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CRC - CENTRO RICERCHE SULLA COOPERAZIONE  
E SUL NONPROFIT

WORKING PAPER N. 21

**Philanthropic Foundations  
as policy entrepreneurs  
The role of philanthropic foundations  
in shaping the Social Innovation discourse  
in Italy and the UK**

Benedetta De Pieri

**VP** VITA E PENSIERO

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

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ISBN 978-88-343-3687-8

Research support was provided by a grant from the International Research in Philanthropy Awards (IRPAs) of Italy. IRPAs is a joint initiative of the Centro di Ricerche sulla Cooperazione e sul Nonprofit (CRC) of the Catholic University of Milano (Italy), the Dipartimento di scienze economico-sociali e matematico-statistiche of the University of Torino (Italy) and ASSIFERO (Associazione italiana delle Fondazioni ed Enti della Filantropia istituzionale). An earlier versions of this article have been presented and discussed at the Sifth Workshop on Foundations, March 19 -20, 2018.

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## **Abstract**

*Despite being still a contested concept at theoretical level, in recent years, social innovation has become a fashionable phrase both at academic and policy level. Together with other private and public actors, philanthropic foundations have been involved not only in implementing social innovation but also in shaping the public and policy discourse around it.*

*This study explores the role of philanthropic foundations as policy entrepreneurs in driving the emergence of social innovation discourse and focuses on two European countries, Italy and the UK.*

*The first part of the paper reviews the academic debate about the legitimacy for philanthropic foundations to intervene in policy-making and outlines the context of social innovation policies in the two countries.*

*To investigate the role of foundations in shaping social innovation public discourse, the study analyses newspaper articles published between 2009-2016 on six newspapers, three for each country. The articles were retrieved using the database Factiva.*

*Results highlight the different role and importance of philanthropic foundations within the British and Italian contexts. While in the British social innovation discourse a prominent role is played by other types of organisation, the analysis of the Italian articles suggests that philanthropic foundations inform the Italian public debate on social innovation in many ways.*

*This exploratory study opens up to further research about how different ecosystems influence the development of social innovation policy discourse and about the potential role of philanthropic foundations as policy entrepreneurs in different contexts.*

**JEL codes:** L31, L38.

**Keywords:** Social Innovation, Philanthropic Foundations, Policy Entrepreneurs

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, Social Innovation (SI) has become a fashionable concept in academic, public and policy debate. In academic literature it has been defined in different ways and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (Pol & Ville 2009; Sinclair & Baglioni 2014; Ayob, Teasdale & Fagan 2016). Some of the most popular and cited definitions were formulated by Phills et al (2008) on SSIR<sup>1</sup>, by the Young Foundation and Nesta (Murray et al 2010<sup>2</sup>), and on European Union's documents (Caulier Grice 2010<sup>3</sup>, Hubert et al 2011<sup>4</sup>). At the same time, the concept has become popular at policy level and it has been employed to simultaneously foster both sustainable growth and

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<sup>1</sup> "A novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals." (Phillis et al 2008, p. 36)

<sup>2</sup> Social innovations are "innovations that are social both in their ends and in their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act." (Murray et al 2010 p. 3)

<sup>3</sup> "Social innovations are innovations that are social both in their ends and in their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act." (Caulier-Grice 2010, p.18).

<sup>4</sup> "Social innovation relates to the development of new forms of organisations and interactions to respond to social issues (the process dimension). It aims at addressing (the outcome dimension):

Social demands that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions and are directed towards vulnerable groups in society.

Societal challenges in which the boundary between 'social' and 'economic' blurs, and which are directed towards society as a whole.

The need to reform society in the direction of a more participative arena where empowerment and learning are sources and outcomes of well-being." (Hubert et al 2011, p. 43)

the development of new welfare models (Caulier-Grice et al. 2010; Mulgan, Simon & Pulford 2011).

In Europe, SI has entered the policy agenda with the involvement and support of a variety of private and public actors. One research project, for instance, recently investigated the role of the third sector both as a provider and advocate of SI in different member states (Eriksson, Einarsson & Wijkström 2014), but also other organisations and institutions have been involved in shaping public and policy debate on SI.

Also the existing literature mostly describes philanthropic foundations as implementing and financially supporting SI, but their role as advocates has not been extensively explored. This research is an exploratory study aiming at investigating the role of philanthropic foundations as policy entrepreneurs in shaping the public and policy discourse on SI in two European countries, Italy and the UK. Policy entrepreneurs are defined by Kingdon (2014) as those actors (e.g. think tanks, civil society organisations, and private citizens) who manoeuvre to open “windows of opportunities” and promote their favoured policy ideas onto the policy agendas. Policy entrepreneurs push for particular definitions of problems and seek to exclude alternatives from the policymaking processes.

The research aims to explore who are the main actors involved in shaping public and policy discourse about SI in Italy and the UK,

and, specifically, to focus on the role of philanthropic foundations among them in the two different contexts.

