



Citation: Ana Luísa Silva (2022) *Innovation perspectives in international development cooperation: the case of organised civil society*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», Vol. 12, n. 23: 179-197. doi: 10.36253/cambio-12283

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Open Essays and Researches

Innovation perspectives in international development cooperation: the case of organised civil society

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Abstract. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are still in the side-lines of the emerging literature on innovation in international development cooperation, although the topic has been gaining prominence since the 2000s, accompanying the wider transformation of the development cooperation field. The present paper presents the results of a mixed methods research that involved a broad geographic sample of 20 NGO national co-ordinating bodies through an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The goal was to map and analyse innovation perspectives, motivations, and practices in these organisations, understand their relationship with mainstream views of innovation in the field and uncover their potential to promote inclusive innovation. Results suggest that these actors have potential to promote inclusive innovation practices in the field, since they approach innovation with social change as an end goal, as opposed to having an overly solutionist and problem-solving view of social innovation. The paper also highlights the key role of information and communications technologies, as well as digital tools, as both a reason to innovate and enablers of innovation in these organisations. Finally, the conclusion leaves questions open for further research on innovation in development NGOs.

Keywords: inclusive innovation, NGOs, development cooperation, global justice, digital transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

In the past two decades, innovation became a rising agenda in the rapidly changing field of international development cooperation (hereafter

¹ Acknowledgements: This research would not have been possible without the support of Forus International and all the civil society professionals who agreed to complete the survey and be interviewed. I would like to thank them for their time and input. Earlier versions of this work were presented to the Civic Innovation Research Group of

referred to simply as development cooperation). A sub-field of international relations with roots in post-World War II reconstruction efforts and decolonization processes, development cooperation is historically coupled with international aid, i.e. Official Development Assistance (ODA): concessional financial flows (such as grants and loans) provided by official government agencies in high-income (developed) countries towards the promotion of economic development and social welfare of low- and middle-income (developing) countries (Hynes, Scott 2013). The field's range of action has since expanded from this largely hierarchical, one-way relationship between wealthy (western/northern) and poor (southern) countries, into the present 'beyond aid' landscape, which encompasses a multiplicity of actors and ways of working together (Janus, Klingebiel, Paulo 2015; Mawdsley, Savage, Kim 2014; Gore 2013). An activity can today be categorised as development cooperation if it meets the following four criteria: (1) it aims explicitly to support national or international development priorities; (2) it is not driven by profit; (3) it discriminates in favour of developing countries; and (4) it is based on cooperative relationships that seek to enhance developing country ownership (Alonso, Glennie 2015).

This sectoral transformation in development cooperation is partly a consequence of the wider evolution of international relations into an interwoven arena of multiple actors – states, multinational corporations, international organizations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), transnational movements, citizens –, coming from multiple centres of power and legitimacy and no longer dominated by Western liberal democracies (Acharya 2017). The past two decades have also seen an increasing rise in number and complexity of the problems facing the world, and which require international responses. Pandemics, climate change, financial crises, migrations – all multidimensional, complex, often global problems, impossible to solve solely at the international level (Klingebiel, Gonsior 2020). It is in this wider context that the most recent innovation agenda in development cooperation is promoted by western donors in OECD's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), United Nations Agencies, and big philanthropic organisations (Silva, 2021). On the one hand, innovation is seen as a path to solve the increasingly complex global development problems (e.g., UN Millennium Project 2005; UNICEF 2014; UNDP 2018) affecting developing countries and their poorest, most vulnerable populations, as well as a strategy to improve the international aid system (e.g., IDIA 2015; G7 2018). On the other hand, the innovation agenda appears as a natural consequence of key changes in the sector, such as the rise of United Nations goal-based development agendas as a policy instrument (Silva 2021).

The topic is now consistently present in the policy discourse and practices of traditional (western) development cooperation actors (such as western bilateral donors, multilateral organizations, and northern-based international non-governmental organisations), eager to design policies, frameworks and models to encourage a more innovative development sector that produces better innovation (e.g., IDIA, 2015; Ramalingam, Bound 2016; UNDP 2016; OECD 2020a). Nonetheless, the academic literature on innovation in development cooperation is presently still scarce, with a disproportionate focus on the sub-theme of humanitarian innovation (Silva 2021; Bloom, Betts 2016; Sandvik 2017; Scott-Smith 2016, James, Taylor 2018). Best defined as social innovation, the current agenda of innovation in development discourse so far shows a clear pro-poor dimension that reflects the inclusive aspirations of the sector. At the same time, it echoes wider calls for responsible innovation to transform traditional economic growth-centred innovation into inclusive sustainable development policies (Schot, Steinmueller 2018), highlighting the need to move from a *distributive* justice paradigm towards a *relational* justice imperative (Papaioannou 2018). Nonetheless, it is still unclear what the current problem-focused, solution-driven innovation for development agenda tells us about the *politics of innovation* in development cooperation and how it relates with wider narratives of systemic transformation and *social change*.

the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University Rotterdam) and at the 17th Development Dialogue Conference (ISS, Erasmus University Rotterdam). I would like to thank all the colleagues who provided feedback at the various stages of this research, in particular my supervisors, Prof. Luís Mah (ISEG-Universidade de Lisboa) and Prof. Kees Biekart (ISS, Erasmus University Rotterdam). Finally, I would like to thank Prof. Giovanni Mari (Università degli Studi di Firenze), whose feedback and encouragement were most valuable, and the two anonymous reviewers, whose constructive comments and insights have greatly improved the manuscript. Funding: This work was supported by the University of Lisbon under its PhD Scholarship Program (BD2017); and FCT, I.P., the Portuguese national funding agency for science, research and technology, under the Project UIDB/04521/2020 and PhD Scholarship 2020.07297.BD.

An important starting point is to understand how different development actors (not just western, northern actors) address and position themselves regarding the less explored justice issues linked to the direction, distribution, and diversity in knowledge and innovation production processes (Heeks, Foster, Nugroho 2014; Papaioannou 2018; STEPS Centre 2010): “what innovation, for whom, by whom”? This paper aims to contribute to the debate by analysing innovation definitions, rationales, and practices across a sample of 20 national platforms (the majority of which based in the global south) that bring together development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in a given country. With roots in 1960s/70s international solidarity movements, NGOs are today an established actor in development cooperation (Lewis, Kanji 2009; Fowler 2011), traditionally perceived as precursors of alternative development models, natural social innovators, and catalysts of international solidarity (Banks, Hulme, Edwards 2015; Davies 2014). Recent figures estimate that OECD-DAC donor countries channelled close to USD 21 billion through NGOs in 2018, or 15% of total bilateral aid (OECD 2020b), illustrating their weight in the sector. Given the social movement origins of development NGOs and their grassroots connections, they might be well equipped to act as originators, advocates, and diffusers of inclusive and responsible innovation practices, both in their *ends* but also in their *means*.

