Political debates on Social Innovation in Japan: a Discourse Network Analysis

In recent years, the concept of social innovation has re-gained importance in the academic and political debate; in particular, its revival has coincided with the recent global economic crisis, which forced many countries to review their economic models and policymaking approaches. The idea of social innovation as an instrument for promoting a better quality of life – by developing new solutions for addressing social problems – became a sort of 'silver bullet' for many developed countries. This has been particularly true for Japan, a country affected by several social challenges due to its peculiar demographic situation, i.e. a mix of aging population, low immigration flows from foreign countries, and rural depopulation. The emergence of Japanese political and social actors focusing on social innovation dated to the 1970s, but only in the 21st century there has been a legislative effort towards the support of social initiatives targeting social innovation.

However, despite its popularity amongst policymakers, a clear definition of social innovation and its applications is still a matter of debate, both at academic and political level. Moreover, the processes that lead to social innovation and the characteristics of the actors that carry out social innovation have not been explored in depth in the literature. In this paper, we concentrate on one aspect influencing the social innovation process in Japan: how national policymakers (i.e. Japanese parliamentarians) discuss specific measures for supporting social innovation, and therefore explicitly promote and finance these measures. Policymakers express different positions in political debates, and the network patterns arising around one or more measures can provide an overview of the "discourse coalitions" in the political arena – and therefore how social innovation policies are addressed by the policymakers.

By examining a novel database on political discourses about social innovation in the Japanese National Diet from 2017 (following the 48th general election of members of the House of Representatives), we use Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) to investigate the "discourse coalitions" developed around specific themes related to social innovation. Through an extensive literature review, we identified seven themes characterizing policy initiatives on this topic: business ethics; local aspect; participation and inclusion; sustainability; collaboration and cooperation; social entrepreneurship; role of institutions. Our results from the observation of the core-periphery structure show a general agreement – independent from the party affiliation – on supporting collaboration between public authorities and the civil society, leading to the creation of heterogeneous coalitions; at the same time, while it is well-established the prominent role of social enterprises, there are conflicts between policymakers regarding the type of financial support that should be given to these actors, and the role of institutions in regulating their activities. In the end, social innovation emerges as a divisive topic only according to certain themes – where political ideology on the role of institutions creates a barrier between policymakers.