

# Place-based social innovation ecosystems: components, emergence and the challenge of strategic orchestration

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the components and emergence of place-based social innovation ecosystems, highlighting them as promising configurations for tackling complex societal challenges at the local level.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study draws on a three-year, multi-university research project conducted in Italy. For the purposes of this paper, the empirical analysis relies on a desk analysis of 67 crowdsourced case studies and one focus group with practitioners. Adopting an abductive, qualitative approach, the research develops a conceptual model to understand the key components of place-based social innovation ecosystems.

**Findings** – The study identifies four key components of place-based social innovation ecosystems – entrepreneurial solutions, local public administration support, social impact measurement and impact finance – and finds that place-based social innovation ecosystems typically feature multiple components working in combination, with at least two of the four components present in observed cases.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes a novel framework for understanding the components and emergence of place-based social innovation ecosystems, which complements existing frameworks such as mission-oriented innovation, civic wealth creation and collective impact.

**Keywords** Strategic management, Social economy, Public value, Transformative social innovation, Local governance, Civic wealth creation, Social entrepreneurship, Collaborative governance

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

A search on Scopus conducted in January 2025 has found only 31 articles containing both the words “social innovation” and “public value” in any of the titles, abstracts and/or keywords. This is despite “social innovation” alone appearing in more than 7,000 hits and “public

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value” almost 4,000 times (according to the search criteria above within the Scopus database) [1].

We were puzzled to see quite a disconnection between these two research areas, given that both social innovation and public value deal with the generation of societal value beyond profit.

Surely, a functional and siloed way of thinking could claim that social innovation happens from society, not from the State and that public value is the pursuit of the public sector, and we need to keep those distinct for empirical clarity and/or for ideological reasons. In other words, and with academic terms, from this perspective public value is just concerned with developments in the discipline of public management, while social innovation is a matter of investigation for third sector, civil society and social entrepreneurship studies. However, both the empirical reality and developments in theories of social innovation and public value signal that the common intention to achieve public value and/or social impact [2] (societal value) should suggest a closer analysis on the relationships between socially innovative and entrepreneurial endeavors and public organizations (Bryson *et al.*, 2017; Calo *et al.*, 2024; Karré, 2024). Moreover, we believe that the disconnect between social innovation and public value has hampered the possibility of building on social innovations to transform existing democratic and collaborative governance arrangements (Sacchetti *et al.*, 2017; Sancino *et al.*, 2018; Thabit *et al.*, 2024; Torfing *et al.*, 2019) and to foster their scalability (Beckman *et al.*, 2023; Sancino *et al.*, 2024).

Recent reviews have acknowledged this point by writing on the neglected understanding of public institutions roles within the social innovation field which does not consider ‘the enormous potential for leveraging the public sector’s unique position to tackle social problems by transforming systems across entire populations and jurisdictions’ (Beckman *et al.*, 2023, pp. 688-689) as well as a limited understanding of the potential of learning and replicating social enterprises solutions for public value co-creation (Calo *et al.*, 2024; Chandra and Paras, 2021).

This paper explores the components of place-based social innovation ecosystems, defined as “a set of actions designed *and implemented at the local level* to promote the development and growth of social innovations, partly through improving interactions between actors” [OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), 2021a, p. 23, italics added]. We move from a positionality which considers the potential for increasing public value creation from strategic learning and scaling up and out place-based social innovation ecosystems (Sancino *et al.*, 2024). Drawing from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2021b), which builds upon the work of Moore (1993), we consider ecosystems more broadly as ‘a community of actors that are somehow interconnected and enables these actors to interact with each other to generate a certain value proposition’ [OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), 2021a, p. 23]. This aligns with Adner’s (2017, p. 40) definition of ecosystems as ‘the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialize.’

Despite the promising potential, the relationship between social innovation and public value has not yet garnered sufficient attention as a strategic venture to scale the creation of public value and/or social impact.

We are guided by the following research question:

RQ. What are the main components of place-based social innovation ecosystems?

Our paper is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature on social innovation and its connections with developments in public management on public value

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creation. This is followed by the methodology section that outlines the research strategy, data collection and data analysis. The findings section presents the main components of place based social innovation ecosystems. Finally, the last section provides some concluding remarks.