To answer these questions, the study draws on an ideation approach to the study of policymaking. This recognises the importance of ideas and discourses – the latter conceived as the means by which ideas are conveyed and represented – in shaping policymaking processes (Schmidt 2008, Béland 2005, Kingdon 1984, Blyth 1997). It particularly values the role of policy entrepreneurs adopting and conveying ideas in the policy discourse in their endeavour to shape policy agendas. According to this approach, not only the ‘coordinative discourse’, in which policy makers engage one another about the development of policies, but also ‘communicative discourses’, in which policy ideas are communicated, presented, and discussed with the wider public, are important to explore the policymaking processes (Schmidt 2008).

To explore the role of philanthropic foundations as policy entrepreneurs for SI within this theoretical perspective, the policy frameworks and the public discourse on SI are analysed in the two countries.

The first part of the study reviews the existing literature about the legitimacy of philanthropy and its role in policymaking processes in general, focusing particularly on the relation between philanthropic foundations and the promotion of innovation and SI. Secondly, the paper illustrates the policy context supporting SI at a European level



and in the two countries considered. This section draws on policy documents and on previous reviews and reports analysing SI policy frameworks.

Following this, the paper analyses the public discourse on SI in the two countries through a newspaper analysis. Newspaper articles published between 2009 and 2016 and mentioning “social innovation” or “innovazione sociale” in Italy and the UK were retrieved and analysed. The articles were collected from six different newspapers, three for each country: The Guardian, The Times, Financial Times, Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, and Sole 24 Ore. The sample includes one conservative, one progressive and one economic national newspaper for each country. The articles were retrieved through the database Factiva and coded and analysed using NVivo. Attribute coding (Saldaña 2015) was used to code basic descriptive information about sources (date, newspaper, country) and actors involved in the debate (actor name, type of actor, organisation, etc.). Structural coding was used to code segments of data that relate to specific research questions (Saldaña 2015).

The paper closes with some concluding remarks and suggestions for further research development.

## ***2. Philanthropic foundations and public policy***

This study defines foundations, in accordance with Anheier (2001), as organisations that are: non-membership-based, private, self-

governing, not distributing profits, and serving a public purpose. In the UK and Italy foundations can be both grant-making, whose main activity is to provide financial support to initiatives and projects implemented by other entities, and operating, that primarily implement their own projects and do not provide grants or funds to other organisations (Anheier 2001). This study focuses on the former and, hereafter, refers to them as philanthropic foundations or, simply, foundations.

In literature, philanthropic foundations are often mentioned among the main promoters of SI, providing both financial support, through grants or social investment funds, and capacity building (Social Innovation Europe 2012). In Italy, for instance, recent exploratory research on SI recognised foundations as the primary source of funding for SI, in terms of the amount of money invested, followed by public sector and other private entities, such as private companies or associations (Caroli 2015). Despite this significant support to SI, the involvement of foundations in the policy debate and their role as public advocate is scarcely referred to in the literature.

At the same time, although part of the literature recognises philanthropy as a global force able to act beyond mere financial support, highlighting emerging needs, advocating innovative solutions, supporting social and policy change, and influencing the agenda of social problems (Anheier and Daly 2004, Anheier 2013, Ricciuti and

Fosti 2015), its potential in informing policy debate specifically about SI has not been extensively investigated.

The role of foundations as policy entrepreneurs for SI, although not directly addressed in the existing literature, can be inscribed in a wider debate about the legitimacy of philanthropy and its potential in promoting innovation. This debate has been developed extensively in the US, where philanthropic culture is more pervasive at social and political level (Heydemann and Toepler 2006, Anheier 2001, Anheier and Daly 2006). Here, particularly in the last decades, many foundations have been committed to participating in public and policy debates around the social problems that they have traditionally only subsidized through donations. This attitude has been justified through various arguments. For instance, it has been stated that philanthropists' voice can be heard where the voices of beneficiaries cannot, therefore foundations can help some unmet needs to emerge and be represented in the policy arena (Wright 2016). Others noted that the knowledge and amount of data coming from years of experience in the field of social service provision can be a precious resource to advise and support policy makers (Berman 2017). Moreover, the development of venture philanthropy approaches opens new space for philanthropy, beyond the mere financial support and towards a tendency to anticipate social problems (Scott 2009) and even contribute to setting the political problems' agenda (Ricciuti and Fosti 2015).

In this context, the lack of democratic governance in foundations' boards has raised concerns about the appropriateness of private bodies interfering with democratic policymaking. The fact that choices made by a closed circle of board members, lacking public debate and democratic consultation, could contribute to inform decisions concerning the public good has been criticised by many. For instance, it has been noted that, from a policy perspective, philanthropy is not a simple act of generosity, since giving money implies a more or less implicit exercise of power and in democracies power requires scrutiny, not just automatic gratitude (Reich 2016).

