

Article

Unpacking social innovation by nonstate service providers in the challenging social work practice

by

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Abstract

Nonstate service providers in the form of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in the delivery of social services and the development of social work practice, in particular in fragile and conflict-affected countries. In such challenging settings, NGOs also mobilize various resources, implement novel activities or service delivery models that may induce the development of social innovation; however, such perspectives have been overlooked in the social work literature. This study outlines a framework for understanding how social innovation generates by nonstate service providers in a challenging social work context. By analyzing 15 interviews from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the study identified three interrelated key mechanisms that drive social innovation by local NGO service providers: a) transcopy, b) coactive novelty and c) knowledge construction. The processes underlying these mechanisms include transnational networking, copying and adapting, contextual modification, relationship-building, pioneering novel solutions, knowledge production and transfer. This study offers new insights into the role of nonstate service providers in the development of social innovation in a challenging social work context and has several implications for practice.

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Introduction

Reductions in welfare provision and increasing demographic pressure have led to scholarly interest in social innovation as a way of addressing emerging social problems and achieving sustainable development by various actors (Anheier et al., 2014; Millard et al., 2017; Oosterlynck et al., 2020). Although there is a natural connection between social innovation and social work (Parpan-Blaser and Huttemann, 2018), this topic has been largely neglected in social work research and education (Flynn, 2017). However, a recent social work conference has also highlighted the need for a greater emphasis on emerging novel practices and innovative social services due to increasingly complex challenges facing the world today (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

Social innovation can be developed by public, private or nongovernmental organizations and can be emerged in various countries and socio-political contexts in order to resolve global and local issues (Moulaert et al., 2013). However, in the literature, much attention is given to social innovation as part of the top-down approach of the public sector in advanced economies with respect to improving public administration and service delivery, where spending on welfare is relatively high (Steiner et al., 2021). There is a need for a more explicit focus on the role of nonstate actors in emerging social innovation, especially in the context where exists fragmented social sector system, multiple actors and where a public sector failed to meet the necessary needs of vulnerable citizens and service users (Ayob et al., 2016, Steiner et al., 2021). In such unfavorable settings, according to Stott and Tracey (2018), NGOs can be an important factor to stimulate innovation and facilitate interactions between various actors.

To bridge this research gap, this paper examines social innovation by nongovernmental social services organizations, with a special focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia). This country provides a useful example of a challenging social work practice. Although there is a long tradition of social work in Bosnia, beginning in the 1920s as part of former Yugoslavia (Hessle, 2020), the brutal war in the 90s and a turbulent post-conflict transition period have significantly damaged the field of social work in the country (Hessle, 2020; Maglajlic and Selimovic, 2014). The current public social services sector faces multiple challenges and fails to meet the fundamental

social needs of the vulnerable beneficiaries, while the provision of preventive social services has been almost exclusively the domain of NGOs in Bosnia for more than 25 years. NGOs' activities are predominantly supported by funding from international aid donor organizations, which first partnered with local NGOs, including those in the social services sector, to reconstruct the country after the war (Žeravčić, 2016).

In spite of the possible challenges that may arise from the interaction of NGOs with international aid donors and public welfare organizations, recent studies show that this interdependence has led to social innovation in response to the complex needs of various service users groups in resource-limited areas, such as Bosnia (Bozic 2017, IN Foundation, 2019). However, it is still unclear what characterizes social innovation when NGOs are involved in the challenging social work and service sector in Bosnia, where structural innovation supports are completely nonexistent.

Therefore, this study investigated the following research questions: How does social innovation generate by nonstate service providers (local NGOs) in the Bosnian social work practice? What types of mechanisms and processes of social innovation arise from the involvement of NGOs in the provision of services and how do they manifest in the practice?

These questions are addressed in the following sections: the theoretical concept, methodology, results, discussion of results, and conclusion.

