Social innovation and learning in the region

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Abstract

City-regions are increasingly seen as dynamic places and hotspots for economic development, social cohesion and policy innovation. These dynamics result in series of challenges and opportunities. To deal with these challenges and opportunities, and come to innovative ways of governing governments increasingly depend on a wide range of actors. Stepping away from traditional participation processes it is widely recognized that innovations emerge in settings where co-learning is central, and actors learn from each other through sharing of knowledge and insights across sectors and contexts. This contribution focusses on practices of co-learning and the methods used in regional settings. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a better understanding of learning interactions, underlying mechanism and methods used in relation to social innovation and regional policies.

Key-words: regions, governance, learning, social innovation, Hart van Brabant.

Introduction

In the daily practice of problem solving, people, organizations and business enterprises look for promising partners across traditional administrative and geographical boundaries. For example, the housing market, schools, social welfare organizations, or the labor market are not restricted to cities or local communities, but succeed that level and are organized at regional levels. In addition, economic developments take often place at this level, involving a wide range of actors and their networks. Consequently, contemporary western societies are more and more characterized by network forms of interactions and activities, formed by dynamic constellations of actors. This characteristic has urged governments, non-governmental organizations and other organizations involved in public policy-making to broaden their scope and take these networks into account. As a result, the regional level seems to be a promising way forward and is seen as increasingly important for economic development and social cohesion (OECD, 2011).

The growing attention towards the region results in a plethora of governance forms, ranging from light forms of cooperation based on voluntary agreements on specific issues (often referred to as “new regionalism”) to more heavy institutionalized forms that sometimes even are supported by legal frameworks and assigned tasks (Schaap et al., 2010; Levelt & Metze, 2013). Despite their differences, regional governance is strongly characterized by the involvement of a wide network of diverse actors and corresponding ideas, perspectives, values and interests (Van Asselt, 2000). A variety that is potentially bigger than on the local level as the regional level is about working across boundaries. It is believed that this variety on the regional level holds a specific capacity for knowledge sharing, learning and creative development. In addition, the more recent idea that labor no longer attracts people but that
it is the quality of places that attracts companies, is attractive for regional planners and other policy-makers. Especially as companies follow the creative class that wants to live in attractive, tolerant, and innovative places that allows for cross pollination of ideas, information and experiences (Florida 2002; Lang and Danielsen 2005; Boschma and Fritsch 2009; Florida, 1995; Sol et al., 2012). To foster these developments, regional governing bodies have a growing interest in knowledge exchange, innovations and learning.

The attention towards innovation and learning between actors in governance settings as a way to improve the economic position of regions in a networked society is not new. The importance of knowledge exchange and learning has been research objects of various groups of scholars (for reviews see: Fazey et al., 2012; Reed et al., 2010). Despite the growing attention towards learning in regional governance settings, little is known about how learning takes place in networks on the regional level. Especially as learning is often approach on individual, interpersonal or intergroup level, the regional level as a governance unit is neglected in learning literature. Therefore this contribution aims at bringing about understanding of how learning takes place within a region. In doing so we focus on the Hart van Brabant Region in the Netherlands, and more specific on the case of the policy to become the region of social innovation.

First we will discuss learning and social learning in more depth. Departing from these discussion we built an analytical frame to look at the case of Hart van Brabant region. Based on the case we wrap up with a discussion and conclusion.

Conceptual approach: social learning

For regions and a wide range of policy-sectors learning, knowledge exchange and experience are vital (Florida, 1995). “Regions must adopt the principles of knowledge creation and continuous learning; they must in effect become learning regions. Learning regions provide a series of related infrastructures which can facilitate the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning.” (Florida 1995, pp. 532). Despite these recommendations by Florida, in regional governance, attention usually is being paid to the effectiveness of collaborations in regional networks, for example in regime theory (Stoker, 1995) and the triple helix model of collaboration between government, businesses, and knowledge institutes. These regional collaborations have been theorized and empirically studied in interesting and extensive ways, including a focus on participation and collaboration. However, less attention has been paid to learning in those regional networks.