The tendency of some foundations to influence public conversation on some topics, either explicitly or as a consequence of the magnitude of their donations, is called by Horvath and Powell "disruptive philanthropy" (Horvath, Powell 2016). The disruptive dimension of this attitude lies in the potential of philanthropists to inform and drive public discourse about social issues and public good. This capacity, if unchecked, represents a risk to democracy as it could change the public conversation in the image of philanthropists' and not in the public interest.

Despite these concerns, some of the critics highlighting these potential risks of philanthropic involvement in policy and public discourse have also identified a "redemptive" argument, legitimising philanthropic involvement in policy and public debates (Reich 2016). In fact, precisely because of their restricted governance, foundations are

free to experiment and invest in long-term strategies, where the payoff and the impact are uncertain and may materialize only in the distant future. This ability to operate on a long-time perspective and the freedom to take risky decisions, regardless of the return on investment and election results, gives philanthropic foundations freedom to invest in innovative initiatives and experimentations and makes them a potential vehicle for innovative social policy (Reich 2016, Anheier, Daly 2004).

From this perspective, philanthropic foundations may have a valuable role in fostering SI not only as financial providers but also as advocates. They can support policymaking through pilot initiatives and experiments, provide evidence based on their innovative experiences and enrich public conversation about social issues.

Against this theoretical background, the following part of the study investigates whether and how philanthropic foundations are entering the public and policy debate on SI in the two countries considered.

### ***3. Policy framework: Social Innovation in Europe, the UK and Italy***

To understand the role of philanthropic foundations in SI policy discourse in Italy and the UK, it is important to know the policy context in which it develops. Several studies and research projects have reviewed existing policies fostering the development of SI at a European level (among others: CRESSI - Creating Economic Space for So-

cial Innovation; TEPSIE - Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Social Innovation in Europe, ITSSOIN - Impact of the Third Sector as SOcial INnovation) and highlighted their seminal role in regard to SI support in many member states. Drawing on their work and on policy reports, this paragraph describes the policy framework on SI at the European level, in the UK and in Italy, highlighting relations and differences among them.

### *3.1. Social Innovation in Europe*

Although sporadic references to SI can be found in EU documents throughout 1990s and early 2000s (Harslof 2014), it is from 2008-2009, under the Barroso presidency, that European Union started to conceptualise societal challenges and the role of private and public actors in light of a social innovation perspective (Bonifacio 2014, Edmiston 2015).

Tracing the use of the phrase “social innovation” in the Commission Communications to the Parliament and the Council between 2005 and 2011, Bonifacio (2014) noted an increasing importance of the terminology related to SI after 2009-2010. Before then, the concept of innovation fostered by the Lisbon agenda was mainly related to the production of economic value and, reflecting a Shumpeterian perspective, enterprises were considered the main agents of innovation and growth (Echeverria Ezponda and Merino Malillos 2011). One of the main documents that contributed to the emergence of SI

in the European discourse is the report “Empowering people, driving change: Social innovation in the European Union”, which originated from a workshop organised by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) in 2008 and initially published in July 2010 (followed by an updated version in 2011) (Hubert 2010). The document intended to foster a systematic policy framework to promote SI and to measure its impact and proposed a working definition of SI which became, as mentioned above, one of the most commonly cited bot at academic and policy level.

In the Europe 2020 strategy the social dimension of innovation become more relevant and the concept of SI is present in the three growth targets and in some of the related flagship initiatives (for the relevance of SI in Europe 2020, see Reynolds, Gabriel & Heales 2016, Edmiston 2015; Eriksson, Einarsson & Wijkström 2014). For instance, the aim of the flagship initiative "European Platform against Poverty" is to “design and implement programmes to promote social innovation for the most vulnerable, in particular by providing innovative education, training, and employment opportunities for deprived communities, to fight discrimination (e.g. disabled), and to develop a new agenda for migrants' integration to enable them to take full advantage of their potential” (European Commission 2010). The flagship initiative “Innovation Union” aims to “re-focus R&D and innovation policy on the challenges facing our society”

(European Commission 2010, p.10) and recognize the importance of collaboration with civil society and nonprofit actors in developing SI. A number of initiatives were put in place by the EU in the following years to foster SI through different policy instruments. Funds were established to finance SI, such as the European Regional Development Funds and the European Social Fund. Also investment financing for SI was promoted, for instance through the Employment and Social Innovation programme. Research on SI implementation and impact was supported through funds such as the Framework Programme 5 to 7 and Horizon 2020. Competitions and awards were launched to disseminate good practices, together with support for networking and capacity buildings. New organisational forms were promoted, for instance by the Social Business Initiative that enhanced conditions conducive to the creation and growth of social enterprises.

In all these initiatives different DGs were involved: DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, DG Growth, DG Research and Innovation, DG Connect, DG Enterprise and Industry, only to mention a few<sup>5</sup>.

Despite these efforts to support the development of SI, disparities remain in the way SI has actually been fostered by policy frameworks across member states. In some cases, such as the UK, the poli-

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<sup>5</sup> Recent reports about the different initiatives promoted and DGs involved can be found in (Reynolds, Gabriel & Heales 2016, Eriksson, Einarsson & Wijkström 2014).



cy discourse around SI emerged before its development at European level, while in other countries it still struggles to emerge.

