Social Innovation beyond politics?

A critical interplay of theory and practice within the social housing context

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Management Research

Norwich Business School - University of East Anglia

January 2024

Abstract

The time for social innovation as a topic of both theoretical and practical interest has arrived. The European Commission has made social innovation a driver for changes in the economies and societies of member states in order to enhance the development of communities, the capabilities of individuals, and human well-being. Social innovation is featured in policy-oriented literature largely as a way to tackle social issues and social needs that "conventional" means, such as the market or the state do not meet effectively. Paradoxically, the emergent literature treats social innovation as an apolitical concept when it is operationalised and implemented at the local level. This calls for more critical investigation. Indeed, little is known about the strategic dimension of social innovation, especially when practices are embedded in local contexts. This research addresses this gap by answering the research question: "How does the way that social innovation practices are embedded, define the strategic and political dimensions of social innovation at the local level?" To do so, the study explores the social innovation practices developed by housing associations in the north of France and the south of England. The research draws on multiple case studies, consisting of 71 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (including programme advisors and social innovation participants), and ethnographic observations (including social innovation training and participant observations). The thorough analysis of embedded social innovation practices shows that a "proximity" approach in the French case and a "personal development" approach in the English case are both driven by contextual and political considerations that underpin the strategic dimension of social innovation. In the challenging context of budgetary austerity, social innovation is necessary and represents a solution to maintain the increasingly fragile power of housing associations. These findings constitute the two key contributions of the study to the social innovation literature: 1) it develops a multi-layered and interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation, which provides a holistic conceptualisation including the organisational dimension 2) this understanding elucidates the critical strategic dimension of social innovation, which reveals the close relationship between social innovation and local politics. Through being associated with prestige, credibility and local competition over funds, social innovation is inextricably driven by political and financial stakes. Thus, the study offers critical policy contributions that will be relevant to local third-sector organisations involved in social innovation activities.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the following people who have helped me undertake this research:

My supervisors Professor Zografia Bika and Dr. David Watson, for their enthusiasm for the project, for their support, encouragement, and patience.

The Norwich Business School and, more specifically, Liane Ward and Dr. Pinar Guven-Uslu for their organisational leadership and their coordination, which have helped me to embark on this research journey.

The partners of the EU-funded project who facilitate access to research participants.

The research participants in the north of France and south of England, for their availability, for taking part in the research, and for generating data, the very substance of my study.

Dr. Thomas Perrin, my master's thesis supervisor, who introduced me to the fascinating topics of social innovation and territorial cooperation.

And to my partner, Juliette, friends, and family.

Glossary

APL: Personal housing allowance *(Aide personnalisée au logement)*

BEPA: Bureau of European Policy Advisers

Centres Sociaux: Proximity organisations that create and foster social links and local communities' development through the implementation of social, educative, and cultural activities

Collectifs d'habitants: Main output of the social innovation practices developed in the north of France. Local associations initiated by HA residents and supported the by the HA proximity team that implement neighbourhoods' animations through local volunteering activities

ERDF: European Regional Development Fund

HA: Housing Association

INSEE : National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques)*

MEESS: Main output of the social innovation practices developed in the south of England. Micro-Enterprise and Employment Support Services

Mission Locale: Local mission (or Youth Centre) is an association that supports young people to find a job or training courses

OPH: A type of housing association in France that accommodates the most vulnerable people (*Office Publique de l'Habitat)*

SI participants: Social housing residents and non-residents who participated in social innovation activities delivered by the HA (not be confused with research participants)

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Research background and objectives

European institutions, and primarily the European Commission, have made social innovation a driver of change for European economies and societies. The Europe 2020 strategy and the BEPA Report "Empowering people, driving change – Social innovation in the European Union 2011" consider social innovation as a necessary condition to address poverty, create employment, and improve human well-being through the development of new social relationships or collaborations (European Commission, 2013, 2014). Thus, social innovation features prominently in contemporary policy discussions and political debates. This dominance of the grey literature in the application of this concept has contributed to the term "social innovation" becoming a buzzword, an over-used and ill-defined concept (Grimm et al., 2013; Grisolia & Ferragina, 2015; Pol & Ville, 2009).

Accordingly, the objective of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, the study seeks to improve concept clarity (Suddaby, 2010) by identifying what is central to defining social innovation. Because social innovation is fragmented across different research fields (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Pel et al., 2020), the study builds a holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of the concept through a multi-layered analysis. Secondly, the research aims to draw out the political dimension of social innovation through the exploration of two empirical cases. Paradoxically, whilst social innovation is mainly defined by a policy-oriented literature, the concept is marked by its "denial of politics" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016). Recent critical studies call for building a political understanding of social innovation by transcending the discourses of political institutions, such as the EU commission, that deploy normative definitions of the concept (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Larsson & Brandsen, 2016; Marques et al., 2018). Social innovation

is used widely in policy yet is treated as an apolitical concept. To address this gap, the study examines social innovation in practice through two case studies, adopting a contextualised approach to understanding social innovation as a strategic and political process when it is implemented at the local level.

The notion of context is thus central in the investigation. The context does not surround the phenomenon under investigation (social innovation) but is constitutive of it and, in that regard, explanatory (Welch et al., 2022). More precisely, the study concentrates on different contexts that assume a plural form, related to the social housing sector of two coastal places – one located in the north of France and the other, in the south of England – where housing associations have implemented social innovation activities. In this regard, the research introduces and employs the notion of "embeddedness" as a useful theoretical lens for examining social innovation. Embeddedness is used as a heuristic notion that enables theoretical knowledge about social innovation to be built through identifying the interactions between agents, practices, and their relationship with contexts (Terstriep et al., 2022; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). Embeddedness describes the duality between contexts and social activity, which depends upon the social, cultural, political, and local environment in which it is embedded (Uzzi, 1996). It facilitates "sensitivity to context" (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022) and contributes to exploring the dynamic and multi-layered interactions between social innovation and contextual factors (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2019). To capture the complexity of the notion, embeddedness is understood through a multi-level perspective that integrates the macro (a place shaped by socio-cultural factors), the meso (the organisation), and the micro (individuals) levels. These different levels of embeddedness, which are interdependent, serve as an analytical tool to investigate social innovation.

To summarise, in order to discern the political dimension of social innovation, the study adopts the lens of embeddedness to understand how social innovation practices are configured

in two case studies. It helps to reveal how social innovation is used strategically when practices are embedded at the local level, as they always are. In this fashion, the study contributes to building a critical understanding of the concept, by examining the role of structures and their influences on social innovation practices. The role of social science research is central to forming judgements about concepts that are contested, and particularly those that are used as strategies by political institutions. This is the case for social innovation, a "quasi-concept" (Bernard, 1999) forged by political discourses (Ziegler, 2017), and marked by its fluidity and vagueness with regards to its meanings (Jenson, 2016).

1.2 Theoretical background

Although the term "social innovation" is not new, efforts to conceptualise it are relatively recent (Sharra & Nyssens, 2010; Logue, 2019). Consequently, it remains a weakly conceptualised notion that can take many forms, such as a principle, a social movement or a piece of legislation (Phills et al., 2008; Tracey & Stott, 2016; Bennett & McWhorter, 2019). There are also various semantic variations, such as inclusive innovation, grassroots innovation, or frugal innovation, which makes the concept even more nebulous (Tesfaye & Fougère, 2021). Furthermore, the concept is fragmented across different fields of research, such as human geography, business, and entrepreneurship studies, sociology, urban planning or political sciences. This multi-disciplinarity reveals the multi-dimensional nature of social innovation.

Whilst the social innovation literature is amorphous, it can be understood by being divided into three major approaches; although not discrete categories, these are useful in considering how scholars have tended to treat social innovation according to these different perspectives. First, the agent-centred perspective, associated with the social entrepreneurship school, focuses on individuals and their crucial role in developing innovative solutions to social problems (Mulgan, 2006; Nicholls, 2006). This approach uses the terms "social

entrepreneurship" and "social innovation" interchangeably (Phillips et al., 2015). Second, the territorial development approach defines social innovation in terms of local communities' development, articulated around territorial governance and social networks (Moulaert et al., 2005; Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013). Finally, institutional theory emphasises the influence of institutions and structures, such as norms, values and rules (Di Maggio, 1988) regarding the social innovation process (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). It also refers to the capacity of social innovation to produce transformative and radical changes by challenging, altering, or replacing dominant institutions (Pel et al., 2020). Despite contributing various insights in understanding social innovation, the literature has tended to favour one perspective over another rather than developing understandings of social innovation that connect these different approaches.

Embeddedness is a useful conceptual lens through which this shortcoming in the literature can be addressed and used to build an interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation that brings together different dimensions of social innovation. Embeddedness captures the duality between contexts and actions (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2019). Therefore, "embeddedness" offers a fertile soil for building new theoretical insights by helping to understand the interactions between "contexts" and social innovation actions. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the purpose of embedding social innovation practices at the local level. Critical studies of social innovation predominantly focus on the scale of European institutions (Fougère et al., 2017). For example, at the EU level, social innovation is perceived as "a policy pragmatism" associated with a structural system of power, defined by European Institutions (Edmiston, 2016). Within this structural framework, social innovation is perceived as a "magic concept" (Voorberg, et al., 2014) that is intrinsically related to a "morality" (van Wijk et al., 2019) and its inherent "goodness" (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019).

By mobilising "embeddedness" as a heuristic notion, the study builds a contextualised understanding of the strategic dimension of social innovation. On the one hand, "embeddedness" refers to how actors are involved in the structured world in which they live. On the other, it relates to the way actors appropriate the structured world in which they live (Lewandowski, 2000). Therefore, "embeddedness" can reveal the way in which social actors' practices combine with structural elements (Terstriep et al., 2022; Uzzi, 1996). Consequently, "embeddedness" offers a theoretical basis upon which to explore the strategic dimension of social innovation, as well as moving beyond the political discussions and discourses at the EU level. Through the lens of embeddedness, the study develops a critical analysis of social innovation practices which are also associated with "moral" considerations when they are implemented at the local level. In other words, local organisations gain respectability through these practices imbued with a morality that confers local recognition. From this perspective, the political dimension of social innovation, at the local level, is closely related to "morality".

