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## **MIDDLE-RANGE THEORISING**

Bridging Micro- and Meso-Level

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# Middle-range Theorising – Bridging the Micro- and Meso-Level of Social Innovation

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## ABSTRACT

*Solutions to empower and (re-)engage vulnerable and marginalised populations to unfold their hidden potential allowing them to fully participate the social, economic, cultural and political life, necessarily involve institutional change. This in turn necessitates understanding the processes and mechanisms by which social innovations lead to institutional change. Considering the specific nature of social innovations as interactive, generative and contextualised phenomena while maintaining that many practices at the micro-level can add up to patterns and regularities at the macro-level, middle-range theorising (MRT) is proposed as an appropriate method to theoretically underpin and substantiate theoretical advancements towards a multidisciplinary perspective on the economic dimensions of social innovation, identifying the direction of future empirical inquiries.*

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## Contents

1	Introduction.....	2
2	Reviving Merton & Colleagues – Roots & Development of mrt.....	2
2.1	Merton’s MRT – Roots & Consequences for SIMPACT.....	2
2.2	Modern MRT – In Search of Social Mechanisms.....	3
3	MRT – Consequences for SIMPACT.....	5
4	Making Research Work – Methods in MRT.....	6
5	Mechanisms – From Micro to Meso.....	7

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2011 Elliot and Attridge published a reader discussing the question of «Theory after Theory» and some years later Felsch (2015) published his impressions of the «long summer of theory». Both publications – and further debates in most disciplines of social science and humanities – stand for an ongoing discussion about the future of theorising. There are good reasons to be sceptical about general theories such as «modernisation theory» or «system theory» especially about the gap between ambitious theories on the one hand and empirical groundings on the other hand.

SIMPACT project is neither the place to redefine the future of theorising nor to surrender a theoretical approach. SIMPACT follows an established way of linking theoretical and empirical research and is committed to the concept of middle-range theorising (MRT).

At the time SIMPACT's rationale was developed, we emphasised the following key assets of a theoretical frame for the economic underpinnings of social innovation:

- Starting with a multidisciplinary theoretical framework;
- Combining institution-centric-views and actor-centric-views;
- Middle-range theory committed to evolutionary thinking;
- Reflecting the position in the social innovation lifecycle;
- Bridging micro-level and medium-level by a design approach;
- Clear emphasis on economic foundations of social innovations;
- Strong (not exclusive) focus on marginalised and poor (as an economic asset)

In the course of the project some aspects had to be adapted according to the findings from the multidisciplinary literature review (Rehfeld et al., 2015) and first results of the empirical phase. For instance, it became evident that middle-range theorising is not only committed to evolutionary thinking, but necessitates adding results from social and historical process theories. To understand the dynamics of social innovation, we need to overcome the limited view of the social innovation lifecycle and to account

the dynamics of underlying processes. Considering these aspects and to bridge micro- and meso-level asks not only for a design approach, but also for studying the role of public policy.

Acknowledging the procedural nature of middle-range theorising this working paper is to be understood as an initial step to advance understanding the underlying methodology and its consequences for SIMPACT. The remainder paper summarises the project's theoretical approach and lessons learned during the first year of the project: Key assumptions are presented, references are made to the theoretical framework, and suggestions for the next project phase are made. We start by looking back on the roots of middle-range theorising (MRT) and giving an overview about the further chapters. Key topics are refer to a modern interpretation of middle-range theorising, aspects that frame the SIMPACT approach, and consequences for empirical research.

## 2 REVIVING MERTON & COLLEAGUES – ROOTS & DEVELOPMENT OF MRT

*«Like so many other words that are bandied about, the word theory threatens to become meaningless. Because its referents are so divers - including everything from minor working hypotheses, through comprehensive but vague and unordered speculations, to axiomatic systems of thought – use the word often obscures rather than it creates understanding.»*

(Merton, 1968: 39).

### 2.1 Merton's MRT – Roots & Consequences for SIMPACT

When Merton (1949) published his reflections on middle-range theorising the first time, he intended to criticise the poor empirical base of system theories, for example, Parsons' «structural-functionalism». In the course of the post-war years Merton became one of the most prominent scholars in social theory and in philosophy of science.