### *3.2. United Kingdom*

It has been observed that the social innovation rhetoric developed in the UK has been seminal for the development of SI discourse at EU level (Echeverria Ezponda, Merino Malillos 2011; Eriksson, Einarsson & Wijkström 2014). The public and policy debate around SI and the acknowledgment of its potential in tackling societal challenges emerged during the first decade of the 2000s. The influential work of some institutions, such as the Young Foundation and Nesta (National Endowment Fund for Science, Technology and the Arts), for instance the frequently mentioned report by Mulgan et al. “Social Innovation: What it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated” (2007), contributed to generate policy attention on the topic. The Bepa report (2011) mentioned above explicitly recognises the influence of the British debate.

From 2010 onward, the support to SI can be inscribed in the emphasis on the ‘Big Society’ promoted by Cameron’s government (Conservative Party 2010), aiming to shift the power from central government to the local level and to promote the role of private actors, such as third sector and social enterprises, as public service providers (Eriksson 2014). Within this context, some interventions aimed to pool resources from private, civic and public actors to develop new

models of social welfare provisions. For instance, the Open Public Service White Paper (2011) proposed public service be open to providers coming from all sectors to increase social impact. The Localism Act (2011) aimed to devolve power and autonomy to local government and community groups. The Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012) required public bodies to consider, beyond the financial transaction, also the economic, social and environmental well-being connected to the provision of public service contracts.

It was also in 2010 that Nesta, originally established as an executive non-departmental public body, was transformed by the Government in an independent charity that funds itself from the interest on an original endowment of £250 million. The organisation became one of the leading advocates of SI public and policy discourse in the country.

Also in the UK, a number of interventions focused on financial support for SI and new financial tools were experimented with, such as, the Social Impact Bonds. These interventions, trying to address social needs in a context of reduction of public spending, were inscribed in the Big Society programme praising the innovative potential of civil society organisations and the role of private resources in tackling social problems (McHugh et al 2013).

### *3.3. Italy*

In Italy the public and policy debate on SI emerged quite recently and is much less structured and centralised compared to that in the UK. Recent comparative researches on different European countries observed that, until now, in Italy there is not a coherent policy framework at national level focusing on SI (Eriksson 2014). The only national policy initiative related to some extent to SI is the recent reform of the third sector, launched in 2013 and still under development (Legge 6 giugno 2016, n. 106, Delega al Governo per la riforma del Terzo settore, dell'impresa sociale e per la disciplina del servizio civile universale). However, SI is not explicitly mentioned in policy documents, which focus instead on social entrepreneurship and on a general re-framing of the multifaceted juridical forms defining the third sector in Italy (Decreto Legislativo 3 luglio 2017, n. 112, Revisione della disciplina in materia di impresa sociale; Decreto Legislativo 3 Luglio 2017, n.117, Codice del Terzo settore).

Besides this reform, as well as in the European and British context, the attention given to new financial tools to support SI, such as pay-by-results instruments, is growing and there is an increasing debate around the importance of social impact measurement and the enhancement of new financial tools to support SI (Eriksson 2014).

Despite the limited policy discourse on SI at national level, it is worth noticing that the debate appears livelier at the local level. Particularly in some municipalities, such as Milan, Turin, Bologna, there

are examples of local policy framework fostering SI (for instance the White Paper for SI by the Municipality of Milan) or supporting virtual and spatial platforms to support local networks and capacity building for SI (Torino Social Innovation in Turin).

In conclusion, Italy and the UK present quite different policy framework for what concern SI. In Italy policies are a more fragmented, decentralised and local; while in the UK a more coherent and centralised policy program has been developed. To explain the causes and implications of such differences is beyond the scope of the present work, however it is important to note that in both the contexts the role of philanthropic foundations in relation to SI is not explicitly recognised and they are mostly regarded as potential providers of financial support. The analysis of newspaper articles can help to understand if and how philanthropic foundations are involved in shaping public conversations about SI and what is their space and role in this public debate compared with the other actors involved.

#### ***4. The public discourse on SI and the role of philanthropic foundations***

This paragraph illustrates, firstly, the sample composition and presents some insights about the development of SI public discourse based on the number and distribution of the articles across the considered time span. Secondly, it presents the different actors inform-

ing the debate. Finally, it explores the specific role of philanthropic foundations.

#### 4.1. The sample

The sample considered in this study comprised articles from six newspapers, three for each country. A synthetic description of the selected newspapers is illustrated in Table 1. All the articles were retrieved using Factiva, an international news database produced by Dow Jones that combines over 36,000 sources from about 200 countries in 28 languages. Table 2 describes the characteristics of the databases of each newspaper.