Social Innovation

Although research interest in social innovation has increased, to date there is no comprehensive and unified definition of the phenomenon and research on this topic is in a pre-theoretical stage of development (Ayob et al., 2016). There are different interdisciplinary approaches to social innovation and diverse explanations, which can lead to definition confusion (Husebø et al., 2021). This article embedded the understanding of social innovation from the work of Moulaert et al. (2013), Moulaert & Maccallum (2019) and Oosrelynck et al., (2020). Accordingly, social innovation is defined by three interrelated principles: "it meets genuine needs neglected or exacerbated by the state/market apparatus; it creates new forms of eco-social/institutional relations and politics; and it collectively empowers people (especially marginalized people) to act – not only within the existent systems and

modes of governance, but also towards transforming them (Moulaert & Maccallum, 2019, p. 4). Further, social innovations “add new actors (for example grassroots initiatives and social entrepreneurs) or redefine the role of existing actors (civil society organizations or local governments), introduce new instruments (for example based on the participation of clients or empowering of citizens) and put forward new goals (such as recognizing diversity in social service provision)” (Oosterlynck et al., 2020, p. 8).

As the main focus of this article is on social innovation from the perspective of NGOs engaged in the provision of social services for vulnerable groups, they can be seen as one of the key actors of social innovation with their innovative engagement in a wide range of unresolved social problems (Butzin & Terstriep, 2018). It typically involves a higher degree of grassroots and bottom-up action than other forms of innovation (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012; Krlev et al., 2019). Although they possess certain independence in terms of activities and diverse financial resources, NGOs often face financial pressures to deliver effective and affordable services at reduced costs that enable them to identify more alternative ways to invest their limited resources. At the same time, their primary focus is meeting the needs of vulnerable groups who are often neglected by a state or a public social sector, which leads them to generate novel ideas and new methods in precarious socio-political and economic settings (Anheier et al., 2014) and build connections with other actors to better integrate those service users into society (Baglioni and Sinclair, 2018, p. 90). In this way they are influencing the distribution of power in society (Scoppetta, Butzin, and Rehfeld, 2014). Further, the collaboration of NGOs with public and private actors in the implementation of novel initiatives often results in social innovation as these diverse actors blur the traditional boundaries between sectors (Nicholls and Murdock, 2012), and utilize different instruments and resources that stimulate the mutual learning process (Oosterlynck et al., 2020, p. 9).

Contrary to optimistic views surrounding social innovation, scholars have also highlighted some critical aspects and potential challenges. Although social innovation in the field of social welfare has partly been characterized by the collaborative approach, where public and nonpublic actors share resources and work to improve services (Husebø et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2021), there are certain challenges

associated with the collaborative relations between civic groups and local governments. A lack of political will to cooperate, insufficient legislation, or various bureaucratic contracting logics and pressure on civic actors for professionalization can all contribute to this situation (Eschweiler, Hulgård, and Lykke Noor Ørgaard, 2018). This may result in tension not only between organizations but also among actors involved, which may produce power imbalances and institutional barriers in terms of the implementation of social innovation (Mendes et al., 2012; Osborne et al., 2019). Further, contextual factors, including the lack of availability of funding and the existing policy framework (Krlev et al., 2019; Mulgan, 2019) can seriously inhibit the diffusion and sustainability of social innovation developed by the civil actors. Also, scaling up socially innovative services by NGOs can be challenging due to various constraints including high costs, lack of proper funding mechanisms and regulations, institutional barriers, security issues (in fragile states), participatory reluctance by users, or cultural and religious sensitivity issues (Agapitova & Linn, 2016; Westley et al., 2014). It is common for social innovation to be linked to a long-term change at the organizational, institutional or cultural level (Husebø et al., 2021; Moulaert & Maccallum, 2019), but according to Brandsen et al. (2015), often temporary innovative initiatives implemented by fragile organizations such as grassroots or NGOs with limited grants mostly result in modest and short-term growth.

Country Context

Despite some improvements over the years, Bosnia as a non-EU European country still has a standard of living that is below the average for EU member states (European Commission, 2018). The poverty gap before the COVID-19 crisis was 25%, with a significant unemployment rate, a high prevalence of informal or 'grey' labor and high levels of economic emigration (Šabanović, 2018). Poverty represents a particular threat to children's rights, with 30.6% of children aged 5–15 living below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2017). Negative demographic trends in the country, including a rapidly aging population, the lowest fertility rates in Europe, and high emigration rates for young people (United National Population Fund, 2020), are also expected to place massive pressure on the already ineffectual public social services in the next decade.