The paper is structured as follows: it starts by discussing the current innovation agenda in development cooperation, the existing academic literature on the topic and specifically addressing innovation and development NGOs, as well as the conceptual challenges of social innovation. Secondly, it describes the mixed methods methodology used to collect the data, which is then analysed to understand how development NGO platforms in the sample currently approach innovation in their work, from definitions to motivations to innovate and innovation practices. The discussion looks at how the perspectives uncovered by this research relate to the existing narratives and academic literature on the topic. Final thoughts are presented in the conclusion regarding the implications of these findings for further research and development practice.

2. INNOVATION, INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION, NGOS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

2.1. *An agenda focused on solutions to solve complex problems*

Innovation has always been a key topic in development cooperation, although it has been interpreted differently by different development actors, in different periods. Between the 1950s and 1990s, innovation in development cooperation was broadly approached in two different ways (Chaminade et alii 2011; STEPS Centre 2010): (a) ‘innovation for growth’, i.e., innovation as technological change for economic growth; and (b) social innovation, i.e., innovation to address the needs of the poor in developing countries and tackle the shortcomings of mainstream economic development. On one side of the debate, the ‘innovation for growth’ perspective (technology-led change as the foundation of industrialisation and economic growth, i.e., the basis of modern development) has been a key argument in development economics and catching-up theories since the 1950s (Unger 2018). Technology transfer and technical support to assist developing countries ‘catching up’ journeys with wealthier economies are a cyclic key feature in the strategies of multilateral organisations, western OECD-DAC donors, and South-South cooperation. On the other hand, initiatives emerging in the 1970s as a reaction to this perspective like the Sussex Manifesto and the Alternative Technology Movement² (Chataway, Hanlin, Kaplinsky 2014), represent a view that is closer to ‘social innovation’ theory in its grand challenges narrative: a responsible, environmentally, and socially conscious innovation is needed to address social needs and to solve the problems that endanger the planet and

² The Sussex Manifesto was the work of a group of academics that criticises global science, technology, and innovation (STI) policies that favour the goals and needs of rich countries. The Alternative Technology Movement, which advocates for the affordable technologies adapted to the needs of poorer populations in developing countries inspired by Ernst Schumacher’s 1973 book *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973)

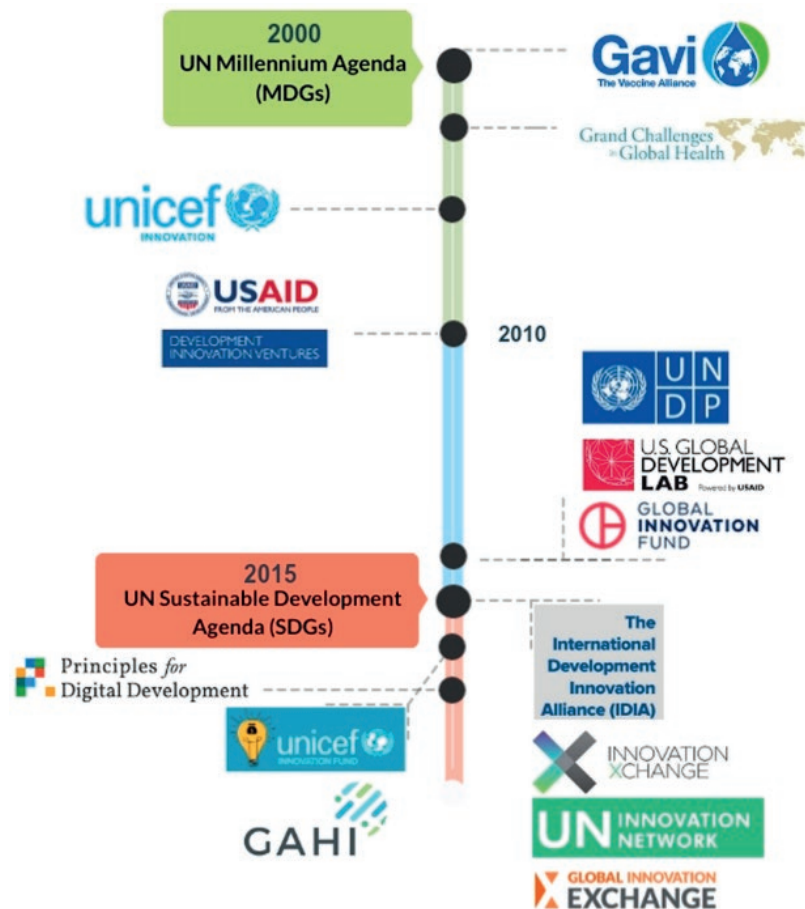


Figure 1. Innovation in international development initiatives: timeline 2000-2018 (Silva 2021).

human existence (Edwards-Schachter, Wallace 2017). These two views thus co-exist over time, promoted by different actors at different times. Although these views are not restricted to a specific timeframe in terms of theory, discourse, and practice, the first slightly precedes the latter.

The current dominant innovation narrative in development cooperation agenda is mostly concerned about finding solutions (often using technology) to the complex global development problems that affect developing countries, particularly its poorest and most vulnerable populations, as well as improving the international aid system (e.g., IDIA 2015; G7 2018; UNDP 2018). Both a consequence of and an answer to the wider sectoral transformation in development cooperation in the 21st century, it has as frameworks the two ambitious United Nations development agendas of this period: the Millennium Agenda, launched in the year 2000 and which focused on ambitious development goals set for developing nations to reach by 2015 (UN 2000); and its follow-up, the global 2030 Agenda and its equally ambitious sustainable development goals (SDGs), launched in 2015 as targets for all countries (UN 2015). This agenda has thus developed over the past 20 years (Figure 1), with the UN global agendas in the background, aided by information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the digital revolution, as well as a growing presence of private sector actors such as big philanthropy organisations, social entrepreneurs, and for-profit companies in the sector. Today, innovation is hence largely promoted by western OECD-DAC donors, United Nations Agencies, and big philanthropic organisations, concerned about the urgency of solving complex global development problems and improving the international aid system. In its proposed goals, directionality, and intention, this is a narrative much closer to social innovation than to the ‘innovation for growth’ perspective.

