Institutional forms of social innovation

1 Introduction
Despite wider conceptualisation and applications, social innovation remains a relatively under-theorised concept in academic literature (Jessop et al., 2013). With the diffusion of social innovation-related policy discourses, a need has arisen not only to understand the emergence of social innovations in contemporary societies, but also look at how socially innovative initiatives can be sustained by the institutions in a society over time in the face of uncertainty and change. This paper focuses on the vulnerability of complex urban social, economic and environmental fabric in the rapidly growing urban centres in global South. Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) exhibits an institutional framework with a range of actions and initiatives that have transformed the living standards of local communities. In the following, section 2 gives a brief overview of concepts and practice in social innovation. It outlines the preconditions for emergence of social innovation for local and community development. Section 3 takes a critical view to social innovation and identifies the assumptions of replicability, durability and resistance from social innovation literature. It subsequently offers an alternative approach to these in the form of comparative but strategic features of adaptability, sustainability and resilience in contemporary dynamics of social innovation practice. Section 4 uses these features in parallel to look at the case of OPP as a set of institutions that has adapted with the changing demands of the local communities, proved resilient in the face of change, and has sustained its activities since its inception in 1980. In conclusion we derive the institutional aspects of social innovation and emphasise its evolutionary character whereby socially creative agendas and strategies become embedded within institutional dynamics of the communities.

2 Social innovation and institutions
From community development perspective, social innovation refers to such changes in agendas, agency and institutions that lead to a better inclusion of excluded individuals and groups into various spheres of society (Moulaert and Hillier, 2007). It offers a vision of human progress that favours “solidarity over individualism, integration over
sectoralization, and collaboration over division, it distinguishes itself through epistemological, ethical and strategic approaches” (Klein 2013, p. 11). It also helps explain spatial processes of local change, social inclusion and bottom up creativity and participation. The challenges of urbanisation such as housing, employment, social inclusion, health and environment have resulted in a number of attempts at redefining and reimagining social innovation in contemporary society from various perspectives. For instance, whereas Phills et al. (2008) look at the role of financial regimes and funding mechanisms such as microfinance in promoting social innovation, Mulgan (2006) and Murray et al. (2010) refer to the importance of civil society in promoting social economy and social entrepreneurship. From socio-ecological perspective, Westley (2008) recommends an integrated approach to social innovation relating the communities with their local environments. Appreciating this diversity of scope, the Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA) divides social innovation into three tiers: first, grassroots innovations as a response to the (unfulfilled) social demands of vulnerable communities (e.g. elderly, children, and minority groups); second, innovations addressing societal challenges for wider social and economic benefits to society (e.g. organisations such as the Red Cross); and third, innovations that bring fundamental and systemic changes “in attitudes and values, strategies and policies, organisational structures and processes, delivery systems and services” (BEPA, 2010, pp. 7-8) (e.g. adaptation to climate change). This scalar categorisation assumes that institutions play a key role in social innovation, and that people are empowered through participative mechanisms in reshaping social relations. Based on empirical work on bottom-up strategies for social inclusion derived from a range of international case studies, Moulaert et al. (2005) have set out three preconditions for social innovation: the satisfaction of basic needs; reconfigured social relations (social transformation); and, socio-political empowerment or mobilisation. These preconditions also invoke a wider view on the economic, socio-cultural and political logic of social innovation and the necessary connection between social innovation at local level, social reform and urban transformation (Moulaert et al., 2013).

3 Discourses in social innovation
Attempts have been made to better integrate social innovation into wider interdisciplinary theorisation in social, economic, environmental policy and planning and to apply these in transdisciplinary practices such as participatory planning, action
research, stakeholder engagement and so on (see Moulaert et al., 2013). From a historical context, certain assumptions have been taken for granted in an extensive adoption of the concept and the attempts for transforming it through various perspectives and perceptions. These preconceived notions can be grouped into three assumptions, namely the ‘replicability’ of social innovations so that these can be imitated elsewhere; the ‘durability’ of such actions so that these could last longer; and, their ‘resistance’ to any opposition. Whereas assumptions of replicability and durability may be recurrent in social innovation conceptualisation, policy and practice today, the third, that is, ‘resistance’ can be traced back into history of social innovation as social movement (Godin, 2012) that largely remained implicit. As discussed below, these assumptions need to be explicitly clarified and attuned to the corresponding social needs, as not all socially innovative actions in the longer term may inherit these qualities or intentionally follow certain assumed paths.