The country has a complex system of governance and a weak and fragmented social welfare system that is incapable of addressing the country's social challenges (Obradović, 2016). To end the Bosnian War, the Dayton peace agreement of 1995 created an ethnocentric Bosnian constitution with a complex multilevel government. The country comprises 4 tiers of governance at the state, entity (two entities and a district), cantons (ten cantons), and municipality levels with separate constitutions, parliaments, governments and judicial powers (Keil and Perry, 2015). This approach resulted in an inefficient multilevel government system, as well as political and legislative structures that encourage institutional fragmentation, widespread corruption and unharmonized social welfare systems (Keil and Perry, 2015). Accordingly, there are three distinct and unharmonized social welfare systems in the country, managed by various institutions, with varying rates of contribution and conditions for access to benefits (Lepir, 2015). This fragmented system leads to inequalities in the social and cash assistance available to safeguard people from certain risks (Obradović, 2016).

Most social work services and cash benefits are delivered at the municipality level through Centers for Social Work, which operate on a 'one-stop-shop' model. As Akesson (2016) argued these organizations have a limited capacity to provide modern and adequate services and address users' risks and vulnerabilities due to staff shortages, outdated approaches, overly complicated administrative procedures, financial restrictions and marginalization by politicians and public decision-makers. Consequently, according to some authors (e.g., Malkić and Hadžiristić, 2016; Maglajlic and Selimovic, 2014), public social institutions are continually reinforcing the social exclusion and inequality of vulnerable people and have shown a profound inability to implement preventative social interventions and services.

On the other hand, since the early 1990s, international aid donors have significantly intervened in state-building and reconstruction development in Bosnia. The donors represent a varied array of multilateral (e.g. United Nations agencies), bilateral (e.g. U.S. Agency for International Development), and international non-profit organizations or foundations (e.g. Save the Children). Over time, international donors also became key actors in the country. Among other things, they have taken a lead role in establishing local NGOs and partnering with them to implement policy and

programme agendas (Žeravčić, 2016). As part of this approach, international donors conceptualize, fund, and transfer policy ideas from outside to redevelop social policy and practice in Bosnia (Maglajlic and Stubbs, 2017). NGOs that are funded by international aid donors deliver a range of preventive social services to address multiple social issues due to the failures of the public welfare sector (Papić et al., 2013). Although reliable systematic data is not available, it has been estimated that up to 27,000 local NGOs are currently registered in Bosnia, all with different forms, styles, capacities, and programmatic orientations (Žeravčić, 2016), but the number of NGOs that are actively involved in delivering social services is unknown.

However, according to Maglajlic and Stubbs (2017), international donors' interventions have encouraged further fragmentation of Bosnia's social policy without leading to real systemic change, whilst high aid dependence is the main reason for Bosnia's limited progress on institutional welfare reforms. Such a view is closely connected with a broad critical perspective of international donors' interventions and the distribution of foreign aid in the development context. The main weaknesses can be seen in donors' dominance and short-term funding projects planned on an ad-hoc basis without meeting the real needs of society, but the focus is more on achieving donor objectives, while the longer-term impact on meso and macro levels remains questionable (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012; de Zeeuw, 2005). In addition, some criticisms have related to donor-led approaches marked by unrealistic program expectations which are generally based on principles of the Western governance model and are often unsuitable for fragile and unstable post-conflict environments (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012; Islam, 2016).

Methodology

Sampling

This study adopted a qualitative research design and a purposive snowball sampling method. In this study, the primary focus was on identifying nongovernmental organizations that needed to have experience in providing social services to different groups of service users and be recognized as having created innovative solutions. Further, international donors and public sector organizations have also been taken into account due to the interaction between NGOs and other actors in Bosnia when it comes to delivering social services and achieving social innovation (author, 2021).

Therefore, contact was first made with representatives of the two biggest international aid donor organizations in Bosnia that funded projects of local NGOs to initiate innovative social work and community-based preventive services, models and practice. Through this contact, other potential participants from local NGOs, donors and public institutions were identified. Ultimately, 15 interviews were conducted.