2.2. *Development NGOs and the innovation agenda in development cooperation*

Academic research on the recent innovation in development cooperation agenda is nonetheless still incipient and has so far focused on the sub-topic of humanitarian innovation, where grey literature has also been more prolific (e.g., Ramalingam, Scriven, Foley 2009; Scott-Smith 2016; Sandvik 2017; James, Taylor 2018). Development NGOs, which are the focus of the present paper, have so far not been central actors in this research, which has kept its main focus on private sector actors (for profit and philanthropic) and UN Agencies (e.g. Bloom, Faulkner 2016; Scott-Smith 2016). However, NGOs working in development cooperation have traditionally been perceived as precursors of alternative development models, natural social innovators, and catalysts of international solidarity movements (Banks, Hulme, Edwards, 2015; Davies 2014). In this context, how do development NGOs currently define innovation?

Four national NGO platforms based in the global north were found to have produced studies or position papers addressing the issue since 2015: Bond, the national platform for development NGOs in the UK (Peach, Inventium 2016); ACFID, the Australian development NGO national platform (Whitehead 2016); Partos, the national platform for development NGOs in The Netherlands (Partos 2016); and the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC³), the Canadian development NGO platform (Reilly-King, Charles 2018). These documents address the topic at the macro-level, although the Bond and ACFID papers identify examples of innovations by their members to illustrate what their members saw as innovative. Definitions are always a starting point to these works, due to the overall lack of conceptual clarity the innovation concept suffers from, but also to the lack of research on the topic of innovation in the context of development cooperation.

As we can see from Table 1 below, except for Partos' definition (in which collective action and inclusive development come across as key aspects of the platform's view on innovation), NGO platforms define innovation in the context of their work as a solution to solve a shared human need/goal/socially relevant problem. In these four documents, innovation can therefore be classed as social innovation (much like the mainstream innovation agenda described above) in its proposed goals, directionality, and intention. Likewise, the innovation perspectives that emerge from these works are focused on the idea of being more efficient, finding solutions to development problems, and fixing existing approaches. The 'innovation for growth' perspective is thus absent from these works, which is not surprising, given that development NGOs are generally absent from science, technology, and business sectors, focusing instead in providing social services like education and health, or defending environmental protection, democracy, and human rights.

2.3. *Social innovation, learning, and social change*

Much like the very concept of innovation, social innovation is a troubled concept. Since the 1960s, the desire to innovate and the idea that all innovation is positive, or in the words of sociologist Everett Rogers the *pro-innovation bias* (Rogers 1983), has invaded a wider range of spheres of human activity, including civil society and the public administration sectors (Cajaiba-Santana 2014; Moulaert, MacCallum, and Hillier 2014) and led to an extensive academic literature that is not only intertwined with public policy efforts but also rather acritical (Godin, Vinck 2017). And although economists and innovation scholars have widely acknowledged the social change dimension of innovation (beyond its technological and economic impact) – this includes the founding father of innovation studies Joseph A. Schumpeter⁴, who advocated for an ensemble of disciplines to study innova-

³ This platform has recently changed its name to Cooperation Canada.

⁴ Innovation studies have historically been dominated by economics and by the works of Joseph A. Schumpeter (1883-1950). Schumpeter saw innovation as internal to the process of economic change, as the independent phenomenon in capitalism (an endogenous, not an exogenous factor) that brings about change itself, what would become known as 'creative destruction'. He defined innovation as "the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way" (Schumpeter 1947: 152) and equated it to the entrepreneurial function in economic activity. The entrepreneur breaks with social and economic routine, being thus able to

Table 1. Innovation definitions by NGO platforms found during the literature review.

Bond (Peach, Inventium 2016)	After seeking input from Bond members, we believe social innovation in NGOs can be most simply defined as: “any solution that has the potential to address an important development problem more effectively than existing approaches.”
ACFID (Whitehead 2016)	It is difficult to pin down exactly what warrants are being called ‘innovation’. Innovation is subjective and often in the eye of the beholder, where ‘one person’s innovative is another person’s ordinary’ (...) Innovation can be large or small and take many forms, whether a product, process, position or paradigm. It can involve a complete change in the way things are done, or achieve smaller, incremental changes. Innovation is often associated with the new and shiny, but just because things are new does not mean they are innovative. Innovation occurs when new ideas contribute to change that adds value.
CISU – Civil Society in Development, Danish NGO platform (Reilly-King, Charles 2018)	A new or improved solution or invention.
InterAction – US national development NGO platform (Reilly-King, Charles 2018)	Innovation is a new, improved, or borrowed solution to a problem often involving scaling up solutions.
Partos (Reilly-King, Charles 2018)	Collaborative action for a more inclusive and sustainable world that supports the development of new ideas, and proposes new strategies and solutions through the identification of emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities.

tion (Moulaert, MacCallum, Hillier 2014: 16) – social innovation as a topic and research concept remained in the side-lines of innovation research until recently.

As Busacca (2020) and Mulgan (2015) both observe, the policy and practice debates preceded academic research on social innovation, fostered by a widespread desire to produce public policies to encourage and support social innovation in its many forms: social entrepreneurship, social innovation labs, human centred design initiatives, collaborative local government initiatives, and so on. In public policy and practitioner circles where social innovation has become popular, but also in more recent debates on innovation for sustainable development, social innovation is commonly used to simply mean an innovation a) that addresses a shared social or environmental problem, as opposed to innovation that is primarily technology or business (profit) oriented, and/or b) coming from the non-profit or government sectors, as opposed to the science, technology, and business sectors (OECD/Eurostat 2018; Schott and Steinmueller 2018). These rather simplistic and utilitarian definitions revolve around a normative, common good dimension, which makes social innovation in fact equivalent to ‘*desirable* social innovation’ (Pol and Vile 2009). They also emphasise the problem-solving, solutionist aspirations of social innovation in face of the current complex dilemmas faced by our societies (Fowler 2013). The mainstream innovation agenda in development cooperation discussed in the previous section clearly pertain to this problem-solving, solution-focused, utilitarian view of innovation.

