People-Centered Social Innovation as an Epistemological Alternative for Critical Recentering of People in the Development Agenda

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Abstract

There are many complexities in today's world, and alternatives are needed to open up spaces for truly reconfiguring people-centeredness in the current development agenda. This editorial piece, therefore, envisages a shift in the development narrative through the conceptualisation of people-centered social innovation that provides an epistemic alternative. The effort is to accelerate people-centered change through critically recentering people, especially marginalised groups and communities. This includes understanding the contextual and structural inequities, people's knowledges and agency emerging from their embedded context, and institutionalising empowering spaces for actors that turn the wheel of social relations for epistemic justice.

Keywords: People-Centered Social Innovation; Social Innovation; Epistemological Justice; Development Alternatives; Epistemologies of the Marginalised

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Introduction

Indeed, the crisis of 'development' (Escobar, 1992) could be felt more than ever in today's world, which is underlined by multiple and structured inequalities. Piketty (2013) argues that the 21st Century may be the most unequal time for humanity. The critique of development emerged in the classical works of many post-development theorists (Sachs, ed.1992; Apffel et al., eds.1990), who critique the epistemological foundations of development itself. To imagine an alternative would, therefore, mean centering local and marginalised people's knowledges, representation, and participation in the development process. This editorial thus seeks to focus on people-centered social innovation (PCSI) as an emerging and transformative paradigm that centre-stages people and their knowledges for a process of transformative change.

Interrogating the idea of People-Centered Social Innovation as an Epistemological Alternative

Moulaert et al. (2013) explain that social innovation comes to the fore when traditional approaches to change cannot address many of the root causes, including poverty, social exclusion, deprivation, etc. Further, Howaldt and Hochgerner (2019) argue that social innovation as a change process differs as the impacted actors and the actor networks drive it. Banerjee et al. (2020) further position the actors, especially marginal actors and their agency, to change their context as a critical construct in conceptualising people-centred social innovation. Shajahan and Hulgard (2020) elaborate on this and mention how a people-centered approach helps locate the power relations between the actors and attempts to address the same, including the structures and processes of development policy implementation. People-centered social innovation, therefore, can be seen as an emerging approach that adopts a global perspective, engaging with different experiences of participation, advocacy, marginality and precariousness across the global South and North (Banerjee et al., 2020). These engagements are about bottom-up solutions that respond to the contextual realities of local and marginalised groups and communities (Banerjee, 2019). Implicit to this is recognising and hearing the knowledge and intersectional voices of the marginalised groups and communities. This is located in the theoretical perspective of 'ecologies of knowledges' (Santos, 2016) that recognises diverse and plural knowledges and theorises this knowledge as new emergences or 'sociology of emergences'. Thus, people-centered social innovation is conceptualised as a paradigm that has the potential for epistemic inclusion of people at the margins. The aim is to open up and expand the scope of epistemological justice.

Epistemological Drivers and People-Centered Social Innovation

Epistemology plays a key role in shaping the practices, power dynamics and organisational forms that structure both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic socio-cultural and economic systems (Esteves, 2019). Henfrey (2024) further mentions that the epistemological and ontological crisis of the current development paradigm constrains the individual and collective human capacity to develop alternatives. The construction of the false claim of universality spread through development processes, coloniality, patriarchy, etc., relegates alternative ontologies into silence and epistemic invisibility (Esteves et al., 2024). It thus invisibilises the voices of people at the grassroots. The aim is, therefore, to reimagine the way we do development, moving from an instrumental understanding to a transformative understanding of counter-knowledge (Banerjee & Shaban, 2021) that emerges from a people-centered perspective of development and social innovation. Uncovering people's voices becomes a commitment that all are listened to. The epistemological drivers emerging from the paradigm of people-centered social innovation and change are discussed by focusing on some key questions, including 1) How do we situate the everyday experiences of people and

understand the embedded power relationships 2) how do we understand people's intersectional knowledges and alternative views as located within the above context and 3) How do we build empowering spaces and collective solidarity and knowledges that change the hierarchical social relations.