Irrespective of its origins, knowledge and learning shape decisions and future actions (Fazey et al., 2012). Over the last decades, a growing amount of literature has been written on the issue of learning in a various settings, scientific fields and from different perspectives. In recent years, the attention has shifted more and more to the social aspects of learning, especially in environmental and, to a lesser extent, regional governance. In these fields social learning was long considered as a panacea or tool for fragmentation and dealing with controversies in participatory processes (Van Assche et al., 2013).
Social learning entered the world of governance through participatory natural resource management but finds its origin in the 1930s by Mumford (1938) as a critique on the earlier assumptions that the future could be planned rationally. Since gaining recent attention, many different fields and scholars have been working on social learning resulting in different (not always clear cut) understandings of social learning and various sub-streams. Despite these understandings and the absence of one unambiguous definition of social learning (Muro & Jeffrey, 2008), several general characteristics can be found. Following Muro & Jeffrey (2008) in their review on social learning: “At the core of these models [of social learning] is a process of collective and communicative learning, which may lead to a number of social outcomes, new skills and knowledge as well as the development of trust and relationships may form the basis for a common understanding of the system or problem at hand, agreement and collective action” (p. 330). As such, social learning is a mode of learning “that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social networks.” Reed et al., 2010 (pp.4).

Recent publications (see amongst others Van Assche et al., 2013), add to this dynamic definition of social learning and emphasize the importance of taking into account the context or community in which social learning takes place. In other words, learning is an interplay between social competence and individual experience as ‘it combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures’ (Wenger, 2000, pp. 227).

Social learning, these authors argue, is not something that happens isolated between individuals but takes place embedded in a complex community, potentially leading to collective learning (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). In such a community, social learning is influenced by structures such as formal and informal institutions, social dynamics like trust, leaders and power relations, and technology such as tools enabling information processing (Gerlak & Heikkila, 2011). Looking at social learning from such a dynamic multi-faceted perspective, it is argued that social learning takes place at various sites and in various ways (Wenger, 1998). In other words, communities exist of multiple, but connected, learning sites in which learning takes place. Social learning taking place in these different sites does, however, not always simply add up to existing insight and knowledge (Gerlak & Heikkila, 2011). Moreover, new insights and findings are continuously re-interpreted in various learning sites, triggering planned and unplanned effects elsewhere in the community (Pollard & du Toit, 2011).

Understanding social learning on such a more collective or community level thus means taking into account different and interconnected learning sites within learning communities. Following Etienne Wengers’ theory on communities of practice (1998) such an analyses includes focusing on three interrelated elements:

Domain: characterized as a ‘shared domain of interest and shared competences’, the domain is the shared subject on which the network with other to learn from is based.
Community: the shared practices and interactions that are undertaken by members to engage in joined initiatives.

Practice: shared practices result in a shared repertoire of doing and ‘a shared repertoire of resources’

Relating these focal points back to the main aim of this paper, bringing about understanding of how learning takes place through interactions and activities at different sites within the region, thus means focusing on domain networks, practices and interactions within these networks and how these contribute to a shared repertoire of practices and resources (community) and thus a more collective learning process. In the subsequent sections we will use this focus by looking at the domain of social innovation in the region of Hart van Brabant and how the different elements develop into collective learning.

Methods

In order to answer these questions, we look at the domain, community and practice of social innovation in the region Hart van Brabant in the south of the Netherlands. This region developed ‘social innovation’ as a place-making strategy in order to become a more attractive and economic viable region. In this region, social innovation as a place-making or regional branding strategy entailed an ambition of the region to become the leader in social innovations, either as products – for example the youth unemployment free zone (jeugdwerkloosheidsvrije zone) – or as an experimental form of collaboration between businesses, knowledge-institutes, governmental actors, non-profit organizations, and individual citizens. The policy aim was coordinated by a regional body attempted to initiate and coordinate a regional, collective learning process. The question is what happens if a regional body attempts to connect social learning in smaller groups to a collectivity that is not organized, at least not in a traditional way.