Nevertheless, in its exponential growth and evolution of the past two to three decades, social innovation has been studied by several different disciplines (such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology) and different research fields. Depending on their background and research field, researchers tend to focus on different aspects of the phenomenon and thus define it differently (Ayob, Teasdale, Fagan 2016; van der Have, Rubalcaba 2016; Edwards-Schachter, Wallace 2017). In a review of 55 high impact publications published between 1989 and 2013, Ayob and colleagues give a useful contribution to the debated by labelling the existing definitions of social innovation into two groups, ‘strong’ and ‘weak’, which highlight, respectively, “the disparity between a more radical and normative tradition which sees social (and political) change occurring as a consequence of innovations in social

bring an idea (or an invention) into practice by introducing it to the market – through this process, it creates economic value. This value creation aspect is what makes innovation such an interesting topic for economists.

relations (...), and a more utilitarian approach which emphasises the societal impact of any innovation as defined by changes in aggregate individual utility” (Ayob, Teasdale, Fagan 2016: 648-9). The literature that belongs to the ‘strong’ social innovation group is influenced by the work of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), one of the pioneers in the study of innovation, and who precedes the work of innovation studies founding father, Schumpeter (Godin 2015; Tarde 1890). In this vein of literature, social innovation is therefore best defined as a collective process, which happens at different levels, once a new technology or social practice addressing a common human need/goal or a social problem is widely diffused, by imitation or adaptation, leading to social change at scale.

It is also important to note that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, innovation was a regular research topic linked to the literature on learning in development NGOs (Britton 1998; Roper, Pettit 2002). This earlier body of research was spurred by the realisation by international development NGOs that the type of service delivery and welfare support which had largely characterised their action in developing countries since the 1970s (and expanded due to the liberalisation policies promoted by the Washington Consensus agenda in the 1980s) would not lead to true, long-term systemic change for the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the developing world. This realisation led to a growing view that organisations also needed to focus on the macro-policy level – which would mean investing in learning to understand the root-causes of problems and building up knowledge that could be used as leverage with other actors (Fowler 1997).

Nevertheless, translating these conclusions into practice, i.e., changing the *modus operandi* and making learning as one of the key strategies of an organisation is not straightforward, especially given the financing architecture that supports development NGOs, which has evolved to become primarily project- and even results-based. Making space for learning is difficult to protect when this is seen as separate and secondary to ‘real work’, i.e., service delivery (Edwards 1997). Recent work emphasises similar links between learning, innovation, and impact. Authors Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair build an impact creation theory around four in-depth case studies of social sector organisations based in India and Bangladesh (Seelos, Mair 2017). They argue that the strategic focus for social organisations should not be on innovation, but on ensuring that learning and scaling strategies (with or without innovation) are aligned with vision and mission. In other words, organisations should aim to learn about activities/actions having in mind their mission and vision, in relation to changes in context – i.e., be reflexive (Chambers, 2017; Ramalingam, Scriven, Foley, 2009; Roper, Pettit, 2002). Ultimately, this strategic alignment is what will most likely produce real social change (‘strong’ social innovation) and not merely isolated solutions to social/environmental problems (‘weak’ social innovation).

2.4. Implications for this paper

Looking beyond immediate innovation outcomes and understanding innovation processes is key to changing the politics of innovation in development cooperation and to promote inclusive innovation, moving from a *distributional* to a *relational* justice imperative (Papaioannou 2018). Definitions are a good starting point when analysing the perspectives and rationales of different actors on a given subject. In this section we looked at the definitions emerging from academic literature and policy/practice discourses on innovation in development cooperation (subsection 2.1), confronted it with the few available reports and position papers by development NGO platforms (subsection 2.3), and with the social innovation literature, as well as the existing literature on innovation in development NGOs (subsection 2.2). The analysis suggests that the predominant innovation perspectives in the sector are aligned with a ‘weak’ definition of social innovation, that simply defines the phenomenon as innovation to solve a shared human need/goal/socially relevant problem (often using technology) or in opposition to science/technologic/business innovation. Delivery and problem solving, not social change, appear to be the main concerns of these development actors when it comes to innovation. This section also uncovers the lack of academic research on the topic of innovation in development cooperation. Development NGOs are particularly under researched: the (scarce) existing work addressing the topic is produced by NGO national platforms. Furthermore, these reports originate in structures based in the global north, as seen in subsection 2.2.

The main goal of the research presented in this paper is therefore to map and analyse innovation perspectives, culture, and practices across a broader geographic sample of development NGO co-ordination bodies (national platforms). NGO platforms are umbrella organisations that work as co-ordination bodies, creating space to advance collective action, defend their members' freedom for civic action, help their members coordinate and share experiences, but also by helping regulate the sector and increase accountability (Fowler 1997: 116).

The following research questions guided the empirical analysis:

- How do NGO platforms currently approach innovation in their work?
- Why do they innovate and how?
- Do innovation perspectives and practices analysed fit the mainstream innovation agenda in development cooperation and the social innovation literature?
- Can NGO platforms play an active role in building more inclusive innovation policies for sustainable development?
- What is the role of digitalisation and ICTs in NGO platforms innovation processes?

3. A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

A mixed methods approach was chosen, starting with an online survey to identify trends and following up with semi-structured interviews with selected survey respondents. Although innovation surveys are useful (as opposed to input vs output analysis) to understand processes in innovation research (Godin 2002), interviews help explore identified trends in exploratory research. A partnership was created with Forus, a global network of national NGO platforms, established in 2008 “as the umbrella organisation for National NGO Platforms and Regional Coalitions from 82 countries and 5 continents”⁵. ‘National NGO Platforms’ are described by Forus as associations of NGOs (and sometimes other civil society organisations) created in one given country to advance the interests of their member organisations; ‘Regional Coalitions’ bring together national NGO platforms to coordinate actions at a regional level. Today, the Forus network counts amongst its members 69 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions, representing more than 22 000 NGOs working on development around the world, from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and the Pacific.

The online survey was directed at staff working in Forus members. The questionnaire, with an estimated duration of 10 minutes to complete, was initially developed in English and then translated into French, Spanish, and Portuguese, to cover all four working languages of Forus. Staff from 20 different platforms⁶ responded to the online survey between May and July 2020, for a total of 21 valid responses⁷; of these platforms, eight were based in Latin America and the Caribbean, four were based in Africa, three in Europe, three in Asia, one in the Middle East and Northern Africa, and one in North America – most platforms in the sample are based in the global south (16 out of 20). Based on the initial analysis of the survey responses, eleven platforms were then interviewed via Zoom between August and September 2020. This sample included platforms from different regions representing

⁵ <http://forus-international.org/en/about-us/what-we-do>, accessed on 24/03/2020.

