, 2009).

Another example in this context is the lab created in France – *La 27e Region*, which is a project of general interest and has the role to produce and strengthen knowledge, proposals and *feedback* with the objective to share all this information for individuals' common good. It carries out various action and research programs in order to test new methods of innovation in the process of public policies' elaboration, creating partnerships with local and regional authorities, public administrations and private sector's stakeholders (La 27e Region). The project mobilizes the capabilities exhibited by multidisciplinary teams made of designers, generators of ideas and social scientists from many fields, committing to specific actions. Thus, the focus is on user experience, civil servants and citizens, this being seen as a starting point for public policy review (La 27e Region).

Denmark is another example of positive attitude towards this new method of stimulating creativity, innovation and collaboration, by creating *MindLab*, which is a part of transgovernmental innovation, through which citizens and businesses have the possibility to be involved in creating new solutions to problems arising within the society. This lab targets broad policy fields that affect daily life of Danish citizens, education, employment and entrepreneurship being just a few of them (MindLab).

These are just some successful examples that Europe has had in recent years⁴, all of them being models that local and regional authorities should take into consideration regarding the production of impact on the development of the country's areas and, hence, on generating social change by developing new and evolved innovation systems, changing the public policies or implementing new ones, making changes on the business

² This living lab is no longer an active member of ENoLL's network since 2010, as we can see on The European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) website, <http://www.openlivinglabs.eu/ourlabs/Romania>, accessed on January 2017.

³ A special interest group in Romania, which focuses its actions on academic multidisciplinary research.

⁴ For more examples, see Europe Tomorrow, <http://europetomorrow.org/blog/>, and Social Innovation Lab, <http://www.socialinnovationlab.net/previous-labs/>, accessed on January 2017.

and entrepreneurship fields, on the social and individual welfare and also regarding internationalization (Schaffers, Merz & Guzman, 2009).

Conclusions

Through social innovation labs, societies can become smarter, by means of activities based on the use of ICT, in order to help citizens generate social innovations and to support the development of the communities they belong to.

Public administration is also an actor who plays an important role regarding the stimulation of innovations and the use of ICT to develop new projects and, thus, to increase productivity, stimulate the creation of public value, increase efficiency in the relationship between citizens and public administration, finally responding to the challenges brought by today's society (Matei, Săvulescu & Antonovici, 2015).

Social innovation is considered to be a practice that may be possible through the development of creative minds, that go beyond the normal pattern's edges (Tîrziu & Vrabie, 2016). In this context, social innovations labs are essential elements, which offer to participants and to persons targeted a chance to see how an innovation could behave over time, this way making it possible to highlight unexpected effects, also being useful in terms of prompt analysis carried out by participants – their knowledge and personal experiences can suggest the effects and consequences that must be considered when designing innovations (Westley, 2015).

However, it must be remembered that although digital technologies provide valuable support regarding social innovation and community development, the fundamental element in any interpersonal relationship was and will always remain the human resource. Therefore, the individuals' interaction should not be suppressed at a rate of one hundred percent, but there must be found a balance between technologies and the traditional methods of performing certain actions (Tîrziu, 2016).

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