## 2. Social innovation and public value creation: ecosystem thinking as a convergent strategic framework

### 2.1 Framing social innovation: four focal points

Whilst social innovation has always existed as a fundamental aspect of human life, its emergence as a central theme in academic, policy and practice discourse gained prominence especially in Europe following the global financial crisis in 2008 (Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014). This increasing focus on social innovation was driven by the need to find alternative solutions to societal challenges that traditional State and market mechanisms had failed to address (Ayob *et al.*, 2016; De Pieri and Teasdale, 2021; Nicholls, 2006). The evolution of social innovation research can be understood as marked by four distinct focal points, which contribute to the evolving discourse on social innovation as a complex interplay between individual and collective agency, organizational strategies, as well as policy and institutional frameworks.

The first focal point emphasizes social innovation as a grassroots phenomenon, focusing on the capacity of individuals and communities to come up with solutions to social problems unmet by the State and market (Mulgan, 2012). This view frames social innovation as a localized and community-driven process, characterized by the creative potential of community actors and voluntary action as key drivers of innovative social responses for resilience and adaptive capacity.

A second focal point looks at the institutionalization of social innovation, particularly through the rise of social entrepreneurship as a strategic arm for system change (Nicholls, 2006). This perspective embraces the complex interplay between State intervention, new models and organizational structures within capitalistic business paradigms, and bottom-up innovation, suggesting how policy and business agendas can shape, and sometimes constrain, the transformative potential of social innovation (Teasdale *et al.*, 2013; 2023). In this context, some literature focuses on social innovation as an instrumental mechanism to deliver public value, often in response to government-initiated policies such as the Big Society agenda in the UK (Nicholls and Murdock, 2012; Seelos and Mair, 2020; Bacq and Janssen, 2011). This stream of social innovation research highlights a shift toward managerialism and measurable outcomes, where social innovation becomes increasingly aligned with economic efficiency goals rather than social empowerment, as business-like practices are adopted to achieve social objectives, thereby risking co-optation (Teasdale, 2011; Dey and Steyaert, 2016).

A third focal point emphasizes the growing prominence of open and technology-enabled social innovation, which occurs through interorganizational and multi-stakeholder collaborative ecosystems. In this context, open social innovation is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for promoting collaborative initiatives that leverage collective intelligence and resources to cocreate innovative solutions with the aim of generating public value and/or social impact (Mair *et al.*, 2023; Mulgan, 2017). These initiatives foster knowledge exchange and resource mobilization, with intermediary organizations playing a crucial role in sustaining these emerging ecosystems by facilitating collaboration and scaling social innovation efforts (Calderini *et al.*, 2023; Roy *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, a fourth focal point in social innovation research centers on its relationship with proximity economies and the resilience of communities amidst increasing societal

turbulence. This view highlights the importance of local and place-based social innovation ecosystems in fostering adaptive capacities and social cohesion through short supply chains, civic engagement and decentralized collaboration (European Commission, 2024; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Tricarico *et al.*, 2022; Zandonai and Venturi, 2019). Resilience theory frames social innovation as a mechanism that enables communities to adapt and transform without collapsing, emphasizing iterative cycles of learning, reorganization and renewal, where social innovation thus becomes a generative force in navigating systemic shocks and fostering long-term sustainability (Westley, 2013). Recent literature also underscores how turbulent conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can catalyze new forms of collaboration and resource recombination, enhancing the transformative potential of social innovation in crisis settings (Calò *et al.*, 2024).

### *2.2 Social innovation: a functional and processual perspective*

A number of contributions also converge in treating social innovation from a functional and processual perspective (Oeij *et al.*, 2019), that is, as a sequence of activities through which new social practices emerge, evolve and become stabilized rather than as static interventions. This perspective reflects broader attempts within social innovation scholarship to clarify how initiatives unfold through nonlinear pathways shaped by shifting configurations of actors, resources and institutional conditions (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace, 2017; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). In this view, social innovation progresses through interconnected phases of initiation, development and implementation that structure the formation, contestation and institutionalization of new ways of addressing social needs.