⁶ Encuentro de Entidades No Gubernamentales para el Desarrollo (Red Encuentro) - Argentina, Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO) – Philippines, NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN), Coordinadora de ONGD – Spain, National Platform of Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organizations – Lithuania, Plate-Forme Nationale des Organisations de la Société Civile de Madagascar (PFNOSCM), Uganda National NGO Forum, Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), Réseau de plateformes d’ONG d’Afrique Occidentale (REPAOC), Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), POJOAJU - Asociación de ONGs del Paraguay, Espace Associatif – Morocco, Plataforma Portuguesa das ONGD - Portugal, Asociación Nacional de ONGs orientadas al desarrollo (ANONG) – Uruguay, Unión Nacional de Instituciones para el Trabajo de Acción Social (UNITAS) – Bolivia, Conseil Inter ONG en Centrafrique (CIONGCA), Confederación Colombiana de ONG - Colombia, ACCION Asociación Gremial – Chile, Associação Brasileira de ONG (Abong) - Brazil, Mesa de Articulación de Plataformas Nacionales de ONGD y redes regionales – Latin America and Caribbean

⁷ One of the platforms submitted two responses, by two different staff members. The number of valid responses per question often varies due to the answers given by survey respondents.

different perspectives on learning and innovation, as well as different innovation practices. Interviews were conducted in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted with the platform staff who had initially responded to the online survey, although on a few occasions other platform staff replaced or joined the survey respondent for the interview.

We recognise that this is a small sample that does not allow us to draw definite conclusions. However, given the lack of existing research on the topic, particularly concerning organisations based in the global south, we believe that the present research provides important exploratory work, opening questions and avenues for future research.

4. INNOVATION IN THE EYES OF NGO PLATFORMS: PERSPECTIVES, RATIONALES, AND MOTIVATIONS

4.1. *Innovation as social transformation, collaboration, and learning*

The first important finding to highlight is that survey respondents consider their organisations innovative: to the question “Was your organisation involved in an innovative initiative in the past three year?” all but two survey respondents answered “Yes”. According to 85% of the survey respondents, innovation is either a ‘high’ or a ‘very high priority’ for their organizations. Only one of the respondents stated that innovation is a ‘low priority’ for their organisation; none saw innovation as a ‘very low priority’. Nineteen (all but two) survey respondents submitted a definition of innovation in the context of their organizations’ work. The definitions submitted are quite broad, but they are also rich and varied. It is possible to regroup them around a combination of two or three of the following perspectives on innovation:

- Innovation is newness, originality, and creativity;
- Innovation is a process towards social transformation and systemic change;
- Innovation is about responding to CSO needs, in order to improve their work/autonomy/sustainability;
- Innovation is about collaborating with other actors and working through networks;
- Innovation is about learning and using evidence-based approaches;
- Innovation means being people-centred, locally anchored, and developing accountable approaches.

Most definitions analysed encompass more than one perspective on innovation, reflecting the varied nature of the work conducted by platforms and perhaps a lack of clarity on what innovation means to organizations working in development cooperation (as noted in section 2.2). Nonetheless, looking at how these different perspectives overlap and connect in the same definition it is possible to unveil three key macro-perspectives on innovation in our survey results:

- ***Innovation as a creative process towards social transformation:*** in definitions that understand innovation both as ‘originality, newness, creativity’ and as a process towards ‘Social Transformation and Systemic Change’;
- ***Innovation as evidence-based learning and collaboration:*** definitions that encompass the ideas of innovation as ‘Learning and evidence-based approaches’ and ‘Collaboration with other actors / working as a network’;
- ***Innovation as a people-centred approach to answer CSO needs:*** definitions that see innovation as responding to CSO needs, in order to improve their work/autonomy/sustainability and their ability to be people-centred, locally anchored and accountable.

Examples of survey answers that correspond to each of these macro-perspectives are presented in Text Box 1.

For NGO platforms that took part in this study, to innovate is *to use evidence-based and collaborative approaches to improve the support to their CSO members*, in order to help them address current challenges and be more accountable to the vulnerable populations they serve, and/or *to find creative solutions to achieve wider goals of social transformation and systemic change*, in light of local and global challenges, working in collaboration with their own members and other development actors and stakeholders (including the people they serve and represent).

Text Box 1. A selection of innovation definitions, by key macro-perspective.

Innovation as a creative process towards social transformation

“It is an alternative proposal, new, which aims to solve a social problem that is in transformation, in movement. It is a collaborative practice that seeks profound changes and that puts people and its needs at the centre of any action.” (translation from Spanish)

“Applying new approaches to improve systems and bring greater results.”

Innovation as evidence-based learning and collaboration

“Innovation is in the practices that we develop and that promote CSO autonomy and strengthen their value offer, with which they stand out from the action of other actors because it creates knowledge and it is framed within a network approach; it is relevant because it implements practices that promote auto-regulation, transparency and accountability, leads to the development of public policy and in addition creates value in the sense that it brings about and contributes to the effective enforcement of rights or their defence, promotes citizen participation ability and does not generate dependency.” (translated from Spanish)

“Innovation means to challenge the imagination to adapt institutional action strategies to the context and the needs and demands of the population towards whom we direct our work, generating better conditions to interpret the reality and to respond in a timely and appropriate matter; and improving the team’s technical capacity.” (translated from Spanish)

Innovation as a people-centred approach to answer CSO needs

“Innovation is the ability to bring about important changes in the way we manage the platform, so that it can effectively answer and reflect the expectations and aspirations of the people, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, so that they can see in the organization the spokesperson to whom they can lean on and rest their trust.” (translated from French)

“Effectiveness, efficiency, and timeliness alignment of the global context with the local needs and vice versa, for the benefits of our member CSOs, other beneficiaries/stakeholders”

4.2. *Innovation as a response to external pressures and demands*

In line with survey results, interviewees see their organisations as inherently innovative. At the same time, they look at innovation today with a sense of urgency. Innovation is key to address external pressures on civil society and to respond to growing threats to human rights, democracy, and inclusive sustainable development. In line with the conclusions of CCIC’s discussion paper (Reilly-King, Charles 2018), the in-depth interviews thus reveal a variety of different rationales and motivations to innovate in NGO platforms (i.e., ‘why innovate?’):

- a) the need to respond to a crisis that affects society as whole;
- b) the need to reaffirm the civil society space as one of dialogue with other development actors;
- c) the need to respond to donors’ request for innovation;
- d) the enabling role of ICTs and digitalization tools.