Data gathering and data analysis

For our data gathering and analyses we used a three stage approach. In the first stage we conducted a short review towards social innovation in order to operationalize social innovation in terms of community of practice. In the second stage, we conducted ten in-depth interviews with people involved in the regional collaboration, for example the mayor of the largest city in the region; the province; one of the social-welfare organizations; one of the people working for the regional body for economic development. In addition, we conducted a document analysis of policy documents, and we organized two focus group meetings. In the third stage, we analyzed the interviews, the documents and the minutes of the focus groups with a coding scheme based on dimensions of social innovation as distinguished in the literature on social innovation in order to map the domain. Building on this analysis we created a radar of the shifting definition of social innovation that had been negotiated by these actors. In addition, we analyzed the documents in excel / atlas.ti to understand what the community and practice of social innovation in the region are. In order to find the community, we searched for actors involved in the regional branding as initiated by a regional governing body, but also for regional actors that used social innovation in their (policy) documents. We used the same strategy to find practices of social innovation in the region, but also elsewhere.
The Hart van Brabant: a case of social innovation as collective learning?

The Hart van Brabant is a region in the South of the Netherlands. It is located between on the one hand, the more Eastern ‘technological’ region around the city of Eindhoven. A rather successful example of triple helix governance (Verheul & Daamen, 2014). And on the other side there is the ‘Delta’ region that is considered a logistical ‘hotspot’ (see figure 1).

An alliance of communities, entrepreneurs and knowledge institutes developed an ambition for the region to become known and attractive because of ‘Social innovation’¹. This ambition was shared and co-created with regional stakeholders in a participatory process facilitated by ‘De Ideale Connectie’ (“The Ideal Connection”) which preempted ‘Midpoint’ and functioned as a sort of economic board of the region. The Ideal Connection had the objective to collaboratively strengthen and increase the visibility of the socio-economic power of municipalities, educational and research institutes, and businesses in the Middle of Brabant. As part of this investment social innovation in this region was developed to strengthen the identity of the region, to brand the region (Hospers, 2006) and to use it as a way to lobby for European resources (Power2020, 2014).

In 2010 the regional alliance formulated a strategic agenda to become the region of Social Innovation in the Netherlands and within Europe. Five ambitions were formulated: 1) creating a top-knowledge institute for social innovation; 2) open source knowledge and development platform (Midpoint); 3) to make the region more attractive for new businesses; 4) innovate governance structures; 5) branding the region. In this way the region also aimed at connecting strategically to an important theme in Europe that was part of the European agenda in 2011. The chair of the European Committee, Jose Barroso confirmed this issue in a speech in 2011, and the theme is also part of the European grant scheme Horizon 2020.

Figure 1 Clusters in Brabant (Bron: https://www.brabant.nl/dossiers/dossiers-op-thema/economie-en-werk/sterke-brabantse-clusters.aspx accessed August 22 2015)

Results
Domain, Community and Practice of Social Innovation
What may be confusing in this case, is the fact that social innovation is an academic concept that has been transplanted to and is further developed in policy, planning, and economic development practices of a region in the Netherlands. To operationalize it further in relation to communities of practice, we therefore started off with a literature review.

In the academic literature, social innovation, has been conceptualized most of all in response, or in addition to literature on technological innovations. In this strand of literature, the importance of the social dimension of innovations has become a widely accepted idea. Research on innovation has widened to accept the process of innovation itself as a social action. Therefore, although we have a lot to gain by building on previous research on technical innovation, the particularities of social innovation call for new paradigms and new theoretical perspectives in order to move forward (Cajaiba-Santana 2014, p.43)

Roughly two approaches to social innovation can be distinguished in academic literature: the first one developed by scholars in economics and considers social innovation as a form of social entrepreneurship of small radical innovative businesses (e.g. Goldsmith (2010). The second approach to social innovation is more closely related to not-for-profit initiatives, including citizen’s initiatives (e.g. Mulgan (2006). Emphasized by both groups of scholars is that we live in a network-society in which hierarchical structures no longer function and are considered counter-productive for innovations. In addition, the social innovations typically challenge these structures, routines and systems: “social innovations are, in a significant way, new and disruptive towards the routines and structures prevailing in a given (welfare) system or local setting. Whether or not they can be seen as “better” (more effective / social / democratic) is a question of its own that can only be answered in retrospective” (Evers, Ewert, Brandsen 2014).
In addition, one of the most important questions in the academic literature is how technological and social innovations relate. Previously, technological – product- innovations were considered the instigators of social innovation. Examples are the internet, but also cell-phones and technologies such as GPS in TOMTOM, and how these change inter-human interaction. However, literature in innovation studies more and more acknowledges new governance arrangements, new social relations and interactions, and social initiatives as important innovations in themselves: “The importance of the social dimension of innovation has become a widely accepted idea. Research on innovation has widened to accept the process of innovation itself as a social action. Therefore, although we have a lot to gain by building on previous research on technical innovation, the particularities of social innovation call for new paradigms and new theoretical perspectives in order to move forward” (Cajaiba-Santana 2014, p.43)