The commitment to Merton's MRT suggests starting with his original ideas. Following Merton (1949: 448) theories of middle range «[...] lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uni-

formity of social behaviour, social organisation, and social change.» Unlike theories that consist of elaborate frameworks with various conceptual distinctions, theories of middle range comprise a limited set of interrelated prepositions, aimed to understand a defined topic (Merton, 1968). A further characteristic that distinguishes MRT from grand theories is its strong emphasis on the interaction between theory and empirical research (Geels, 2007).

Merton's approach initiated an ongoing discussion about linking empirical research and theory in social science and especially in sociology. The most prominent comment was by Boudon (1991), who concluded that Merton did nothing but making the established way of social research explicit. Other discussants missed a clear line of Merton's approach. For example, Schmid (2010) proposed to ignore the term middle-range theory. He argued that Merton is right when he criticises ad-hoc hypothesis on the one hand and general theories on the other hand. But in between – he argues – are very different levels of theorising and Merton did not explain clearly what middle-range exactly means.

Despite of the vague argumentation of Merton we can identify some key assets of MRT that are important for the approach of SIMPACT.

Firstly, following Merton, MRT is about guiding empirical research by theory. This has methodological implications that are discussed in section 4.

Secondly, MRT focuses on a specific field of social studies. It is not about general theory independent from time and space, but on social action and/or social structure in the context of a specific socioeconomic constellation (see section 3).

Thirdly, with MRT Merton laid the ground for a new understanding of causality in social science. Elaborated by Merton rather implicitly, but refined by his successor, the key question of causality is not about general statement such as «if ... then ...», rather it is on bridging the micro- and macro-level. Causality in this understanding asks for mechanisms that work when individual actions result in new social configurations or constellations. This is important for SIMPACT because it is strongly related to the question of scaling, diffusion and social processes (see section 5).

## 2.2 Modern MRT – In Search of Social Mechanisms

Overall Merton's MRT is about the basic question in social theory on the relationship between actors and structure. Not surprisingly the further development of MRT focuses on this aspect when it emphasises the link between micro- and macro-level. In this respect micro-level refers to the actors or the actions and macro-level for the structure.

One important contribution to the discussion on MRT was by James S. Coleman (1987, 1990) who shifted the focus of MRT from the level of structure to the level of actors and worked out the «macro-micro-macro model» depicted in Figure 1. In his model «macro» refers to social systems (e.g. family, business, society) and «micro» to individuals as well as corporate actors (Coleman, 1986: 346, 1990: 325f.). In this model we find social mechanisms that cover three modes of transition: (1) the macro-micro transition, (2) the micro-micro transition and the (3) micro-macro transition. The movement from the macro- to the micro-level of individual action and back to the macro-level, is what is referred to as «methodological individualism» (Coleman, 1986). Coleman (1990: 2) himself was mainly interested in the micro-micro transition, that is «[...] processes internal to the system, involving its component parts, or units at a level below that of the system». In this respect his approach is committed to rational choice theory, with its basic premise that aggregate social behaviour results from the behaviour of individual actors.

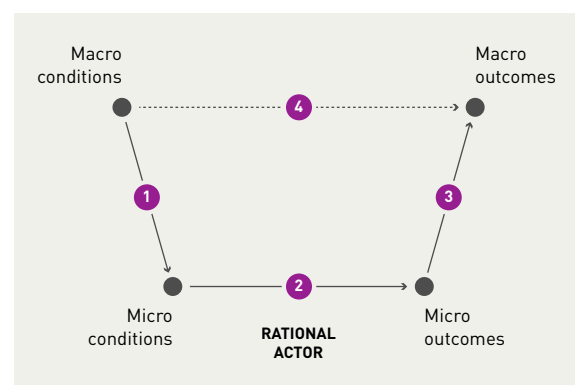


Figure 1. Coleman's Macro-Micro-Macro Model (after Coleman, 1990)

With regard to micro-macro transition, «[t]he interaction among individuals is seen to result in emer-

gent phenomena at the systems level, that is, phenomena that were neither intended nor predicted by the individuals» (ibid: 5). It is in this type of transition, which, according to Coleman, poses a major challenge to sociology. Subject the social context of an actor, actions are expected to have different consequences. That is why social organisation plays a pivotal role in transition processes from the micro to the macro level.