Interestingly, nor the MDGs nor the SDGs and their respective agendas, key frameworks for other development actors working on innovation (as seen in section 2.1), come up as drivers of innovation. In the remaining paragraphs of this section each of the rationales for innovation across our sample is described.

The need to respond to a crisis that affects society as a whole: crises can be economic, social, political, environmental, but they push NGO platforms to adapt and innovate, so that they can rethink the way they support both their members and society as a whole. In Brazil, the extreme right was very quick to use online spaces to take-over the progressive protests and movements that initially started in 2013 against rising public transport fares, but that expanded to demands for political and police reform, social justice, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights⁸. The extremist take-over of these movements contributed to an increasing polarisation

⁸ “Cinco anos depois, o que aconteceu com as reivindicações dos protestos que pararam o Brasil em junho de 2013?,” Fernanda Odilla, BBC News Brasil, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-44353703> (accessed 05/06/2021).

of political discourse in the country in the following years, which culminated with the election of extreme right president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. Similarly, the 2008-2009 crisis had a strong impact in the development NGO sector in Spain, as the interviewee from Coordinadora, the Spanish platform, observes: “[the 2008 crisis] brought to the table evidence of something that in theory we all preached already, which is the fact that poverty and inequality are problems that have the same roots in every country” (Coordinadora interview, translated from Spanish).

The Covid-19 pandemic itself represents a moment of crisis, this time a public health emergency, which has pushed NGOs to find diverse ways of working (ICVA 2020; CIVICUS 2020) – and in this civil society is not very different from other sectors of human activity, which had to adapt and experiment with different ways of working and organising. Interviewees noted how that the restrictions to movement and physical contact imposed by governments during the pandemic pushed them to adapt and innovate, especially by finding new and better ways to engage effectively with members, other civil society actors, and governments. ICTs and digital tools are key to this transformation, reshaping the way platform staff communicate with member organisations, partners, and even citizens.

And it is now [in the Covid-19 pandemic] that we are debating how we can reclaim some of the processes that should have never been led by the extreme-right. With the pandemic, we have intensified our online processes, we have been organizing more talks, and that has been interesting because sometimes we didn't have that many people because it was far away, it was more expensive to bring those people to attend and via online talks we can have those people that weren't there before. (Abong interview, translated from Portuguese)

The need to reaffirm the civil society space as one of dialogue with other development actors is a common topic mentioned as a reason for NGO platforms to innovate. This rationale translates into the need to help fulfil their members' advocacy role, by reclaiming a public sphere for dialogue between civil society's actors, governments, private sector organizations. We found many examples of platforms that initiated and sustained dialogue spaces with other civil society actors: for example, Bolivia's platform UNITAS' multi-stakeholder forum; Argentina's Red Encuentro's social dialogues on the SDGs; Spain's Coordinadora Quorum Global meetings with activists, social movements, and civil society organisations; Uganda National NGO Forum's Citizen Manifesto to engage political candidates and citizens in electoral processes; Brazil's Abong “Pacto pela Democracia” (Pact for Democracy) to encourage political debate and fight populism.

This rationale goes back to the double-realization that a) NGOs will not achieve their longer terms objectives of social change by acting alone and b) NGO co-ordination bodies such as national platforms are well placed to facilitate dialogue in the public sphere and thus help advance collective action (Fowler 1997: 116). As the following excerpt illustrates:

... today we are looking at the issue of articulating with worker cooperatives, with other sectors, with the social movement, which allows us to develop capacities in strategic terms, in terms of negotiation, in terms of... Well, this implies that we have to negotiate with others, we have to build a position, we have to argue, we have to build evidence, we have to investigate, right? In other words, this [dialogue] becomes necessary to the extent that we have to articulate with others in order to negotiate. So for us this has been an innovative instance in how to think about strategy. (Uruguay's platform ANONG interview, translated from Spanish)

The need to respond to donor's push for innovation: interviewees highlighted that the need to respond to growing demands from donors for innovation has pushed them to think about what could be done differently and to develop innovative initiatives. Survey results show that public and private donor grants are the main funding source for innovative initiatives; only three respondents stated that member fees were used to fund innovative initiatives, and only one identified donations from citizens as a funding source for innovation. Interviewees described different innovation funding processes, including using the platform's unrestricted funds, directly responding to donor calls, and negotiating with existing funding partners. The European Union (EU) and multi-donor funding mechanisms to support civil society were often mentioned as funding partners that both request innovative approaches at proposal stage and are open to negotiate funding innovative initiatives proposed by civil society organizations.

The enabling role of ICTs and digitalization: although the ICTs and digitalization aspect did not come across strongly in the innovation definitions previously described, it was mentioned by almost all interviewees as

an important enabler of innovation in advocacy and communication activities. This trend was clearly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions to movement and public gathering imposed by governments across the world, as the interviewee from Paraguay's platform POJUAJU observes:

The change factor of the last few years is the introduction of information technology - that is what accelerates and brings about some changes that we as an organization have to adapt to. The most typical case is that now, with the pandemic crisis, the meetings are online and the organizations are adapting to webinars, this online seminar, etcetera, etcetera, right? So, that on the one hand, and on the other hand, since a few years ago, everything related to communication through social networks, Facebook, web page, etc., which accelerates [change in communications]. (POJUAJU interview, translated from Spanish)

The pandemic has provided at the same time an urgency to use these technologies to communicate and an opportunity to experiment new, improved ways of doing advocacy and to influence using ICTs and digital tools. This of course comes with risks and not everything is positive. It is hard to manage the information overload and the increasing time spent on online communications (emails, social media, online meetings). Especially when engaging with citizens, interviewees note the need to manage people's fatigue of online methods of communication and the need to constantly keep communication content relevant and 'fresh'. A balance has yet to be reached.

4.3. *Social innovation as innovation for social change*

One important aspect to consider is that the innovation perspectives, rationales, and motivations analysed in this section uncover the same two directions for innovation in the work of development NGO platforms that have been observed in other studies of innovation in development cooperation (Bloom, Faulkner 2016): *inwards* innovation (directed at the work done internally, as an answer to the needs of the platform members) and *outwards* innovation (in the form of external advocacy, as platforms act as a convenor for members and other civil society actors, for wider social change). Looking at this data alone, we can argue that the platforms in our sample show a view of innovation that is closer to 'strong' social innovation definitions (Ayob, Teasdale, Fagan 2016), where collective action has a key role. Social change – not merely social value, or individual utility – is the goal. At the intention level, platforms aim to innovate primarily *outwards*, to fulfil the goal of advancing the wider development and social change aspirations of their members. Technology (namely ICTs and digital tools), at this level of analysis, appears as an important enabler (one of the *means* to innovate) but not a central feature in the innovation discourse.