The initiation phase comprises early forms of problematisation and framing. During this stage, dispersed concerns and loosely coordinated activities begin to converge around a perceived social problem. Exogenous triggers such as governance failures, social crises or political changes frequently accelerate the recognition of a need for collective action and can act as focal points for mobilization (Oeij *et al.*, 2019). These triggers influence the interpretive frames through which actors define the boundaries and urgency of an issue. Early mobilization involves identifying and engaging those actors whose situated knowledge, lived experiences and institutional positions enable them to shape how responsibilities, priorities and possibilities for action are configured (Calò *et al.*, 2024). Evidence from SI-DRIVE research project shows that this phase is often grounded in community capabilities, informal networks and local institutional ecologies, confirming the strong context dependence of early-stage social innovation (Howaldt *et al.*, 2016).

As social innovation moves into the development phase, its trajectory often proliferates into multiple and sometimes competing pathways. The literature describes this phase as characterized by relational and organizational complexity, where divergent interpretations, uneven commitments and conflicting incentives become visible (Dhondt *et al.*, 2018). Setbacks such as interruptions in funding, lack of qualified personnel, political resistance or regulatory ambiguity are common and should be understood as systemic properties of social innovation processes rather than unexpected disruptions. These moments require actors to recalibrate objectives, renegotiate roles and adjust organizational arrangements. Leadership becomes salient not as hierarchical steering but as the capacity to maintain direction, hold together heterogeneous coalitions and navigate uncertainty in ways that sustain momentum (Westley *et al.*, 2014). The development phase therefore reflects a continuous interplay of problem-solving, institutional work and the iterative refinement of practices.

The implementation phase concerns the embedding, consolidation or expansion of social innovation. Across comparative studies, the presence of an enabling infrastructure that is organizational, financial and relational is consistently identified as a decisive condition for

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sustainability (Howaldt *et al.*, 2016; Oeij *et al.*, 2019; Tafoska *et al.*, 2026). Implementation may take the form of scaling out when practices diffuse across settings or populations or scaling up when institutional rules or governance arrangements are reorganized to integrate new social practices more deeply (Westley *et al.*, 2014). Both forms of scaling require alignment across diverse actors, adaptation to different local contexts and the stabilization of resource flows. Social innovation studies show that implementation rarely constitutes a terminal stage, because new practices may be reinterpreted, contested or abandoned depending on political support, organizational fit and the resilience of the infrastructural arrangements that sustain them.

### 2.3 Social innovation and place-based public value creation

The concept of public value has emerged as a central framework in public management scholarship for understanding how public organizations can create positive societal value (Moore, 1997). Moore's seminal work positioned public managers as entrepreneurs and social innovators tasked with creating value that extends beyond inward and administratively focused endeavors to address collective policy problems and societal needs (Cels *et al.*, 2012; Moore, 1997). In recent developments, Moore himself has acknowledged that the public value framework has proven useful for a wider range of actors beyond *traditional* public managers, including social entrepreneurs, social change makers and social innovators (Geuijen *et al.*, 2017; Moore, 2019). This expansion reflects a fundamental shift: public value creation is increasingly understood not as the exclusive domain of public institutions but as happening in societies (Bryson *et al.*, 2017; Osborne *et al.*, 2022; Sancino, 2022).

Complementing this evolution, the ecosystem paradigm has gained prominence in the discipline of public management as an analytical lens and as an organizing framework for understanding the complex, relational nature of public value creation through public services and with a citizens centered logic of public service (Cui and Aulton, 2023; Osborne, 2020). The ecosystem approach offers a unifying framework that transcends previous paradigms by simultaneously integrating context specificity and interdependence among actors (e.g. Petrescu, 2019; Strokosch and Osborne, 2020; Dudau, 2025). Ecosystem thinking in public management has emphasized multiple levels which affect dynamics of public value creation or destruction: individual and professional beliefs (sub-micro), individual actors (micro), organizational networks and service systems (meso) and institutional/societal norms (macro) (Osborne *et al.*, 2022), as well as emergent patterns of interaction where value arises through ongoing exchanges among heterogeneous actors (Strokosch and Osborne, 2020; Kinder *et al.*, 2021). In this respect, scholarship in strategic management has conceptualized ecosystem leadership as the exercise of externally-oriented dynamic capabilities – sensing, seizing and reconfiguring – through which leaders address coordination and cooperation problems among ecosystem participants to enable ecosystem emergence and facilitate the realization of integrated value propositions (Foss *et al.*, 2023).

