

## Reading on Innovation

*“For perhaps the first time in history, Humanity has the capability to create more information than anyone can take in, to encourage more interdependence than anyone can manage, and to promote change with a velocity than no one can keep up with”. Senge (1992)*



Globalization has increased both competition and the exchange of information, while technological advances and changes in social and market demands mean that one needs to move quickly in order to stand one's ground and develop in today's world. This interactive and complex reality puts us face to face with the constant challenge of adapting adequately, and obtaining greater efficiency in the use of our organization's resources and in the contributions we make to the welfare of the poor.

In a broad sense, **innovation** refers to introducing a **novelty**, that is, a positive adaptation to the changes taking place in today's world. That is why **innovating** requires us mainly to develop creative capacities that will let us detect opportunities in an organizational setting and in a dynamic environment.

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Innovation, then, means improving the capacity of our organizations to respond to the social, organizational, and market needs, by generating new ideas that will be translated into new products, services, or processes, capable of exploiting internal and external opportunities that improve our organizational performance.

The challenge to innovate will lead us to become agents of change that transform the reality of our organizations in the first place, and then of our communities and societies, making strategic contributions to the processes of rural development and to improving people's welfare.

### **What is innovation?**



The debate surrounding innovation has undergone a marked evolution over the last several decades. It has evolved from an economic notion related exclusively to economics, technological advance and business, towards other, wider meanings, in which the context is highly relevant, as are the participation of local agents, their practices, and their ways of learning within the process of innovation.

This evolution implies a change from the notion of innovation as a *product* to a view of innovation as a *process* that is a central and permanent factor in the life of an organization.

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### The concept of innovation

*"The introduction, and the application or procedures, within a role, a group, or an organization, on the condition that it be new to the entity that has adopted it, and that it has been designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, the organization, or society in general" West and Farr 1990<sup>1</sup>*

Innovation is an action that is intentionally designed and directed to generating change within a role, a group, or an organization, which, when applied, will result in benefits, not only of a financial nature, but also to the organization and to society. Innovation does not happen by chance, it is a planned action, aimed at improving an existing situation.

Innovation can bring about **multiple benefits**. Apart from the financial or commercial returns, which were described by the traditional views on innovation, it can benefit various areas of the organization, such as personal growth, the satisfaction of its members, the group's feeling of belonging, and internal and external communication. From this perspective, it is the organization and its needs – and those of its members and/or clients – that define what is beneficial in a context of innovation.

Rural innovation is **not limited to technological or methodological change**; it includes new ideas or processes for managing and guiding human resources, new ways of using previous knowledge, the creative application of models of action that have been used elsewhere, and the administration of social or development processes that will result in greater benefits to an organization, a rural community, or society as a whole.

Many countries in the Global South have shown great capacity to learn, adapt, and apply innovations in original and effective ways, in their fight against poverty and in the promotion of modern rural development. It is important to showcase and **leverage** the positive impact of successful rural innovation, and extend its positive effect to other poor communities.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is discussed at length in the text by America Gonzalez V: "Innovación Organizacional. Retos y Perspectivas" (Organizational Innovation: Challenges and Perspectives), CLACSO, which is part of the bibliography.

### Scaling Up

Scaling up refers to the challenge of extending the impact of a rural innovation which has shown itself to be effective on a micro scale (often limited to a small number of communities or sectors within these communities), to larger geographical areas or the population within the latter.

Scaling up is understood as an *end* because it aims at producing more benefits for more people in a wider geographical area, and in a more lasting manner; it is also a *means* to create and strengthen local capacity – institutional, organizational and communal – to plan, implement and assess development activities.

That is why scaling up is a *learning process* which mobilizes and reinforces rural communities' resources, agents, and capacities at the local and country levels, and extends their impact and makes it more sustainable.

It is important to point out that an **innovation need not be an absolutely new idea**, but it must be new for the entity or - partnership of entities- that adopts it. In other words, we can also speak of innovation when an organization adopts an idea or a technology that has been applied in another context, as long as it is new to the entity that adopts the innovation.

In this process, the **application** of the innovation is a crucial element, because it implies the transformation of knowledge or information into a **practice** which embodies new benefits to those who develop it.

**Innovation is not the same as invention.** The mere generation of novel ideas is not sufficient to create innovation: an idea is not innovative until it has been used to satisfy a concrete need. An innovative idea must be appropriate to the organization that implements it, and to the organization's members who incorporate it into their work practices, validating it as a tool to improve their internal performance and/or the responses to the surroundings.