First of all, it is often assumed that social innovations can be easily replicated. That is by following the prescribed steps individuals and groups can become social innovators (Mulgan, 2007). This can be termed as the assumption of the ‘replicability’ of social innovation. Actors in this case are expected to pursue certain patterns and steps (Westley, 2008). The replicability assumption is also used as a solution to socioeconomic problems, as in social economy discourses, by means of policy or support mechanisms (e.g. social entrepreneurship, microfinance or even philanthropy) that would increase the pace of social innovations and allow people to resolve their own problems (Antohi, 2009; Phills et al., 2008). Such approach is visible in UK government’s Big Society agenda. This assumption of replicability as a form of ready-made solution can be counterproductive for communities. As Healey (2012) demonstrates, the flow of ideas, concepts, techniques and instruments contingently evolve through experience, innovation, debate, critique and so on. Successful examples should be learnt from. Rather than imitating them, social innovations can be adapted in accordance with the respective local social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges and needs (Gonzalez and Healey, 2005). Governance institutions play an important role in achieving a balance between top-down policies and bottom-up actions to support socially innovative initiatives (Baker and Mehmood, 2014, Miquel et al., 2013). Hence, the ‘adaptability’ of social innovations seems a better approach than replicability. As the case of OPP institutions reflects the success of the programme can
attributed to its focus on adapting to the changing needs rather than replicating its own models and practices.

The second assumption anticipates that social innovations can remain effective and durable for an extended period of time. This ‘durability’ argument sees social innovation as a ‘disruptive force’ that challenges existing social norms and brings longer term effects on society (Westley, 2008). Such a view tends to look at the role of social and political systems and institutions rather than their wider social, economic and environmental impacts on society as a whole. Durability, within this perspective, also becomes a criterion for the relative success of a socially innovative action. Counter to this argument, social innovation should be instrumental in incorporating social, economic and ecological dimensions into grassroots and community actions, in particular as a response to the problems of unsustainable practices and unsatisfied social and economic needs whilst not overlooking the environmental impacts. Transition Towns can be cited here as a successful example of locally championed and institutionally-oriented sustainable development visions and their implementations. Based on concerns around peak-oil, climate change and economic crisis this movement has largely emerged through community actions (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). However, the movement has only remained successful in the global North with relatively less impact in the southern countries (Mehmood and Franklin, 2013). Also, it is worth noting that not all socially innovative actions may deliberately put sustainable development goals on their primary agenda. This concern also appears in the case of OPP where a general lack of awareness for environmental sustainability is evident. There is, therefore, a need is to make the social ‘sustainability’ focus much more prominent, especially in the grassroots socially creative strategies (Mehmood and Parra, 2013).

The third assumption which exists intrinsically, but does not explicitly feature in most of the discussions above, is the ability of social innovations to stay resistant in the form of social movements to face a crisis. The crisis, uncertainty or disturbance might exist or occur in the form of social, economic or climatic changes, policy interference or political challenges. Irish Loan funds in 1720s are considered an earlier institutional form of social innovation. As an alternative to the conventional banking system, these independent microfinance institutions offered low-interest loans to the poor (Hollis and
Whereas the late-twentieth century work had already recognised the situation of urban crises as among the main drivers of social innovation (Chambon et al., 1982; Moulaert and Leontidou, 1994), the contemporary challenges for the adaptability and sustainability focus do well to assume that social innovations have a strategic focus, and are able to face external shocks and maintain their goals for community wellbeing. The objective here remains social emancipation, such as innovation in social relations, rather than in the social order, that is, social relations as a means to sustain the status quo (Jessop et al., 2013). Despite a limited latitude for replicability and durability assumptions mentioned above, it is much more important for socially innovative strategies to stay ‘resilient’ in the face of uncertainty and change. Whereas a lack of replicability can be recuperated through adaptability, and a limited view of durability can be broadened through an overall social, economic and environmental sustainability focus, there is limited room for longevity in the absence of resilience.