**Table 1 - Description of selected newspapers**

Name	Country	Circulation	Description
The Times	UK	440.048	National daily broadsheet newspaper covering general, political and business news from the UK and around the world.
The Guardian	UK	157.704	National daily broadsheet newspaper covering general, political and business news from the UK and around the world.
Financial Times	UK	212.489	International newspaper providing news, comment and analysis about financial and economic and business news.
Corriere della Sera	Italy	407.057	National daily newspaper covering local, national and international news.
La Repubblica	Italy	396.691	National daily newspaper covering national and international news.
Il Sole 24 Ore	Italy	212.673	National daily newspaper providing reports on business, politics, developments in commercial and labour law and corporate news.

**Table 2 - Description of the databases**

Name	Description	Time span covered	Article coverage	Notes
The Times	Covers all national (London) and regional (Scotland, Ulster and Eire) print editions. Supplements included: The Game, Mind Games, T2 (Mon), Body & Soul, Mind Games, T2 (Tue), Fashion, Mind Games, T2 (Wed), The Table, Mind Games, T2 (Thu), Arts & Ents, Mind Games, Bricks and Mortar, T2 (Fri), Weekend, Sport, Playlist, Magazine, Saturday Review (Sat)	1981 - 2016	Full text	Does not include tables. Selected coverage from 2 January 1981 to 30 June 1985. Abstracts from 2 January 1981 to 30 June 1985.
The Guardian	From January 2015 this source will contain both print and online content. Supplements incl.: Sport, G2 (Mon-Fri), Saturday - The Guide (North, South London, Scotland), Review, Sport, Weekend Magazine, Travel, Family and Cook, Special Supplement: Do something Monthly	1981 - 2016	Full text	Does not include tables. Selected coverage from 2 January 1981 to 4 October 1996. Abstracts from 2 January 1981 to 31 October 1989
Financial Times	Covers all 7 print editions (2 London editions, 2 USA editions, 1 European edition, 1 Asian edition and 1 Middle East edition). Includes all supplements except "How to spend it" and "The Global 500 list". Supplementary material subject to change.	1981 - 2016	Full text	Does not include tables and "Calls for tenders". Abstracts from 2 Jan 1981 to 31 Dec 1981; selected coverage from 2 Jan 1981 to 31 Dec 1981.

Name	Description	Time span covered	Article coverage	Notes
Corriere della Sera	Covers the second national print edition and local editions from Roma, Milano, Brescia and Bergamo. Supplements included: Corriere Salute on Sundays since September 2005, CorriereEconomia on Mondays since June 2010 and Corriere Lettura on Sundays	1997 - 2016	Full text	Does not include tables
La Repubblica	Covers last national print edition. Supplements: Includes R2 daily and any insert published inside the journal, such Affari e Finanza on Mondays, Salute on Tuesdays and Viaggi on Wednesdays. Excludes supplements published separately.	2005 -2016	Full text	Does not include tables
Il Sole 24 Ore	Includes the regional editions and extensive coverage with the supplements Finanza & Mercati, Norme & Tribute, Impresa e Territori, Nova 24, Commenti & Inchieste, Strumenti Di Lavoro, Professioni & Imprese 24, Diritto24,Casa24, Moda24, Plus 24 Risparmio.	2001 - 2016	Full text	There is a gap in coverage between October 2007 and February 2014

As mentioned in Table 2, the database of “Il Sole 24 Ore” has a gap in the coverage between October 2007 and February 2014. To fill this gap the researcher integrated the search using the online archive of the newspaper (available only for subscribers at [www.archivistorico.ilsole24ore.com](http://www.archivistorico.ilsole24ore.com)). Through the online archive it was possible to retrieve articles between 2012 and 2014, but a smaller gap remains between 2009 and 2011.

Table 2 also shows that the database of “The Guardian” is the only one including both print and online editions (between 2015 and 2016). Other databases including online editions were searched and it was possible to retrieve through Factiva articles from the database of “Repubblica.it”, which includes the online version of “La Repubblica” between 2014 and 2016.

Finally, it has to be noticed that the database of the “Financial Times” includes also some international editions. During the coding, only articles related to the UK were considered for the purposes of this study.

The search resulted in 433 articles, 279 from Italian newspapers and 154 from British newspapers. Table 3 shows that there are relevant differences among the different newspapers and while some made wide use of the phrase “social innovation”/“innovazione sociale”, others appear to have almost ignored it during the considered period. For instance, 64% of British articles retrieved are from The Guardian, 29% from Financial Times and only 10 articles (7%) from The



Times. In Italy, 121 articles were retrieved from Corriere della Sera and 115 from Il Sole 24 Ore (together they are 86% of the sample), while only 40 articles (14%) were retrieved from La Repubblica.

**Table 3 - Number of articles from each newspaper**

British Newspaper	Articles	%	Tot
The Guardian	98	64%	154
Financial Times	45	29%	
The Times	10	7%	

Italian Newspaper	Articles	%	Tot
Corriere della Sera	121	44%	279
La Repubblica	40	14%	
Il Sole 24 Ore	115	42%	

The distribution of the articles between 2009 and 2016 gives some interesting insights about the relevance of the topic in the public debate in the two countries. As shown in Figure 1, the number of articles retrieved in British newspapers decreased in the first part of the period (2009-2014), increased significantly in 2015 and diminished again in 2016. Concerning Italian newspapers, the number of articles mentioning SI grew constantly until 2015, and it only decreased in 2016.

