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RESEARCH PAPER

Idealistic incentives in non-governmental organization innovativeness: bridging theoretical gaps

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ABSTRACT
This paper bridges the theoretical gap between traditional innovation studies and more recent studies of innovation among civil society actors and contexts. The paper presents a study of the nature and function of idealistic incentives in innovativeness of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based on case studies of two national NGOs in Sweden, the Sensus Study Association and the Church of Sweden. The results show that the idealistic incentives of a basic view of human beings focusing on dignity and solidarity in the studied cases are closely related to various forms of NGO innovativeness, including the identification of challenges and needs, the aspired change at individual, organizational and societal levels, the involvement of concerned groups, and in cross-organizational and cross-sectoral cooperation. This contributes new knowledge not only of what NGO innovation entails and how it is brought about, but also of why such processes are initiated and thus why individual, organizational and societal transformation is essential in such processes. As part of this, the probable impact of beliefs, norms, ideologies and identities on all innovation processes, regardless of sectoral context, is highlighted.

Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – including non-profit, voluntary and religious associations – have a long tradition of developing innovative solutions to various challenges and needs in society (Pestoff, 1998; Sirianni and Friedland, 2001; McDonald, 2007; Osborne *et al.*, 2008; Davies *et al.*, 2012; Dover and Lawrence, 2012; Martinelli, 2013; Lindberg, 2014; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016; Angell, 2016; Berglund *et al.*, 2016; Bond, 2016). They have, for example, been pioneers in public services, starting libraries, pharmacies, kindergartens, ambulance services and so on. They have also been responsible for a wide range of private activities and concepts, such as scouting, urban farming, social supermarkets, summer camps, helplines, Sunday schools and Fair Trade. Their innovations also include new products and technological solutions. Despite this innovativeness, NGOs have rarely been acknowledged in traditional innovation studies, which have focused on technological,

commercial innovations in industrial and high-tech companies, paying specific attention to such innovation incentives as profit, growth and market expansion (McDonald, 2007; Dover and Lawrence, 2012; Lindberg, 2012, 2014; Godin, 2014; Rønning and Knutagård, 2015; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). These studies highlight innovations in terms of new types of automobiles, financial instruments, Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT) software, biotechnologies, telecommunications and so on (Fagerberg *et al.*, 2005; Sveiby *et al.*, 2014). This industrial and technological focus in traditional innovation studies limits the applicability of the concepts and theories developed in the innovation field (McDonald, 2007; Dover and Lawrence, 2012).

As the interest in innovation as a way of handling complex societal challenges such as unemployment, poverty and migration has increased among policy-makers, researchers and innovators during the last few years, it has become necessary to study innovation in more forms and contexts than only industrial and technological ones (Grimm *et al.*, 2013; Jordan *et al.*, 2013; Lindberg, 2014). Several researchers have started to explore a wider range of innovations – including low-tech service innovations, organizational innovations and social innovations (Fagerberg, 2005; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Lindberg, 2014). The role of civil society in innovation has also been increasingly highlighted, mainly in terms of involvement of users and other stakeholders in the development of new solutions to their perceived needs (Chesbrough *et al.*, 2006; von Hippel, 2006; Buur and Matthews, 2008; Davies and Simon, 2013; Daniel and Klein, 2014; Ehn *et al.*, 2014; Etzkowitz and Rickne, 2014), but also in terms of social innovation where disadvantaged groups in society are involved in the development of new solutions to their perceived needs (Pol and Ville, 2009; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Cajaíba-Santana, 2013). Some studies have also started to delineate the specific role of civil society organizations, such as NGOs, in innovation (Pestoff, 1998; Sirianni and Friedland, 2001; McDonald, 2007; Osborne *et al.*, 2008; Davies *et al.*, 2012; Dover and Lawrence, 2012; Martinelli, 2013; Lindberg, 2014; Angell, 2016; Berglund *et al.*, 2016; Bond, 2016; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016).

Because the accumulating studies of NGO innovation seldom refer to concepts, theories and literature from traditional innovation studies, a coherent theoretical accumulation of knowledge on NGO innovation as part of the wider field of innovation studies is hampered and amplified by the corresponding lack of interest of civil society actors in traditional innovation studies (Osborne *et al.*, 2008; Bond, 2016). A more theoretically coherent knowledge accumulation, bridging traditional and emerging innovation studies, could significantly improve the understanding of the contribution of NGOs to organizational and societal renewal, as well as of the nature and function of idealistic traits in their innovativeness.

