

Community engagement for social and environmental innovation: A Sicilian case study

Abstract

Topic:

This project sets out to consider the contextual difficulties for community engagement efforts for social and environmental innovation in a rural Sicilian setting. Having conducted a community based participatory research study with the principle of grounded theory, the researcher set out to immerse in a rural Sicilian setting alongside a number of community organisers and activists. Whilst presenting some relevant and action-oriented contemporary literature around community engagement theory at a rural festival the researcher intended to gain first-hand insight into some of the opportunities and challenges faced by local change-agents for stimulating community-led social and environmental innovation. Consequently, the researcher conducted a series of interviews with a wide range of community members to gain deeper insights into some of the contextual difficulties behind stimulating change in a rural Sicilian setting.

Applicability to theme:

The applicability to the conference's theme lies in this project's adoption of a place-based approach for empowering communities to entrepreneurial innovation. With a focus on inclusivity, this research aims to support community-driven innovation with outcomes of direct and localised social and environmental prosperity.

Aim:

The aim for this project is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the contextual difficulties faced by community organisers in rural Sicily. In doing so, this project sets out to recommend a set of solutions to address these difficulties and support a cultural shift toward improved inter-community relations, institutional trust and a greater capacity for implementing sustained social and environmental innovation. As an active participator in the research setting, this project set out to raise awareness at a grass-roots level among community members for the opportunities of community-driven social and environmental innovation.

Methodology:

This research uses a case study which is ideally suited to studying contemporary, real life, complex phenomena and provides tools to investigate phenomena within its natural context, and thus elicits detailed explorations (Chetty, Partanen, Rasmussen, 2014; Ozcan and Eisenhardt, 2009). The use of a case study aids in understanding the complexity and dynamics of the social and of place (McKelvey, 2004; Steyeart and Katz, 2004).

This field work incorporates ethnographic participant observation and depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders in the local community around Noto, Sicily. Participants for depth interviews were carefully selected to encompass a diverse set of community members differing in age, socio-cultural backgrounds and experience in community engagement and activism. Following an ethnographic approach allows a reflexive understanding of the research in question (Atkinson, 2007). This approach will enable deep-grained understanding of the ways in which communities can effect change, with whom and how effectively change is enacted over a period of time.

Contribution:

Organisational scholars are increasingly advocating for research that addresses grand challenges such as those presented by poverty, climate change and social injustice (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013; Dorado & Ventresca, 2013; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi and Thiyani, 2016; Mair, Martí, & Ventresca, 2012). This interest is reflected globally by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which sets out clear targets for social, environmental and economic innovation through collective, collaborative and co-ordinated actions.

Through an ethnographic study of a community engagement project, this research responds to calls to expand our understanding of context in community engagement theory, foregrounding place rather than treating it as a background categorisation (Chalmers and Shaw, 2015; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017).

Furthermore, this research contributes to the limited work that explores the institutional conditions that facilitate or hinder collective engagements (Dorado and Ventresca, 2013). Scholars argue for a need to examine ways in which motivated actors can enact opportunities through bricolage, a making do with 'whatever is at hand' (Levi-Strauss, 1967: 17; Di Domenico, Haugh and Tracey, 2010) and the experimental strategy of social effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2008; Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005) when communities find themselves in institutionally-constrained environments.

Implications for Policy:

This research supports the importance of understanding the potentiality of community-based actions for sustained social and environmental impact and seeks to apply place-based approaches for the implementing the described innovations.

References:

- Ansari, S., Wijen, F., & Gray, B. (2013). Constructing a climate change logic: An institutional perspective on the "tragedy of the commons". *Organization Science*, 24(4), 1014-1040.
- Chalmers, D. M., & Shaw, E. (2017). The endogenous construction of entrepreneurial contexts: A practice-based perspective. *International Small Business Journal*, 35(1), 19-39.
- Chetty S. K., Partanen J., Rasmussen E.S. (2014) Contextualising case studies in entrepreneurship: A tandem approach to conducting a longitudinal cross-country case study. *International Small Business Journal*, 32(7): 818–829
- Di Domenico, M., Haugh, H. and Tracey, P., 2010. Social Bricolage: Theorizing Social Value Creation in Social Enterprises. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 34(4), pp.681-703.
- Dorado, S. and Ventresca, M. J. (2013). Crescive entrepreneurship in complex social problems: Institutional conditions for entrepreneurial engagement. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 28, 69–82.
- Gaddefors, J. and Anderson, A.R. 2017. Entrepreneursheep and context: when entrepreneurship is greater than entrepreneurs. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 23(2), pages 267-278.
- George, G., Howard-Grenville, J., Joshi, A. and Tihanyi, L. (2016). Understanding and tackling societal grand challenges through management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59, 1880–95.

Lévi-Strauss, C. 1967. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mair, J., Marti, I., & Ventresca, M. J. (2012). Building inclusive markets in rural Bangladesh: How intermediaries work institutional voids. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(4), 819-850.

McKelvey, B., 2004. Toward a complexity science of entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 19(3), pp.313-341.

Sarasvathy, S. D., & Dew, N. (2005). New market creation through transformation. *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, 15(5), 533-565.

Sarasvathy, S., 2008. *Effectuation: Elements of Entrepreneurial Expertise*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham, UK