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A FRAMEWORK FOR ESTABLISHING AN OBSERVATORY FOR SOCIAL INNOVATIONS AND INTERACTIONS: THE CROSSROAD OF THE DIVERGENT AND CONVERGENT APPROACH IN RECONSIDERING COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEMS

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Abstract: *The paper aims to present the observatory model as a tool for successful interaction between different and often contradicting in their needs, expectations, and ideas stakeholders in regional ecosystems. An overview of the "observatory" concept and its application is made to rethink community policies, ensuring active involvement in all stages, from the design to the implementation, monitoring, and control. Based on the remaining foreign practices in the USA, Honduras, Brazil, as well as EU countries of establishing and developing different community-oriented observatories to reconsider or improve the management of existing ecosystems, the paper proposes a general model for designing a regional observatory for social innovations and interactions as part of the regional eco-social system. It also provides guidelines for its establishment and development. The author comments on the model in terms of digital transformation trends and their effect on applying the approach of the social observatory. The paper is an output of implementing "A study of regional potentials for development of socially innovative ecosystems in terms of digital transformation," financed under the Scientific Researches Fund - a research project of the Faculty of Business and Management at the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev."*

Keywords: social observatory, innovation, interaction, eco-social system, digital transformation

JEL Codes: C31, O35, Q56, R58

INTRODUCTION

The observatory as a concept in the social, economic, and legal sciences arose by parallel with the astronomical observatory. This direct analogy leads to an initially very narrow and limited treatment of the understanding of the role and functions of the formations using this conception, as tied to the functional aspects of the "observatory" as a facility to observe and focus in-depth on processes, trends and phenomena beyond the possibility of immediate tracking in a specific environment of human habitation. This view excludes interaction in the observation process, and does not presuppose the consideration of any other features of the structure defining it only as an instrument to achieve a specific goal - an interpretation which places it in an extremely passive position. Then the question arises, "Why is a static approach necessary in the survey of dynamic social realities?". We can probably find more or less abstract answer in the remark of the first woman - astronomer in the USA - Maria Mitchell: "Do not look at stars as bright spots only. Try to take in the vastness of the universe (Yasuda, 2015)".

EXPOSITION

On a more pragmatic level, this statement by Mitchell is projected in the understanding of the anthropologist Robert Allan Hackenberg, who links the need to develop the concept of the social observatory with the realization that research, careful and consistent observation in the social sciences which are essential to explaining the dynamics and interactions within a community (Hackenberg, 1967). Such an understanding raises the concept of the observatory from the functional level of "facility" (means) to some formation that implements planned and targeted analytical-research activities, the result of which ensures social development.

However, the idea of some strategic role of social observatories for the development of communities and systems remained almost until the end of the 20th century very much hidden behind the usual treatment of the observatory as a social science laboratory aiming to induce "new theoretical breakthroughs" (Adam et al. 2015) through intensive research, which should logically lead to the formulation of new scientific hypotheses for social development (Guerrero et al, 2018).

This becomes the main justification for the creation of many "observatories" at the local, regional, national and supranational levels, which are perceived as interpreting laboratories, aimed at the study and analysis of events and interactions in relatively limited communities, to provide detailed data on -much faster and more efficiently compared to long-term, large-scale and difficult to organize and conduct studies (Guidotti, 2022), (Barros et al, 2019), (Bixter et al, 2019), (Escoto & Jipsion 2021).

A typical example illustrating this stage of the concept is the observatory of public health, which arose in France in the 1980s, whose main task is to closely monitor trends in the health status, epidemiology, and morbidity of a certain population in a given region.

The social observatories created at the end of the 20th century are usually sector-positioned and functionally oriented. Regardless of the fact that they realize research objectives based on the monitoring they carry out, they are mainly perceived as a source of in-depth data on trends and processes in the sector. Their role as a data provider places them in a subordinate position to a specific public or private interest, depending on the funding they use and they are under the control of institutions or private corporations with a leading role in the respective sector. Such is a large part of the health observatories in Austria, Germany, France, Denmark, and Great Britain, directly financed by the relevant ministries or regional governments (depending on the state structure).

These observatories have a regional or national scope of impact and do not generate their own agenda. This dramatically reduces their interactions with other entities to the exchange of data. Therefore, the community recognizes them as a modification of state agencies. Similarly, corporate observatories also arise, e.g., marketing ones whose functions are difficult to distinguish from marketing agencies.