To bridge this theoretical gap, this paper explores NGO innovation in terms of traditional innovation studies and explores traditional innovation studies in terms of NGO innovation. The paper also investigates the link between incentives and innovativeness in such innovation. The study is guided by the research question: what idealistic incentives can be perceived in NGO innovativeness in the light of traditional innovation studies as well as more recent strands of civil innovation, third-sector innovation, non-profit innovation and social innovation? Social innovation is employed as a bridging, not all-encompassing, concept, as it does not solely refer to innovation among NGOs, but also among public and private-sector actors. Nor does social innovation cover all possible types of NGO innovation, which may include technological, organizational and service innovations as well. The study is designed as a case study of two national NGOs in Sweden, the Sensus Study Association and the Church of Sweden.

The paper starts with an account of how traditional innovation studies have contributed basic insights into the character and dynamics of innovation and innovativeness. This is complemented by an account of the emerging studies of innovation in civil society as well as social innovation. The research design is then presented and discussed in terms of the case study. The idealistic incentives in NGO innovativeness are thereafter outlined and discussed, followed by conclusions about how systematic knowledge development in innovation among civil society actors and contexts can be encouraged.

Theory

Traditional innovation studies have mainly studied technological product development and commercialization in industrial contexts, largely ignoring other innovation forms, contexts and motives (McDonald, 2007; Dover and Lawrence, 2012; Godin, 2014; Lindberg, 2012, 2014; Rønning and Knutagård, 2015; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). Even so, this literature provides some basic insights into how innovation and innovativeness can be pinpointed and analyzed in other contexts. This includes notions of how innovative solutions can be systematically developed, implemented and value-creating for individuals, organizations and communities. Innovation is defined as a process of developing new ideas and transforming them into solutions that create value for individuals, organizations and communities. The solutions can take the form of new products, services, concepts, methods, process, strategies, organizations, structures and so on. Thus, the solutions can cover different levels: a micro level of new goods, services and methods; a meso level of new organizational methods, organizational forms and forms of cooperation; and a macro level of new norms, approaches and social systems.

Traditional innovation studies have also pinpointed new solutions developed through a process with different phases, such as needs identification, idea development, prioritization of ideas, design of solutions, testing and implementation, and scaling and dissemination. Innovativeness has been distinguished in terms of what is new to the specific context or new as a combination. Innovation may be new to a particular organization, within a certain field of activity or for a particular target group. It can also be a new combination of different components, where new values are created in their intersection. Innovativeness can be detected in both the process and the result. It may be that one or more of the phases of the innovation process are designed in a new way; for example, through new ways of identifying unfulfilled needs within a certain area of activity. It may be that the developed solutions are new in some sense, or that they give rise to new effects that no previous solution could have achieved (Fagerberg *et al.*, 2005; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Rønning and Knutagård, 2015; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016).

A pro-innovation bias is evident in innovation studies where the development of new solutions is generally approached as an inherently good thing without acknowledging unintended and undesirable consequences of such processes. This is manifest in widespread lack of concern among innovation scholars in what happens after the diffusion and implementation of an innovation (Sveiby *et al.*, 2014). Calls for social theories of innovation have consequently been made in order to acknowledge the role of human relations in innovation processes (Styhre, 2013; Daniel and Klein, 2014). The demand for innovative solutions to such societal challenges as migration, poverty, unemployment and ill health has simultaneously risen among both policy-makers and researchers (Grimm *et al.*, 2013;

Jordan *et al.*, 2013; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013). As part of this, civil society involvement is regarded as crucial for obtaining socially and economically sustainable innovation processes and results (Chesbrough *et al.*, 2006; von Hippel, 2006; Buur and Matthews, 2008; Etzkowitz and Rickne, 2014; Rønning and Knutagård, 2015). In consequence, the term 'innovation' is increasingly mentioned in civil society studies, although primarily without subsequent analysis of its specific meaning in relation either to established innovation studies or to previous studies of civil society renewal (Osborne *et al.*, 2008; Anheier *et al.*, 2010; Micheletti and McFarland, 2011; Bond, 2016). Social movements are, for example, described as an important source of innovation (Trägårdh, 2007), civic innovation as important for community development and community health (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001), and civil society stakeholders as important for industrial innovation (Laville *et al.*, 2015). Some studies have started to delineate the specific role of NGOs in innovation, although with few references to concepts, theories and literature from the traditional innovation field (McDonald, 2007; Osborne *et al.*, 2008; Davies *et al.*, 2012; Dover and Lawrence 2012; Martinelli, 2013; Lindberg, 2014; Berglund *et al.*, 2016).