When social innovation has been examined under the lens of embeddedness, this has mainly focused on place, structures, or individuals, and overlooked the organisational level. Such studies are scarce in the social innovation literature (Abad & Ezponda, 2021; Henriques et al., 2022). It is therefore critical to investigate the role of local organisations such as housing associations, in delivering social innovation activities and configuring social innovation practices. Housing associations are locally anchored organisations; their actions are shaped by local factors such as the level of socio-economic deprivation of the area in which they are located, or the influence of local authorities on their decisions. Whilst traditionally, housing associations are focused on the provision of affordable housing, they now have wider and important responsibilities for tackling social issues through social innovation activities that offer skills development and support neighbourhood initiatives (Mullins, 2010; Pawson & Mullins, 2010; Walker et al., 2022). Housing associations have been identified as having the

capacity to match the three dimensions of social innovation as articulated by the European Commission (2013): the development of new social relationships, collaborations and networks; tackling social exclusion; and enhancing the individual's capacity to act (Ziegler, 2017). Therefore, housing associations can be seen as locally embedded organisations aimed at delivering social innovation. As such, they offer a valuable empirical context in which to investigate the strategic dimension of social innovation practices. Furthermore, focusing on housing associations contributes to shedding light on the management of social innovation by third sector organisations at the local level. This focus on social innovation management, undertaken by a local non-profit organisation, helps to reveal the strategic side of social innovation and its close connection with local politics.

1.3 Research question

The research study asks, "How does the way that social innovation practices are embedded, define the strategic and political dimensions of social innovation at the local level?"

This research question implies investigating two pathways. Firstly, a thorough exploration of the levels of embeddedness (macro, meso, and micro) in each case under investigation here, is required to identify the interactions between contextual factors and social innovation practices. This first step is necessary to examine what embeddedness reveals about social innovation. Indeed, the research question raises questions about the purpose of social innovation practices: what is the role of the housing associations in the embedding process of social innovation practices in particular ways, and why are social innovation practices embedded in the way that they are? Secondly, having established how social innovation is embedded in different ways in each case, the research considers the strategic and political dimension specifically: why are practices embedded in this way, what are the consequences of this for the organisation and individuals?

Therefore, the research question itself indicates the process through which the strategic dimension of social innovation at the local level will be studied, where housing associations develop their embedded social innovation practices. That is why the word "practice" is relevant to this investigation: it refers to the capacity of organisations – in this case, the housing associations – to act. The use of the wording, social innovation "practice" helps direct the focus on organisational actions. In addition, "practice" supposes planning, actions, and strategies. Practices are enabled by structures (Giddens, 1984), and in this regard, "embeddedness" does not simply condemn organisations to remain "in the room", but it names "an enabling predicament of human practice" (Lewandowski, 2000, p. 58). Therefore, using the notion of "practice" is relevant to exploring how organisations are involved in contexts and how they "make sense" of contexts to deliver embedded social innovation activities; but also, how they influence context through their actions or practices. By including the notions of "practices" and "embeddedness", the research question directs attention to the focus of the study on "practices" at the strategic level, and how these are shaped by the way in which social innovation practices are embedded.

Finally, the research question illustrates the exploratory nature of the research, which aims at revisiting what is central in the conceptualisation of social innovation. Thus, the research question fulfils the research objectives by looking at what embeddedness can bring to the conceptualisation of social innovation, and how it can further our understanding of the politics and strategic dimensions of social innovation practices. This necessitates a qualitative case study approach.

1.4 Methodological overview

The research question is addressed through a comparative qualitative case study approach that supports the exploratory and contextualised approach taken in this research. The research

design consists of a contextualised case study analysis (Eisenhardt, 2021; Welch et al., 2022) based on the idea of "case study" developed by Yin (1981), and an inductive reasoning process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this respect, the study employs a holistic approach to case study analysis that considers the interrelationship between the phenomenon under investigation and its contexts (Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015).

The research strategy is founded on two specific cases: first, a coastal conurbation in the north of France where a housing association has implemented social innovation activities based on local community development and volunteering activities; secondly, a coastal county in the south of England where a housing association has implemented social innovation activities through the development of Micro-enterprise and Employment Support Services (MEESS). The social housing sector is the common component of the two cases and the basis for comparison. However, the cases are also quite different so a range of contextual characteristics such as language, culture, economy, politics, and history, need to be taken into consideration. These differences enable a fuller exploration of the research question, since whilst the organisations are comparable as housing association organisations engaged in social innovation practices at a local level, they are embedded in very different ways and consequently, their practices are configured differently. Thus, the multiple case study approach represents the ideal method with which to conduct a contextualised exploration of social innovation.

Regarding the data collection process, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations were undertaken in both field sites and organised around a two-step process. Initially, key informant stakeholders (housing associations, local authorities, community centres, charitable organisations, employment support organisations) were interviewed, followed by participants of social innovation activities (SI participants) and social housing residents living in the areas under investigation. Simultaneously, ethnographic observations

were carried out on site during the two stages of the fieldwork. In total, 37 in-depth interviews (including 12 SI participants and three non-participants living in the social housing neighbourhood) were carried out in three neighbourhoods located in the French coastal conurbation. In the English case, 34 in-depth interviews (including 23 SI participants) were conducted across the whole coastal county located in the south of England.

The data analysis is also based on a two-stage process, involving both a contextual within-case analysis and a cross-case analysis. The within-case analysis provides a deep contextualised analysis of the social innovation practices implemented by housing associations in each local context; these reflect how social innovation is embedded and is necessary in order to adequately explain how and why phenomena in the social world occur (Welch et al., 2022). This first stage lays strong foundations for the cross-case analysis which aims to generate theory and develop our understanding of how social innovation is configured, according to political dimensions and strategic imperatives, driven by how it is embedded. This two-stage approach enables both a contextual exploration of a social phenomenon and a wider analysis of findings. Indeed, to engage with context-sensitive theorising (Charmaz, 2014), case designs should be based on the similarities and differences across cases. This is also a condition for the enhancement of theory building (Eisenhardt, 2021).

To rigorously analyse the data, a thematic analysis has been employed which identifies the key themes that characterise the embedding process of social innovation practices, and their purpose for housing associations. In more practical terms, a data structure has been elaborated which comprises different first-order codes (within-case analysis) and similar second-order codes (cross-case analysis). Consequently, the methodology is a systematic and creative way of thinking about "designing, executing, and writing up qualitative research – the full Monty" (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 293).

1.5 Thesis structure

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 – The literature review provides a comprehensive examination of the social innovation literature. Social innovation appears to be entering a new phase as a research field (Nicholls et al., 2016). In this regard, particular attention is paid to recent discussions that contribute to developing social innovation as a research area. The literature review is the preliminary step in fulfilling the research objective, discerning existing definitions and debates about the concept. In addition, the chapter theoretically reviews "embeddedness" by demonstrating that the notion is well founded with regards to conceptualising social innovation.

The literature review offers a theoretical understanding of the contextualisation of social innovation. Therefore, it is organised into three sections that each address critical gaps in the social innovation literature. After a brief introduction (2.1), section 2.2 explores three major perspectives on social innovation (agent centred; territorial development; institutional theory approaches). It reveals that social innovation is a multi-dimensional concept that requires a holistic and interdisciplinary comprehension to improve concept clarity. Section 2.3 focuses on the paradoxical association between social innovation and local politics. Social innovation is shaped by policy discourses but is conceived as "apolitical" when it is implemented at the local level. Thus, this section examines how and why social innovation is perceived as an apolitical concept in the literature. Finally, section 2.4 focuses on the theoretical definition of a contextualised approach to social innovation and reveals how the notion of "contexts" takes a plural form. It explores the social housing sector as a space in which social innovation practices can occur. These three sections contribute to identifying the gaps in the social innovation literature and how the notion of "embeddedness" can bridge them to further conceptualise social innovation. In addition, the literature review chapter helps to build an

analytical framework (macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis) with which to explore social innovation.

Chapter 3 – The methodology describes the research strategy adopted for this study. First, the philosophy underpinning the research is detailed by outlining its epistemological position and the pertinence of "pragmatism" in the exploration of social innovation. The research strategy is then discussed, justifying the use of the contextualised case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989, 2021; Welch et al., 2022). The chapter presents the two specific cases and their relevance to investigating social innovation. The chapter then continues with information regarding the data collection process which is based on both in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations in the field sites. Finally, the chapter explains the data analysis process and, more specifically, the coding process resulting from a thematic analysis, toward the elaboration of theoretical codes. The chapter also outlines ethical considerations, the researcher's positionality, and the adaptation of the data collection process in the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The presentation of research findings is organised in two chapters resulting from the within-case and cross-case analysis of data.

Chapter 4 – The first findings chapter describes the way that social innovation practices are embedded in each case. This chapter focuses on the connection between contextual factors and the social innovation practices, developed by housing associations. It reveals how the embeddedness of each case characterises two approaches to social innovation, developed by housing associations: the "proximity" approach in the coastal conurbation of the north of France and the "personal development" approach in the coastal county of the south of England. This analysis demonstrates that housing associations are social innovators that produce social value through embedded practices, but that this value and practices vary markedly according

to context. Therefore, this analytical chapter which gathers data from the within-case analysis, lays the robust foundations to investigate social innovation as a strategy: how practices are embedded at the local level determines this strategy.

Chapter 5 – Following the analysis of embedded social innovation practices, this chapter reveals the strategic dimension of social innovation. By configuring social innovation practices in response to context, the housing association builds credibility and a reputation as a social innovation player. Thus, this chapter explores the importance of how social innovation practices are embedded and underlines the political dimension of social innovation at the local level. Indeed, housing associations shape social innovation practices in order to effectively compete over funds, power, and local recognition in challenging contexts that are characterised by budgetary austerity and profound changes in the social housing sector.

Chapter 6 - Discussion and conclusions outline the key contributions of the study, particularly in relation to the social innovation literature.

Firstly, the findings contribute to understanding social innovation as a strategic concept for housing associations, closely connected to local politics. This finding helps to build a critical perspective in the conceptualisation of social innovation. By revealing that housing associations strategically shape their social innovation practices in response to local context, which characterises how they are embedded, the study challenges the implicit use of social innovation as being apolitical; this is questionable at the local level as well as at higher levels.

Secondly, the findings show that embeddedness helps to build an interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation, by revealing the interconnections between different contextual factors. The "personal development" and "proximity" practices are embedded social innovation approaches that help to discern the relationship between contexts and social innovation. Therefore, the study of embedded practices contributes to understanding what

enables the interactions between the fragmented dimensions of social innovation identified in the literature: the agent-centred, territorial development, and institutional theory perspectives. Through the lens of "embeddedness", social innovation is understood as a holistic concept that does not only focus on individuals (agency), territories or institutions. This interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation also helps to develop a critical analysis of the concept.

Finally, policy contributions, strengths, limitations, and directions for future research are considered before concluding the thesis.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, the thesis seeks to provide new theoretical insights into the concept of social innovation, by examining the way in which social innovation practices are embedded. All research needs to be informed by existing knowledge in a subject area (Rowley & Slack, 2004). The literature review is thus the preliminary step in fulfilling the research objective, by discerning the existing definitions of social innovation and debates associated with the concept. In addition, reviewing the literature contributes to identifying gaps in the social innovation literature that the research can bridge, by mobilising the notion of "embeddedness".