One however needs to be cautious of the various connotations that have been associated with resilience as a contested notion due to variable definitions across the disciplines. Its conceptual meanings vary from the vulnerability to stability (bouncing back) of material systems, and from adaptability (bouncing forth) to transformability of interdependent socio-ecological systems (evolutionary resilience) (Davoudi et al., 2013). Although the concept of resilience has been entangled with that of complex systems, it enables the role of social actors and their networks in capacity building (Moore and Westley, 2011). Whether seen as a process or as a specific end-state, resilience in social innovations can only be guaranteed when both internal and external mechanisms (actors, networks, institutions) are mobilised. Internally, it involves more empowered and well-networked actors who continue to develop and apply good learning and adaptive practices. Externally, it demands an approach to ‘bottom-linked’ governance where institutions can facilitate bottom-up initiatives with top-down support (Baker and Mehmood, 2014). This is particularly important when considering social innovation as an impetus for changes to institutional structures and social transformations, especially through impacts on public policy and practice. OPP as a collection of interlinked institutions provides a good example of such a network of institutional actors and networks.
4 Orangi Pilot Project as institutional social innovation

Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) is a non-governmental voluntary organisation that started in 1980 as a slums improvement and redevelopment initiative in Karachi. There are more than 334 squatter settlements (*katchi abadis*) in Karachi. About 113 of these settlements are concentrated in the area of Orangi spread over 500 acres and housing about 1.5 million people (Rahman, 2004). The settlements historically developed and spread through informal and incremental construction of buildings with minimal or no government support. As a result the road and water infrastructure was non-existent. By the time government agencies realised the scale of the problem, it was too expensive to intervene through public money or development funds. Local residents on the other hand continued to expect the local governance institutions to take the responsibility for infrastructure development and maintenance. Realising this dilemma, a social activist Akhtar Hameed Khan followed the approach to ‘development from below’ to start a low-cost sanitation initiative under the banner of OPP (Khan, 1996).

OPP fulfils the three preconditions of social innovation for local development as set forth by Moulaert et al. (2005) above. The programme identified the unfulfilled needs of the community; empowered local communities through technical assistance, support and advice to fulfil those needs; and, helped in strengthening local social capital. More specifically, starting with the dire needs for a decent sanitation system, OPP identified technologies that could be implemented by local residents and improved the design features to reduce costs up to one-fourth of the prevalent rates (Hasan, 2010). It followed an approach to street-level participation, planning and management. The OPP volunteers would first visit the local communities and win the trust of the residents in each street (involving 20-30 households) and convince them to take responsibility for street improvement and share the costs, whereas the OPP team would provide expertise, advice and technological knowledge. Not only did people agree to participate in construction, they also took responsibility for maintenance, replacement and rectification of the infrastructure (Hasan and Vaidya, 1986).

4.1 Replicability vs adaptability

OPP considered street as a unit of organisation and self-help with collective representation at neighbourhood level. OPP invested through research and extensions promoting self-management. The sanitation success evolved into a programme of work
based on cooperative model of participatory development in four additional areas of housing, health, education and microcredit for local businesses (Hasan, 2010; Hasan and Raza, 2012). Many of the programmes such as microcredit, health and education were replicated in other parts of Karachi as well as across the country (Rahman, 2012). Later on in 1988, the areas of focus were consolidated into three autonomous and self-managed bodies: Research and Training Institute, to manage water supply and sanitation, housing support, children’s education and women’s savings programs besides core objectives of research, advocacy, training and rehabilitation from natural disasters; Orangi Charitable Trust, to manage microfinance and microcredit schemes for small enterprises in the local area; and, Karachi Health and Social Development Association, to formulate, support and manage public health actions for the local communities. Over the time, the overall framework of institutions has remained the same while adapting to the changing socio-legal and urban environment (Hasan, 2010). More autonomy has been given to each body to self-manage and collaborate with funding bodies and local communities besides keeping healthy partnerships with government departments, international institutions and other NGOs working on similar issues.