Participants

The NGO representatives came from ten officially registered local NGOs that were nominated by international donors as being active in implementing innovative social services concerning mental health, child protection, at-risk youth, children with learning disabilities, domestic violence, people with physical disabilities and violence prevention. The representatives held prominent positions as directors, program managers or service coordinators (social workers). The donor representatives came from three of the most prominent international organizations active within the Bosnian social services sector and held program management and other managerial roles. The two local government representatives held social worker qualifications and worked in partnership with NGOs on various social policy matters. The interviewed representatives held between 10 and 20 (and over) years of experience in the NGOs and social services sectors. In this paper, the NGO representatives are identified as P1–P10; the donor representatives are identified as P11–P13 and the local government representatives are identified as P14 and P15.

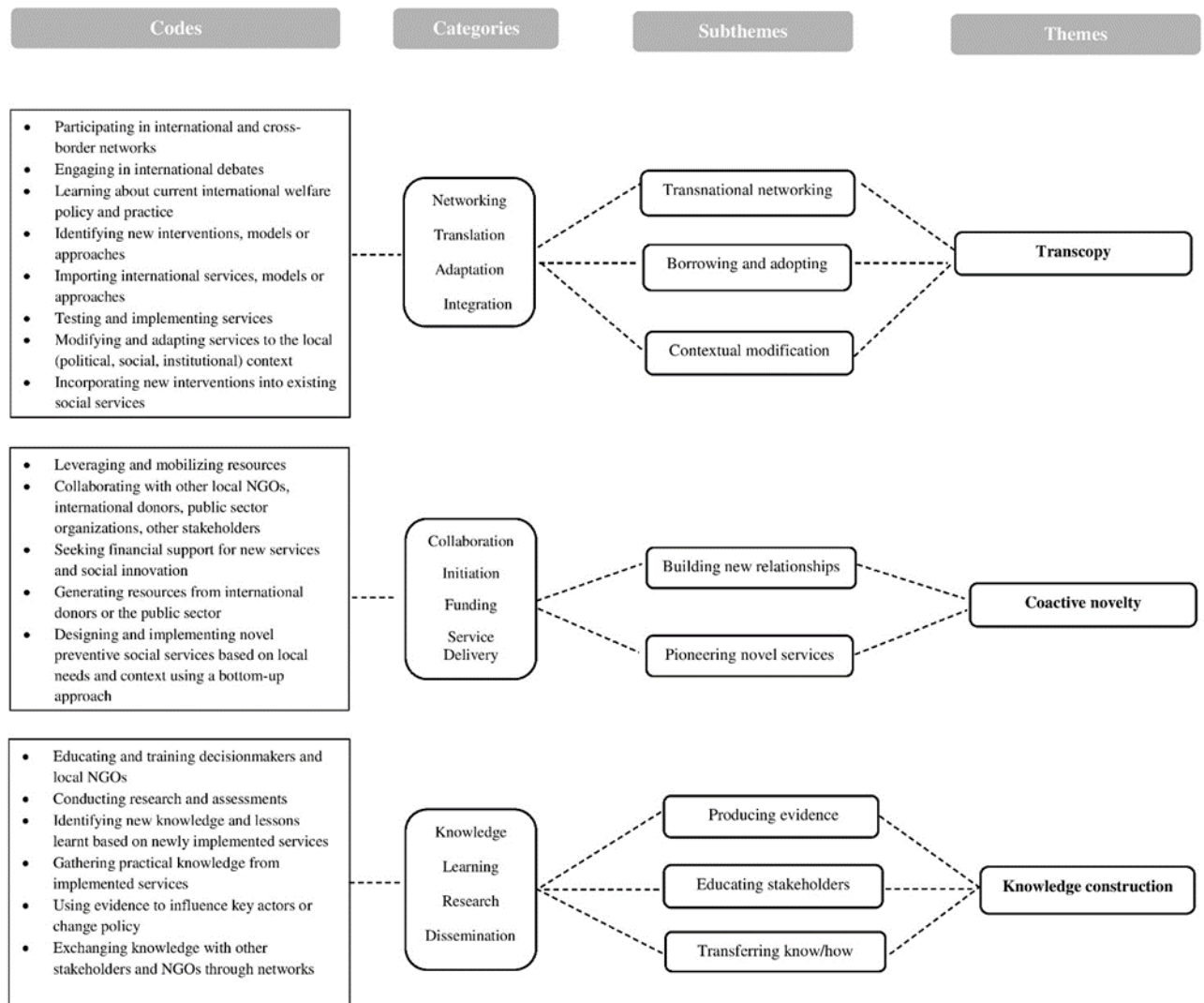
Data collection and analysis

Before the data was collected, this study was reviewed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and received privacy, data protection and ethical approval. Data collection took place between January and February 2019. All participants provided signed consent forms regarding their participation in the study. Fifteen semi-structured interviews of between 45 minutes to 2 hours and 15 minutes were conducted, with fourteen being conducted face-to-face and one online. After the interviews, the audio files were transcribed, enabling a better understanding of the sense and depth of the data before they were coded.