Innovation then, is doing things in a new or different manner, in the context where our activity takes place, whether in the organization's internal levels, or in specific rural communities. Innovation implies a novelty that is put into practice and confirmed by the organization as a valid and beneficial response to certain needs, problems, or challenges. The nature and quality of an innovation are relative to the context where it is introduced.

An important element for an innovation, is its **validation through use**, in other words, an innovation has meaning because a rural community or society uses it, makes it theirs, incorporates

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and develops it. It is new knowledge, around which social agents will be mobilized, and which has an impact on the community, the organization, or society as a whole.

Nevertheless, innovations also need to be **validated by experts**, or **evaluated** to check the innovative nature of a process and its contribution to the development of an organization or community. This is done using methods which identify the relevant elements in a process of innovation and provide criteria to judge progress or setbacks, and indicators of impact.

Lastly, innovation is a **social construct** that involves processes of interaction and interchange among diverse agents and institutions having different, and often conflicting, interests and unequal quotas of economic, social and political power. As a result, the introduction of innovations is not free of conflicts, since it involves the transformation of longstanding models or ways of doing things, which have determined how benefits are distributed in a given organizational or social context. Therefore, communication and setting up alliances and agreements among various actors and interests are important in implementing and sanctioning an innovation.

## SUMMARY

1. An Innovation is an action that is **purposefully** designed and intended to generate **changes within a role, a group or an organization**, of a kind that will bring about **multiple benefits**, not only of a economic nature, but also on the personal, organizational and social levels.
2. Rural innovation **is not limited to technological change**; it involves the knowledge and expertise of rural communities that act in novel and effective ways in their efforts to improve their quality of life.
3. Innovation **does not require absolute novelty; it is subjective**: the idea must be new to the entity that adopts it.
4. The mere production of new ideas is not enough to generate innovation; there must be **application** towards a concrete need, and **appropriation** on the part of the people or community involved.
5. **Scaling up** refers to the challenge of extending the impact of a rural innovation which has shown itself to be effective on a micro scale (often limited to a small number of communities, or to sectors within these communities), to greater geographical areas and populations.
6. The **sources of rural innovation** are diverse, including scientific research and knowledge, the opinion of experts or specialists, and also the practical experience and knowledge gathered by the rural organization.
7. Innovation is a **dynamic process** that includes the following steps: assessment or identification of the needs for innovation; the creation, search, or adaptation of an innovative experience to respond to such needs; the preparation of a project or plan for innovation; the implementation of the innovation and its appropriation in the organizational context where it is applied; and the dissemination and learning of the innovative experience.

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## The role of the agent of change

*"You will not find anything happening anywhere, from experimental school courses to a new clinic in a hospital to an operation in the private sector, which does not have a committed person behind it. This is of no interest to me. The problem is not to employ committed people but how to convert average people within these organizations into such committed champions; I believe that this is the key"*  
(Peters, T. 1988).



There is always someone – or some people – behind a successful innovation process. No innovation is possible without the *personal involvement* of those who will implement it, both those who generate the idea and those who have to implement it.

Those who are involved committed with an innovation process become **agents of change**. To set out on the road to something new requires energy and persistence, born of committed involvement; a desire and a will to

persist in the face of the difficulties, failures or errors which appear during the process.

The role of the *agent of change* is to identify the problems of, and provide a new focus on, the traditional activities of an organization, and to propose ideas designed to improve and transform them.

Concepts such as *"intrapreneurs"*, *"idea generators"*, indicate that it is the individual, or group of individuals, that brings new ideas or focuses to the activities of an organization.

This process necessarily implies a *rupture*, since organizations tend to protect themselves against instability and change, and thus it is seldom the organization which decides, on the basis of its accumulated knowledge and experience, that its established procedures or rules can be improved.

It is important that whoever is *championing* an innovation process must be committed to the *problem* and not to the project. In other words, the commitment must be to the purpose or objective of the change sought, not with the process, route or plan of action drawn up to achieve it. This allows him/them to make variations and to introduce new plans or actions in unsolved areas of a problem, when it becomes clear that the planned strategy is deficient or ineffective. The

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logic of the actions and solutions designed must remain partially open, and must be flexible to adaptation, for the innovation to be successful.

People who generate interesting problems, who discover new ways of looking at the organization, the rural community or society, are the true discoverers of niches for the development of innovations. They are the greatest wealth of the organization; as *creative primary capital*, their contribution is invaluable.

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