The dynamics of social interactions in the first decade of the 21st century, technological innovation, and global connectivity pose challenges to scientists, decision-makers, tink-tanks, and opinion leaders that far exceed the familiar scope of social sciences and economic and legal sciences action. Divergent approaches remain in history replaced by the recognition of commonly faced problems, shared priorities, causes, and community-centered policies whereas the generated knowledge is not only to be transferred and open for constant upgrading but also to become the basis for a new type of complex and systemic solutions mediated by innovation breakthroughs.

In these conditions, the passive monitoring of trends and processes attributed to observatories ceases to meet the growing needs of policy-makers, managers, and informal opinion leaders. The latter not only definitely recognizes the need to attract expert and research capacity to improve the quality of management, but also looks for models of sustainable involvement of all stakeholders, in processes beyond the monitoring and control of implementing shared goals; models that combine analytical, research, advisory, innovative, entrepreneurial, communication and decision-making functions in the conditions of shared responsibility for the development not of sectoral systems, but of entire ecosystems.

It was in response to this need that the concept of a social observatory was rapidly rethought, and since it was never theorized and clothed in stigmatized or stereotyped administrative-legal and organizational forms and postulates, it proved to be the most adaptive, intuitive and syntetic and was adopted as a way of working on socially sensitive topics and programs with an inter-, multi-, or transdisciplinary nature.

The process of transformation of the understanding of the social observatory from a passive, subordinate structure into an autonomous, open, networked, strategic formation, accumulating knowledge, technologies, public support, assets, financing, information, and human resources to provide governments with qualitatively new solutions, methods, and means for their implementation, turns social observatories into a powerful tool for the realization of supranational policies and global changes.

Thus, organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the European Trade Union Institute, the National Science Foundation of the United States, create social observatories global in scope and importance, to which they delegate portfolios of long-term programs for economic and social development.

An illustration of the transformative potential of the social observatory concept is the short historical overview of the European Social Observatory (Observatoire social européen, OSE). The OSE was founded in 1984 as a national initiative of the Belgian trade unions, has extensively enlarged to the present global observatory acting as a *“not-for-profit research center specialized in the social dimension of the European Union (EU). Its mission is to analyze the impact of European integration on social and employment policies both at EU level and within Member States. It does this by conducting comparative research and formulating policy proposals. With its forward-looking approach, it operates as a think tank, identifying issues as they emerge – from the impact of the internal market on healthcare systems and the social challenges associated with the EMU to the ‘greening’ of EU recovery and the social consequences of digitalization. As a result of its vibrant research activity, the OSE has been consistently ranked (by the University of Pennsylvania) since 2016 among the top 100 social policy think tanks worldwide...”*

The OSE has likewise acted as coordinator or partner in a variety of EU and global programs and it is actively involved in major networks of academic excellence. The observatory is teaming researchers, associates, and interns from Europe and North America to create a hybrid multidisciplinary and multilingual environment, considered as an eco-social system.

Almost the same is the example of the World Bank initiative for social observatory established as part of the World Bank’s Development Research Group in 2012 to improve the adaptive capacity of anti-poverty projects. The *“adaptive capacity”* is understood as the ability of projects’ management to make operational up-to-date decisions, and to modify projects’ design, based on high-quality descriptive and evaluative process-oriented information, provided through enlarging sustainably observation frameworks on-site, off-site, and outside.

Similar models of interactions between decision-makers, scientists, opinion leaders, entrepreneurs and political and community leaders, practitioners can be met also at national level not only in well develop countries as USA, Canada, Australia, UK, UAE, but also in countries as Honduras, India, Columbia, Brazil, Uganda.

The ORIA (*Observatory on Regional Integration in Africa*) is a formation of eight regional economic communities recognized by the African Union Heads of State and Government as constituting the building blocks of the African Union:

- the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU),
- the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA),
- the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD),
- the East African Community (EAC),
- the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS),
- the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),
- the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

These communities established ORIA as a formation aiming to support and strengthen Africa's regional integration agenda. Overall objective of the observatory is to provide information, support interaction and inclusive management of the agenda priorities by establishing a public forum with large stakeholders' involvement. *"It will also serve as a central platform to discuss key activities and publications of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Union, the regional economic communities and other partner institutions"*.