From this perspective, "embeddedness" is a relevant lens that brings further theoretical knowledge to social innovation. The study explores the way in which social innovation practices are embedded, which relates to the interactions between social innovation practices and contexts. This is how embeddedness is understood. Therefore, the lens of "embeddedness" is used to inform the literature about the concept of social innovation.

To effectively explore existing knowledge and potential gaps in the social innovation literature, the chapter is structured in three sections. Section 2.2 examines how social innovation practices have been understood in the literature, revealing that social innovation is a multidimensional concept that is scattered among different research areas and has been conceptualised in different ways that can be understood under three major perspectives: the agent-centred, territorial development, and institutional theory approaches. Section 2.3 presents the state-of-the-art regarding the political dimension of social innovation - a notion shaped by policy discourses as "normative" yet seemingly "apolitical" when it is

operationalised. Finally, section 2.4 provides a theoretical definition of the contextualised approach to social innovation. It focuses on the social housing sector as a context where social innovation can occur and the role of third sector organisations (such as housing associations) in developing social innovation actions. In this chapter, the notion of "embeddedness" will be incorporated into each section as a "heuristic" tool that contributes "to find/discover" (from *εὑρίσκω, heurískō*) what is central in the theorisation of social innovation, with a view to moving toward a more holistic conceptualisation.

2.2 Social innovation, a multidisciplinary concept

Social innovation is a relatively young area of research, but the term "social innovation" is not new (Sharra & Nyssens, 2010; Henriques et al., 2022; Logue, 2019). For example, the term "social economy" has repeatedly come to the fore in relation to social innovation (Ayob et al., 2016). Since the late nineteenth century, in the framework of the rise of labour movements, Robert Owen and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon identified social innovations as systems based on solidarity, reciprocity, and actors' response to change, with a view to making the economy more social (Sinclair & Baglioni, 2014). Max Weber's Social Action Theory, which helps to understand human action and social change (Weber, 1905), can also be identified as one of the first signs of the emergence of the concept of social innovation. In addition, innovation studies originated by Joseph Schumpeter are also valuable for understanding social innovation. For example, the concept of "creative destruction" is central to understand the process of innovation and its capacity to disrupt established practices. "Creative destruction" is defined as an opportunity to increase productivity and to seek profit. In the case of social innovation, "creative destruction" can also be a way to meet common goals (Marcy, 2015; Marcy & Mumford, 2007). In 1970, James Taylor was the first to incorporate the social dimension in innovation studies, defining social innovation as involving not only social inventions but new ways of doing things. From this perspective, Taylor identifies social innovation as a separate

category of innovation (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016) that goes beyond the mercantile logic of innovation developed by Schumpeter (1934).

While it is not entirely clear who was the first to use the term "social innovation" (Moulaert, et al., 2013), the publication of the series *Que-sais-je?* in 1982 (Chambon, David & Devevey) articulated one of the first definitions of social innovation (cited and translated by Moulaert & Mehmood, 2011):

> "Socially innovative […] practices are more or less directly aimed at allowing an individual – or a group of individuals – to deal with a social need – or a set of needs – that could not be satisfied from other means." (Chambon, et al., 1982, p. 8)

This general definition presumes that the aim of social innovation is to meet needs poorly satisfied by "official" means such as the market or the state. From this point of view, social innovation is not synonymous with novelty, but it aims at satisfying unmet needs. Social innovation refers to innovative changes, but socially innovative practices are not necessarily new; rather, they are nonstandard or alternatives (Hillier et al., 2004). More precisely, the most promising solutions to meet a set of social needs are sometimes "long-standing ones that can be either considered or approached in new ways or treated with new importance when elevated as social policy" (Beckman et al., 2023, p.25).

This brief historical overview shows that there is no consensus regarding the definition and relevance of social innovation in social sciences. It is considered as an imprecise buzzword that requires terminological precision and semantic clarification if it is to improve theoretical knowledge and scientific progress (Pol & Ville, 2009). Social innovation is associated with distinct terms that further hinder the theoretical understanding of the concept. Meeting "social needs" (Mulgan & Pulford, 2010), "the public good" (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012), "quality of life" (Pol & Ville, 2009) or "social value" production (Phills et al., 2008) can all be considered as expected outcomes and/or possible processes of social innovation. An outcomes-based

approach further clouds the definition of social innovation, reducing it to an inherently good and normative phenomena.

In addition, social innovation covers a wide range of disciplines integrating research fields such as urban studies, organisational studies, innovation management, sociology, or entrepreneurship studies. The social innovation literature is scattered across different research fields (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Dawnson & Daniel, 2010): social innovation studies are rooted in different social science disciplines that provide substantial insights, and a plethora of new approaches and frameworks (Pel et al., 2020). This eclectic interest in social innovation has thus led to a proliferation of definitions (Lawrence et al., 2014).

Therefore, this first section of chapter 2 provides a multidisciplinary review of the social innovation literature. It identifies three theoretical dimensions: the agent-centred perspective; the geographical and territorial approach; and the institutional theory dimension. These three perspectives have tended to be favoured by particular literatures, entrepreneurial, territorial development, and sociological respectively. Whilst not limited to these literatures, they are broadly representative of these different disciplinary areas and taken together cover how social innovation has tended to be conceptualised more generally. However, these three dimensions remain disconnected despite their distinctive and complementary insights into understanding social innovation. This is an important gap in the social innovation literature. Whilst social innovation is a multidisciplinary concept, there is still a need to connect the different disciplines to improve its conceptualisation: the social innovation literature straddles different disciplines but lacks an interdisciplinary understanding of the concept that integrates interactions between the different perspectives.

2.2.1 The agent-centred perspective

The first dimension concerns the (social) entrepreneurship school or the "agent-centred perspective" of social innovation. This approach focuses on individuals and their crucial role in developing innovative solutions to social problems. Mulgan (2006) is in line with this perspective and uses the Schumpeterian tradition of the heroic entrepreneur to define social innovation: "social change is portrayed as having been driven by a very small number of heroic, energetic, and very impatient individuals" (Mulgan, 2006, p. 148). From this point of view, individual behaviours, leadership, and personal motivation matter: "some of the most effective methods for cultivating social innovation start from the presumption that people are competent interpreters of their own lives and competent solvers of their own problems" (Mulgan, 2006, p. 150). Therefore, individualised solutions, personal capacity, and the willingness to take risks "to influence opportunities for innovation" (Grimm et al., 2013, p. 447) are crucial to meet social needs. This "agent-centred perspective" refers to creativity (Jiang & Thagard, 2014; Marcy & Mumford, 2010; Zahra et al., 2009), opportunity identification (Dimov, 2010), the need to be proactive (Newbert et al., 2013), and self-leadership (Mumford et al., 2020). From the agent-centred perspective, social innovation is closely related to the idea of entrepreneurship.

In this regard, the terms "social entrepreneurship" and "social innovation" can be used interchangeably (Westley & Antadze, 2010). There are apparent similarities in the wording of both concepts to describe their objectives. Social entrepreneurship relates to creating social value, maximising social impact, and the potential social change induced by entrepreneurial activities (Nicholls, 2006). Social entrepreneurship is increasingly acclaimed as a means to address social problems and challenges by introducing new products, services or business models (Hietschold et al., 2022). This definition is very similar to a frequently cited definition of social innovation, which refers to the development of novel solutions (including products,

processes, and technologies) to social problems (Lawrence et al., 2014; Mulgan, 2010; Phills et al., 2008). Like social innovation, social entrepreneurship is a response to market insufficiencies (Moulaert et al., 2017; Smith & Stevens, 2010) and "to unmet needs within a community" (Di Domenico et al., 2010, p. 699). Again, the word choice is nearly the same in the definition of social innovation provided by Moulaert and colleagues (2005), where the concept is identified as a means to meet "unsatisfied or alienated human needs" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1973). Therefore, social enterprise and social innovation appear to be both necessary. The drivers for social innovation include necessity (Tracey & Stott, 2016) and social entrepreneurs identify and develop solutions to social problems. Therefore, social entrepreneurship offers an entrepreneurial understanding of social innovation. Indeed, in entrepreneurial theories, a gap in the market is often identified as an opportunity, while in the social entrepreneurship framework, a social problem could be recognised as a gap to bridge (Kirzner, 1997; Smith & Stevens, 2010).

Moreover, both social innovation and social entrepreneurship are dynamic processes that imply creation and experimentation (Lichtenstein et al., 2006), continual efforts (Engel et al., 2017), and learning processes (Fulgencio & Le Fever, 2016). This dynamic lens, which observes the appearance of social phenomenon out of individual choices (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996), contributes to a conceptual reconciliation of the social innovation and entrepreneurship literature. Social entrepreneurship implies creativity, improvisation, and social skills. It also requires significant activity and effort (Baker & Nelson, 2005), and can be an essential precursor to "emergence", which involves exploring alternative tendencies (Anderson, 2010). According to Bessant & Tidd (2007), a social entrepreneur develops a mission-oriented venture aiming at social issues with business aptitudes and competencies. A social entrepreneur is often identified as the "natural" originator and carrier of social innovation (Tortia, et al., 2020). In this context, social innovation can emerge through "the creative

expression of intrinsic and pro-social motivations" of social entrepreneurs (Tortia et al., 2020). In the same vein, the social innovation literature identifies "the agent" as the social entrepreneur or innovator engaged in "a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning" (Sharra & Nyssens, 2010, p. 2). The similarities between conceptualisation of social entrepreneurship and social innovation highlight individuals' central role in the social innovation dynamic, a proactive process of creation that seeks to generate social impact and address social problems. Whilst this literature highlights the role of individuals as the central focus and 'agent' of innovation, it tends to downplay the role of the context around the individual and the role of organisations in driving social innovation.

Beyond seeing the individual as the central agent of social innovation, this literature has also sought to explore how individual activity targeted towards social innovation can contribute to positive outcomes. Firstly, improving human well-being, which is identified as a key objective of social innovation by the European Commission (2013), is attracting increasing interest in the entrepreneurship literature (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020; Ryff, 2019). For example, Wiklund and colleagues (2019) define "entrepreneurial well-being" as "the experience of satisfaction, positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and psychological functioning in relation to developing, starting, growing, and running an entrepreneurial venture" (Wiklund et al., 2019, p. 579). Moreover, several studies explore and demonstrate the positive impact of entrepreneurial processes on nascent entrepreneurs' "well-being, personal development, satisfaction, and their family's well-being" (Renko, 2013, p. 1047). From this perspective, this entrepreneurial dimension is linked to the eudaemonic approach of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001), which refers to its proactive dimension and the experience of "feeling alive, authentic, and thriving" (Stephan et al., 2020, p. 3). Therefore, the parallel between individual entrepreneurial and social innovation activities appears relevant because it underlines well-being as a potential outcome of the process.