The interviews were thematically analyzed, with codes and themes being generated from the qualitative dataset. Although this was an inductive process, beginning with

the interviews, then identifying patterns and relationships in the data and extracting codes and themes, this process was also deductive, as it was informed by existing theoretical concepts concerning social innovation and NGOs. The interview data were manually coded as well as by using NVivo. By identifying specific patterns across codes, themes and subthemes were generated as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Coding Themes Derived From the Analysis of 15 Semi-Structured Interviews



Results

Transcopy: Transnational Networking, Borrowing and Adapting, Contextual Modification

Transnational Networking

Most NGO and donor respondents reported that NGO activities in Bosnia often evolve through active collaboration at the European level. In the context of

collaboration, it may be understood as the process by which resources, information, skills, knowledge, and values are pooled or transferred between more organizations (participants) by strengthening their partnerships, cooperation and alliance (Yan et al., 2018). All the NGO respondents belonged to partnerships with other NGOs across Europe and were active members of various international networks, cross-border projects, coalitions, and alliances. For example, respondent P2, from an NGO dealing with social inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, discussed how his organization benefits from international networks:

Although our organization comes from Bosnia, which is not in the EU, we are members of umbrella organizations for our field of activity within the EU; we are talking about membership within organizations such as Inclusion Europe or the European Independent Living Network, which promote contemporary, innovative, community-based practices and standards that we try to replicate and implement within our country. So, innovations, in our case, come through the channels of networking.

Indeed, there was strong agreement among the respondents that organizations can benefit from participation in such networks and cooperation with foreign NGOs, including the identification of solutions to shared problems. Respondents reported exchanging knowledge, tools, experiences and information, all of which strengthened their organizational capacities and contributed to the implementation of programs and services. Such collaborations are also opportunities to launch actions and projects with network partners to help transfer best practices and lessons learned concerning specific themes and issues.

Borrowing and adapting

This international networking has enabled local NGOs to import new practice models and adapt them to the Bosnian context. For example, the director of a local NGO working with at-risk children and families, respondent P1, described this process:

Social innovations arise as a result of our networking, interaction, research and awareness of acceptable practices...this most often happens based on our observing the needs of vulnerable beneficiaries and researching good practices developed outside [the country], and then somehow trying to integrate these new models, services or practices in our environment.

The Family Group Conference (FGC) Model is one of many innovative international practice models that have been copied, imported, adapted to the local context and implemented in Bosnia. FGC is an internationally recognized child protection model that transferred from the Netherlands that has been implemented by NGOs and

financially supported by international donors. The leading NGO responsible for scaling up this model across the country, in collaboration with other local NGOs, is a member of the European Network of Family Group Conference, which consists of over 100 representatives from 18 European countries. As respondent P1 explained, participating in this international network provided an ability for the NGO to learn the potentials of this model to prevent harm to at-risk children and families, then share it with other NGOs to test and adapt this model to the local context. FGCs have been scaled up and implemented in eight municipalities across the country.

According to two NGO representatives with experience implementing FGCs one innovative element of the model in the Bosnian context is its unique co-creation process in child protection. Co-creation can be understood as a two-way process of involvement of users in designing and delivering services with other public and nonpublic actors (Bason, 2017). Accordingly, service users are directly involved in the design and implementation of FGCs through a multisector partnership between local government, social workers, NGOs, and trained volunteers from the community. Over 300 FGCs have been implemented over several years resulting in better educational, protection, safety, health and family relation outcomes for 1500 children and families at risk. Although many lessons learned have been identified through the model implementation, it has not been broadly accepted or recognized by the wider public social sector.

