



# WHY SHOULD WE TAKE SERIOUSLY THE SOCIAL ECONOMY? The future of work and the role of social innovation

by Maria Luigia Pisani

**The ongoing debate about the new great transformation of work is mainly focused on drivers such as technology and globalizations.** New forms of work are born in a few years and are spreading out quite quickly (co-working, smart working, digital working, e-working) affecting different target of people and workers. **Demographic change is also playing a major role:** workforce aging, low birth rate (especially in western countries), migrations, mobility are some of the challenges that any developed country should take on. **This transformation is affecting not only working conditions, but also the way we look at work, the meaning and deepest sense of work, how it is undertaken, its impact on people and society.**

New and complex economies are developing: **it is not only about labour market and industrial relations' institutions, finance, technology and scientific innovation, it is about progress and the relationship between work and society,** environment, welfare, education and diversity management. It is about different “places where personal and professional identities intersect in risky or rewarding ways” (Taylor P., Wagg P., *Work and Society: Places, Spaces and Identities*, University of Chester Press, 2014).

It concerns people and the necessity of meeting these new needs by investing in social innovation, which is new ideas meeting unmet needs. Some of these needs, challenges, problems and difficulties are faced by civil society and organizations instead of governments and institutions. This happens for several reasons: lack of knowledge and participation of institutions and governments, poorly understanding of practices, lack of adequate mechanisms to adopt, adapt and scale social needs.

**The so called “third sector” is growing, including cooperatives, mutual, foundations, NGOs and social enterprises.** Some of them have created strong international networks and deal with all forms of social poverty, providing a wide range of activities that combine in a very innovative way the functions and the production of goods and services in the field of health, social services, children's rights and so on. These organizations primarily pursue social aims and are characterized by participative governance systems.

In many countries, they have evolved spontaneously, without comprehensive policy support or regulatory frameworks that could contribute to their development, by promoting new social services, born primarily out of the initiative of groups of volunteers and only after several years they received the official recognition by government and public institutions. Economist estimate that 50/80% of economic growth comes from innovation and new knowledge. **Some of the barriers to lasting growth (such as climate change, or ageing population) can only be**

**overcome by social innovation, which is a bottom-up process, starting from people who want to solve people's problems and needs. Social entrepreneurs and innovators can drive the social change which is needed to address the gap between what people need and what they're offered by governments and private firms – a gap which is constantly widened by the emergence of new technologies and new scientific knowledge** (*Social Innovation what it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated*, Geoff Mulgan, The Young Foundation, Oxford 2007).

Social economy is also enhancing new professions and competencies to respond to the transformation of societies and the connected labour market. **New professional profiles are emerging from this asset and transformation to take on new challenges coming up from the demand for social innovation.** With this respect, the focus is usually on medium-low qualified profiles employed in the social care sector or on the spreading of “white jobs” and “green jobs”, but also in this field we can expect a rising demand for research, management and entrepreneurial skills.

**Growing importance is given to new professional profiles such as the *Social innovation project manager*, with a deep knowledge of social unmet needs, leadership and management skills, ability to creating and managing a new projects, new processes and services for the society**, by planning, drafting, managing, monitoring, assessing and controlling projects and by creating national and international networks. This also requires a specific mindset, the ability to catch the potential innovation in new or not linear contexts, avoiding to lose opportunities sometimes “hidden” or not easily affordable and without labeling new dynamics and transformation *a priori* (*Social Economy and social entrepreneurship*, Social Europe guide, European Commission, Luxembourg 2013).

Lack of knowledge and specific expertise often impede the many institutions and companies interested in producing social innovation, including philanthropists, foundations and governments. A first step is to recognize that future growth and well-being depend as much on social innovations as they do on a continuing stream of new technologies. The European Union is working on grabbing new opportunities and needs rising within the member countries: the program Horizon2020 is the biggest Innovation and Research program pursuing some of these objectives: green policies, research and education, new welfare assistance, smart cities, gender equalities.

**With the boundaries between technologies, economy and people , a new paradigm is needed to move from development to *progress*, from change to *evolution*, from invention to real *innovation*.**

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