Hartmunt Esser's (1993, 1999) «model of sociological explanation» (MSE), is a second contribution with relevance for MRT. Also interested in mechanism bridging the micro- and the macro-level, Esser's model (see Figure 2) is quite similar to that of Coleman, but positions the social situation (i.e. the macro-level) in the centre. His key interest is to answer the question how single actors (alter and ego) change their action depending on the change of the situation/social system.

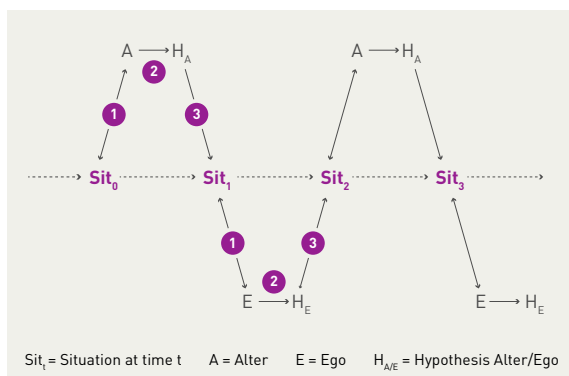


Figure 2. Esser's MSE Model (after Greshoff, 2008b: 112)

Basically the model comprises three steps Greshoff (2008b): (1) The *logic of situation* connects societal structures at the macro-level with subjective factors guiding individual actors' decisions, i.e. the micro-level. (2) The *logic of selection* specifies a rule (e.g. rational choice) about these factors' connection and the selection of certain behaviour. (3) Resulting individual effects accumulate toward a certain collective outcome, i.e. the *logic of aggregation*. In summary, to use Esser's (2004: 1133) words, «[...] the model systematically connects the macro-level of social structures with some micro-processes of actors and actions, and back again». Two key aspects of this approach are of interest for SIMPACT: First the assumption that it is not the social situation that drives social dynamics but the individual actors, their problems and interpretations of the situation

as well as resulting actions and their consequences. Second the interplay of individual actions and underlying selections result in a change of the social situation.

Developed by Renate Mayntz and Fritz W. Scharpf, «actor-centred institutionalism», one of the most important recent examples of making use of MRT in social science, is high relevance. The actor centred institutionalism claims to be a tailored frame (categories, guiding questions and hypothesis) to analyse and systematise empirical studies in the field political steering and societal self-organisation in different political arenas (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995). Special interest is an actor constellation and modes of interaction.

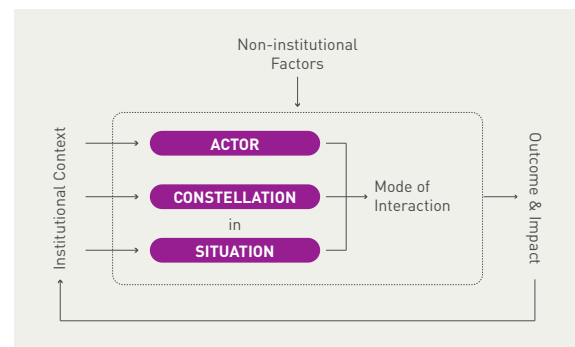


Figure 3. Analytical Model of Actor-centred Institutionalism (after Mayntz & Scharpf, 1995: 45)

As depicted in Figure 3, it aims at bridging methodological individualism and neo-institutionalism and centres around four basic assumptions:

- It transcends the outdated understanding of political institutions by studying *interaction between corporative actors* in political arenas;
- It focus on a *narrow understanding of institutions* that structure political arenas by giving rules (distribution and use of power, definition of competencies, access to resources or decision competencies); institutions or result of and guide for social action; institutions refer to «[...] systems of rules that structure the courses of action that a set of actors may choose» (Scharpf 1997: 38);
- Insofar it studies institutions as independent as well as dependent variable in explaining political results;
- To this end, institutions stimulate, encourage or limit action but they do not determine it.

The actor-centred institutionalism approach has been very prominent in the late 1990ies. As is noticed by Scharpf (1995: 66), the approach clearly suffers from over-complexity to be applied in empirical studies. Nevertheless, basic ideas of this approach have been adapted, for example, in the «varieties of capitalism approach» (Hall & Soskice, 2001) as well as in comparative studies about the welfare state (Graziano et al., 2011).

In our context a by-product of the debate on actor-centred institutionalism is of interest: the papers of Mayntz (1999) as well as Mayntz and Nedelmann (1997) on social processes that emphasise the micro-macro problem. The focus is on explaining emergent effects, i.e. the question how aggregated individual action brings about new structure or features in complex social systems.