The concept of the social observatory gained such popularity and proved to be so rapidly transformable and easily adaptable to all kinds of complex and multifactorial contexts and problems of communities of different scopes, specializations, information, and abilities to deal with them it evokes an exponential emergence of all large variety of forms of observatories: from virtual to physical, from sectoral to transdisciplinary, from functional to strategic, from regional to transboundary, supranational to global, from subordinate to governmental or corporate structures to autonomous and independent.

All these examples showing the dynamic change in the understanding of the social observatory as a response to public needs for shared responsibility in the management of eco-social systems of different scopes, but they still do not fill the definitional gaps regarding the structure, types, and functions that a social observatory should have.

In 2014-2015 researchers from Simon Bolivar University (Colombia) undertook a large-scale documentary study of the scientific reflection of the social observatory concept using the following descriptors to define sub-categories of observatories: purpose, focalization, topics, problems, and methods - five categories established in a previous phase of their research (Moreno & Mantilla, 2016), and even though they extract, qualify and describe very systematically the characteristics of subcategories of observatories that differ in scope, instruments methods, means, organization, goals, and mode of action, such as e.g. technological, communication, social, health, network-based, etc. the researchers make little progress in the attempt to find a unified definition of the social observatory.

However, the lack of such a definition confirms the statement that social observatories are dynamic, self-evolving, and self-adaptive constructs with or without a formalized (institutionalized) organizational structure, which allows them to be transactional by nature.

Regardless of the purpose, methods, topics, problems, and scope, this type of formation implicitly contains the following general characteristics:

- manage large information arrays accumulated through monitoring, analysis, and evaluation, which they share openly and inclusively in the conditions of digital connectivity;
- provide social interaction between public groups with often conflicting interests;
- organize and coordinate socially responsible initiatives;
- provide administrative, research, and technological capacity;
- generate added value in terms of public consensus;
- ensure the sustainability of conducted policies through the creation and implementation of monitoring frameworks adaptable to different contexts (more or less crisis, more or less technological);
- have mechanisms for public control and provide corrective pressure on the centers of power in the decision-making process;
- offer qualitatively new systemically applicable solutions to problems significant to the community based on their innovative potential;
- manage resources through programs and projects;

- have a high integration potential to create cluster formations or integrate into public or private structures to transfer knowledge and carry out an advisory or other strategic functions.

These features were extracted based on a qualitative on-desk survey of web-based content of 80 different social observatories conducted in the period September - October 2022. The observatories included in the analysis are chosen based on the defining of following restrictions:

- 1) only official web-sites of the observatories to be analysed;
- 2) the web-sites content to provide/include information at least:
 - on territorial scope of the observatory,
 - initiating country/organization,
 - main purposes and/or activities,
 - method of financing;
- 3) the chosen units should refer to observatories whose main activity falls within the spectrum of social, economic and legal sciences;
- 4) the chosen web-sites should refer active to the present moment social observatories;

Tab. 1. Basic results from on-desk study of social observatories

social observatories																
orientation	functionally-oriented (passive monitoring)					program-oriented (program or policy monitoring and advisory)					integrated					
	local	regional	national	supra-national	global	local	regional	national	supra-national	global	local	regional	national	supra-national	global	
establishment/impact																
Bulgaria	1	5	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	
Europe	1	9	2	1	0	0	1	3	1	1	0	3	7	2	1	
USA & Canada	0	3	1	1	1	0	3	2	1	0	0	2	5	0	1	
Latin America	1	2	2	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	5	0	1	
Asia (India & UAE)	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	
Africa	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	
Australia	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	
Total	2	16	8	2	1	0	6	11	2	1	0	5	20	3	3	
29					20					31					80	
execution of																
approach	Total number	research	monitoring & control	public debate/discussion	advisory	provision of resources	program management	capacity building	digital network	risk management	corporate social responsibility	provision of innovative solutions	data management	quality management	Average	
transdisciplinary	26	26	26	22	19	26	19	12	26	25	26	18	26	26	22,85	
cross-disciplinary	3	3	3	3	1	1	2	3	3	1	3	0	3	3	2,23	
interdisciplinary	32	32	32	31	28	32	24	21	32	31	32	31	31	31	29,85	
multidisciplinary	19	19	19	16	18	18	16	18	18	13	18	9	13	18	16,38	

The analytical results grouped the chosen observatories by in 3 main groups:

- functionally-oriented (those observatories are mainly executing passive monitoring);
- program-oriented (mainly concentrated on executing program or policy monitoring and advisory) and,
- integrated (combining both passive monitoring and active program or policy implementation monitoring and advisory activities which usually manage their own portfolio of programs and projects, undertake lobbying initiatives and provide innovative solutions for solve community or sectoral problems).