When confronting these perspectives, which come from a majority of organisations based in the global south, with the mainstream innovation agenda in development cooperation described in section 2.2 and the discourse of platforms based in the global north in section 2.3, we can observe some similarities but also some fundamental differences. On the one hand, all these perspectives are closer to 'social innovation' than to an 'innovation for growth' perspective (which is in fact absent from the discourses of both global north and global south platforms). Innovation is also seen as both a means to improve internal organisational efficiency (*inwards* innovation) and to address external challenges (*outwards* innovation). The inclusive development aspirations of the development cooperation sector are present all around, with the needs of the poorest, most vulnerable, excluded populations that development organisations work with/for appearing consistently in definitions as an innovation starting point. On the other hand, the focus of platforms in our sample is the need to increase the agency and democratic participation ability of these populations, or in the words of some survey respondents 'put people in the centre of our action'. The mainstream discourse is more 'solutionist': it wants to solve the problems of the poor and vulnerable and trusts technology as a key ally. The perspectives uncovered by our research link innovation to learning and collaborative action towards social change, seeing technology (namely ICTs and digital tools) as an enabler to do things differently.

In the next sections we examine the relationships between learning, collaboration, and ICTs and digitalisation more closely, as well as the innovation practices identified by the platforms in our sample.

5. LEARNING, COLLABORATION, AND THE ROLE OF ICTS AND DIGITALISATION

The central role of learning and collaboration in the respondents' innovation views is not only highlighted by the innovation keywords exercise represented in the world cloud reproduced in Figure 2. These findings are, on the one hand, in line with the existing literature on learning, innovation, and development NGOs (Seelos, Mair 2017; Ramalingam, Scriven, Foley 2009; Edwards, 1997). On the other hand, they are only natural, if we consider that one of the key roles of NGO/CSO platforms is to foster connections, promote exchanges, peer-learning, and collaboration within their member networks and with other civil society actors.

In fact, 90% of the survey respondents state that learning⁹ is either a 'high' or a 'very high' priority and no respondent considered learning either a 'low' or a 'very low' priority. Learning is a 'very high' priority for half of the respondents, while innovation is a 'very high priority' for only 30%. The support that platforms currently give to their members on innovation and learning is heavily tilted towards the learning side: more than half of the platforms encourage partnerships and collaboration among their members (75%), help members disseminate their work (65%), and provide online resources and materials (55%). Almost half (45%) provide training on innovation-related topics and skills, as well as research and knowledge creation. Moreover, all respondents stated that their organisations would like to do more in these fields, even more of what they already do. As one respondent sums up very clearly, learning is inextricable from innovation when looking at the work of development NGOs and their social change goals:

(...) the concept of innovation, while attractive, is not fully clear. Learning seems to me much more powerful, because if we want to change or improve the reality, according to Forus' principles we need to understand to transform. This emphasis [on learning] is old in the social sciences and in the history of development NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean. (translated from Spanish).

Surprisingly, technology is not one of the themes that comes across strongly in the innovation definitions submitted via the online survey (it appears in only two definitions). However, 'ICTs and Digitalisation' appear in the second most visible layer in the word cloud of innovation keywords, are seen as an enabler of innovation by interviewees, and many of the identified innovations described in section 6 involve ICTs and digitalisation. This reinforces the idea that ICTs and digitalisation are key enabling factor for innovation and change in development cooperation, already noted by previous research (Boas, Dunning, Bussell 2005; Silva 2021). One of the most important trends in the sector, the evolution towards goal-based agendas, can only be accomplished if mechanisms for regular monitoring and evaluation are in place – computers, mobile phones, and the internet have revolutionised the quantity, quality, and timely collection of data collection even in hard to reach, difficult contexts. For NGO platforms like the ones that constitute our sample, the key change appears to be in the areas of communication with members and citizens. Online communication through websites, email communication, and social media not only widen the reach of knowledge sharing and activity dissemination, they also change how campaigning and influencing are done, as the next section of the paper illustrates.

6. INNOVATION PRACTICES

The initiatives identified as innovative by the survey respondents ranged from formal to informal projects/activities, externally and/or internally resourced, developed alone or in collaboration with other actors/organizations. Analysing the innovative initiatives identified by survey respondents using Tidd and Bessant's 4Ps typology (innovation as Product, Process, Position, and Paradigm, one of the typologies frequently used in development and humanitarian innovation literature¹⁰ – Figure 3), we can observe that most initiatives identi-

⁹ Understood explicitly in the survey as: an organisation's capacity to create and accumulate knowledge through its work and use that knowledge to improve, re-think, or change its practice.

¹⁰ A discussion on typologies could be the subject of another paper, but Tidd and Bessant's 4Ps is one of the most used in innova-



Figure 2. Innovation keywords (word cloud representing word frequency).

fied as innovative by survey respondents are *process* innovations, i.e. initiatives that change the way platform products and services are provided to the platform members. Good examples are platforms that increasingly use online training methods and that are changing their communication strategies to make better use of digital tools. This means that, although platforms see innovation in their work directed both *inwards* and *outwards*, and outwards innovation comes across initially as a stronger concern when analysing definitions and motivations to innovate, these organisations are first and foremost worried about innovating inwards, by providing better services for their members. Not necessarily *new* services, but *better* services that can respond to the current needs of their members.

A handful of platforms is designing innovative *products* and *services* for their members. Good examples are CODE-NGO's Centre for Humanitarian Learning and Innovation (CHLI)¹¹ in the Philippines, an online platform that provides virtual and blended learning courses to non-profit professionals, and the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia's Civil Society Fund¹², a fund designed and managed by the Cambodian platform to support grassroots organisations with small grants.

tion management literature, as well as in studies of humanitarian innovation. Its types show change at different levels (with paradigm being equivalent to social change), which is useful for our analysis.

