Is social innovation (SI) the path to re-legitimating democracies and welfare models? This question is at the heart of *Local social innovation to combat poverty and exclusion*. This book offers many important insights on the evolving governance of socially innovative initiatives in the fight against poverty. It relies on a rich methodology, with 31 intensive case studies in Europe (and Brazil) around three fields of action: labour markets, education, and housing. The socio-economic team of contributors reflects the different trajectories existing in Europe, as the important pluralism trends needed in order to produce relevant knowledge about the concrete reality of economic practices.

In the history of social economy, SI initiatives are not a recent development. However, the growing interest of the European Union, combined with the 2008 crisis, have shaped their evolution. The authors observe a shift from original views of emancipation and societal change to an entrepreneurial frame, leading to new market opportunities (chapter 2). One consequence is the instrumental use of SI initiatives as a vehicle for welfare states to experiment, and for social investors to achieve efficiently social goals. The message of the book is that SI could contribute to a societal change and a reorganisation of governance leading to societies that are more inclusive. The contributions are numerous for policymaking and academic research.

**Going beyond established definitions and methodologies**

The authors stress the importance of understanding SI as involving processes and relations, based on socially constructed and interrelated needs (chapter 1). SI is not just a matter of achieving certain goals with innovative methods. It is above all a matter of implementing new social and institutional arrangements. SI is thus defined here around three dimensions: content, as these initiatives aim to satisfy basic social needs; process, as social and power relations are transformed; and empowerment, linking process and content, implying the access of individuals to different capabilities. In this sense, SI is a specific paradigm, different from the social protection paradigm, pillar of the welfare systems, and social investment, focused on labour productivity, technological innovation and competitiveness, from a cost-efficient perspective (chapter 3). This SI paradigm is studied in the light of the fight against poverty. Instead of considering the strict monetary vision of poverty, the authors insist on a multidimensional and relational definition of poverty, as a process
of social exclusion, that is, the lack of capacity to fully participate in society (chapter 1). Hence the focus on governance dynamics. This overall framework is coherent and supports an institutional and critical vision establishing that institutions, power technologies and ideas shape social outcomes.

**A continuing fundamental role for the states**

In the fight against poverty, the authors do not observe a strict retrenchment of welfare states, since they still strongly participate in many SI initiatives, but they see a change in the state’s current role. Besides, public authorities are necessary to support SI towards delivering societal change and an inclusive society. It is especially important in favouring individual and collective empowerment (chapter 6). Local self-organisation is not automatically positive and may, on the contrary, reinforce present inequalities. Not everybody is represented and/or has the same capacity to actually participate, to be heard, and to mobilise for their own rights. The role of public authorities also shapes the opportunities for SI to develop across the different scales of governance (chapter 4) and to consolidate in the long term (chapter 9). The support of the state is finally needed to avoid an individualist bias privileging concern for diversity and neglecting equality (chapter 7). To consider both in a comprehensive approach to citizen building requires both political will and funding.

**A need for multi-scale governance and multiplicity of knowledge**

To achieve positive socially inclusive outcomes, the three paradigms of the fight against poverty should not be considered separately, or result - as shown from several case studies - in a trade-off between one or the other (chapters 3). They involve different scales and actors, with various instruments and interests. The contextualisation of the local vision is important, but has to be replaced in a multi-scalar perspective (chapter 4). Three forms of SI initiative are distinguished by the authors here, the first one being the more limited, with a lower life cycle: ‘locally bounded’, trapped in the local level; ‘bottom-linked based’, establishing relations between the different scales; and ‘network based’, prioritising large networks, leading to more opportunities for funding and being heard at the policy level. This multi-scaling aspect is also important in knowledge sharing, as the production and diffusion of knowledge is currently shaped, to a great extent, by stakeholders’ expectations, searching for effective and cost-efficient initiatives (chapter 8). The organisation of the different scales is not simply geographical, it is fundamentally social, dynamic, and transformed by power relations among them.

**From small-scaled initiatives to global implications**

The implications of this work are broad. They concern empowerment, diversity, equality, more inclusive societal models, and echo situations encountered in many other parts of the world, with regard to the evolution of democracy, welfare, and development, when the policies of international organisations rarely refer to the potential of social innovation. The cases in Brazil, if a bit surprisingly at first, when compared with European cases, illustrate the openness of the research. These implications also underline a crucial issue: many policies and development programmes are under pressure for short-term results. Nevertheless, societal changes, permitting the shaping of institutions and enabling the inclusion of everybody, need long-term perspectives. This book will be useful for many audiences, being accessible even for non-experts in the matter of social
innovation, with clear messages resulting from a wide and coherent project. The constructed framework, around governance and the various policy paradigms in the fight against poverty, is convincing, providing an understanding of the evolution of SI, of the complexity of the European welfare mix, and its potential future. The current Covid-19 situation makes it even more important to think about the type of European economy and society we want.

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**Reviewer Biography**

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