Social innovation seeks to "enhance individuals' capacity to act" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6), this points to individual agency as being key to how social innovation is understood by European policy makers. This dimension relates to an expected outcome of social innovation: empowerment. "Empowerment" is a micro-level process by which people gain the ability to act on goals that matter; it is conceptualised in terms of the satisfaction of basic psychological needs such as autonomy and relatedness (Pel et al., 2020). "Empowerment" is thus a critical component of the agent-centred approach to social innovation. However, it is difficult for vulnerable people affected by social exclusion (such as social housing tenants) to feel empowered (von Jacobi et al., 2023). Social innovation thus aims at addressing this empowerment deficit by fostering the participation of excluded people in social innovation initiatives. Thus, social innovation is "done by" (Tracey & Stott, 2016) individuals in deprived places who seek to "take control of their destinies" (Tracey & Stott, 2016, p. 8) and become solvers of their own social issues. This pro-active approach creates a social value associated with empowerment, namely "the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence, the belief in the ability to achieve goals" (Pel et al., 2020, p. 4). Social innovators are part of this perspective of seeking satisfaction, autonomy, and inclusion. In this regard, empowerment is an agent-centred process that refers to a socially innovative way of tackling social exclusion through the motivations, achievements, and empowering outcomes that the entrepreneurial process offers to social innovators (Hopp & Stephan, 2012; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018; Rauch & Frese, 2007).

Finally, the agent-centred approach to social innovation has been critically examined as furthering to neo-liberal narratives promoted and legitimised by political institutions. For example, Fougère, Segercrantz and Seeck (2017) demonstrate that European institutions promote an individualistic approach to social innovation through neoliberal political rationality; a neoliberal paradigm (Montgomery, 2016) that transforms the citizen into "only a

rational decider" (Fougère et al., 2017, p. 8). This approach draws a parallel between social innovation processes and entrepreneurial behaviour within the "dynamic of business culture" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1974). From this perspective, social innovation shapes a specific type of entrepreneur, characterised by a strong sense of leadership and creativity (Marcy & Mumford, 2010; Mumford, 2010). This individualistic perspective of social innovation is legitimised by neoliberal political narratives. Discourses "give validity" to "specific social practices" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 47), such as the actions of heroic and energetic individuals (Mulgan, 2006). Consequently, this agent-centred approach to social innovation, legitimised by neoliberal political narratives, highlights the entrepreneurial dimension of the concept. Indeed, "agency" and individuals' roles are crucial to understanding social innovation, a process that seeks to meet individuals' needs.

In this regard, the agent-centred dimension of social innovation presents some limitations. Considering that social innovation is only the result of individual choices is problematic as it risks ignoring structural inequalities that have disempowered those individuals, and expecting them to solve those problems. In addition, focusing exclusively on individual agency to define social innovation is an approach embedded in the neoliberal paradigm, in which individual changemakers are the sole agents of social innovation (Wittmayer et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to question the agent-centred approach to social innovation in order to develop a critical understanding of the concept.

2.2.2 The territorial development approach

The second major approach in the literature regards social innovation as an engine for local development. Social innovation has increasingly become a research focus in the territorial development and urban studies literature (Brandsen et al., 2016). From this territorial development perspective, social innovation targets three objectives: satisfaction of human

needs, changes in social relations, and increasing socio-political capability (Moulaert et al., 2005). Accordingly, this approach refers to the process and the outcomes of social innovation, namely the satisfaction of unsatisfied human needs and "the social relation between individuals and groups in neighbourhoods, and the wider territories embedding them" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1973). Thus, social innovation is seen as having a key role to play in the promotion of sustainable and inclusive places. Social innovation can counterbalance social exclusion and, by supporting collective wellbeing, "can help promote more sustainable forms of development at the place-based level" (Baker & Mehmood, 2013, p. 321).

In addition, improving living conditions in a territory (outcome) is equally important to cooperation, partnership, and collaboration between local stakeholders and inhabitants (process). For example, the role of civil society in social innovation is significant: civil society can take action and develop socially innovative processes, by fostering social integration through local governance dynamics (Gerometta et al., 2005). On that basis, Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2005) emphasise the crucial role of territorial governance and social networks in the social innovation process by suggesting a new neighbourhood organisation, which helps to tackle local development problems through "an alternative to sectoral, ahistorical, and top-down strategies for local development – especially neighbourhood development." Indeed, "for local development to be successful, various domains of intervention (e.g., economy, housing, education and training local, democracy or culture) have to be integrated; but the agencies and the spatial scales of intervention must be articulated in territorial social networks" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1973). From the territorial development perspective, social innovation refers to local community development (Moulaert, 2010) and new forms of local governance (Baker & Mehmood, 2013). The territorial development approach is also associated with a democratic dimension, the democratic paradigm of social innovation (Montgomery, 2016), emphasising a

citizen-participatory approach, based on partnerships between various stakeholders, for solving social issues.

Tracey and Stott's (2012) concept of "community resilience" is closely related to the territorial development perspective of social innovation. "Community resilience" translates into aims to develop "a cohesion and collective responsibility" (Tracey & Stott, 2012, p.12), which is used as a solution to tackle social issues. Social innovation has also emerged as a critical concept in the urban planning and local development literature through the lens of citizen participation (Nyseth & Hamdouch, 2019; Agger, 2021). From this perspective, urban planning can support social innovation at the neighbourhood level by stimulating participatory and collective practices that empower neighbourhood inhabitants through volunteering and associational activities (De Blust et al., 2019). Consequently, the territorial development approach refers to a social innovation process that can effectively tackle social issues by mobilising local stakeholders and empowering local communities in an integrated, participatory, and collaborative approach. Indeed, social relationships and collaborations are essential, and territories have features that can prevent or foster social innovation, such as "local leaders" or "traditions of economic solidarity" that can "determine the strength of local initiatives" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1998).

Collaboration is associated with local governance, a critical process of the territorial development dimension of social innovation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2015). This geographic approach to social innovation emphasises the crucial role of local groups and territorial partnerships between different and various stakeholders. Social innovation connects the contribution of many people through complex networks and partnerships that involve a broad variety of interests (Murray et al., 2010). Within this approach, social innovation is seen as a collective learning process of knowledge creation, involving different actors from various sectors (Cloutier, 2003). Thus, social innovation occurs through involving varied stakeholders

who share the same objective: tackling economic, social, and environmental issues in specific local situations (Domanski et al., 2019). In this regard, the emergence of social innovation can be found in the setting up of multidisciplinary teams. The example of community-supported agriculture illustrates this idea and represents an excellent example of grassroots social innovation (Chiffoleau & Loconto, 2018; Voltan, 2017). It is an alternative, locally based economic model of agriculture and food distribution, which seeks to create a direct relationship between food producers (farmers) and food consumers (Cone & Myhre, 2000). It is not necessarily recent but is innovative in its organisational model because it offers an alternative to industrial agriculture. It involves a group of consumers and producers that collectively organise the exchange framework and guarantees coherence between the practices and values shared among the stakeholders. Therefore, the territorial development approach to social innovation encourages and is, in turn, supported by new place-based governance processes that enhance civil society engagement (Baker & Mehmood, 2013). In this regard, social innovation integrates the concept of territory to understand and elucidate the spatial processes that hinder or foster "the capacity of action of disfavoured social groups" (Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013, p. 133).

By fostering social cohesion and local community development, social innovation is an inherently territorialised process (Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013). Social innovation copes with improving the welfare of individuals and community through employment. In other words, citizens' participation; its expressed goal is therefore to provide solutions for individual and community problems (Pol & Ville, 2009). It seems, therefore, that social innovation and local development can be considered as intertwined. In this regard, social innovation refers to a collectivist approach to the concept. Moreover, this collectivist dimension is even more vital in poor places such as deprived neighbourhoods, where "community" initiatives are significant and offer a local response to local needs (Tracey & Stott, 2016). Indeed, poor places are sites

of substantial social issues and suffer from an important lack of resources that can hinder community development.

Consequently, the territory should be at the heart of the social innovation analysis. Spatial sciences such as geography, spatial planning, and urbanism should be mobilised to systematically understand the concept (Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013). However, the territorial development perspective of social innovation highlights "*à la mode*" practices and the inherent goodness of cooperations, partnerships, and community-based actions (Jessop et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to question this approach to build a critical understanding of social innovation by incorporating other dimensions – such as individuals or cultural structures - that go beyond the sole focus on territories and territorial cooperation.

2.2.3 The institutional theory lens

The third dimension refers to institutional theory and focuses on the influence of institutions (norms, values, and rules) on our understanding of the structures of societies and their changes (DiMaggio, 1988). This approach stresses the central role of structures and their influence on the social innovation process (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). The institutional theory perspective posits a duality between a top-down versus a more radical form of social innovation. This duality connects social innovation to power and politics in that social innovations are changes in the cultural, normative or regulative structures [or classes] of the society, which enhance "its collective power resources and improve its economic and social performance" (Heiskala, 2007, p. 59).

This institutional theory lens aligns with the transformative dimension of social innovation, which suggests that it can bring structural changes in society: "social innovation can originate from any sphere of society but should seek to change society as a whole" (Ziegler, 2017, p. 399). The literature positions social innovation as a powerful conceptual tool that can

attempt to pursue extremely ambitious objectives (Grimm et al., 2013) and produce radical changes. Social innovation can also be "disruptive" by challenging social institutions and affecting the underlying distribution of power (Westley & Antadze, 2010). This institutional theory definition of social innovation refers to what Pel and colleagues (2020) call "transformative social innovation", a specific type of social innovation process that entails "challenging, altering, or replacing the dominant institutions in a specific socio-material context" (Pel et al., 2020, p. 5). Social innovation is thereby perceived as a powerful force that can remove barriers and enhance society's capacity to act. In the same way, social innovation implies systemic changes (Pol & Ville, 2009), and radical changes, such as the upset of power relations (Franzoi, 1996). Therefore, from the institutional theory standpoint, the success of social innovation may result in a social disruption, namely "efforts that interrupt, disrupt, short-circuit, or undermine established routines that otherwise would go unquestioned" (van Wijk et al., 2019, p. 906).

Institutional theory emphasises the complex nature of social innovation (van Wijk et al., 2019), which is defined as an "agentic, relational, situated, and multi-level process" (van Wijk et al., 2019, p. 889). From this perspective, social innovation is embedded in various structures and institutions. For example, stigmatised individuals (such as long-term unemployed people or social housing tenants) suffer from a lack of legitimacy inside a given social system influenced by social structures. However, the perception of society can change through the individuals' participation, initiatives, and activities. Indeed, these processes initiated by individuals are considered as a "virtue" in itself by the society (Voorberg et al., 2014) and can contribute to "normative integration" (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). This statement raises the question of validity: individuals, social innovators, job seekers or entrepreneurs can gain validity and prestige through their actions, efforts, and proactive behaviours, which are institutionalised. Considering the role of individuals' actions and

behaviours is crucial to understanding social innovation from an institutional theory perspective since individual perceptions and judgments (Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2005) but also "emotions" or "normative beliefs" are shaped by institutions (Bitektine & Haack, 2014; Johnson et al., 2006).

