

Open Knowledge 2026-2: Social innovation and development

August 14 – 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. | August 15 – 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. (in person)

The FIGRI School of Government and Public Policy invites you to participate in *Open Knowledge*, which will take place in person on August 14 from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. and on August 15 from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Who can attend:

This program is open to students enrolled in postgraduate programs at FIGRI. While English proficiency is desirable, interpretation services will be provided by the organizers for participants who are not comfortable communicating in English.

Only 60 seats are available. Preference will be given to students from the School of Government and Public Policy.

Registration:

[Open Knowledge: Social Innovation and Development: Rellenar formulario](#)

Description

The Promise of Social Innovation

Over the last decades, the concepts of “social innovation” and “technological innovation” have become Babylonian buzzwords. The European Commission defines social innovations, very generally, as the introduction of novelty in the economic and social spheres. Such a novelty is closely tied to societal and technological transformation. Therefore, governments all over the world have adopted the word “social innovation.” Western countries, with technologically highly advanced industrial technologies, need social-technological innovations to overcome shortages in energy supply.

Emerging economies struggle finding a balance between industrialization and respect for the natural environment. Countries permeated with societal conflict and violence need a stable base for sustainable socio-economic growth and technological development. Social innovations are crucial in our societally and technologically transforming world.

This is emphasized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which defines social innovations as: “New solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet:

- a social need (more effectively than existing solutions)
- lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources.

In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act.”¹

Are social innovations symbolical?

Over the world, in completely different contexts, must face a world characterized by technological disruption and global change. Governments must deal with those disruptions and change. They legitimize their power-basis by promising (fundamental) change and transformation for the benefit of society. The “capacity to act” is essential for any government’s survival. Governments often use the word “social innovation” as a magical concept, a spell to change the world. Governments, thus, adopt the concept of social innovation to induce a promotion of health, production of sustainable energy, climate adaptation, preservation of nature, as well as the attainment of social equality and peace. You as a professional may wonder whether for you, in your situation, such magic works.

Are social innovations idealistic?

In contrast with the global nature of societal challenges and technological disruption, social innovations are often small-scale and community-based initiatives. They thrive in local contexts. Examples include the self-governance of water resources in Africa, the introduction of small-scale sustainable clothing factories in India, a local community in Colombia growing medicinal plants for native healing, or the introduction of specific foods in Vietnam to combat malnutrition. Such examples are ideals, and you may wonder whether the ideal-type situation applies for you and your professional situation.

Sometimes, a massive introduction of social innovations at community-level can, indeed, result in a societal transformation. But these are still exceptions. One example is the ‘micro-credits’ program of banker Muhammad Yunus. Another example is the initiative of citizen-collectivities as energy producers that collectively invest in sustainable forms of energy production.

A realistic approach

As a professional in your local government, or non-governmental organization, you may wonder whether the concept of social innovation has relevance for you. What could you – yourself – do to promote, initiate, design, and implement social innovations? For the context in which you work is so different from all the “best practices” and “good examples.” How could you best apply this sometimes symbolic, and often idealistic, concept to your own professional situation?

The master seminar will inspire you to develop a *realistic approach* to the design of social innovations. You are public managers and professionals and work your own local government or non-governmental organization. You are confronted with very specific circumstances that (seem to) make your work unique. The realistic approach may prove helpful for you, as a public manager, to develop your own way to approach social innovation in your specific context.

It helps you to navigate around two fundamental challenges of societal transformation that you face as public managers and public professionals:

1. You face a world characterized by societal transformation and technological disruption, that come with high levels of uncertainty.
2. Those transformations and disruptions materialize in a very specific, unique, way in your own professional contexts; professional contexts are sometimes completely different between public managers and professionals.

Ad 1. The intimidating “VUCA” world

For emergent economies in the Global South and the Northern West and East alike, the concept of social innovation inhibits a promise of building a better and sustainable society. This promise is made in the face of emergent technological disruptions and fundamental societal change.

In such a world, you operate as a public manager in a complex environment that is characterized by the acronym “VUCA”. VUCA stand for “volatile”, “uncertain”, complex”, and “ambiguous”. Such a world can easily be very intimidating. Thus, VUCA environments call for a specific type of public management and leadership that is fundamentally different from traditional management concepts. The field of Public Management studies how political-administrative systems can address societal problems in such complex environments. This entails conditions for:

- a) Prudent political and administrative decision-making in VUCA environments, which contributes to the attainment of public values and acceptance of political-administrative decisions.
- b) The bottom-up design and diffusion of novel interventions, policies, programs, and interventions that work and really contribute to the public values.