**Fig. 1 - Number of articles mentioning “social innovation” or “innovazione sociale” in each country per year**

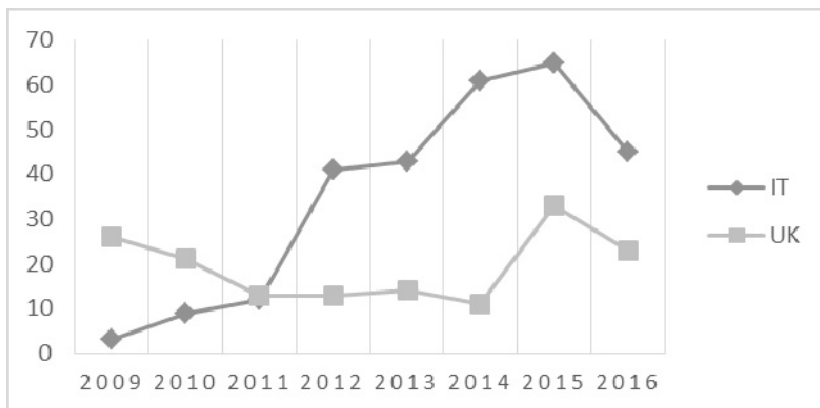
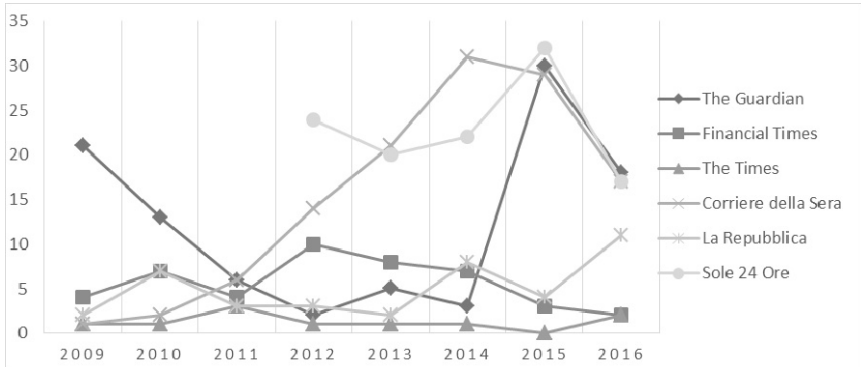


Figure 2 shows that different newspapers sometimes present different trends within the same country. In the UK, it is clear that the decreasing trend between 2009 and 2012 is mainly attributable to the number of articles in The Guardian, as well as the growth in 2015. The Financial Times seems to be rather consistent along the period, with only a slight increase in the number of articles in 2012. In Italy, on the other hand, the three newspapers show a similar growing trend until 2015, particularly pronounced for Corriere della Sera and Il Sole 24 Ore.

**Fig. 2 - Number of articles mentioning “social innovation” or “innovazione sociale” in each newspaper per year**



These observations suggest a first difference between the two countries. Corresponding with what was observed concerning the policy framework, the decreasing number of articles between 2009 and 2012 may suggest that in the UK the debate on SI was livelier before 2008-2009 and decreased afterwards. In contrast, in Italy, the concept of SI emerged later in the public debate and mainly gained interest after 2009, possibly reflecting the growing European SI discourse.

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed when comparing these data with the results of the media analysis conducted by the ITSSOIN project (Lund and Lilleør 2015). The sample used in the ITSSOIN project refers to an earlier time span (2003-2013) and included two leading national and two leading regional newspapers for each of the

nine countries involved. In the UK “The Times”, “The Guardian”, “The Herald”, and “The Belfast Telegraph” were selected, while in Italy the research focused on “La Repubblica”, “Corriere della Sera”, “La Stampa” and “Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno”. Thus, the sample partially overlaps with the one used in the present study. Concerning the articles mentioning “social innovation” and “innovazione sociale”, the research found that the peak in the use of the term in the UK was around 2008-2010, while in Italy the number of articles mentioning SI starts growing after 2012 (Table 4).

**Table 4 - Number of articles mentioning “social innovation” or “innovazione sociale” between 2009 and 2013**  
(Source: Lund and Lilleør 2015, p. 48 and p. 50)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
UK	2	5	2	8	6	11	16	10	9	5	15
Italy	1	0	0	1	5	1	0	2	8	13	12

This initial overview of the sample suggests that the development of the public discourse on SI has followed the evolution of the policy interest in SI in the two countries, with an earlier development in the UK and a later growth in Italy. It is also worth noting that the number of articles decreased in both countries in 2016. This may suggest a diminishing interest in the topic or a change in the use of the phrase in both countries.