In addition, Tyler (2005) uses a Weberian approach to illustrate the interactions between institutions and individuals' actions by showing that: "social norms and values become a part of people's internal motivational systems and guide their behaviour separately from the impact of incentives and sanctions" (Tyler, 2005, p. 378). This process is key to inducing changes in the institutional environment (Purtik & Arenas, 2019), marked by social norms and values. That is why institutional theory is crucial in the social innovation process. The process of institutionalisation gives "validity to actions that change social systems and creates new and legitimised social practices" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 47). In this regard, institutional theory has an ambivalent impact on social innovation. On the one hand, it validates social actions and considers the influence of external institutions and power on these actions. On the other hand, it defines social innovation as a disruptive process that engenders social transformations and acknowledges the possibilities for change in institutions, such that social actors are both shaped by and can shape institutions with the latter being regarded as social innovation.

Furthermore, institutional theory brings complexity to understanding social innovation. It also integrates the power of discourses into the definition of social innovation. Speeches "acts" on or "performs" certain realities (Austin, 1962). There is a connection between discourses, legitimacy, institutions, and different elements of processes that occur through language (Suddaby et al., 2016a). For example, "rhetoric" is often used in the literature (Nicholls, 2010) to describe the impact of narratives and discourses in the social innovation process by demonstrating the high degree of agency in "using language purposively to

construct legitimacy" (Suddaby et al., 2016a, p. 460). The lens of "legitimacy" approaches social innovation as a phenomenon that is "constituted, de- constituted, and re-constituted through the sayings and doings of multiple socially embedded, and materially embodied actors who attempt to make meaning of unfolding processes" (Garud et al., 2018, p. 61). Institutions, perceptions, individual interpretations, mental representations (Packard, 2017) and discourses spread values, customs, and norms, which influence phenomena and actions such as individuals' initiatives or communities' engagements. Understanding this process is thus crucial to understanding the process of social innovation in an institutional logic. Indeed, social innovation is constructed, deconstructed, shaped, and promoted by discourses and power. Consequently, the institutional theory approach contributes to understanding social innovation as a concept used by political institutions, shaped by discourses, and predominantly defined by policy-oriented literature.

The analysis of the three dimension of social innovation demonstrates that the concept is inherently multidisciplinary. Each discipline brings insights to the understanding of social innovation. However, each dimension of social innovation detailed in this section also has limitations. Social innovation is not only an individual process based on an entrepreneurial conceptualisation. It is also reductive to define social innovation as a territorial notion referring only to community-based initiatives and local development. Although the institutional theory lens helps to identify the overlaps between social innovation approaches, it is crucial to build "integrated or holistic problem-solving approaches" to social innovation that recognise "the complexity of post-industrial societal challenges as multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary" (Grimm et al., 2013, p. 448).

The restrictive focus on social innovation as an agent-centred, territorial, or institutional concept constraints the development of a critical understanding of social innovation. This "social innovation trap", resulting from disciplinary silos, obscures the specific advantages of

different sectors to social innovation (Beckman et al., 2023). In addition, by failing to consider different disciplinary perspectives, "the field of social innovation currently focuses on a narrow set of inquiries that prevent us from understanding the complexities inherent to tackling large-scale social problems" (Beckman et al., 2023, p.3). It is a shared ambition among social innovation scholars to "move the field forward" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) by "enhancing theoretical and conceptual coherence to better inform research, policy, and practice" (Pel et al., 2020, p. 1). To build this comprehensive approach, social innovation should be conceptualised as "a dialectic relationship whereby agents and the social context cannot exist independently and therefore cannot be understood as separate or distinct from one another" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 47). Knowledge of contexts in which social innovation practices and actions are embedded, is critical to conceptualising social innovation as an interdisciplinary notion (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022). From this perspective, "embeddedness" can help to develop a holistic conceptualisation of social innovation by examining the interactions between contexts and practices.

2.2.4 Embeddedness, a heuristic notion to explore social innovation

The concept of embeddedness is not synonymous with "context". Granovetter's definition of embeddedness (1985) as "the contextualisation of economic activity in ongoing patterns of social relations" (Dacin et al., 1999, p. 319) is widely accepted in the business and management literature. There are, however, new voices that have started to criticise this network-based approach as being reductive, binary (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2019), and insufficient when considering the dynamism of embeddedness (Harima, 2022; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022).

These recent critical voices have also started to move beyond a determinist approach in which structures determine agents' actions and behaviours. Embeddedness is now considered to be dynamic and fluid, describing ongoing processes that evolve through interactions.

Proponents of this approach, such as Wigren-Kristoferson and colleagues (2022), show that embeddedness refers more to a process than static reality. This understanding takes into account that embeddedness is constituted over time, place and structure (Gustafson, 2001; Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022). In this regard, the literature identifies different types of "embeddedness".

The first type is the individual level of embeddedness. It includes "cognitive embeddedness", which involves "the regularities of mental processes that govern individual action" (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010, p. 738). It refers to the micro-level of embeddedness and focuses on the everyday life of agents. The impact of cognitive embeddedness is mainly subconscious and linked to mimetic behaviour (DiMaggio, 1988) and mental representations, interpretations, and models. It refers to our tendency to replicate learnt behaviour sub-consciously. In the entrepreneurship literature, some scholars refer to the entrepreneur's personality and its influence on learning processes, emotions and perceptions (Cope, 2005). This definition echoes the concept of cognitive proximity defined by Nooteboom (2000) when suggesting that the similarities in the way actors perceive, interpret and evaluate the world should be considered (Ben Letaifa & Rabeau, 2013). It also includes "reflexivity", refereeing to the "general awareness of the constraints and opportunities created by the norms, values, beliefs, and expectations of the social structures that surround them" (Suddaby et al., 2016b, p. 229). From this perspective, the notion of "reflexivity" helps to understand the close relationship between the individual level of embeddedness and institutional theory. This is also the case for the notion of "emotions", which highlights the influence of social structures on agency (Zietsma, & Toubiana, 2019). Emotions connect people to social groups and social problems "often through their commitment to institutionalised beliefs or values, or through their commitment to, or compassion for specific social groups" (van Wijk et al., 2019, p.893). The individual level of embeddedness is therefore crucial to understand what guide and shape

individual behaviours or commitments; how and why individuals dedicate effort and resources to endeavours such as social innovation activities (Voronov & Vince, 2012).

The second type is social embeddedness, a term which has often been used interchangeably with "social networks" (Hayton et al., 2012). They both refer to "interdependencies between actors" (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010, p. 738). This approach refers to Granovetter's conceptualisation of embeddedness. Following the convention of modern economic sociology, Granovetter (1985) conceived the term as "a conceptualization of social structure primarily in terms of inter-actor ties and direct relationships" (Dacin et al., 1999, p. 325). In Granovetter's conceptualisation, the strength of social ties is crucial, their strength associated with a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity and intimacy of inter-actor relationships (Granovetter, 1973). In this regard, the strength of ties includes emotional factors that impact agents' behaviours. Strong ties are defined as stable and durable relationships associated with affective and frequent contact that "often exist among members of cohesive groups (i.e., families, friends) in which interaction is common and shared norms govern behaviours" (Newbert et al., 2013, p. 282). In contrast, weak ties refer to short-term, light touch (or arm's length) relationships, characterised by "infrequent interaction and exchange" (Newbert et al., 2013, p. 283). Ties are thus crucial to understanding social embeddedness; they reveal that social embeddedness is also associated with micro-level factors such as emotions and affects.

The third type is cultural embeddedness that relates to neo-institutional theories, with their focus on rituals, symbols, myths, and cultural values (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000). Neo-institutional theories restore a cultural approach to embeddedness, by emphasising how "taken-for-granted cultural meanings provide templates for interpretation and actions" (Greenman, 2013, p. 633). Therefore, cultural embeddedness refers to the influence of institutional structures (norms, symbols, myths, and cultural values) on individuals' and organisations'

actions. It involves the more macro-level shared meanings of embeddedness (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010) that shape an organisation's activities, structures, and processes (Dacin et al., 1999). Additionally, political embeddedness also refers to the influence of social institutions (such as legislation, reform, or tax policies) on organisational actions (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). Even if there are fundamental differences between cultural and political embeddedness, they are often related in that they concern "social structures" and "institutions", and that cultural institutions influence political institutions. These two dimensions of embeddedness are therefore connected. For example, the European political model is "strongly embedded in welfare policies" while the American one "relies more heavily on market resources" (Tortia et al., 2020, p. 461). This comparison between two political models illustrates the political-cultural interplay that defines embeddedness processes at the macro-level.

Finally, the fourth type of embeddedness concerns its socio-spatial dimension. Territorial embeddedness examines "place" as a context and its influence on organisations and agencies. "Place" is a geographic notion that integrates psychological and cultural dimensions. The place combines location, which refers to the "where" of place; and "sense of place", which relates to the personal feelings and emotions a place inspires (Cresswell, 2009). This emotional dimension of place echoes the concept of a "sense of belonging", which is "created through cultural and social constructions along with local interactions, personal experiences and individual actions, and beliefs" (Anderson & Gaddefors, 2016, p. 506). Beyond this individualised conception of "place", the critical geography – inspired by Marxist, feminist, or post-structuralist studies – has explored the influence of power in the construction or reproduction of place (Cresswell, 2009). In this regard, Edward W. Soja uses the concept of socio-spatial dialectic (Soja, 1980) that highlights the political dimension of place. This approach considers that the social and the spatial must be conceptualised together (Massey, 1995). "Place" is a geographic, social, and political object. It is not neutral, and it implies

different levels of embeddedness. "Place" is shaped by the intersection of different contextual layers, such as social, political, gender, class, or race considerations.

The notion of territory is even more precise to articulate the political significance of place. This can be seen in the work of Lyman & Scott (1967) who emphasised the sociological dimension of "territoriality", which they define as "the attempt to control space" (Lyman & Scott, 1967, p. 236). "Territory" has been mainly employed in political theory to underline the interactions between power and space. Recent Human Geography literature has specified the definition of "territory" as "a term that is often used interchangeably with land or space, but it connotes something more precise" (Cowen & Gilbert, 2008, p. 16). According to Storey (2018), "territory" is a geographical space or land that is claimed or occupied by a person or group of persons, or by an institution. The concept of territory is thus closely related to power, control, and appropriation of space. In this regard, the territory encompasses different dimensions of embeddedness. It integrates several dimensions of social life, social power, control of space, but also symbolic dimensions like social identity (Paasi, 2003). Consequently, territorial embeddedness refers to the interconnections between cultural, political, and relational factors located in a delimited portion of space.