More recently, Osborne *et al.* (2025) have provided an important link between ecosystem thinking and place-based approaches, introducing the concept of place-based public service ecosystems and foregrounding the importance of place-based configurations that are responsive to local needs and situated practices (see also Bianchi and Grippi, 2025). This territorial grounding resonates strongly with several focal points of social innovation scholarship discussed above, such as those focused on proximity economies, community resilience, grassroots phenomena and bottom-up place-based innovation, as well as the role of local ecosystems in fostering adaptive capacities. The convergence between developments in public value creation frameworks in public management and social innovation studies provides conceptually fertile ground for examining how multi-actor, territorially-bounded

configurations can generate and sustain societal value through place-based socially innovative, collaborative and entrepreneurial practices. In sum, the literatures on social innovation and developments in the discipline of public management centered on public service ecosystems converge around ecosystems and place-based configurations as critical sites where social innovation and public value creation intersect.

#### 2.4 Research gaps

Although social innovation and public value creation are increasingly discussed through the language of ecosystems, the literature remains fragmented along three main gaps. First, ecosystems are largely treated as conceptual or normative frames rather than as analytically specified configurations of actors, resources and practices, leaving limited empirical understanding of how place-based ecosystems actually function (Osborne, 2020; Mair *et al.*, 2023). Second, while process-oriented perspectives have clarified how social innovation unfolds through nonlinear sequences of learning and adaptation (Oeij *et al.*, 2019), these insights are rarely connected to ecosystem level dynamics, making it difficult to explain variation in stability, sustainability and scaling across places. Third, despite the evolution of public value toward a societal and multi-actor understanding (Moore, 2019; Bryson *et al.*, 2017; Sancino, 2022), empirical research continues to privilege formal public service systems, under-theorising the role of locally-embedded entrepreneurial actors, intermediaries and resources external to public sector within place-based configurations.

It is against these gaps that our paper contributes by examining place-based social innovation ecosystems as sites where socially innovative and entrepreneurial initiatives and public organizations interact, align and learn in the pursuit of societal value creation.

### 3. Methodology

This paper is the first international output of a three-year research project (2022–2025) involving four Italian universities and a team of approximately 15 researchers at different stages of academic careers with expertise in public management, social innovation and impact entrepreneurship (Sancino *et al.*, 2026). The research employs a qualitative and exploratory strategy to investigate the relationship between social innovation and public value from a place-based perspective, with the aim of identifying the foundational components of place based social innovation ecosystems. In our empirical context, we considered social innovation ecosystems as territorially-grounded configurations of actors and resources aimed at addressing collective societal challenges through socially innovative, collaborative and entrepreneurial action that generates societal value. By place we considered a local jurisdiction defined as a municipality and, in a few cases, a local jurisdiction including multiple municipalities, but only when these involved small municipalities. Our research followed a multistage qualitative process. We first conducted two workshops based on the Double Diamond Methodology (British Design Council, 2005) to identify dimensions relevant to selecting place-based social innovation ecosystems, attended by seven participants: six academics from the four research units specialized in public management, social innovation and impact entrepreneurship, and one social innovator acting as facilitator. Following the workshops, the research team crowdsourced 67 case studies of social innovation ecosystems distributed across Italian regions. Cases were selected based on five eligibility criteria:

- (1) territorial representation across Italian macro-regions (North, Center, South) and settlement types (urban, semi-urban, peri-urban, inner areas);