¹¹ <https://chli.asia/>, accessed on 01/03/2021

¹² <https://www.ccc-cambodia.org/en/what-we-do/civil-society-fund>, accessed on 01/03/2021

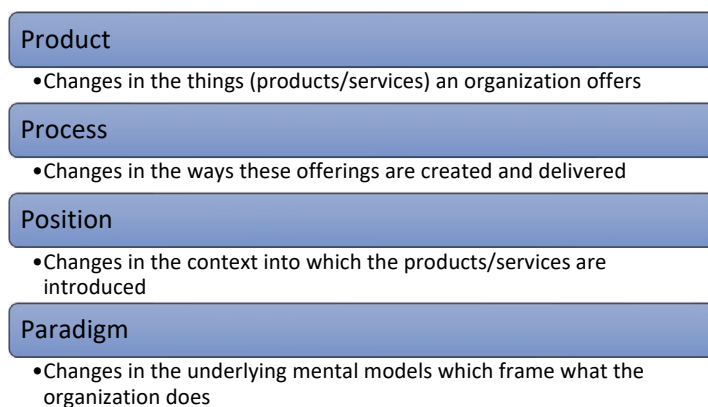


Figure 3. Dimensions for innovation, adapted from (Bessant, Tidd 2015).

Finally, although they are a minority, there are platforms working to change the *paradigm* of civil society action in which they normally operate. These are platforms like Abong, in Brazil, and Coordinadora, in Spain, who are using their structure and existing services to fulfil a wider enabling role for other civil society actors (citizen activists, social movements), as well as to assert a more politically active role for themselves and their members against threats to national-level democratic participation and to our collective existence. For example, Abong was a founding member of “Pacto pela Democracia”¹³ (in English, Pact for Democracy), a multi-actor, politically plural movement in Brazil fighting for an open civic space in the context of the rising far-right in the country, using virtual spaces and social media as one of its advocacy tools. In Uganda, the National NGO Forum used a tool called Citizen Manifesto in 2009-10 (and which they were hoping to use again in the 2021 elections) to promote civic participation during the electoral process and democratic accountability. These platforms, who are involved in the initiatives with the most transformative potential (in relation to wider social change) are the ones engaging in *outwards* innovation, playing the role of enabler for social movements and civic participation, helping materialise a Gramscian perspective of civil society as a site for politics and conflict (Edwards 2020), as a response to democracy threats, the civic space crisis, and the rise of populism.

7. CONCLUSION

In a context of transformation in the international development cooperation sector and of an emerging innovation agenda, the present research surveyed a sample of 20 geographically diverse, although mostly based in the global south, national NGO coordination bodies. It concludes that, for NGO platforms that took part in this study, to innovate is *to use evidence-based and collaborative approaches to improve the support given to their CSO members*, in order to help them address current challenges and be more accountable to the vulnerable populations they serve, and/or *to find creative solutions to achieve wider goals of social transformation and systemic change*, in light of local and global challenges, working in collaboration with their own members and other development actors and stakeholders (including the people they serve and represent).

These findings show that, when compared to the perspectives coming from the western donor narrative, but also to existing definitions coming from global north platforms, the innovation perspectives unveiled by this research are unequivocally closer to a ‘strong’ view of social innovation (Ayob, Teasdale, Fagan 2016), i.e. a collective process, which happens at different levels, once a new technology or social practice addressing a common human need/goal or a social problem is widely diffused, by imitation or adaptation, leading to social change at scale. This comes across very strongly in the definitions explored in the survey and interviews, but also in *para-*

¹³ <https://www.pactopelademocracia.org.br/o-pacto>, accessed on 01/03/2021

digm innovations identified by the surveyed platforms, such as “Pacto pela Democracia” in Brazil and the Citizen Manifesto in Uganda. The ideas of learning and collaboration are seen as almost integral to the innovation process, in line with existing literature on learning, innovation, and development NGOs (e.g., Seelos, Mair 2017; Britton, 1998; Edwards, 1997). The most vulnerable populations and the voiceless stand in the centre of innovation efforts towards more democratic development processes. As such, across our sample, the idea of innovation scale and impact is much more often linked to the idea of achieving social change, transforming systems, strengthening democracy, and finding alternatives to the mainstream development model, than to ideas of problem solving, aid efficiency, and value for money as highlighted by the mainstream innovation for development agenda in western donors and global north platforms (subsections 2.1 and 2.2). In a sense, these findings also accompany the evolution in social innovation literature (Ayob, Teasdale, Fagan 2016), which is moving away from a ‘weaker’, overly solutionist perspective of social innovation, focused on solving social and environmental problems.

The results discussed in the present paper suggest that civil society organisations, in particular NGO coordination bodies such as national NGO platforms, due to their organisational nature and structure but also to how they are adapting to current crisis and challenges, are therefore in a good position to promote and advocate for inclusive innovation for sustainable development processes that go beyond a simple distributional justice imperative for innovation and knowledge production – in line with the arguments put forward by authors like Papaioannou (2018) and Schot and Steinmueller (2018). They reinforce the idea that development cooperation as a system guided by pro-poor aspirations and international solidarity (Janus, Klingebiel, Paulo 2015), and especially development NGOs, can play an important role in the development of more inclusive innovation ecosystems in developing countries – not just by helping provide common goods in areas such as education and health (Altenburg 2011) but also by reclaiming their original role of social innovators and precursors of alternative development models (Davies 2014).

Lastly, the fact that ICTs and digitalisation come across as the most important enabler for innovation and one of the key reasons to innovate in surveyed platforms has important implications for further research. The literature on digitalisation, organisational change, and innovation points to the profound changes to organisations brought by digital transformation (Hanelt *et alii* 2021; Verhoef *et alii* 2021; Vial 2019), defined as “organizational change triggered and shaped by the widespread diffusion of digital technology” (Hanelt *et alii* 2021: 1187). The boundaries between types of organisational innovation become more blurred, as implementing digital tools within an organisation can lead not only to the intended internal change but, at a later stage or concurrently, change the very practices of that same organisation. Our results suggest that, so far, ICTs and digitalisation tools are first and foremost spurring change at organisational level (*inwards*), changing products, services, and processes of surveyed platforms. However, there are already signs that these will also lead to wider changes in the way these organisations act and interact with other actors in their work – the examples such as the paradigm innovations identified where platforms like Abong in Brazil and Coordinadora in Spain use digital tools to engage politically with social movements, citizens, and political parties, illustrate the potential for this more substantial (and *outwards*) change.

This research aimed to contribute to the academic debate about an under-researched topic (innovation) and an under-research actor (development NGO platforms) in development cooperation. The findings discussed in this paper helped uncover innovation perspectives and practices in development NGO platforms mostly based in the global south and situated them with the existing literature. They open questions for further research on change in development cooperation, particularly in international aid, the role of less traditional development actors, and the role of transnational civil society networks in global change.

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