Social innovation emphasizes changing human cognition and behaviors in interaction with technological change to attain important *public values* as outcomes of innovation – and not commercial outcomes allocated to private enterprises. Thus, social innovation is both an activity and an outcome of that activity. Social innovation emphasizes social interactions at the local community level to co-create / co-design, and co-produce practices and technological artefacts – involving a constant learning and capacity building. It is crucial, and often neglected, that the importance of a process of social innovation is at least as valuable as the social innovation itself for the community.

Ad 2. The uniqueness of our own work context

With the conclusion that the activity of social innovation is at least as valuable as the outcome of that activity (the “social innovation”) itself we encounter a serious problem. That is: communities in which social innovations are developed all seem to (fundamentally) differ from each other. Hence the question you will ask yourself: why would this or that ideal-type social innovation apply to my work context? Why or how could I learn from other contexts that seem to be so fundamentally different from my work context? How could a social innovation in a big city of Bogota would work in a much smaller community like Acacías, situated in a much different natural environment?

This question is very relevant for Colombia, which encompasses so many places so many different physical environments. From the Andes ranges, the Amazonas rain forests, to the contested rural areas in the South-West and the beaches of the Caribbean: there is no one single context for social innovation. Take the organization of Colombian central and local government: so many local governments, so many different rules, tax regimes, or accountability structures. Take the local social contexts: elite capture makes it sometimes very difficult to engage in the democratization of local communities where the power is in the hands of one or few families. Violence related to criminal

activities of intertwined drug cartels and guerillas will prohibit many social innovations that would flourish in other parts of the world – or even Colombia.

In the seminar we address this problem of context by changing the way we think about intervention programs and innovations. We will move from away an experimenting (laboratory) approach to an approach that emphasizes *social mechanisms*. If we adopt a social mechanism approach, the core question becomes: “what works in my specific context?” As a consequence, we will accept the notion that a particular innovation does not work in different contexts. We must even accept that the adoption of an innovation in contexts that *appear* to be similar, may produce different outcomes.

Aim of the Seminar

The problem of context is a serious concern for any professional who would want to learn from social innovations. How can we learn lessons in a systematic way – and adopt (some elements of) a social innovation with the confidence that it will work? In the seminar, participants will learn how to systemize their thinking about social innovations in such a way, that they can learn from best practices to develop social innovations that work in their own context. We use the approaches of *design thinking* and *realistic evaluation* to develop this understanding. Participants practice with applications in their own work context.

Learning objectives

1. Students have an understanding of the concept of VUCA. They can apply the concept of VUCA to describe and analyze complexity of environmental dynamics in their own work context.
2. Students have an in-depth understanding of *general* versus *contextual* explanations for the success or failure of social innovations. Students can identify these explanations in their own work context.
3. Students are able to apply *Realistic Evaluation* in their own work context and are able to use the CMO approach to adapt / design social innovations to be successful in their own work context

Literature

Brown, Tim and Jocelyn Wyatt. 2010. *Design Thinking for Social Innovation*. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter, pp. 30-35.

Pawson, Ray and Nick Tilley. 2013. An Introduction to Scientific Realist Evaluation. In: Eleanor Chelimsky & William R. Shadish (Eds.), *Evaluation for the 21st Century: A Handbook*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publishers (12 pp.).

Overview of Master Seminar

Day-1	
Reading material: Brown, Tim and Jocelyn Wyatt. 2010. <i>Design Thinking for Social Innovation</i> . Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter, pp. 30-35.	
Schedule	
14.00 AM – 14.45 AM	Lecture 1: Social Innovations in a VUCA Environment
14.45 AM – 15.00 AM	Break
15.00 AM – 15.45 AM	Lecture 2: Social Innovation: Design principles
15.45 AM – 16.00 AM	Break
16.00 AM – 16.15 AM	Instructions
16.15 AM – 17.15 AM	Work on assignment A
17.15 AM – 18.00 AM	Feedback and discussion

Day-2	
Reading material: Pawson, Ray and Nick Tilley. 2013. An Introduction to Scientific Realist Evaluation. In: Eleanor Chelimsky & William R. Shadish (Eds.), <i>Evaluation for the 21st Century: A Handbook</i> . Thousand Oaks, Sage Publishers (12 pp.).	
Schedule	
08.00 AM – 08.45 AM	Lecture 3: The Problem of Context
08.45 AM – 09.00 AM	Break
09.00 AM – 09.45 AM	Lecture 4: Realistic Evaluation
09.45 AM – 10.00 AM	Break
10.00 AM – 10.15 AM	Instructions
10.15 AM – 11.15 AM	Work on assignment B
11.15 AM – 12.00 AM	Feedback, discussion, and wrap-up

More Info

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