This is unpacked here through a change story, emerging from the author's engagements with a rural women's Self-Help Group (SHG)/collective (Banerjee, 2011). This collective was not only able to initiate an income generation programme that addressed issues of livelihood insecurity, but one of the members of the collective was also elected as the head of the village council. To begin with, while the author was trying to analyse the change processes emerging from this collective, it seemed like a perfect success story. The author had stayed and engaged for some time within this micro-context and deeply interacted with the different stakeholders, or so she thought. However, on the day the author was finally leaving the village, the woman who was the head of the village and also a member of the SHG broke down and shared a crucial part of her struggle which she didn't share earlier. She mentioned how she was threatened to be sexually abused by the previous village head if she did not leave her position. So, what the author thought was the end of her engagement in this village was actually the beginning, and it unfolded an entire story of change that attempted to reconfigure the existing power relationships through the collective solidarity of the women. The author thus learnt that building authentic relationships through trust and empathy, for people to truly share their experiences, is the first step towards epistemic justice. This leads to uncovering local people's voices and knowledges embedded in their local contexts, structural inequities and marginalities. The author then continued to listen to the voices and extended her stay in the village. This woman, who was the village head, further narrated how she felt helpless as an individual woman in the beginning. However, through the solidarities and support of other women in her collective, she slowly regained her confidence, decided not to step down as the village head, and slowly built her capacities along with the collective capacities of the women in the group/SHG. There are many more nuances to this story, but what prominently emerged is the transformative potential and collective power or 'power with' (Rowlands, 1995) of the women in the collective against oppressive societal structures, including patriarchy. This changing story, therefore, elucidates the emergence of actor networks of marginalised women as a key driving force for people-centered social innovation (Anderson & Banerjee, 2020). The critical epistemological drivers are outlined below:

Framing of Local Space and Structural Inequities

Chambers (2008) argues that local and micro environments often get hidden and unobserved and, therefore, undervalued and excluded in development data and 'mainstream' approaches to development. It is thus important to frame the diversities and complexities of people and their local space and context that determine the politics of participation.

Conceptions of Counter-power through Intersectional Knowledges and People's Agency

Feminist theorists (Rege, 1998) have contributed to challenging and broadening the scope of epistemological diversities, supporting different areas of knowledge through the ideas of sameness and differences and intersectionality across gender, caste, class, race, etc. (Banerjee et al., 2023). Santos (2016) talks of recognising the diversities of people's knowledges, epistemologies and ontologies as a matter of cognitive justice. Alternative world views are, therefore, often silenced, and agencies of marginalised people caught in structural inequities are relegated to 'unfree agencies'. This leads to epistemic invisibility (Esteves et al., 2024). It implies how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic worldviews are formed locally through epistemologies and everyday practices beyond the Eurocentric understanding of personal gain (Esteves et al., 2024).

Institutionalising Spaces for Solidarity and Empowerment of Marginalised Groups and Communities

Spaces for the participation of actors and actor networks that are contextually and spatially situated, leading to new practices and consciousness-raising, are possible responses to the constraints of a 'mainstream' development agenda. This hermeneutic location is essential to visibilise the invisibilities emerging from the contextual and structural inequities.

Conclusion: Conceptions for Collective Meaning-Making and Epistemic Justice through People-Centered Social Innovation

This conceptualisation in theory and practice thus emerges as an alternative paradigm for reimaging a new sociality, social relations and institutions that recenter marginalised people and their participation. This further opens up new democratic spaces and interpretations of development practice that depoliticise functions of the 'mainstream' development agenda for an epistemological alternative. This also provokes alternative and community-led socio-economic structures and innovations that prioritise the creation of social value from the non-hegemonic knowledge and epistemologies of the people. Such initiatives defy the 'mainstream' processes of social, cultural and economic activities and organisations that are often marginalised by the dominant development paradigm (Eynaud, 2019). These thus promote the ontologies that configure worldviews and social relations in favour of collaborative and place-based approaches that support different forms of collectivisation and community building (Federici, 2010). The emergence of such new practices in the form of community-based collectives, including self-help groups, farmers' cooperatives, micro-enterprises, and other forms of grassroots innovations and movements and new social actors, and actor relationships is recognised by many as the most striking and hopeful sign of the present era.

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