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- (2) public sector involvement in the place-based ecosystem (reflecting our research focus on strategic governance);
  - (3) multi-actor collaborative dynamics among governmental, commercial and civil society actors;
  - (4) explicit social innovation and public value intentionality; and
  - (5) place-based local scale enabling the link between social innovation intentionality and citizen-perceived impact (see Supplementary Appendix B).
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The research team then conducted desk analysis of the 67 case studies, collecting and analyzing approximately 3–5 documents per case from publicly available sources, including institutional websites and strategic documentation, policy reports and evaluation studies, media coverage and press releases, annual reports and impact assessments (where available), and academic publications or working papers about the initiatives. We employed a systematic abductive coding process, organizing findings through a hierarchical data structure (Thompson, 2022), which helped to identify a list of relevant dimensions of place-based social innovation ecosystems. This process of data analysis was iterative and was informed by several meetings among coders to discuss and to refine thematic codes and to aggregate them hierarchically. These dimensions were then discussed and validated in a focus group lasting approximately two hours with eight practitioners from public sector and social economy organizations with the aim of co-creating knowledge with practitioners (Hartley, 2017). During the focus group we explored with participants two main questions: first, identifying the key components of place-based social innovation ecosystems that can inform new governance models; and second, understanding what contextual factors and mechanisms enable these ecosystems to function and sustain themselves. Participants were all high-profile professionals in the Italian policy and practice landscape, including a former General Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office and the Director of the largest research center for social economy in Italy. They were sampled through personal contacts to ensure representative balance between the public sector (three participants) and the social economy (five participants). All participants possessed deep knowledge of both sectors, having worked across both throughout their careers. This multistage process was instrumental in generating the strategic framework and its four components presented in the findings section. The four components emerged as empirically grounded yet theoretically informed constructs that:

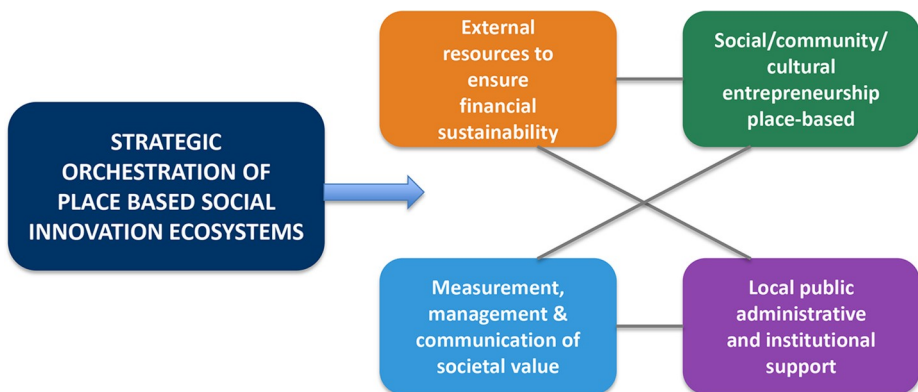
- (1) appeared across all cases in varying combinations (each case exhibited at least two, with some displaying all four);
- (2) resonated with practitioner experience from focus groups;
- (3) connected to established social innovation and public value literature; and
- (4) reflected distinct but interrelated dimensions of ecosystem functioning.

Importantly, these components are not sequential stages but rather interdependent elements whose presence enables ecosystem emergence and strengthens sustainability and scaling potential for public value and social impact generation. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the lead institution, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for human subjects research. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement, and participant identities have been anonymized in all research outputs. Several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, our focus on Italian contexts may limit transferability to other national settings with different

social economy traditions and public governance arrangements. Second, the crowdsourced identification process may introduce selection bias toward more visible or formally recognized ecosystems. Third, reliance on publicly available documents may not capture informal dynamics or contested aspects of ecosystem functioning. Future research could address these limitations through comparative international studies and ethnographic approaches. Finally, we acknowledge the use of AI at the text revision stage of this paper, specifically for refining our definition of key concepts and for proofreading.

#### 4. Findings

Based on desk analysis of 67 cases and subsequent validation through focus group discussions, we identified four main components of place-based social innovation ecosystems (see below [Figure 1](#)). Taken together, these components are not to be intended neither as sequence to deploy nor as necessary condition for a place based social innovation ecosystem to come into existence, but rather as key components to exist for the sustainability and potentially the scaling of public value and/or social impact (societal value) through place based social innovation ecosystems. In other words, according to our analysis, place based social innovation ecosystems happened in some cases thanks to the presence of external resources through philanthropic grants or public calls/tenders/grants from European Union, central or regional government to activate entrepreneurial ventures then supported by local public administration; in other cases, it has been the enabling role of local public administration through - for example - making available a physical space to elicit an entrepreneurial venture triggered by the public value and social impact purposes; other sequential combinations might be pertinent, with the four components not always necessarily present in all our case examples. However, from our analysis and focus group discussion we identify these four interrelated components nested at the ecosystem level (e.g. [Thomas and Ritala, 2022](#)) for place based social innovation ecosystems generation, sustainability and scaling of societal value creation. They are: place based entrepreneurship, which considers the social, community and/or cultural entrepreneurial ventures that operate in markets to generate societal value in a given place; local public administration support, which deals with the authorizing, enabling and supporting role of the local public sector organizations such as municipalities, schools, hospitals, police stations, public agencies with local