Based on the academic discussions, we distinguished five dimensions of social innovation that are helpful in analyzing the domain of social innovation in the region Hart van Brabant. We organized these five elements in relation to the three dimension of social learning that Wenger defines, the domain, the community and the practice. The five dimensions of social innovation (cross checked in the first focus group):

**Domain:**
1. Social and technological innovations
2. Social and economic (entrepreneurial) innovations
3. Product innovations or social innovation as an innovative process
   Domain elements

**Community**
4. Localized or networked innovations – are innovations place-specific, or are they created in a community?

**Practice**
5. Individual/projects or structural innovations?

**Domain Social Innovation**
The analysis of the interviews and documents demonstrated that the domain of social innovation in the region is mostly related to economic development in connection to societal challenges. Especially in the beginning, when SI was chosen as focal point for regional policies. In other words, social innovation in the region is considered as new forms of collaboration between businesses, governments and knowledge institutions. New ‘businesses cases’ are part and parcel of any of these new forms of collaboration. In the words of one respondent: “social innovations always need to be able to finance themselves, government should not have to subsidize these. Economic development is the engine for social innovation”. However, we also see that SI is perceived broader amongst those connected to the
technical focused Brainport region. These groups still see the domain dominated by the socio-economic perspective but also in connection to social-technical innovations.

The domain of social innovation in the region, to most respondents and in most policy documents, is the idea that the region can increase its attractiveness and better position itself, economically but also otherwise. Social innovation – in the form of social entrepreneurship – fits with the DNA of the region. So far the domain of SI seems to be characterized mainly by product innovations and the domain is less characterized by SI as process innovations. This does, however, not mean that there is not the wish to focus on processes. The entrepreneurial DNA of the region and the focus on products result in a slightly more emphasis on social entrepreneurship than on citizens’ initiatives.

When looking for future possibilities for the domain of social innovation, the policy documents and respondents identify the social challenges as something that needs to be better included (fig 2). Interestingly, this does not immediately lead to the conclusion that the community needs to be broadened with actors from society (see under community). In addition, the same goes for the broadening of the domain to social-creative innovations and wish to focus more on process innovations. Both are seen as important, but neither of them results in focusing more on structural changes to allow new processes, or the inclusion of the creative class.
The community

The formal community of Hart van Brabant is described at the start of this empirical section. However, this regional collaboration not necessarily forms the community around social innovation. Who forms the community around social innovation? The Ideal Connection was first established as an organization to enhance social innovation in the region. Next to promotion of the economic assets of the region (leisure, logistics and life science). In 2010 this Ideal Connection that functioned as a platform, was re-organized into a sort of economic board, called Midpoint. In 2015 Midpoint erected a center for social innovation as a ‘hatchery’ – fertile ground – for entrepreneurship and innovation that ultimately should lead to the creation of societal and economic value (http://www.midpointcsi.nl/over/). This center is financed by the municipality of Tilburg and Midpoint (and through that midpoint partners, see above). In addition this center has the following partners: SHFT (consultancy firm); Het Pon (research and consultancy form); MVO013 (platform of social entrepreneurs in Tilburg); NHTV (Breda university of Applied Sciences); Leefbaarheid Brabant (platform for social innovation and livability); Incubate (a festival at the fringes of theatre, music, visual arts, and film). In addition, there is the European Social Innovation Week; in the past there were ‘Pathfinders’ (sort of ambassadors for SI); and Tilburg University has several knowledge centers that conduct some form of research related to social innovation (Metze 2014).