Contextual Modification

Although there are signs of successful outcomes in how socially innovative models and practices are incorporated into the Bosnian social sector, NGOs face difficulties when importing such models and practices in the challenging social work setting. The representatives from all three groups of actors involved in the interviews explained that this has to do with different laws and regulations of highly decentralized Bosnian social sector, cost calculations, available resources, but also with political and socio-economic ambiances. One NGO representative (P8) further explained:

When we talk about social innovation, we also have to look at the specific political, socioeconomic conditions in the country... all these new promised practices and models are developed in EU countries with more advanced socioeconomic conditions than in our country, so when we decide to test them in the complex environment of our country, we may face additional challenges... Actually, I would say it is also some

kind of innovation, to adopt one practice from a rich resource country and make it sustainable, replicative, and innovative in such an insufficient resource context.

This comment reflects the views of other respondents concerning the transfer and adaptation of models from highly developed social policy contexts to less developed states like Bosnia. For example, in the case of the FGC model, respondent P3 explained that contextual challenges are regularly discussed at intervision meetings organized among the involved local partners. This has resulted in modifications to some components of the model, mainly in the process of monitoring families after organized conferences. Such modifications have been discussed with other members of the European Network of FGCs. The NGO respondents emphasized that they always consider resource limitations and potential structural barriers in the Bosnian social work context when deciding whether to import international models.

Coactive Novelty: Relationship Building and Pioneering Novel Solutions

Relationship Building

In Bosnia, international donors have created strong connections with local NGOs and public services providers. All the respondents confirmed that to obtain donor funding, NGOs must collaborate with public social services providers in the implementation of innovative services. Strong relationships between NGOs and the public sector may also result in the co-funding of innovation. For example, P15, a municipal government representative, commented:

We have launched a new service healthy aging centers for the elderly provided in close cooperation between local NGOs, local government and international donors. The goal is to establish facilities and prevention programs for the elderly, where international donors will finance 30% and our administration 30%. Preventive services for children at risk in rural communities provided by local NGOs have also been established in this way, and these services can be considered innovative because they did not exist before.

However, the NGO representatives reported that not all local municipalities are willing to allocate funding to novel NGO services, even when such services respond to a real need in the local community. Co-funding is more likely to be arranged during the testing phase of a novel service, but it often ends once the donors withdraw and municipalities fail to integrate the tested services into the local welfare system. The problem is that funding provided by a municipality during the testing phase is much smaller than what NGOs usually receive from international donors. Municipalities may not be able to keep providing financial support to the NGO when the time comes

to take over the funding aspect of the service fully due to the costs of sustaining the service and maintaining its quality. On the other hand, during interviews with NGO representatives, they confirmed that municipalities, as well as other public institutions, are often untransparent in their allocation of funding to support local NGOs' activities in the social sector. Local municipalities tend to favor and support some NGOs that are close to a municipality, while others are rarely considered even if they had better results or more effective services. Such situations require NGOs to invest significant effort to build, strengthen, and sustain intersectoral relationships to influence the public sector. The NGO representatives additionally explained that although collaboration with public sector organizations is expected, it can nevertheless be very challenging due to various political influences and pressures.

Pioneering Novel Solutions

As was further explored during the interviews, the representatives of a Dutch donor organization and its local Bosnia-based NGO partner jointly initiated a grant scheme to coordinate and financially support local NGOs to develop socially innovative social work solutions for at-risk children, youth and families. The accepted proposals of local NGOs receive 3–4 years of financial support to design, test, implement and evaluate their socially innovative proposed services. Respondent P12, from another international donor organization, also recognized that local NGOs take a grassroots, bottom-up, innovative approach to support vulnerable children and young people:

...I see many of [the local NGOs] who have come up with quite innovative, creative and cost-efficient approaches in addressing social problems. Many NGOs are quite resourceful in creating local networks and building relationships with key actors on the ground...

Over the past few years, the Dutch donor program mentioned above funded over 200 local NGOs across Bosnia to pilot innovative, community-based preventive services, models and practices to respond to child abuse and violence, children and young people at risk due to family vulnerabilities (e.g., alcohol, domestic violence, mental health problems, poverty) and gender-based violence among young people. The funded services offer innovative prevention mechanisms that represent a novel alternative to the conventional public welfare system. The services have innovated in various ways, including increasing the involvement of service users in services design, developing some novel prevention methodologies to address specific social problems but also to develop collaboration with other welfare stakeholders, the local

community, service users and volunteers, using digital platforms to process and promote service information.