NGOs have a long tradition of developing innovative solutions to organizational and societal needs. Some studies find that such organizations are inherently innovative because of their idealistic values, democratic organization, non-profit engagement and civil society affiliation. This is considered to make them particularly well suited to developing new ideas and transforming these into new, value-creating practices. The local embeddedness of many NGOs is also considered to contribute to their inherent innovativeness as it allows them to pay closer attention to local needs than more bureaucratic, top-down organizations in the public and private sectors (Pestoff, 1998; McDonald, 2007; Osborne *et al.*, 2008; Dover and Lawrence, 2012; Anheier *et al.*, 2010; Berglund *et al.*, 2016). However, aims, contexts, mechanisms, resources and outputs – and thus innovativeness – vary considerably among NGOs (Pestoff, 1998; Baglioni and Giugni, 2014). Studies of innovation in religious associations show that one of the main added values of idealistic incentives to innovative renewal springs from the existential and relational aspects of social inclusion. This is conceptualized as an empowerment effect, simultaneously considering people's economic, materialistic, social and existential needs in the development of all-encompassing solutions for social inclusion (Berglund *et al.*, 2016; Nahnfeldt and Lindberg, 2017). Other studies trace the idealistic traits of faith-based organizations' innovation processes to their moral resources: ideology and values stimulating solutions that improve the well-being of especially vulnerable groups (Angell, 2016; Eurich and Langer, 2016; Schröer, 2016). Idealism reinforces social and collective aspects of innovation beyond the stereotypical economic, individualistic rational often ascribed to innovators (Styhre, 2013).

The dual role of NGOs as both advocacy and service providers makes the empowerment effect of their moral resources perceivable in their development and delivery of services to fulfill perceived societal and social needs (Wijkström and Zimmer, 2011; Baglioni and Giugni, 2014). These roles might be especially relevant to marginalized groups of people who otherwise are rarely given the opportunity either to influence what needs to be solved through innovation or to benefit from the developed solutions (Lindberg, 2014). As noted by Wijkström and Zimmer (2011), change is imposed on NGOs both externally and internally by political, economic and societal transformation. They distinguish three levels of NGO change; at the macro level, change encompasses transformations in the division of labor between different sectors and institutions. One example identified by Wijkström and

Zimmer is the expanding role of Nordic NGOs as service providers alongside their more traditional role as advocacy providers in historically strong welfare states. At the meso level, change encompasses transformations in organizations; individual organizations adapt their operations to service provision, focusing either on their own members or on other groups through welfare state contracts. Organizational hybridization (e.g. in the form of social enterprises) can be seen as part of this meso level change (Pestoff, 1998; Laville *et al.*, 2015). Micro-level change encompasses transformation in individuals and a gradual shift in focus from traditional members to volunteers, donors and employed staff providing more flexible resources in the realization of the organization's mission.

Studies of social innovation have contributed the most explicit knowledge development on NGO innovation so far (Davies and Simon, 2013; Martinelli, 2013; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016). However, the concept of social innovation does not encompass all possible types of NGO innovation. Neither does it refer solely to renewal among NGOs, but just as much among public and private-sector actors. This makes social innovation a valuable, but not sufficient, concept for understanding NGO innovation. Social innovation studies have served to highlight social traits in innovative processes, specifically concerning novel ways to increase life quality, well-being, relations and empowerment. A general conclusion in social innovation studies is that four aspects characterize such processes: (1) the identification of unfulfilled societal challenges and social needs; (2) the initiation of cross-organizational/sectoral cooperation in order to properly address the complexity of these needs and challenges; (3) the involvement of concerned groups in the development of solutions to these needs; and (4) the aspiration to evoke social change on individual, organizational and societal levels (Pol and Ville, 2009; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Cajaíba-Santana, 2013). As innovativeness is traditionally seen as an individual capacity, social innovation studies contribute an understanding of how innovative processes can be enforced by a collective aspiration for social improvement (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Styhre, 2013). Many NGOs base their operations on shared social motives (Baglioni and Giugni, 2014) and some studies indicate that they may play a pivotal role in initiating and enhancing social innovation processes (Davies and Simon, 2013; Martinelli, 2013; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016). They illustrate that 'innovation is a context-dependent process which is implicitly and fundamentally informed through the social agendas and consensus of those involved' (Daniel and Klein, 2014, p.23). As social agendas differ among stakeholders, the desirability of an innovation will be esteemed differently by different actors. This makes social innovation more explicitly normative compared with other types of innovation, which may well evoke both internal and external opposition (Segnestam Larsson and Brandsen, 2015).