A close analysis of the documents and interviews also indicates that a large part of the community of social innovation is located in governmental organizations, and (temporary) centers or platforms erected by governments with support of consultancy firms and other organizations. This is partly due to the fact that SI in the region was initially initiated by governmental organizations. In this way it is most of all a ‘top-down’ idea to promote the region as desired SI region and aimed after by mostly governmental actors. It are these actors in the community that also are in a position to create a learning environment and exchange about the practice of social innovation.

On the other hand, there are innovative projects and examples that seem not well connected to this more ‘structural’ and strategic parts of the exchanges of social innovation. Under practices there is a list
of these projects that were mentioned in documents and interviews. In addition, the website of the Midpoint Centre for Social Innovation contains about 85 members of this community. These can be considered people that identify with the domain. Members are for example, Panorama energy – consultants in development of sustainable energy or Lifebizz a coaching and training company. Those are also the organizations that attend and organize events at learning settings, such as the social innovation week.

Hence there is a large network of actors that identifies themselves with social innovation; however, the community around social innovation seems to be separated into two rather small communities that have the region as their context. These communities both have their own practices and only a couple of shared practices:

First: a government-led group of people that facilitate and connect people that they identify or that self-identify as social innovators. The ‘governmental actors’ have a strategic agenda on social innovation and attempt to connect this with bottom up initiatives. Because of the governmental influences, this is also the most visible community.

Second, there are bottom up initiatives that entail all sorts of people that identify with the domain and connect to the platforms that governmental actors provide.

Third, the exchange between the strategic level of the community and that of the operational level, seems to be under-developed. Learning between the two communities about their shared domain of social innovation can be further developed in practices (such as the social innovation week; events organized at the midpoint center for social innovation and so on). Moreover, these practices would also allow to connect to a third and less visible sub-community: the national and European community that is also present and only loosely coupled during events, visits or other very temporal practices.

The practices

The practice of social innovation are the loosely connected initiatives and forms of experimentation, in the region. Without giving a complete overview and in random order, examples of current and past successful practices and projects are:

- The Education Lab (Het Onderwijslab)
- The entrepreneurial city (De Ondernemende stad);
- Pathfinders (Het Pathfinders traject)
- The Safe / Caring / Sustainable City (De geborgen stad; zorgzame stad; veilige stad en duurzame stad);
- The Youth Employment Free Zone (De Jeugdwerkloosheidsvrije zone);
- Silver Tilburg is Singing (Zilver Tilburg Zingt)
- Into d’mentia;
- The Starters Grant (De Startersbeurs),
- Collaboration in the Buidling sector (Samenwerking in de bouwkolom);
- Sustainable housing development (Verduurzaming bestaande woningbouw (ketenintegratie));
The practices of social innovation range from collaboration and experimentation on the domains of logistics, dementia, the labor market and experimentation with a form of basic income, sustainable building, and so on. Hence, the practices are very diverse and have in common that they are located in one region, and that they follow some principles that belong to the domain of social innovation: innovative collaboration, some form of entrepreneurship, dealing with societal challenges, new forms of knowledge production. Hence, the practices produce innovative ‘products’ but also ‘processes’. There is a loosely connected network of social innovation practices and there are some nodes in this network that succeed in bringing the practices together: for example the European social innovation week, that not only connects regional practices but also other European practices of social innovation. As a result we see that the practices do not form a structural, interconnected form of social innovation.

This does not mean that there are no innovative structures, but also here they depend largely on one person or company. Moreover, the interviews and documents show a lack of structures opening-up for innovative ideas on the one hand and innovative projects being unable to connect to and influence existing structures on the other. Consequently, existing structures seem to hamper the development of project practices of social innovation to more structure innovations and a process domain.

Links between domain, community & practice: Social learning and social innovation?

Hence, there is a domain, there is a community and there are practices of social innovation at the regional level. These are ingredients for social learning; however, the question is if social learning takes place. Overlooking the case we see that social learning takes place in rather isolated experimentation; and sometimes in explicitly organized events on social innovation, such as the social innovation week, or in two focus groups (commissioned by the regional body) that we organized for this research. These nodes offer important informal learning settings at which the two scattered communities of social innovation that do learn rather individually and isolated in the region engages in an exchange of their lessons learned, tacit knowledge and experiential knowledge, and makes this more explicit. These interactions have the potential to strengthen all three elements of social learning.