In particular, interest is in self-enforcing processes, i.e. processes that are driven by their own dynamic, which in turn is driven by the (not-intended) results of individual actions. Social processes like this are characterised by three mechanisms (Mayntz & Nedelmann 1995: 98ff):

- Despite of minor impulses, individual actions bring about effects that dispose others to follow these actions and reinforce the dynamic. The dynamic is driven by the process itself, not by intentional action;
- Such processes require a specific feature (pattern). Positive or negative feedback loops are characteristic, escalation or destruction are possible results.
- Although emergent effects are not intended, they do not affect the process.

The contribution of Mayntz and Nedelmann is rather heuristic and ambitious as it is in search of general social mechanisms that explain the shift from micro- to macro-level. Following the authors, today societal dynamics are first of all studied with approaches coming from natural science (evolution, chain-reaction, or self-organisation). This is for instance true for the adaption of MRT in the context of actor-network theory and the transition approach (cf. for example Geels, 2007; Haxeltine et al., 2013).

SIMPACT, in contrast, accounts for the difference between processes in nature and in human society what is reflexivity (Mayntz, 1999). Therefore it

is worth to be aware the different modes of social dynamic like intentional planning, strategic action (scaling), reflexive but not targeted action, or self-enforcing processes with not intended results (see part 4).

### 3 MRT – CONSEQUENCES FOR SIMPACT

In general, modern MRT raises three questions of importance for the empirical research in SIMPACT:

**Question 1.** How does the macro-level (social situation, institutional context and related mode of governance) affect the action of the social innovator? As social innovation is about doing things different in distinct ways, emphasis is on motivations and possibilities to overcome established paths of the social configuration. Hence, research on social innovation is about path breaking (cf. Galtung 1975).

**Question 2.** How do social innovators interact within a given system of governance and why do they intend to overcome the limits of given social configurations or governance systems, also by means of scaling social innovation.

**Question 3.** How do different actors with different interests interact in order to promote or impede social innovation? What is the dynamic of the process and in to what extent is politics involved and matters? Here the focus is on the process of social innovation.

SIMPACT does not intend to provide general answers to these questions. In accordance with MRT, we draw on the specific topic that is reflected in the project's initial understanding of social innovation: «*In our approach social innovations refer to new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet the needs of socially or economically marginalized groups more effectively than alternatives and create new or improved social relationships or collaborations leading to a better use of societal assets and resources*» (Terstriep & Welschhoff, 2013)

Following this starting point the specific focus of SIMPACT is on *disadvantaged people* and on *economic underpinning*.

«Economic underpinning» focuses on the potential, the societal and/or the economic potential of vulnerable people. Forasmuch, SIMPACT is commit-

ted to social philosophers such as Gerhard Weisser (1978) or Amartya Sen (2010).

The basic assumption is that from social and economic perspective it is more efficient to unfold the hidden potential of vulnerable groups in society than leaving them in their constraint situation, while paying permanent subsidies: it contributes to overcome bottlenecks in qualified workforces, it helps to reduce costs of the welfare state, it empowers people to participate in cultural and political life, and in consequence it strengthens integration, welfare, and society. This also implies that being marginalised is not an individual feature or deficit, rather it results from the inability to make the potential of a certain groups of people work due to institutional and market failure.

Secondly, *efficiency* in SIMPACT is understood in a broad sense, it is about balancing economic, social and political efficiency. Efficiency has to measure by a range of criteria not only by simple monetary cost-benefit calculation.

Thirdly and not at least, *efficiency* is about tailored political intervention and instruments as well as the contribution to cope with the societal challenges of vulnerability and marginalisation.

Due to the topic of economic underpinning SIMPACT's key categories are *objectives, components and principles*. These categories guided the critical literature review and the empirical work (Rehfeld et al., 2015).

Further on, SIMPACT has a strong focus on Europe in the years following the financial and economic crisis in 2007. This focus is committed to the political and economic consequences of social innovations: Social innovation in SIMPACT's understanding aim at overcoming the economic and social problems caused by the crisis. SIMPACT asks for the societal impact of social innovation, and reflects on the necessity of political innovation to effectively exploit social innovations' potential social and economic impact.