Research design

The study involved a case study (Yin, 2009; Mills *et al.*, 2010; Martinelli, 2013) of two national NGOs in Sweden: the Sensus Study Association and the Church of Sweden. They were relevant because of their experience in identifying societal and organizational challenges, in coordinating processes for developing new solutions to these challenges, as well as in implementing and disseminating these solutions. Their organization on local, regional and national levels in all parts of the country allowed geographical generalizability of the research results, while their diversity enabled a nuanced theory development. Case studies are, according to Yin (2009), particularly rewarding for the exploration of complex real-life

phenomena with many relevant variables. Complexity and diversity are high in NGO innovation (Jordan *et al.*, 2013). Case studies are especially suited to combining in-depth contextual understanding with analytical generalization (Mills *et al.*, 2010). The Sensus Study Association and the Church of Sweden were chosen in accordance with the 'most similar case design' approach, which is an established selection methodology for case studies that enables detection of variation within a studied phenomenon (George and Bennett, 2005). In this study, the variation is in idealistic incentives in innovativeness. The focus is on the nature and degree of innovativeness in the studied cases, rather than on the innovation processes themselves.

The methods of data collection included a chain-referral sampling of examples, qualitative interviews, participatory observations and document studies. The chain-referral sampling of examples (snowball sampling) was conducted in order to identify examples of innovation processes in the studied organizations. This sampling technique is traditionally used in studies were the specific objects are difficult to identify (Heckathorn, 1997), making it suitable for the study of NGO innovation where there are no official records of examples. A selection of top and middle managers was therefore asked to list some of the most innovative processes or solutions in their part of the organizations. These were then validated in terms of their innovative traits in a dialog between the researchers and involved stakeholders, resulting in a final list of five examples from each organization. Semi-structured qualitative interviews (King and Horrocks, 2010) were subsequently conducted with the key figures of the examples. Participatory observations of a selection of activities related to the examples were carried out (Cargan, 2007). Both the interviews and the observations were documented in notes. Document studies were performed on a sample of written material describing the identified examples, including reports, brochures and websites (Bailey, 2008). A thematic analysis was then performed on the collected data, with four pre-formulated themes used for categorization (Guest *et al.*, 2012). These encompassed the most crucial aspects of innovativeness delineated in previous studies of social innovation: identification of challenges/needs; aspired change on individual, organizational and societal levels; involvement of concerned groups; and cross-organizational/sectoral cooperation (Pol and Ville, 2009; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Cajaíba-Santana, 2013) The thematic analysis was intended to produce an analytically generalizable (Yin, 2009), but at the same time socially contextualized (Nowotny *et al.*, 2001), understanding of NGO innovation. This understanding was to enhance development of existing innovation theory with new knowledge on idealistic incentives, and to increase the ability of NGOs to organize innovation processes for social change.

Results

Both the Sensus Study Association and the Church of Sweden have, according to the study, developed a wide range of solutions to societal and organizational challenges, such as unemployment, ill-health, poverty, immigration, declining membership and perceptions of decreased relevance. At the national level, Sensus has designed and initiated a renewal process, Destination Future, to develop its services in line with current societal and organizational needs. At the regional level, Sensus manages a number of innovative processes to renew its popular adult education relevant to inclusion, diversity, equality and health. The Church of Sweden manages similar processes at the national level, including the formulation

of a joint platform for the Church's role in the Swedish welfare system, where reception and integration of immigrants and the unemployed have become particularly relevant. At the regional level, the Church manages a variety of innovative processes to combat marginalization, segregation and isolation. Two examples from each organization have been singled out for scrutiny. In the following, these are described and analyzed in the light of the four most crucial aspects of innovativeness delineated in previous studies on social innovation.