On these nodes of interaction we see a strong link between social innovation as projects and by individuals, and the product orientation of the domain. In other words, there is no project overarching
process innovation for the region, but more social innovation on the project level taking place. This is also visible in the practices, here the more structural innovative practices are practically absent, and existing, more traditional structures remain dominant. In the words of one of our interviewees: “the SI-projects rumble through the existing structures”. Consequently, learning on structure level remains limited.

In addition, there are more limitations when it comes to learning in the region. First of all, as we saw, the connection between the governmental, strategically operating actors on one hand, and the bottom up initiatives, is not made very often. Consequently, these two communities hardly interact. If we focus more closely on the link between the two communities, and the practices in the region we see that the practices of the bottom-up community are unable to influence or connect to the government dominated community. In other words, although there is a shared domain, learning across communities through practices is hardly seen. Second, the initial focus on economic development misses out actors from more societal oriented initiatives or outside traditional business networks. Even though the societal challenges are part of social innovation, respondents not necessarily connect this to the inclusion of societal, not-for-profit organizations in the community of social innovation. As such, the domain remains dominated by the same actors and by the same domain focus on socio-economic innovations. A way of doing, working and collaborating between government and entrepreneurs that also has a strong historical basis and is characterized as part of the DNA of the region. Consequently, learning takes place within this specific domain over the last 5-years.

Conclusions

Social learning at the regional level can contribute to the economic development, place making and branding of the region. Our case study demonstrates that the region of Hart van Brabant developed a domain, community and practice on social innovation. Although it would be premature to claim that the region succeeded in their ambitions to become the region of social innovation and as such be recognized by other actors, such as the Province, Europe and so on; we can well conclude that baby steps have been taken in this direction. On the other hand, a lot of bottom-up initiatives can be brought together under the flag of social innovation and the domain - that in itself has a social learning element to it – facilitates the creation of communities. We also concluded that there is not one community, not one learning network on the same domain. There are two communities, with rather separate practices: on a strategic level of the regional body, the city of Tilburg; mostly government-led community. On the other hand there are the bottom-up initiatives. Every ones in a while shared practices are organized; although, the learning seems to be taking place in two different communities. It are mostly structures and routine-interactions that limit cross-community interaction and learning.

Our question was if and how social learning in projects, can become a process of collective learning. What is necessary for– domain – what for community – what for practice? The case demonstrates that a shared domain and shared practices not necessarily lead to one community. Not in the sense that there is shared social learning community. Even if there is a shared domain - that in this case even had
the objective to create social innovation – which includes some form of collaborative learning in order to meet societal challenges. The case shows that a learning community can be facilitated. However, the case also demonstrates that a rather top-down approach in this facilitation process – elites of government, knowledge institutes and businesses created a strategic agenda for the region and developed some programs to facilitate the implementation – does not connect to the more locally embedded community. This approach does create some linkages among individual practices, and as such a community between the actors involved in these practices. However, the connection with the elites remains rather loose, and the structures that come along with these more traditional ways of working hamper establishing one community and learning with and across other communities. As such two communities of practice emerge around one domain.

What does this mean for regional governance in general and learning in regions specifically? The case shows that a top-down policy to create a region around a certain theme does not necessary lead to the creation of a regional community. More specific it shows how it was unable to connect to other ongoing developments in the region, resulting in dual community around one domain. This raises the question what can be done to better connect the communities? An answer often opted for is a different collaborative governance approach and a different style of leadership. Such a leadership or governance approach would have to function as a catalyst, mediating and facilitating the connection between the communities (Ansell and Gash 2008; 2013). We add that such an approach aiming at place-making, should be sensitive to the cultural routines, the own identity, structures and ideas of the wide range of actors that come along with regional collaboration. Moreover, it should built upon ongoing activities and initiatives that are going on in the region (De Vries, 2014). Such a community sensitive approach is vital in bringing people together, and encouraging them to open-up for new alliances and collaborations, and for allowing people to learn and new innovations to emerge and fail. An approach that requires a different role from, especially traditional, actors. Especially when the focus is on learning, because where learning takes place things go wrong and room to experiment and fail is needed.

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