#### 4 MAKING RESEARCH WORK – METHODS IN MRT

Social innovations are basic drivers and turning points in human history. When SIMPACT focuses on social innovations in the years following the finan-

cial and economic crisis the focus is very specific. The interest is in social innovations and its impact on coming societal challenges. There is need of broadening initiatives that root in civil society as well as to make use of those ideas for policy innovation. Despite of a broad range of research with topics related to social innovation and in certain term the topic is new on the agenda.

Therefore, we have to be careful when we make use of categories and hypothesis from different disciplines. For instance efficiency in the understanding of SIMPACT is quite different from efficiency in established economic research. Another example: The perception of vulnerable and marginalised as a potential contrasts current welfare policies, which tend to shift responsibility for individual development from public to the individual level, expressed by the notion «activating policy». Against the backdrop that marginalisation is subject to institutional failure, social innovation targeting the empowerment/re-inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised is expected to result in institutional change. Further on, institutional change not only covers the national welfare systems, but is strongly embedded in the multilevel European governance system. Institutional change has to rebalance the division of labour between the political levels on the one hand, and to integrate so far separated fields of politics on the other hand.

These examples illustrate that with reference to MRT, SIMPACT understands social innovation and its impact as a question of a specific *economic, social and political frame*. Therefore, the methodological approach bases on case studies (business models and social innovation biographies) that do not pre-define the results of given categories. Hence, the empirical work «follows the actors», as Latour (2007) proposed; it envisages to identify new trajectories of social innovations' emergence, spread and adaption in the political field under concern.

*Institutional change* in most cases is nothing completely new. In terms of social politics, for instance, the core change during the last decade was a retreat of the state and rise of market driven solutions. This means, institutional change often rebalances contrasting or opposite aspects. Therefore, SIMPACT makes use of the *dilemma approach*, which is about balancing different needs or values, while being committed to the understanding of social con-



figurations as fluent, often contradictory and seldom targeted.

Elaborated by Hampden-Turner and Tan (2002) as well as Trompenaars and Prud'homme (2004), the dilemma approach has its roots in management theory. In particular, the dilemma approach accounts for social and cultural complexity, dynamics and the paradoxical, if not conflicting, demands of different actors or by actors and the environment. The application of the dilemma approach in cross-cultural management studies illustrates that by reconciling seemingly opposing cultural values, conflicting values can be transformed into complementary values. In the dilemma approach, cultures are not assessed as a fixed set of value orientations, but by how they reconcile the dilemmas.

Hence, the dilemma approach helps to become aware of the openness of social dynamic and avoids a targeted bias in social innovation studies. A first step to make use of the dilemma approach in social innovation studies is to work out key dilemmas in the course of the social innovation process. The dilemmas are conceptualised on different level of abstraction depending on the level of analysis. On the *macro-level* social dilemmas are balancing, for example, individualist and collective modes of society, «society» and «community», or individual and shared consumption. The term «balance» induces that there is no one best or dominating solution, but that social solutions (or the underlying processes) always tend to reconcile the two extremes of a continuum in a specific way.

On the *micro-level* an important dilemma are, for instance, the balance between economic models and societal modes of efficiency or between cooperative and competitive modes of interaction or between production and consumption.

A dilemma concerning scaling refers to the observation that highly engaged actors drive social innovations, whereas scaling rather requires established organisational structures.

## 5 MECHANISMS – FROM MICRO TO MESO

Identifying social mechanisms bridging the micro- and the macro-level is certainly the most ambitious task in MRT. Rather than focusing on general

societal transition, SIMPACT has a specific, clearly delineated topic, i.e. institutional and related political change (see section 3). Forasmuch, unit of analysis are social innovations addressing vulnerable and marginalised populations, while the level of analysis lies between the micro- and macro-level, that is the meso-level of associated policy fields. Consequently, middle-range theorising within SIMPACT is concerned with mechanisms bridging transferring micro- and meso-level. Recently, bridging mechanism from the micro- to the macro-level increasingly apply evolutionary thinking, mechanisms bridging micro- and meso-level call for a strong social and policy approach. As was synthesised in the transdisciplinary literature review (Rehfeld et al., 2015) and based on our considerations, relevant contributions are exemplified in the following:

The work of Elias (1976, 1977) is on social processes. Elias is interested in *long-standing historical processes* and the factors driving the dynamics of such processes. His focus on balancing or rebalancing societal principles like centralisation and decentralisation can help to base the dilemma approach.