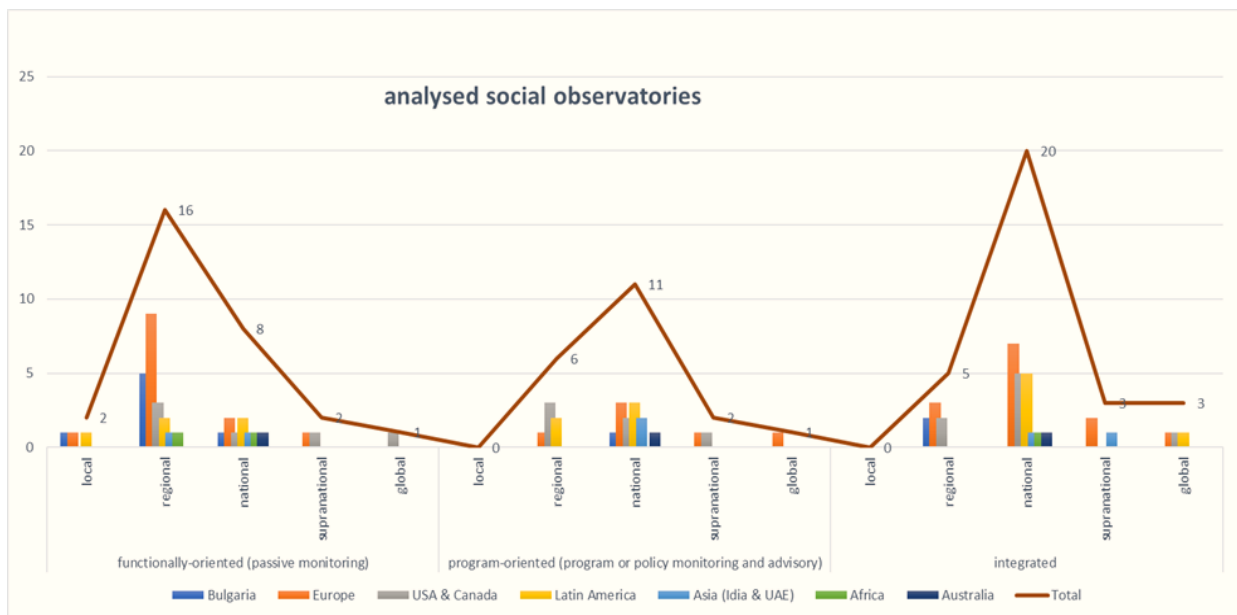


Fig. 1. Social observatories functionalities

The defined groups are crossed with four main approaches, identified based on the described main scope of activities: transdisciplinarity, cross-disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and multidisciplinarity. The results show that typically the scope of the research of the observatories is predominantly inter or multidisciplinary oriented, which logically determines the scope of the implemented monitoring, as well as the involvement of large scale of interested parties, expressed through at least the organization of public debates or discussions.