Nine of the ten NGO representatives that were interviewed commented that services they implement address the needs of underserved user groups and foster more integrated partnerships with public sector stakeholders, local government organizations, and community members, enabling an increased focus on structural change and strengthening the collaboration between the public and NGO sectors. However, several NGO representatives also highlighted potential challenges that may affect the successful integration and future sustainability of the new services, including staff turnover in the NGOs sector due to low and uncertain wages, declining international funding for social programs, the unwillingness of the public sector to accept innovative solutions and unrealistic donor expectations concerning outcomes.

Knowledge Construction: Knowledge Production and Transfer

The interviewees reported that interaction with other organizations, both regionally and internationally, has provided an opportunity for local NGOs to generate and exchange knowledge. According to seven of the involved NGO representatives, networking and interacting have made them more aware of international regulations, laws, and standards in the fields of disability, domestic and gender-based violence, mental health, violence against children, children without parental care and children rights. This, in turn, has enabled them to advocate the application of international service standards to local social welfare policy and practice. At the same time, by adopting and implementing services in the local context, NGOs produce knowledge and experience that are shared internationally, contributing to a strengthened understanding of the implementation of specific programs. As respondent P11 from a donor organization explained, the knowledge generated through close collaboration between NGOs and international donors has also been transferred to other contexts:

For example, the innovative NGO-led centers for children and youth at risk that we fully supported its development in Bosnia, began with a theoretical model based on the various programs we implemented in other Eastern European transitional countries where we worked. However, it was designed following the Bosnian context's needs and was gradually improved during its implementation. This program is now ready for export and application in other countries. And it is already happening.

Furthermore, three donor representatives and two public sector representatives reported that NGOs play a crucial role in generating and managing specialized knowledge and evidence in a range of fields; this knowledge is often lacking in the public sector. In contrast to other countries, public sector policymaking in Bosnia is generally not evidence-based, while national research funding is low and almost non-existent. This gives a particular advantage to NGOs when conducting studies and assessments, aiding them in generating evidence concerning effective interventions to support their advocacy for additional resources. Furthermore, a representative from an NGO active in the disability field (P6) explained NGOs' efforts to build capacity in the public sector:

It is essential to understand that NGOs have significantly built the competencies of relevant public professionals and the public sector's capacities by organizing numerous training, seminars, and conferences. Public sector employees participated in high numbers. This is predominately evident in the social sector. We had a chance to pass on many novelties in evidence, procedures, care services and models. We strengthened the social work case management and policy measures for the most vulnerable groups.

These efforts are critical to Bosnia's application for EU membership because, as a potential candidate country, the public sector is obliged to harmonize procedures and service standards in line with the EU regulations, especially in the field of social inclusion and the transition from residential institutions to community services for people with disabilities, mental health problems, abandoned and vulnerable children and the elderly.

Discussion

The previous section of the paper noted several processes that form part of NGOs' engagement in social work and service provision and support their efforts to improve the lives of underserved, vulnerable service users. Based on an analysis of those processes, this study identified three interrelated mechanisms that serve as a basis for the development of social innovation: transcopy, coactive novelty and knowledge construction. These mechanisms, along with the associated processes, are further explored below. This section also places these concepts in the context of existing theoretical understandings of social innovation from the literature.

Transcopy can be defined as a mechanism that occurs through several processes including the willingness of NGOs in Bosnia to invest their efforts in transnational

networking, interacting between local demands and international solutions and borrowing services and interventions from other jurisdictions and adapting them to the local context. Through participating in transnational networks, NGOs have access to ideas and knowledge from more developed socio-economic contexts. Funding from international donors has enabled Bosnian NGOs to borrow and apply these fresh ideas by importing affordable services, models, and interventions suited for the local social work and service context. In this way, NGOs address gaps in the traditional social sector and meet the needs of underserved service users. This supports Mulgan's (2019) view that social innovation occurs primarily through transfer and adaptation, rather than the development of entirely new solutions. Transferring services and models to different policy and socioeconomic contexts is crucial to successful innovation (Baglioni & Sinclair, 2018). According to Brown (2019), model initiation, cultural adaptation and testing of the adapted internationally developed model are important components of this transfer process. Such components were also observed in the analysis of the Bosnian context.