#### *4.2. Who is involved in the public debate on SI*

This section illustrates the main actors involved in shaping the public discourse on SI in the articles collected. Both actors directly mentioning SI, in direct or indirect speech, and actors not directly mentioning SI but involved in implementing, supporting, financing or advocating it were coded. This led to identifying 141 actors in total, among individuals and organisations. They were classified by type: public sector, private companies, civil society or third sector, and philanthropic foundations. Concerning the number and types of actors, interesting differences emerged between the two countries.

First of all, greater variety of actors were mentioned in the Italian articles, with greater fragmentation concerning geographical location, outreach and sector, while in the UK the most frequently mentioned players are part of a restricted group of similar organisations, mainly London based.

In Italy, all the sectors are well represented among the actors coded. The public sector is mainly mentioned at the local level. A few municipalities in the northern regions are mentioned more than once; one region in the south of Italy is mentioned twice and only a few national entities were coded, namely related to the Minister of Work and Social Affairs and the Minister of Education, Research and University. This result corresponds with what was observed above concerning Italian policy framework, which is not explicitly focused on

SI at national level, while some local governments are paying more attention to it.

Among private actors, the main organisations mentioned in the sample are incubators of social enterprises, consultancy companies working on SI projects and some private funds involved in social impact investing. The only actor mentioned repeatedly with a national relevance is Confindustria, the Italian employers' federation and national chamber of commerce, which is mentioned five times.

Concerning third sector and civil society, social enterprises or third sector organisations are not often mentioned as immediately related to social innovation, while some think tanks, operating foundations, and incubators of social start-ups are referred to a few times.

Finally, different types of philanthropic foundations are mentioned: three important foundations of banking origin<sup>6</sup>, a couple of corporate foundations, and some private smaller foundations.

There does not seem to be a prevalence of one sector in the Italian articles and philanthropic foundations are rather well represented. Indeed, the most frequently mentioned actor in the Italian sample is one foundation of banking origin, followed by a couple of operating foundations active in research and advocacy and by one incubator of

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<sup>6</sup> With the Law Amato-Carli n. 218/1990 for the rationalization and privatization of Italian banks, the former *casse di risparmio*, became private banking companies under control of foundations and the philanthropic activities of the banks were separated from the credit functions. Foundations with banking origin do not do bank activities, but must use their share of profits to address the public interest and support social activities.

social enterprises. Within each sector there is also a significant variety of actors, from local to regional and national bodies in the public sector, from incubators for social enterprises to impact investing funds in the private sector, and a mix of corporate, private and bank foundations among philanthropic bodies.

A tendency to localism can be recognised within the Italian sample, since most of the actors do not have a national outreach. This is particularly evident for local governments, but it is also true for most of the private companies and third sector organisations mentioned. Also the philanthropic foundations are mainly active at the city or regional level.

Concerning the British sample, the actors identified appear to be clustered in the civil society and third sector, with a notable absence of public entities and a moderate number of private actors. In accordance with what was observed about the British policy framework, two organisations stand out with a high number of mentions: the Young Foundation and Nesta. Concerning the rest of civil society and third sector, the articles mention some networks working for advocacy and support of social innovation, while medium and small social enterprises and charities are mentioned sporadically.

The public sector is also less present in the UK than in Italy, and, when it is mentioned, it is more at national than local level. In fact, the only public actors referred to in relation to SI are the Minister for

Civil Society, Nick Hurd, and the PM David Cameron, and both are only mentioned once.

There are not frequently mentioned companies, since various private companies are mentioned only once, mainly in relation to corporate social innovation initiatives or as incubators of social enterprises and consultancy companies supporting social innovation.

Finally, concerning philanthropic sector, only two philanthropic foundations and three investment funds with a philanthropic origin emerged in direct relation to SI.

The British sample presents a less fragmented debate than the Italian one, and a restricted group of institutions specialised in research and advocacy for SI occupy a prominent position. Some of the most frequently mentioned individuals have worked in more than one of these prominent institutions during the timespan considered, suggesting the existence of a well-established circle of individuals and organisations informing the public discourse on SI. Significantly, some of these individuals and organisations are also mentioned in the Italian sample.

#### *4.3. The role of philanthropic foundations*

It is possible to explore more in depth the role of philanthropic foundations in the debate focusing on the articles mentioning them. Looking at the number and type of actors, it can be noted, at first, that foundations are not significantly represented in both countries. How-



ever, they appear to be more relevant in the Italian sample than in the British one, since, as mentioned above, one Italian foundation is the most cited Italian organisation and other corporate and private foundations are referred to. These philanthropic organisations are mostly active at the local and regional level and do not have a national outreach, in line with the above mentioned tendency to localism of the Italian debate.