The work of Mayntz and Nedelman has been introduced above. In their understanding social processes take place in the context of new *modes of governance* and *multilevel governance systems*. Hence, the authors mainly concerned with political processes that depend on networking and bargaining.

In addition, Kingdon (1995) has elaborated three processes or *policy streams* that necessitates politicians openness for new solutions: (i) the impression that given instruments only insufficiently solve the problems addressed, (ii) the availability of new and improved or promising instruments and (iii) political gatekeepers that promote new avenues of problem solving.

Complementary, Chiapello (2010) worked out what is needed for a new concept to become broadly accepted: it starts with good practice, needs promoters that have access to the political system, it needs a well-accepted guiding idea and certain degree of institutionalisation.

These are only some examples in order to illustrate what is necessary to understand the mechanisms transferring micro- and meso-level. An initial attempt to systemise social mechanisms transferring the different levels is shown in Table 1. The first column entails the *actors* or *group of actors* that are ini-

tiating and driving the social innovation, the social innovators. The first three actors are on the agenda of most case studies, yet social movements and the organised civil society (welfare associations, foundations, trade unions and so on) are actors only sel-

dom considered as social innovators account for in empirical studies. The next step will be to add further actors or actor groups that are drivers of social innovations like politicians or traditional companies.

ACTOR	SCALING	SI PROCESS	POLICY INTERVENTION
Stakeholders in search for new solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Networking</li> <li>» Community Building</li> <li>» Events</li> <li>» Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Imitation &amp; adaption</li> <li>» No conflict as long as the solution remains at the periphery of welfare state</li> <li>» Social conflict in case of successful scaling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Project funding</li> <li>» Awards</li> <li>» Better Practice</li> <li>» Open method of coordination</li> </ul>
Self-organised vulnerable and marginalised (e.g. interest groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Locally rooted and globally connected</li> <li>» Campaigns</li> <li>» Knowledge sharing</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Free urban infrastructures</li> <li>» Project funding</li> <li>» Outsourcing (subsidiarity)</li> </ul>
Social enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Growth (often limited)</li> <li>» Social Franchising</li> <li>» Business models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Market-driven</li> <li>» Balancing competition and cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Seed-/start-up funding</li> <li>» Incubators</li> <li>» Regulations &amp; Incentives</li> <li>» Public procurement</li> </ul>
Social movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Organisation (association, club, political party)</li> <li>» Crowd effect</li> <li>» Self-enforcing dynamic</li> <li>» Cellular structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Community-driven</li> <li>» Direct confrontation</li> <li>» Legal conflict</li> <li>» Mediation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Integration</li> <li>» Repression</li> <li>» Adaption</li> <li>» Institutional change</li> <li>» Legal frame</li> </ul>
Organised civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Fundraising</li> <li>» Lobbying</li> <li>» Campaigns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Network governance</li> <li>» Modes of participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Round tables</li> <li>» Policy networks</li> <li>» Moderation</li> <li>» Institutional adaption</li> </ul>

Figure 4. First Ideas for a Systematisation of Social Mechanisms

The second column is about *scaling*: It shows activities or instruments that are used by social innovators to spread and diffuse their idea in a broader societal context. Instruments and activities differ depending on the social innovator's motivation, strategy and resources. The third column is about the *process of social innovation*, i.e. the process when different social innovators and conflicting actors interact to implement or impede a new solution. In this context all modes of governance can be found. While in certain phases the process is pure bargaining, in other phases it can be driven by reflection and shared learning or by self-enforcing and rule-breaking. The fourth column entails *political instruments* to intervene in the process of social innovations. Again there is a broad range of instruments ranging from seed-/start-up support and project

funding, as is the case in current innovation policy, to different modes of cooperation and consensus building, but from time to time resistance and criminalisation of new solutions, too.

In conclusion, as was shown in the previous sections, MRT has much to offer when it comes to the theoretical underpinning of social innovations' economic dimensions. Choosing such approach fits well with SIMPACT's overall research programme that is directed towards establishing strong synergies between the production of theory, strategy and appropriate methodologies. It allows to consider the specific nature of social innovations as interactive, generative and contextualised phenomena while maintaining that many practices at the micro-level can add up to patterns and regularities at the macro-level.

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