Sensus: Breaking Books

Breaking Books (*Brytiga Böcker*) is a norm-critical pilot project managed by one of Sensus's regional organizations with funding from the Swedish State Inheritance Fund (*Allmänna Arvsfonden*). In partnership with public libraries in northern Sweden, the project develops and tests new methods to prevent discrimination and promote equality among children and young people through innovative use of children's literature. Together with librarians, it investigates how new ways of merging a norm-critical pedagogy with established use of children's books can give rise to new approaches to democracy in the libraries' activities for children. According to the Library Act, libraries should provide a democratic arena but lack the guidelines on anti-discrimination provided for schools. The aim is to increase children's access to literature that reflects the diversity among themselves and in their environment, as well as to use literature as a tool for individual, organizational and societal change. Various forms of storytelling, drama, interactive games and physical exercises have been designed and tested with children by the librarians. Simultaneously, the librarians participated in training sessions on norm-critical theory and practice to enable them to integrate these perspectives in their regular activities. Several librarians reported that the project has provided a valuable space for joint reflection on literature in a way that is rare in their daily work. Others reported being quite uninterested in expanding their role as educators or hesitant in using literature as an ideological instrument. The project's activities have expanded significantly, partly because of increased numbers of immigrant children forming a new target group for the project, and partly to initiate cooperation with nine other municipalities in the region in addition to the original one. The project's experiences and methods have been conceptualized in a form that can easily be disseminated to, and used in, other municipalities and organizations.

Breaking Books is motivated by the perceived need to improve practical efforts for democracy in public libraries, as well as by children's need to engage with literature that reflects the diversity among themselves and in their environment. The project enables children to engage with, and challenge, norms in their daily literature, librarians to engage in democracy-enhancing use of available children's literature and the municipality to meet the demands of the Library Act. Librarians are actively involved in the development of methods and activities for norm-critical use of children's literature. The children are actively involved in the interactive methods being designed and tested. Breaking Books is a cooperative project between the NGO Sensus and public libraries, which are in their turn headed by the municipality, an example of cross-organizational/sectoral cooperation to address the complexity of needs and challenges.

Sensus: Participation

Participation is a program managed by one of Sensus's regional organizations as part of its regular, state-funded services. The program provides a social platform for immigrant women, who otherwise often remain at home with the children and thus have difficulty becoming integrated in society. The concept was initiated by a Sensus employee who had immigrated to Sweden herself and had noted this need among other immigrant women. In collaboration with another Sensus employee (who had heard her own mother's stories of isolated women in Swedish peasant communities), she combined the women's need for societal integration with the adult education tradition of Sensus. The main idea was to revive the historical function of study circles among Swedish postwar women to serve this new group of Swedish immigrant women. The platform was made possible by a clear mandate from the regional manager to test the concept, resource allocation and risk-taking to expand the operations followed. A key strategy has been to design the operations step by step, based on the target group's perceived needs, not the interests of other societal stakeholders. Therefore, no extensive collaboration has been initiated with other organizations or sectors. The social platform provides participants with a public – but still safe – venue for social interaction and training in labor market skills. This has encompassed such activities as study circles on digital media, wellness and needlework. Conversation groups were formed to discuss such topics as life, work and studies. Activities have also been organized in which Arabic language training for children was combined with community information for parents. More than 70 women have participated in the activities, forming an extensive network connecting newcomers instantly with established participants.

Participation is motivated by the perceived need of immigrant women to become more integrated in society, as well as by Sensus's ambition to reach immigrant women with its services. It serves immigrant women with a platform for societal interaction and labor market participation, Sensus with an important new target group and society with increased societal participation of a marginalized and isolated group. It also employs Sensus's tradition of popular adult education with mutual learning through study circles. Participation has deliberately abstained from creating cross-organizational/sectoral cooperation in order to prioritize needs among the target group over the interests of societal actors.