The articles mentioning philanthropic foundations were coded to understand particularly what the mentioned foundations do in relation to SI: are they referred to in relation to their financial support or are they presented as policy entrepreneurs and public advocate of SI? The first and most frequently mentioned activity of philanthropic foundations in both countries is, as expected, the financial support they give to SI initiatives. Besides traditional grants, part of this financial support has the form of social investment. In the UK social investment has a longer and more consolidated history and the articles mention some philanthropic funds involved in social investment. While British articles refer to this kind of activity across the timespan considered, since 2009, in the Italian sample social investment strategies are mentioned in relation to philanthropic foundations and their commitment to SI only in more recent years, and they are described as a new promising trend led by a few pioneering foundations. Reflecting this perspective, in one article the president of one important foundation of banking origin says that these strate-

gies correspond to “a new modern vision of philanthropy” that mixes grants with returns on investment. He says that with this new approach “foundations become innovative subjects promoting entrepreneurial approaches not only through grants, but also launching new projects that we realise, on our own or with other partners, investing part of our fund”. These financial tools are therefore presented as boosters of innovative practices that, in the Italian context, are primarily experimented with by foundations.

A second activity conducted by philanthropic foundations in relation to SI is the identification and dissemination of good practice. In four articles, two British and two Italian, corporate foundations are mentioned as organizing a contest (in the UK) and an online networking platform (in Italy) whose main aim is to promote, share and give visibility to social innovations. In these cases, philanthropic foundations spread good practices to scale them and stimulate emulation. One board member of the British corporate foundation says that the competition aims at: “Inspiring new solutions to difficult problems; impact, at a scale affecting millions of people; and inspiration that could provide an idea or model that others might follow or emulate”. With this kind of activity, these foundations give visibility to some good practices by defining them social innovations. They not only bring some initiatives into public attention, but, most importantly, they contribute to shape the public conversation on SI by identifying and giving visibility to what they recognise as exemplar cases.

A third activity mentioned in the articles is the mediation between public and private sector. In one Italian article the role of foundations as a “bridge between private and public sector” is explicitly mentioned by the president of one foundation of banking origin. It is interesting to notice that in a couple of British articles this kind role is referred to using the same term (“bridge”/“ponte”), but it is ascribed to other organisations. In the British context it is suggested that this type of function should be fulfilled by research organisations, think tanks or operating foundations, such as the Young Foundation and Nesta among the others. In Italy, where the development of SI discourse is more recent and less institutionalized, some philanthropic foundations seem to claim this intermediary role for themselves. The president of the Italian foundation claiming that foundations could and should be “bridges” between public and private sector also added that, as intermediaries, they should be able “to foster a dialogue between public and private sector” and they can act as facilitators to define “new and agile models of participation and involvement”.

In other articles Italian foundations are presented as having a more explicit role as facilitators, able to influence a reform of the welfare system through the implementation of innovative pilot projects. In one Italian article the president of one foundation refers to the possibility of philanthropy to “cooperate with the welfare state, without substituting it”, through new pilot projects fostering the development of community welfare initiatives at local level. He says that the work

of foundations may promote a “revolution that may change the Italian welfare”. In another article the same person suggests that philanthropic foundations, beyond their grant activity, may become “a competent partner to design projects and share thoughts, able to anticipate new societal needs”.

While in the British SI discourse a prominent role is played by other types of organisations, the analysis of the Italian articles suggests that philanthropic foundations inform the Italian public SI debate in many ways. Although not the only ones, they are prominent among those supporting social innovations through social investments. They contribute to the definition of what SI is, identifying good practice and raising their visibility. They finally propose themselves as privileged intermediaries between private and public sector, particularly through their support to innovative local social experiments.

On the one hand, this prominence of foundations in the Italian debate may appear unexpected, given the differences in the philanthropic culture and history in the two countries and the greater development of the philanthropic sector in the UK (Anheier 2001). However, the differences in the level of institutionalisation of the SI discourse in the two countries can help to explain this trend. In fact, in a context such as the Italian one, where the public and policy debate on SI is more recent and less institutionalized, foundations have more space to gain an influential position, given that there are not strong and de-

veloped organisations specialised on the topic, neither at national nor at local level.

### ***5. Concluding remarks***

This exploratory study gives some insights into the differences between the British and Italian SI discourse, and highlights the respective roles of philanthropic foundations in the two contexts. In Italy they appear more inclined to influence the public and policy debate on SI and to develop a role of policy entrepreneurs, mainly because of the lack of other institutions specialised on the topic. This potential of Italian foundations is mainly expressed in their role in experimenting new financial tools to support SI and in their involvement in supporting pilot local social projects.

A more extended analysis of the public and policy discourse on SI should be conducted to assess the role of philanthropic foundations as policy entrepreneurs particularly in the Italian context. Other media, such as blogs and websites, could be considered to analyse the role of online communities, and interviews could be conducted with stakeholders both in and outside philanthropic institutions. This may lead to a better understanding of the limits and potential of foundations' influence on SI policy and, more broadly, of the role played by different actors and networks in supporting and shaping SI discourse and implementation in the two countries.

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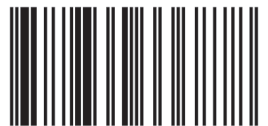
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Printed by  
Gi&Gi srl - Triuggio (MB)  
May 2018



9788834336878