**Figure 1.** Place based social innovation ecosystems: main components

Source: Own elaboration

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branches. The term local public administration does exclude public organizations which operate with a mission above the local level, such as for example province, regions, ministries, national public agencies; measurement, management and communication of societal value (broadly encompassing public value and/or social impact, and/or other similar terminologies), here intended as the practices aimed at evaluating the societal value generated by place based social innovation ecosystems and supporting both strategic decision-making and the legitimization of the ecosystems through both narratives and numbers; investing for impact, which deals with the public and private external resources that can be devoted to supporting and sustaining place based social innovation ecosystems with their generated projects.

We now discuss each of the four dimensions in further detail.

#### *4.1 Place-based entrepreneurship (social, cultural, environmental types of entrepreneurships)*

Place based social innovation ecosystems may emerge through the mobilization of local communities that are deeply embedded in their territories and committed to their development, a condition which might not be present in any location (Hambleton, 2019; Jackson *et al.*, 2018; Jackson, 2019). These communities often cultivate entrepreneurial archetypes – such as associations, cooperatives or start-ups – that recombine existing and new resources to address emergent social needs. These processes are particularly effective when rooted in strong relational networks and shared territorial identities (Moulaert, 2009; Baker and Mehmood, 2015). Place-based entrepreneurship thus represents not only an operational foundation for social innovation ecosystems, but a strategic mechanism for endogenous development (Bailey, 2012; Feld, 2020). According to our study, it is characterized by three distinctive features:

- (1) it explicitly responds to specific local needs;
- (2) it mobilizes and enhances distinctive local assets and competencies; and
- (3) it fosters sustained collaboration among stakeholders committed to societal value for a given place.

#### *4.2 Local public administrative and institutional support*

Place based social innovation ecosystems may also emerge when local public organizations such as those mentioned above shape institutional environments, providing regulatory and financial scaffolding, and promoting collaborative mechanisms such as co-creation, coproduction, collaborative innovation (e.g. Hartley *et al.*, 2013; Nabatchi *et al.*, 2017; Sacchetti and Ianes, 2024; Torfing *et al.*, 2019). This might happen through both direct and indirect actions. We identify at least three complementary roles for public organizations:

- (1) field builder: establishing strategies, policy frameworks and enabling infrastructures for social innovation;
- (2) facilitator: convening and connecting stakeholders across sectors and governance levels; and
- (3) funder: channeling public financial resources to support experimentation and scale-up [OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), 2021b].

The ability of local public organizational actors to switch across these roles dynamically, depending on the maturity and context of the ecosystem, is essential for effective

orchestration. These three roles can be achieved concomitantly or separately through mechanisms such as providing structural resources (e.g. spaces, properties, technology), cognitive resources (e.g. data, skills, social networks, legitimacy), financial resources provided by local public organizations for example through tenders for public services provision and/or public grants and financial incentives.

#### *4.3 Measurement, management and communication of societal value*

Place based social innovation ecosystems requires shared understandings of what constitutes value and how it is produced and assessed. In this respect, the measurement, management and communication of societal value is not only a technical task but a strategic practice of ecosystem sensemaking, aligning actors around shared goals and accountability mechanisms. Three criteria are critical to this regard. First, intentionality: the organization or initiative must explicitly aim to produce positive externalities, with clear mission statements and articulated social objectives (Höchstädter and Scheck, 2015). Second, measurability: impact must be monitored through transparent, reliable indicators, enabling both internal decision-making and external legitimacy (O'Donohoe *et al.*, 2010). Third, strategic communication emotionally charged through framing and education to motivate ecosystem actors to co-creation of value (Sancino and Tasselli, 2024; Kinder *et al.*, 2021).

#### *4.4 External resources to ensure financial sustainability*

Place-based social innovation ecosystems generate societal value by activating locally grounded, context-sensitive initiatives. While these ecosystems thrive on local engagement, knowledge and embedded relational networks, their long-term viability and potential for growth often depend on external financial resources. These may come from public sources (such as European, national or regional funds), philanthropic foundations (e.g. banking foundations) or private actors (e.g. corporations engaged in social impact investing and shared value initiatives).