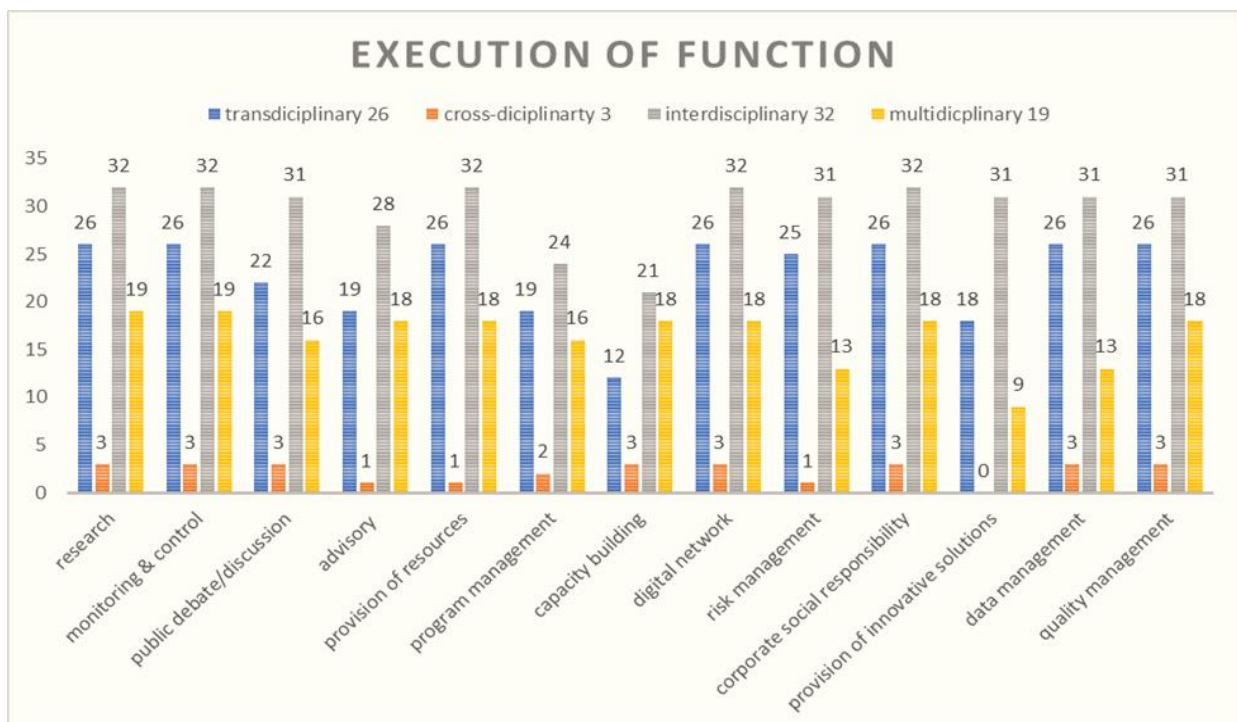


Fig.2. Executed functions of social observatories

Based on the results from the study, critical principles for establishing the Observatory of Communication and Social Innovation as an effective tool for building a reflexive, self-

transformative, and adaptive regional social-eco system have been defined. They aim to determine essential functions and scope of activities that shape the conceptual framework for such supra-institutional, collaborative, a digitally based form of shared development of social-ecosystem:

The proposed concept includes at least the following scope of mandatory activities of an observatory, which is considered as a shared tool and a driver for social ecosystem development.

A conceptual framework for establishing social innovations and interactions

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Embedded” Research and• excellence in research <p><i>which are</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• inter-, multi or transdisciplinary oriented <p><i>to</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• solve community problems and speed up community development <p><i>through</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• applying well-developed PM, QM, and risk management practices and• question Drives Method(s) <p><i>and</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• building adaptive and innovative capacity <p><i>to implement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• portfolio of programs and projects to pursue coherent policy, <p><i>also enlarged with</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• advisory and lobbying activities, <p><i>but</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• in keeping autonomy to set own agenda, <p><i>which is</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• performing a strong corporate social responsibility strategy, <p><i>where the need for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• establishing a joint monitoring framework is implicitly recognized <p><i>and refers to the efficient tools for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• long-term feedback and daily feedback, <p><i>aiming to guarantee</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the Citizen’s inclusion <p><i>through</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• collaborative platform <p><i>which requires</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• back-up team of ICT, economists, sociologists, and data managers <p><i>further with extended</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Specialists in behavioral science, political science, governance, and marketing.
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CONCLUSION

The involvement of different stakeholders additionally leads to the development and further maintenance and extension of digital networks, which, not surprisingly, is a well-developed activity of the interdisciplinary observatories working on all levels, from regional to global, and directly refers to the need to introduce and enhance the corporate culture and own social responsibility policy.

The geographical scope explains that the coverage of implemented initiatives is raising the need for better risk management and quality management execution. Still, the observatories with a national and more extensive scope of action also definitely show the ability to provide expertise for managing these processes to third parties or their members, mainly sharing the responsibility and the risks in governing public programs or policies with public authorities as an outsourced function. Such a trend implicitly raises the empowerment of the observatories as social entities regardless of the lack of mandatory institutionalization. This explains why the well-developed or

mature interdisciplinary observatories often extend and transform their functions into highly skilled think-tank semi-institutionalized transnational groups or a kind of advisory bodies also executing lobbying activities.

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