This multidimensional perspective helps to regard "embeddedness" as a multi-layered concept. Different forms of embeddedness overlap and/or relate to one another. These different forms of embeddedness imply considering different scales in which social innovation is situated. The "scale" is an umbrella concept that provides "an organizing construct for distinguishing the various aspects of context that shape social innovation" (Beckman et al., 2023, p.12). Within this complexity, it appears that the interactions between micro, meso, and macro levels of embeddedness represents a relevant analytical framework to explore social innovation (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022). The macro level of embeddedness is composed of the policy framework marked by, for example, welfare reforms or global crisis, which can be

identified at the national or local levels. The other element of this macro level of embeddedness is the set of cultural aspects that defines a place. For example, a place like a neighbourhood, can be characterised by a specific identity or a strong community spirit forged by values and norms. Thus, from this perspective, the macro level of embeddedness relates to cultural, social, and local embeddedness. The meso level of embeddedness refers to the organisational context such as "the business model, human resources, financing (…) as it adapts to market conditions, public policies or specific local context" (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022, p.338). For example, the social innovation concept is employed in organisational studies to explore the development of alternative business models (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2011). The micro level of embeddedness refers to the influence of individual context - such as emotions, cognitions, and aspirations - on behaviours, actions, and practices. It also concerns experiences of social actors (e.g., volunteers, employees, or entrepreneurs) and how they shape their actions.

Consequently, the role of "embeddedness" in this study is twofold. First, it helps to understand the interactions between "contexts" and social innovation practices, and how "contexts" shape social innovation. Current use of the concept tends to concentrate on one dimension of how social innovation is embedded rather than looking at it in a more holistic sense. There is also a lack of attention to the interrelations between the different dimensions of embeddedness. This is a critical gap that should be addressed, by exploring how embeddedness, as a multilayered concept, shapes social innovation and forges a holistic understanding of that concept. As a multidimensional concept, "embeddedness" can contribute to revealing the purpose of embedded social innovation practices. Why is embedding social innovation practices beneficial for organisations like housing associations? Therefore, "embeddedness" is a relevant lens to challenge the apolitical dimension of the concept, as identified in the social innovation literature.

2.3 Social innovation, an apolitical concept?

Whilst social innovation is mainly defined by a policy-oriented literature, the conceptualisation of social innovation is characterised by the "denial of politics" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016). Social innovation is predominantly shaped by discourses (Teasdale et al., 2020), which afford the concept a normative dimension (Montgomery, 2016) that is associated with "morality" (van Wijk et al., 2019) and labelled as "policy chic" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016). Therefore, the relationship between social innovation and politics remains blurred: in its conceptualisation, social innovation is a normative process, characterised for its "inherent goodness", which is however used in policy discourses to (re)legitimise neoliberalism (Fougère et al., 2017). Therefore, this section will focus first on the policy-oriented literature that reveals the key role of social innovation discourses in the definition of the concept. Then, this section will show that the notion of embeddedness can help to shed light on this paradox by addressing the assumptions about the apolitical nature of social innovation.

2.3.1 Social innovation and the policy-oriented literature

Social innovation features prominently in contemporary policy discussions and political debates. Within the European Union, social innovation has been favoured for its inherent 'goodness' (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019), being treated as an umbrella term and unifying policy concept (Edmiston, 2016) for innovation, with the capacity to address social issues and provide answers to societal problems. From this perspective, social innovation is perceived as "right" and "moral" by political institutions, in particular, European institutions. Accordingly, in the *Guide to Social Innovation*, the European Commission defines social innovation as:

> "The development and implementation of new ideas (products, services, and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. It represents new responses to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving human well-being. Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and

their means. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance individuals' capacity to act" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6).

The European Union shows a specific interest in the concept (appendix 5). The European Union has mainly contributed to promoting the concept, which appears explicitly for the first time in a political speech in 1995, with the publication of the Green Paper on Innovation. Five years later, the publication of the Lisbon Strategy confirmed that social innovation is central to the socioeconomic strategy of the European Union. However, in 2004, an assessment of the strategy showed that the social dimension was not sufficiently developed compared to the economic dimension (AVISE, 2013).

The turning point in recognising social innovation by European Institutions was probably in 2009 when the European Commission launched the "European Year of Creativity and Innovation". This year was marked by the development of workshops and conferences that reinforced the importance of social innovation, seen as a vital element of the European Union strategy in the context of the financial crisis. The financial crisis of 2008 has pushed European Institutions to change their strategy by investing in technological, economic, social, and territorial innovations. Henceforth, social innovation has been used as a political tool that has played and continues to play a crucial role in the European Cohesion Policy (European Commission, 2013). Indeed, several concrete social innovation projects have been funded in the European Cohesion Policy frame. For example, Interreg Programmes (cooperation between European regions) support social innovation projects under the specific objective 1.2 of the Europe 2020 strategy. Furthermore, in the European Union, social innovation has been strategically included in two major policy documents: the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth; and the EU budget. Social entrepreneurship is also being promoted as part of the agenda to improve the European economy and create employment (Shaw & De Bruin, 2013). Social innovation has become an important tool used by the European Union to promote specific policy goals and encourage reforms of the welfare state

(Sabato et al., 2017; Krlev et al., 2020). Consequently, at the EU level, social innovation is recognised as a "policy paradigm" embedded in a structural system of power defined by European Institutions (Edmiston, 2016).

Social innovation is therefore part of political claims made about the grand challenges (Moulaert et al., 2013). Social innovation has also been seen as a "magic concept" (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011), adopted as "a new reform strategy" in the context of "budget austerity" (Voorberg et al., 2014, p. 1334). In this regard, the policy-oriented literature discerns social innovation as a political strategy rather than a scientific concept. Given its relatively recent status as a scientific concept, social innovation is marked by its capacity to generate policy consensus (Edmiston, 2016). Social innovation is central in policy discourses and positively displayed in the policymaking process across Europe (Brandsen et al., 2016; Evers & Ewert, 2015; Häikiö et al., 2017). The dominance of policy-oriented literature contributes to constraining "debated policy alternatives and the ends towards which social innovation as a policy concept is put" (Edmiston, 2016, p. 4).k

Consequently, the political dimension of social innovation remains somewhat paradoxical and blurred in that it is a normative and consensual concept shaped by policy discourses, but its political dimension is denied and negated. Thus, introducing the notion of embeddedness in the conceptualisation of social innovation is relevant to elucidate this political dimension at the local level. The notion of "embeddedness" helps to clarify the relationship between social innovation and politics to bridge this theoretical gap considering social innovation as an apolitical concept.

2.3.2 The strategic side of social innovation

Challenges and objectives of social innovation vary and differ across local contexts (Westley & Antadze, 2010). As identified previously in this chapter, there is an enlightening connection

between social innovation and institutional theory. For example, the notion of "structuration" is associated with social innovation (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) to show the interactions between agents and their social context. Structuration may be conceptualised "as a dialectic relationship whereby agents and the social context cannot exist independently" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 47). The structure is thus a product of and a constraint on human actions (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). From this perspective, structuration and embeddedness are, to a certain extent, linked. Structuration is one of the dimensions of embeddedness that concentrates on institutions. In more general terms, embeddedness concerns how human actions and activities are "situated in contexts" and how "they enable and/or constrain certain activities, actions, and strategies" (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2019, p. 1011). Social structures have a catalyst role on social innovation. Formal and informal institutions (such as "laws", "regulations", "organisations", but also or "informal socialisation mechanisms") shape social innovation (Moulaert et al., 2005). Therefore, embeddedness creates a connection between social innovation and capacities, and plans of organisations to command and manage social innovation actions. "Contexts" can have a structural and enabling role. They can facilitate the development of social innovation practices. In this sense, "embeddedness" can be a strategic means for organisations to develop social innovation practices.

This strategic dimension of social innovation is also a reminder of the entrepreneurial conceptualisation of embeddedness. Indeed, the notion of embeddedness is more established in the entrepreneurship literature than in the social innovation literature, often related to resource acquisition strategies or tactics (Davis & Aldrich, 2000; Newbert & Tornikoski, 2012; Uzzi, 1999). The entrepreneurship literature is particularly eloquent in connecting "embeddedness" and "opportunities". As Uzzi (1996, p. 675) posits, structural "embeddedness" shapes actions "by creating unique opportunities and access to those opportunities". In a similar way, de Souza João-Roland and Granados (2023) underline the

essential role of community, universities, and embeddedness of users throughout the whole innovation process and their influence on social innovation performance. Organisations practicing and managing social innovation combine business performance and social, cultural, and environmental goals (Gasparin et al., 2020).

Accordingly, embeddedness can foster social innovation processes. For example, social innovation ecosystems contribute to understanding social innovation as "a contextualised and strategic phenomenon" (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020, p. 856). Ecosystems for social innovation represent "an innovative-friendly environment" (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020, p. 857). Thus, the distinctive characteristics of contexts become essential to the success or failure of social innovation initiatives; they offer opportunities for social innovation to succeed. From this perspective, social innovation assumes "a strategic normative approach" (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020, p. 861). It is by attending to the way in which social innovation is or might be embedded that actors in the space of innovation can be strategically successful. Local conditions determine the development of social innovations, growth and diffusion, primarily based on their adaptation to the context (Deserti & Rizzo, 2019). In other words, embeddedness creates opportunities and sets up the conditions for successful social innovation practices. By creating these opportunities, embeddedness makes social innovation a strategic initiative around which diverse cross-sectoral stakeholders can coalesce and organise their activities (Edmiston, 2016). This approach refers to the instrumental scope of embeddedness that can foster the development of social innovation in local contexts (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019), where social innovation practices are embedded.

Furthermore, both the academic literature and policy discourse point out the necessity of social innovation to address social needs and deliver social services in a context of budgetary austerity with which governments are wrestling (Sharra & Nyssens, 2010; Voorberg et al., 2014). In a context marked by public spending cuts (Martinelli, 2012), social innovation can

be both an alibi and a solution to address the lessening of the state's social responsibility (Montgomery, 2016): social innovation resonates with contemporary political narratives about the dominance of market-based approaches to solving welfare issues (Goldsmith, 2010; Marques et al., 2018).

Considering that social innovation is "a means to overcome state and/or market failure in poor places" (Tracey & Stott, 2016, p. 5), it can represent a strategy for governments and third sector organisations for combating inequalities and uncertainties created by market rules. In this regard, social innovation is presented as a strategy for reconfiguring the deficits of the welfare state in a neoliberal context marked by government budget cuts (Marques et al., 2018). In view of this, Nowak and Raffaelli (2022) suggest that social innovation "has been proposed as a Polanyian countermovement to re-embed the dis-embedded neo-liberalized market in society" (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022, p. 323). Indeed, the Polanyian approach views the economy as embedded in and not separated from the society (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]), and normatively speaking the economy should serve the society. This approach differs from a purely economic perspective characterised by economistic motivations shaped by the market. In the contemporary context of deregulation of markets and financialisation, organisations that deliver social services (such as non-profit organisations) are required to develop plans and strategies to continue their activities in a situation of budgetary austerity.