Such external funding can play two distinct but complementary roles. First, it can catalyze the emergence of new social innovation ecosystems by enabling experimentation and entrepreneurial activation at the local level. Second, it can enhance the sustainability and scalability of existing initiatives, helping them consolidate their governance structures, expand their reach and increase their impact. These resources are considered “external” because they are not generated within the immediate territorial context of the ecosystem, yet they are critical for amplifying its transformative potential.

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of social innovation thus requires blended financing models that strategically combine philanthropic, public and private funding streams (Bloom and Chatterji, 2009; Murray *et al.*, 2010). Effective orchestration involves not only attracting these external resources but aligning them with the ecosystem’s developmental trajectory. Financial strategies must evolve over time – from seed funding and pilot phases to institutionalization and scaling – reflecting the dynamic needs of the ecosystem and its stakeholders (Moore, 2019). This process entails: mapping the heterogeneity of funding sources; engaging funders with diverse risk and impact profiles; embedding financial planning and governance into the broader architecture of the ecosystem. In this way, external resources become more than just monetary inputs – they function as strategic enablers of societal value creation across time and space.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

Our study confirms that place-based social innovation ecosystems represent an effective mechanism for creating societal value in the face of increasingly complex societal

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challenges. Based on desk analysis of 67 Italian cases and validation through focus group discussions, we identified four key components: (i) place-based social, cultural and/or environmental entrepreneurship aimed at creating societal value; (ii) local public administration support, facilitation and convening; (iii) external financial resources; and (iv) management, measurement and strategic communication of societal value goals. While at least two components are necessary for ecosystem emergence, we argue that strategic orchestration of all the four components is required for these ecosystems to sustain and scale societal value creation.

In this last paragraph, we conceptualize and problematize the question of who might exercise strategic orchestration of place-based social innovation ecosystems – a function essential to their learning capacity and scalability (Van Meerkerk *et al.*, 2018). We define strategic orchestration as the deliberate set of actions undertaken by a focal organization to convene multiple stakeholders, manage interdependencies and align their resources and capabilities toward place based socially innovative ventures (including either new collaborations and/or entrepreneurial initiatives). This extends traditional notions of collaborative governance (e.g. Ansell and Gash, 2008; Torfing *et al.*, 2019) by emphasizing the strategic dimension (Greve and Ysa, 2023): the purposeful shaping of ecosystem architecture and the enabling of interactions aimed at pursuing goals intended by a focal organization. This does not preclude other ecosystem participants from generating value for themselves or creating collaborative value more broadly (Huxham and Vangen, 2013). In the context of place-based social innovation ecosystems, strategic orchestration involves not only managing relationships among ecosystem participants but also strategically configuring the four key components we identified (entrepreneurship, public administration support, external resources and value measurement) to ensure ecosystem sustainability, learning capacity and scaling potential.

This raises a critical question: what types of institutions could exercise strategic orchestration in different contexts (Meijer *et al.*, 2019; Sancino *et al.*, 2024) – public-centric, social economy-centric, hybrid or cross-sectoral? For example, local authorities appear well-positioned to play strategic orchestration for place based social innovation ecosystems emergence and scale up (Sancino, 2016); however, such strategic orchestration requires capabilities – analytical, organizational, political, civic—that are often underdeveloped in many local authorities, at least considering the Italian case. Instead, learning from and scaling already existing and thriving place-based social innovation ecosystems may require other institutions: supra-local public organizations with public policy mandates (provinces, regions, states, supranational entities), as well as philanthropic foundations, NGOs and social enterprises explicitly engaged with transformative social innovation. This tension represents a critical policy challenge our study highlights. While place-based social innovation ecosystems demonstrate significant capacity to generate adaptive, context-sensitive responses to societal problems, their long-term impact is often jeopardized by the absence of focal organizations with resources and capabilities for strategic orchestration of place based social innovation ecosystems. In many contexts, particularly in countries like Italy where our study is situated, public organizations lack the internal resources, institutional autonomy or strategic vision necessary to function as ecosystem orchestrators. Consequently, even promising social innovations risk remaining isolated, ephemeral or overly dependent on short-term funding, with limited capacity for institutionalization, replication or scaling.