4.2 Durability of actions vs sustainability of initiatives

The OPP model of bottom-up development based on voluntary contribution had many demonstrative and multiplier effects. The approach to community participation through experimental social research allowed flexibility to suit the respective local needs (Hasan and Vaidya, 1986). Whereas OPP institutions continue to provide social and technical guidance, expertise and credit support for local enterprises, development work is largely self-financed by the people. The model demonstrates how neighbourhood level financing, management and maintenance of such facilities as water supply, sanitation, primary education, health clinics, waste and security can be financed by people. Focus of the government institutions has been on providing larger infrastructure such as treatment plants, large sewers, water mains, hospitals, landfill sites and higher education institutions. The microcredit schemes were particularly replicated in other urban and rural areas in Pakistan by a number of independent NGOs (often in collaboration with OPP) targeted at small farmers, smaller entrepreneurs, and rural women. OPP continues its work through training, market research, credit appraisals, etc. (Hasan and Raza, 2012). These community participation and self-management aspects are the key features
of long-term sustainability of OPP. The model was rapidly replicated both nationally and internationally.

4.3 From resistance to resilience

As mentioned earlier, the concept of social innovation has been historically based in the idea of resistance or disruption to an existent order. Hasan (2002) interprets initial objectives of OPP as supporting the ‘geographies of resistance’ by communities to the ‘insensitive’ developments occurring in various parts of the city. However, subsequently it paved the way for a resilient informal sector in terms of social, economic and health services. OPP has proved to be more resilient than many other similar institutional innovations elsewhere in the world (Hjorth 2003). This long term success is attributed to the fact that the programme was initiated by voluntary sector organisations and is still primarily managed by people themselves (Hasan and Vaidya, 1986). Not only the institutional structure has proved resilient but also it has helped build community resilience in the respective areas of work. This has been done in terms of human resource development, empowering women, and bringing radical changes in power relations between producers and market operators (Hasan and Raza, 2012). It also brings to forth the role of leadership and foresight. The founder of the OPP developed sufficient human resource and individuals in keeping he institutional functions long after his passing away.

5 Conclusion

With an initial focus on filling a developmental vacuum, OPP managed to provide an alternative to existing institutional forms. The success of OPP as a network of institutions indicates that the historical focus in social innovation debates needs to be moved beyond the replicability-durability-resistance discourse and further into such socially innovative institutional actions that give due consideration to the adaptability of institutional forms, sustainability of the socially innovative actions, and the resilience of such initiatives in order to address the socioeconomic needs especially for the communities in global South that are increasingly facing social, economic and climatic risks, uncertain future, lack of sufficient means and resources and a chronic absence of top-down support. More academic and policy analysis is required in this respect to discover, encourage and enhance new forms of social innovation through more inclusive interdisciplinary conceptualisations and transdisciplinary practices.
It should be stressed however that social innovations can neither be engineered nor replicated, but can be adapted in line with changing social, political, economic and environmental contexts. It is no surprise then that many socially innovative actions may appear to be reactive rather than proactive, in the sense of offering a response to the unfulfilled needs of communities – or to the situations of crises – to improve social relations and foster socio-political emancipation. Social innovation in this respect also exhibits an evolutionary character, whereby socially creative agendas and strategies become embedded within institutional dynamics. Institutions themselves, however, are prone to social change that can catalyse (positively or negatively) social innovation policy and practice. The main lesson to be learnt then from these on-going debates and experiences is that social innovation initiatives, in all their diversity, will be most resilient if embedded in a broader social change movement that would lead to essential social transformations.

References