The Church of Sweden: the Greenhouse

The Greenhouse is a project managed by a local NGO (called Urkraft) in collaboration with a parish in the Church of Sweden, with funding from the Swedish State Inheritance Fund (*Allmänna Arvsfonden*). The project aims to establish a number of greenhouses in order to provide the whole parish with plants for graveyards and ceremonies at the same time as providing green rehabilitation and long-term employment for people with mental disorders, such as Asperger's syndrome (part of the higher functioning autism spectrum). The need for these services arose because the public plant supply to the Church was stopped following municipal cutbacks and because few employers were willing to hire disabled people on a long-term basis. As the green rehabilitation approach had proven successful in attaining/regaining work among disabled people, the combination of greenhouses and employment was seen as potentially rewarding for impaired individuals, the Church and society as a whole. The greenhouses will be operated as a work integration social enterprise

to ensure active involvement by the participants. The enterprise will operate in a socially and ecologically sustainable way, reinvest its profits in its regular activities and keep warm by recycling the heat from the nearby crematorium. There is also an ambition to produce organic urns in the greenhouses, with all of the crematoria in the region as potential receivers, which would ensure year-round activity in the enterprise. The urns will be made of bark gathered on the Church's vast forest estates, creating long-term jobs in remote, rural areas where employment is scarce. The Church regards the initiative as an important part of its diaconal activities for vulnerable people, and Urkraft anticipates increased employment opportunities in its other activities for disabled people.

The Greenhouse is motivated by the perceived need to ensure long-term employment for people with disabilities, as well as the supply of plants to Church ceremonies and graveyards. It aspires to provide long-term employment to disabled individuals, plants to the Church and decreased exclusion from the labor market to the municipality. It is intended to be managed as a work integration social enterprise, where the employees are actively involved in strategic decisions and operations. The Greenhouse is initiated and managed in close cooperation between the NGO Urkraft and one of the Church parishes. It also involves cooperation with Sweden's Public Employment Agency, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and municipalities.

The Church of Sweden: Digniti Omnia

Digniti Omnia is a project managed by one of the Church of Sweden's dioceses, with funding from the European Union Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. The project aims to enforce empowerment and social inclusion among migrating EU citizens who suffer from extreme material poverty. In Sweden, these are often Romani people who try to make a living by begging in the street. The ambition is to provide these groups with more long-term support than the Church's regular, urgent interventions in terms of shelter, clothing, shower facilities, meeting places and so on. The long-term support includes efforts to enable these groups to influence their own life-situation, to participate in society and to make their voices heard in the political arena. The basis for the Church's engagement in such an endeavor is the Christian concern and love of one's neighbor, postulating that no one should have to live in poverty and humiliation. The name Digniti Omnia thus translates to 'dignity for all'. Four thresholds have been identified in order for the concerned groups to lead a dignified life: (1) lacking or non-existent knowledge of the rules and regulations, rights and obligations in their home countries, Sweden and the EU; (2) inadequate or non-existent knowledge of health and self-care; (3) lacking language skills and illiteracy; and (4) inadequate or non-existent access to digital technology and lacking computer knowledge. These thresholds are addressed in the project by efforts in four areas: community, health, language and digital communications. Through the project, the concerned groups receive training in these areas and are also actively involved in forming and managing parts of this training. One example is a web course in Romani on how to create and use an email address. On the organizational level, the project will develop a toolbox for Church efforts toward vulnerable EU citizens. On the societal level, the project provides a platform for the Church to advocate the interests and representation of the concerned groups in public policy-making.

Digniti Omnia is motivated partly by perceived need among vulnerable EU citizens to influence their own lives and to participate in society, and partly by the need among societal

actors to fight poverty and social exclusion. It intends to empower migrating groups in extreme material poverty, to improve the Church's ability to provide unified, long-term services for vulnerable EU citizens and to enable society to find sustainable solutions for a dignified life for concerned groups. Digniti Omnia is organized in cooperation between dioceses and parishes in different parts of the country and is also exchanging experiences with other national and international actors that share the same ambitions.