While related frameworks offer partial responses – Mazzucato's (2013, 2018) mission-oriented innovation emphasizes top-down strategic coordination by mainly national governments; Lumpkin and Bacq's (2019) civic wealth creation highlights collective entrepreneurial agency within civil society; and the collective impact literature (Kania *et al.*, 2022) focuses on cross-sectoral collaboration and backbone organizations – our framework is distinctively situated at the intersection of bottom-up social innovation and strategic public

orchestration. We recognize that while social innovation often emerges outside formal institutional structures (Mulgan, 2019), its sustainability and transformative capacity (Avelino *et al.*, 2019; Pel *et al.*, 2020) depend on strategic orchestration with public governance systems, where 'public' is not restricted to the public sector alone.

This proposition aligns with emerging academic interest in bridging social innovation, collaborative governance and strategic public management (Greve and Ysa, 2023; Sancino, 2022; Sancino *et al.*, 2024). Our contribution provides a conceptual and empirical bridge between these traditionally separated fields, grounded in the reality of places and practices of actors inhabiting them. We offer a strategic framework enabling scholars and practitioners to understand the emergence and components of place-based social innovation ecosystems, opening future research, policy and practice to the question of how these ecosystems may be sustained and scaled up and out to increase public value and social impact. However, realizing this potential depends on developing strategic orchestration capabilities, enabling cross-learning among ecosystems and mobilizing entrepreneurial finance for scaling. Without strategic orchestration, the generative power of place-based social innovation ecosystems risks remaining untapped or fragmented into short-lived initiatives.

Building on our conclusions, we would like to offer three propositions that may guide future research engaging with place-based social innovation ecosystems and support the validation and further refinement of the proposed framework. First, place-based social innovation ecosystems can be more productively analyzed as relational configurations whose capacity to sustain and extend societal value depends on how entrepreneurship, public administrative support, external resources and practices of societal value articulation are aligned and recalibrated over time, rather than on the isolated presence of any single component. Second, the trajectories of place-based social innovation ecosystems appear to be shaped by their initial configurations, suggesting that different points of entry and early couplings among entrepreneurial initiatives, public sector involvement and resource mobilization give rise to distinct patterns of learning, governance and stabilization. Finally, strategic orchestration emerges from our findings as a context-dependent practice, whose role and form vary across institutional settings and phases of ecosystem development, and whose relevance lies in enabling ongoing reconfiguration among ecosystem components rather than in the exercise of centralized control.

From a policy and practice perspective, our paper suggests the need to move beyond fragmented or single-lever interventions in support of social innovation. Policies focused exclusively on entrepreneurship, funding instruments or collaborative arrangements risk overlooking the relational and systemic conditions through which place-based social innovation ecosystems generate and sustain societal value. Public action may work better when oriented toward developing strategic public orchestration capabilities, institutionally embedding socially innovative practices and designing long-term governance architectures that allow place-based social innovation to scale without losing its transformative core. This implies a shift in how public administrations, philanthropists and intermediaries conceive their roles, less as direct providers or funders of isolated initiatives and more as stewards of ecosystem coherence, learning and continuity over time. For practitioners operating within place-based social innovation ecosystems, our findings highlight the importance of investing not only in project delivery, but also in the relational, cognitive and organizational work required to sustain alignment among entrepreneurial initiatives, public support, external resources and societal value practices, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and resource instability.

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## Notes

- [1.] In the Supplementary Appendix A we list all these contributions, noting a scattered landscape of scholarship with a significative presence of conceptual rather than empirical studies with a multi-country but mostly European focus, a prevalence of contributions published not in journal articles but in other outlets, with the academic journals publishing these contributions spanning from public administration, non-profit studies, organization studies and urban studies journals.
- [2.] In this paper, we use the terms public value and social impact as contiguous – though not synonymous – concepts, both oriented toward the creation of societal value that transcends profit generation. While we acknowledge the conceptual distinctions between the two and recognize that their usage by different actors may carry significant implications for the distribution of roles and responsibilities within contemporary economic and political governance, we deliberately adopt a combined usage in this context to highlight their shared normative orientation toward societal benefit.

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### Further reading

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### **Supplementary material**

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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