These organisations must manage social innovation as a solution and a strategy to constitute "new responses to pressing social demands" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6) and address social tensions. For example, in the context of resource scarcity, social innovators must develop new solutions to produce services in response to the needs of a community. The social innovation organisation must adapt to develop resourceful solutions in response to an unpredictable context. Indeed, this context pushes organisations into "finding innovative ways of existing resources and acquiring new resources in order to both achieve financial

sustainability and generate social outcomes" (Di Domenico et al., 2010, p. 283). Consequently, focusing on the organisational level is crucial to understanding social innovation as a strategy to cope with the uncertainty associated with the context. From this perspective, social innovation can contribute to organisational resilience that underlines the relationship between social innovation, organisations, and strategy.

To summarise, contextual factors (local assets or resources) can offer opportunities for organisations to effectively developing social innovation (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020). On the other hand, contextual factors (financial circumstances or budgetary austerity situation) can also make social innovation an economic necessity for organisations that deliver social services (Voorberg et al., 2014). Consequently, the strategic management of social innovation is "a continuing, reflexive, responsive set of practices that revolve around the identification and interpretation of the ecologies and histories of social problems and novel solutions" (Lawrence et al., 2014, p. 7). This approach to social innovation is related to organisational success and/or survival. From this perspective, embeddedness can help to comprehend the strategic dimension of social innovation.

2.3.3 The normative dimension of social innovation

The previous sub-section demonstrated that embeddedness helps to reveal the strategic opportunities for social innovation. Social innovation is associated with "intended, planned, coordinated, goal-oriented, and legitimated actions undertaken by social agents aiming at social change that will emerge in establishing new social practices" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 44). From this perspective, the process of social innovation is culturally embedded and shaped by norms, values, and external structures. Considering this, Cajaiba-Santana (2014) introduces the notion of "validity" of actions that aim to "change social systems and create new and legitimised social practices" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 47). There is a link between the validity

of social innovation action and their legitimacy. Indeed, social innovation actions must achieve legitimacy in the eyes of external power and resource providers (Tracey & Stott, 2016). Therefore, acquiring legitimacy is a necessary strategy for social innovators. Organisational social innovation strategy must seek validation of social innovation actions from external stakeholders and institutional frameworks. To do so, new social innovation practices must be embedded in the status quo to become accepted as a new cultural schema (Johnson et al., 2006). In other words, the legitimation process of social innovation will often reflect a strategic process, deliberately aimed at satisfying particular norms or requirements.

The notion of validity closely resembles the normative perspective of social innovation, where the label "policy chic" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016) has been used. In this regard social innovation is characterised by its "sublime dimension" (Fougère et al., 2017) that makes the concept ideological. Political discourses forge its normative dimension and shape its "conformity", reflected in shared norms, values, beliefs or definitions (Schoon, 2022). Social innovation is usually structured in a highly positive fashion and, as such, has been viewed as a "quasi-concept" (Brignone et al., 2022; Godin, 2012; Krlev et al., 2018; Lindberg et al., 2016). Developed by Bernard (1999), the idea of "quasi-concept" refers to the "hybrid" mental construction that politics develop to "simultaneously detect possible consensus on a reading of reality" (Ziegler, 2017, p. 396). Thus, as a quasi-concept, social innovation is "flexible enough to follow the twists and turns of policy and ideology" (Jenson, 2016, p. 91).

In validating social innovation, there must be compliance between actions and structural conditions. Indeed, to be validated, social innovation must be connected to "the existing broader cultural framework". In this sense, social innovation is thus, either "explicitly justified" or "implicitly accepted" by "actors in the local situation" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 25). In this regard, the legitimacy of social innovation actions is based on institutional frameworks. Social innovations are created at the local level "in response to structural

conditions that create strategic interests or contingent events for actors in the local situation" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 25). Therefore, when social innovation takes a normative dimension, which is also strategic. Institutional structures (formal and informal) shape social innovation and, most importantly, validate social innovation actions. This is why the way in which social innovation practices are embedded raises the question of strategic interests.

This normative approach to social innovation is thus related to the institutional theory perspective of the concept, which has been identified previously in this chapter as one of the three main approaches to social innovation. It appears that "embeddedness" reinforces this dimension. For example, in the entrepreneurship literature, institutional theory "has long been used by entrepreneurship researchers to account for environmental influences on entrepreneurship in general and start-up rates and legitimizing strategies in specific" (Su et al., 2017, p. 505). Therefore, there is a bridge between embeddedness, institutional theories, and the validation of social innovation strategies: embeddedness puts forward the normative dimension of social innovation by emphasising the institutional influences of an environment on an object or phenomenon. Analysis of the way in which social innovation practices are embedded, in turn, helps to understand how these practices are structured. By exploiting these structures and, in more general terms, the institutional contexts, organisations strategically develop social innovation practices which are validated at the local level. From this perspective, embeddedness can help to examine a social innovation's strategic, normative, and political dimensions, which remain under-explored in the social innovation literature (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016).

2.4 Contextualising and conceptualising social innovation through the lens of "embeddedness"

This section looks at how social innovations are shaped by contexts, by employing the notion of "embeddedness". To do so, the sector that serves as a case study for this research is explored

in depth. The social housing sector represents an entirely relevant setting for investigating social innovation. So, while the research is not about the social housing sector itself, it represents an interesting case/setting in which social innovation occurs. In addition, this specific sector brings together "contexts" - such as a policy background - that interact with social innovation.

In light of this, this section will demonstrate that "embeddedness" is a relevant theoretical lens within which to examine social innovation. "Embeddedness" is understood as a process that is constituted over time, place, and structure (Gustafson, 2001; Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022). As a heuristic notion, "embeddedness" helps to understand the multi-layered interactions between "contexts" and social innovation, materialised at different levels (macro, meso, micro). Therefore, the conceptualisation of "embeddedness" will be presented to demonstrate that the notion is germane to bringing further theoretical insights about social innovation.

2.4.1 The social housing sector: a relevant setting in which to explore social innovation

Social housing is the context within which the implementation of social innovation practices is investigated. The not-for-profit housing sector is often forced to innovate to deliver social services while conducting their usual activities (Raynor, 2018) and is a context favourable to innovation. Communities and groups living in social housing dwellings play a crucial role in the development of social innovation initiatives (Marchesi & Tweed, 2021). Social housing inhabitants can be both the target group of social innovation initiatives and initiators or "competent solvers of their own problems" (Mulgan et al., 2007, p. 22) and therefore, actors at the heart of social innovation practices.

Firstly, housing, and more specifically social housing, is a gateway to the everyday lives of residents: their living conditions, circumstances, strategies, and aspirations. The social

housing context is particularly pertinent to exploring individuals' trajectories and aspirations, in terms of social mobility and empowerment. Indeed, social housing tends to be located in areas that are more deprived and as such is marked by specific norms and characteristics that can influence individuals' aspirations (Henry et al., 2014; Kintrea et al., 2015). This view about social housing areas is linked to the contested concept of a "culture of poverty" (Harvey & Reed, 1996; Lewis, 1969) and the potential interrelations between a context marked by poverty and behaviour patterns of groups (Lewis, 1969).

From a geographic perspective, this approach can also be related to "the culture of place" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997) and the relation between culture, psychological factors, beliefs, values, norms, and place, which can have a negative influence on individuals' desires to leave poor neighbourhoods as "a result of the culture of poor areas" (Kearns & Parkes, 2003, p. 830). This cultural dimension suggests that the social housing context is likely to be a challenging setting in which to develop social innovation and points to a crucial role for housing associations in addressing these challenging issues associated with sociocultural and territorial determinants.

In addition, social housing systems "provide below-market rents or prices" and target "households with limited financial resources" (Granath Hansson & Lundgren, 2019, p. 162). Therefore, social housing organisations seek to ensure the fundamental human right to housing (Hohmann, 2013), which is associated with health and with safety (Thiele, 2002). Both social housing and social innovation aim to address unmet social needs (Mulgan, 2006). At the same time, in most cases, social housing residents are stigmatised or at least suffer from negative representations and discrimination. The rate of poor and vulnerable people is higher in social housing than in the rest of society (Gimat, 2017; Lévy-Vroelant, 2013). In addition, social housing lettings are mainly located in deprived areas, identified as an important predictor of residential dissatisfaction and unhappiness (Burrows, 1999; Kearns & Parkes, 2003).

Poverty, stigma, and discrimination are key factors of social exclusion. Social innovation "is almost always a reaction against social exclusion" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1987). Social exclusion is understood as not only referring to material poverty and lack of economic resources but also to the processes by which some individuals and groups become marginalised in society due to a lack of social integration, power, participation, and activities in society (Room, 1995). Social exclusion is characterised by five factors identified by Room (1995): multi-dimensional, dynamic, collective, relational, and catastrophic. Social exclusion is defined as "the continuous and gradual exclusion from full participation in the social, including material and symbolic, resources produced, supplied and exploited in a society for making a living, organising a life and taking part in the development of a (hopefully better) future" (Steinert & Pilgram, 2003, p. 5). It is described as a complex issue requiring systemic and collective engagement to combat it. This ambition can be supported by stakeholders from the social housing sector such as housing associations, which can be crucial in addressing social exclusion and fostering social inclusion. For example, housing association staff can contribute to social network formation, which can impact on job acquisition. When housing association has a team dedicated to community development, tenants living in these housing associations appears to fare better, in terms of employment-conducive networks (Ziersch & Arthurson, 2005). Therefore, the management of housing associations is an important factor that can contribute to foster social inclusion of social housing tenants. Social innovation can also be about social inclusion and "about countering or overcoming conservative forces that are eager to strengthen or preserve social exclusion situations" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p. 1978). In this regard, collective actions from specific organisations such as housing associations, are part of the social innovation process but are also needed to tackle social exclusion.

2.4.2 *The role of housing associations in delivering social innovation*

The literature on social housing and recent political initiatives demonstrate that housing associations have expanded their activities beyond the provision of affordable housing, especially in the UK (Walker et al., 2022). Indeed, these activities are more and more oriented toward community and social capital development through the implementation of volunteering activities that contribute to supporting neighbourhood initiatives (Mullins, 2010). Moreover, "volunteering" activities within the social housing sector are considered (socially) innovative in that they transcend the traditional role of housing associations. "Volunteering" produces "human capital" (Slootjes & Kampen, 2017), contributing to reducing social isolation (Glanville, 2016), and enhancing the employability and the skills development of social housing residents, who are often far from the labour market or have meagre income (Wallace, 2016). Therefore, in the social housing context, social innovation activities that target volunteering activities and community development need to be implemented. In these circumstances, volunteers can be the prime innovators who contribute themselves to their empowerment process through a self-determination perspective (De Wit et al., 2019).