Coactive novelty can be defined as a mechanism derived from two processes undertaken by NGOs: (1) building new relationships with various actors to deploy resources to support innovation and (2) pioneering novel bottom-up preventive services. As the findings reveal, NGOs' willingness to collaborate with international donors and public sector stakeholders is a leading driver for social innovation in the Bosnian social services sector. This supports previous research confirming that multilayer stakeholder collaboration is critical to social innovation not only in complex welfare contexts such as Bosnia but also in more developed welfare systems (Anheier et al., 2014; Oosterlynck et al., 2020; Rey-García et al., 2016). Being supported by international funding has allowed NGOs to think unconventionally about problem exploration and offer innovative responses in the form of newly designed, tested and implemented preventive services, which can then be mainstreamed in the conventional social services sector.

Knowledge construction is the third identified mechanism and is derived from the process of producing and transferring knowledge. Given the inefficiencies of the public sector in Bosnia and the lack of funding for research and development, NGOs have attempted to fill the knowledge and evidence gap. As the findings show, the

lessons learned through the implementation of novel preventive services and the evidence gathered through research and networking in interregional and international learning have contributed to NGOs' knowledge of regulatory trends, standards and evidence in the social services sector, which is then transmitted to local public institutions through seminars, training and policies improvement. This aligns with the view of Novy et al. (2020) that context-specific knowledge that evolves through experience is critical to both the dissemination of innovative models and the maximization of their impact on society.

However, in challenging settings, the involvement of multiple contextual factors and interactions between different actors may both stimulate and stifle social innovation, as well as limiting its sustainability (Stott and Tracey, 2018). Local NGOs in Bosnia highly rely on temporary international aid donor funding to test and develop innovative social services, to gain greater involvement in the social sector, as well as to focus on specialized knowledge. As a result, they are very project-oriented and their temporary innovative initiatives do not achieve long-term growth. Because of that, they are not always well-positioned to advocate to governments, garner support and access more sustainable funding. There is another challenge related to transferring and obtaining local funding for integrating foreign models into local service practice. Thus, a key challenge is ensuring that social innovative services, models and interventions are scaled up or institutionalized within the public system. Due to declining donors support, limited public sector financial assistance and non-transparency for nonstate activities, and the country's fragmented social sector can lead to general unrecognition and weaker sustainability of the innovative efforts of NGOs in the local social work practice.

Methodological issues

This research was limited by its predominantly qualitative approach and nonprobability sampling, which means that the findings are restricted to the sample analyzed in the study. Further research, including more quantitative statistical analysis, could increase the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the way in which the sample of NGO representatives was identified may have caused certain biases, as only those NGOs identified by international donors and other NGO representatives were perceived as successful innovators and included in the study.

Future research could also explore broader perspectives from public social services actors from different levels of government in terms of understanding their views regarding collaboration and integration of socially innovative solutions, led by NGOs and funded by international donors.

Conclusion

The results of this paper show that social innovation generated by nonstate providers in the challenging social work context follows a two-stage pattern. By receiving significant funding from international aid donors and involving themselves in the transnational networks, discourse and practices, NGOs have played an important role in Bosnia by contributing to the provision of preventive social services to at-risk and vulnerable communities, as well as by bringing innovative perspectives to the services they provide. Accordingly, NGOs have engaged in several processes induced by three interrelated mechanisms—transcopy, coactive novelty and knowledge construction— that may serve as a basis for the development of social innovation in such a context. At the same time, the complex nature of the Bosnian social work field, with its multilayer actors, a strong reliance on changeable short-term international donor funding, fragmented and inadequate public sector institutional responses may hinder the broader recognition and sustainability of social innovation diffused by local NGO service providers.

This paper's primary practical contribution is the capturing of much-needed empirical data on social innovation mechanisms and processes in a challenging social work practice. The findings enable a better understanding of the involvement of nonstate service providers and their capacities to activate social innovation. The findings may also have implications for educational programs concerning social work, social development and social policy.

Ethics declarations

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

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