Discussion

The presented accounts help distinguish innovative traits in NGO innovation where the innovativeness lies in new contextual applications or new combinations in the process or results, on a micro, meso or macro level (Fagerberg *et al.*, 2005; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Rønning and Knutagård, 2015; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016). By further distinguishing the innovative traits in NGO innovation in the light of the four main aspects of innovativeness identified in social innovation studies, and avoiding the reduction of NGO innovation to a matter of social renewal only, the idealistic incentives and innovativeness are delineated (Pol and Ville, 2009; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Cajaíba-Santana, 2013; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013)

The examples are all motivated by the perceived need to enforce empowerment and social inclusion among groups that in some regard are vulnerable or marginalized in society – children, immigrants and disabled people. This idealistic motivation can be traced back to a basic view of human beings, where dignity and solidarity form the idealistic fundament. In the aspired change, another idealistic trait is distinguishable in the enforcement of social improvement for the involved groups, organizations and societies (e.g. libraries, parishes and municipalities). The involvement of concerned groups also reflects an idealistic trait as the examples strive to empower children, librarians, immigrants and disabled people to participate in the fulfillment of their own needs. An idealistic trait is also distinguishable in cross-organizational/sectoral cooperation in the close cooperation between NGOs and public institutions that generally share an interest in democracy and social improvement. In the light of previous studies of NGO innovation, these idealistic traits provide insights into the existential and relational aspects of the innovation processes (Berglund *et al.*, 2016; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016; Nahnfeldt and Lindberg, 2017). This is comparable to the 'empowerment effect' of combining economic, materialistic, social and existential needs in the development of solutions for social inclusion, identified in previous studies focusing on 'moral resources' of NGOs in terms of ideology and values (Angell, 2016; Eurich and Langer, 2016; Schröer, 2016). By acknowledging the impact of beliefs, norms, ideologies and identities on human agency, these traits of NGO innovativeness expose the social and idealistic embeddedness of all innovation processes (Styhre, 2013; Daniel and Klein, 2014).

Identifying these idealistic traits in NGO innovation reflects their dual role as advocacy and service providers (Wijkström and Zimmer, 2011; Baglioni and Giugni, 2014). They seem to combine the provision of voice and interest representation with service production (e.g. services in welfare, education and working life) in innovative solutions to societal and organizational challenges and needs. At the micro level, this combination can be understood as a shift of focus from traditional members to flexible co-innovators, empowering vulnerable and marginalized groups to influence the development and implementation of innovative solutions to their own need for social inclusion. At the meso level, it can be understood as an increased tendency among concerned organizations (e.g. parishes, municipalities and

libraries) to orient their innovative processes toward publicly acknowledged societal challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, immigration and ill health, while also serving the interests of vulnerable and marginalized groups. At the macro level, it can be understood as transforming the welfare state contract between the public and civil sectors in Sweden, where NGOs are ascribed an increasingly important role in social services provision, especially for the unemployed, immigrants, disabled people and young people, groups they have traditionally served as advocacy providers.

NGO innovation combines an emphasis on existential meaningfulness, social community and social participation for the individual with general policy interests of sustained and improved welfare provision (Berglund *et al.*, 2016). This lends a collective dimension to NGO innovation; the innovative processes in the studied cases imply joint action by various stakeholders. By challenging the traditional view of innovativeness as an individual capacity (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Styhre, 2013), new knowledge is provided on how shared, idealistic incentives effect innovative processes. In pinpointing the idealistic traits of NGO innovation, knowledge is acquired of what such innovation entails, how it is brought about, why such processes are initiated and why individual, organizational and societal transformations are essential in these (Grimm *et al.*, 2013; Jordan *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusions

The concepts and theories of traditional innovation studies focus on the forms, actors, contexts and incentives of industrial and technological innovation. This paper establishes a bridge between traditional innovation theories and more recent strands of research on third-sector innovation, non-profit innovation, civil innovation and social innovation. The case studies of the Sensus Study Association and the Church of Sweden emphasize idealistic incentives in their innovation processes. We have shown that idealistic incentives can be seen as basic to human beings, focusing on dignity and solidarity, and evident in all four of the aspects of innovativeness we have identified.

The incentives identified in NGO innovativeness cohere with the 'empowerment effect' of combining economic, materialistic, social and existential needs in the development of innovative, idealistic solutions identified in previous studies. These incentives are also associated with the moral resources of NGOs in terms of ideology and values. This renders a collective dimension to NGO innovation, various stakeholders joining to attain individual and societal change. The paper suggests a probable impact of beliefs, norms, ideologies and identities on all innovation processes, regardless of sector.

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