From this perspective, housing associations appear to be relevant actors in providing employment support activities and training that enhance the employability of low-skilled workers (Sanders & De Grip, 2004). Some studies exploring the impact of employment support or training on employability, demonstrate the key role non-profit organisations can play in fostering the employment process. Indeed job-search programmes represent necessary support for job seekers because they focus on "intensifying job-search efforts", "enhancing job search skills", and "preventing depressive symptoms related to unemployment" (Vuori & Silvonen, 2005, p. 261). Therefore, it seems crucial to have both internal (e.g., confidence building to better equip individuals with dealing with challenges) and external interventions (e.g., support

in job search activities) in the reemployment process to encourage the likelihood of individuals' employment (Boswell et al., 2012; Zikic & Klehe, 2006).

Furthermore, concrete actions are undertaken by housing associations to build communities (McDermont, 2004), and promote social inclusion processes. This community development role contributes to creating the circumstances under which tenants would be "acceptable members of the community, able to conform to the norms of the community" (McDermont, 2004, p. 862). From this perspective, housing associations have very wide roles and responsibilities which encompass a political dimension. Whilst housing associations promote tenant initiatives, housing officers are also enrolled in "governing social housing communities" (McDermont, 2004, p. 858). Community development is proclaimed as an area of expertise of housing associations but is also adopted as a political discourse and a tool for tenant management (McDermont, 2004). In this regard, the organisational approach is crucial to understanding the management strategies developed by housing associations and the relationship between social innovation, the management of communities and the "governing roles" of the local organisation (Flint, 2004).

From a management perspective, creating communities and fostering employment among social housing tenants is particularly beneficial to the housing association sector in terms of avoiding tenants' arrears (Baines & Hardill, 2008; Chum et al., 2015). As such, this innovative approach is increasingly becoming part of the housing association strategy. Social innovation therefore represents both an opportunity and a challenge within the social housing context. In this regard, it seems particularly relevant to examine social innovation activities delivered by housing associations as they can shed light on the organisation-based strategic dimension of social innovation.

At the same time, the social housing sector is embedded in a neoliberal economic system marked by budgetary austerity and the retrenchment of the welfare state (Byrne & Norris, 2022). Neoliberalism is subject to varying definitions but it is generally associated with the promotion of "market rationality" and "the retrenchment of many aspects of the welfare state and of state intervention in the economy (Byrne & Norris, 2022, p. 186). This definition describes the political context in which the social housing sector is embedded, particularly in the UK where the Coalition Government in 2010 made severe cuts to the housing budget and radical reforms to housing policy (Mulliner & Maliene, 2013). This political context makes the social housing sector an even more relevant setting in which to investigate social innovation. Indeed, it could be argued that it is a sector where social innovation can take place because in an age of austerity, the government and non-profit organisations will be required to "innovatively utilise their limited resources to combat affordability problems" (Mulliner & Maliene, 2013, p. 398).

In general, social housing and housing associations seem to have the capacity to match the three dimensions of social innovation identified in the definition given by the European Commission: the development of new social relationships; collaborations, networks, and tackling social exclusion; and the focus on individual's capacity to act (Ziegler, 2017). When examining social innovation as an embedded process within the sector, there are macro, meso, and micro-level "contexts" that must be considered: the local context marked by territorial identities (macro level); the organisational context marked by mergers and financialisation (meso level); and the individual context marked by behaviours and aspirations that shape social innovation activities (micro level). The wider political context of budgetary austerity must also be considered with regards to the embedding process of social innovation activities that underpins the complex interactions between "contexts" and social innovation.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review has covered relevant concepts associated with the research questions and problems to critically examine the existing knowledge about social innovation, embeddedness, and their theoretical interactions. The main conclusion from reviewing the literature is that the notions of "social innovation" and "embeddedness" are complex and multi-dimensional processes (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). However, there is a need to investigate the dynamic, processual, and multi-layered dimensions of embedded social innovation practices (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2019) to bring further knowledge to the weakly conceptualised notion of social innovation (Stott & Tracey, 2017). This research, therefore, seeks to understand better the way in which social innovation is embedded and how this influences social innovation practices. Throughout this investigation, the study can contribute to a deeper understanding of social innovation and how it interacts within contexts (local, organisational, and individual). The notion of "context" is intrinsically related to social innovation and understanding the "loci" of social innovation can thus help to conceptualise social innovation (Grimm et al., 2013).

The research aims to generate both theoretical and policy implications regarding social innovation, an emerging, stirring, and "chic" notion (Sharra & Nyssens, 2010) that needs further contextualised investigations to capture its significance. The literature review has also highlighted the processual dimension of social innovation when the notion is associated with embeddedness (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022). In this respect, exploring "how" contextual factors influence social innovation through embeddedness can shed light on "what" social innovation is. Indeed, the social innovation literature consistently calls for improvements to concept clarity (Moulaert et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2017; Pol & Ville, 2009) to understand what is central to the social innovation definition (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012).

The literature review has thus highlighted a number of critical gaps in the social innovation literature that this study can bridge.

Firstly, the three approaches to social innovation identified in this literature review demonstrate that social innovation is a scattered concept, fragmented among different research fields (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Lawrence et al., 2014; Pel et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need to develop an interdisciplinary and holistic understanding of social innovation to enhance the concept's theoretical coherence. These fragmented disciplines are particularly problematic given that social innovation addresses complex social problems, "which necessarily span places, social actors, and social contexts" (Beckman et al., 2023, p.8). In the same vein, the review also shows that embeddedness is a multi-dimensional and multi-layered process that influences social innovation. However, little is known about the way in which social innovation is embedded and how contextual factors shape social innovation practices. This close investigation can help to develop a comprehensive understanding of social innovation characterised by the interactions between different levels of analysis (micro, meso, macro levels). In other words, investigating how social innovation practices are embedded can contribute to the integration of the different theoretical perspectives of social innovation: the agent-centred, the territorial development, and the institutional theory approaches.

Secondly, the literature highlights the strategic dimension of social innovation at the European level. For example, EU policy discourses idealise the ability of civil society to "entrepreneurially self-organize in order to address the social and environmental challenges they face" (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019, p. 2), which is strategically used to support neo-liberal narratives (Grimm et al., 2013). Because it is defined as an inherently good process (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019) for European territories and people, social innovation is perceived as a normative process characterised by its "denial of politics" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016). Thus, there is a need to study social innovation through a critical lens to explore its political

dimension in its local implementation. This approach challenges the normative conceptualisation of social innovation by shedding light on the relationship between social innovation and local politics. Consequently, the notion of embeddedness can help to build new knowledge on social innovation by revealing the strategic dimension of social innovation in its local-level implementation.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The review of the relevant literature identified the multi-dimensional but also nebulous definitions of social innovation. The notion of embeddedness was proposed as a useful lens to develop new theoretical insights around social innovation. Thus, to further delve into the interactions between contexts and social innovation, this chapter aims to describe the research journey that enabled the emergence of research findings. The objective of this chapter is therefore to explicate the research approach adopted in this study to answer the research question and generate new theoretical insights.

In this chapter, a brief explanation of the epistemological approach will be provided to identify the method-research inquiry fit of the study (3.2). Then, the theory-building from case study research will be presented and defined as the principal research strategy (3.3). The following sub-section provides more practical elements about the selection of case studies and the fieldwork design (3.4). These considerations will lead to the presentation of data collection means and the data analysis strategies (3.5 and 3.6). In both sections, the case studies will be methodologically defined. Indeed, sampling (for data collection) and the data structure (for data analysis) will be introduced at this stage of the chapter. Finally, the necessary ethical considerations followed by a section on reflexivity and positionality will conclude the chapter (3.7).

3.2 An epistemological approach to qualitative research methodology

By incorporating the notion of "experiences", "actions", and "knowledge" in social science inquiry, the philosophical movement of pragmatism rejects "traditional assumptions about the

nature of reality, knowledge, and inquiry" (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p. 2). Pragmatism scholars such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey in the 1870's criticised using a single scientific method to access reality (Maxcy, 2003), arguing instead for the possibility of single or multiple realities "open" to empirical inquiry (Meissner et al., 2013) shaped by individuals' experiences and actions. This pragmatic approach transcends rigid and compartmentalised notions of "truth" and "reality", advocating more openness and the willingness to confront "reality" with experiences and beliefs. More precisely, the notion of pragmatism is underpinned by the idea that all knowledge in this world is socially constructed and all meaning is contextual (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p. 3). In terms of this study, pragmatism contributes to a dynamic model that corresponds with the context in which organisations operate and individuals behave (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020).

Adopting a pragmatic approach appears entirely relevant to the examination of social innovation. The literature review highlighted the processual dimension of social innovation based on individuals' actions and organisations' practices. Moreover, several studies – especially from the territorial development viewpoint – demonstrate that considering context is crucial to the analysis of social innovation (e.g., Moulaert et al., 2005; Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020). The role of context is critical for the investigation, the "contextualised explanation" approach - developed by Welch and colleagues (Piekkari & Welch, 2011; Welch et al., 2022) - "treats the context holistically". From this point of view, it is inconceivable "to explain adequately how and why phenomena in the social world occur without treating the context as explanatory" (Welch et al., 2022, p. 5). Therefore, in line with pragmatist principles, the research design focuses on a contextual approach that contributes to conciliating theory and contexts by generating explanations.

Furthermore, the literature review showed that there is an uncritical use of social innovation in the policy-oriented or grey literature. Numerous European projects are financed

under the label "social innovation" and as such, practitioners such as social workers or local authorities are more likely to be familiar with social innovation than academics. Indeed, social innovation has been characterised by its "intrinsically practice-led nature" (Taylor et al., 2018, p. 208). This, in itself, justifies the use of a pragmatic lens in this study to investigate social innovation. The pragmatic approach is founded on "experiences" and advocates a theory-practice interplay (Goldkuhl, 2012). From a pragmatic point of view, "theory is always oriented towards practical problems (Strübing, 2007, p. 595).

Therefore, in examining social innovation in specific contexts, this study's focus on the interactions between contexts and practices, underpinned by the principles of "pragmatism". This epistemological approach contributes to defining the qualitative research strategy adopted in this study. The next section describes inductive theory building from case study as a research strategy to investigate the embeddedness of social innovation practices.

3.3 Principles of theory building from case study research

Building theory from case studies is "a research strategy that involves using one or more cases to create theoretical constructs, propositions and/or midrange theory from case-based, empirical evidence" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 25). This definition stresses two key complementary elements: "theoretical constructs" from "empirical evidence" and the use of "cases". Indeed, "the Eisenhardt model" relies both on the idea of a "case study", and Glaser and Strauss' iterative process of constant comparison of data and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Moreover, theory building from case studies is relevant in situations where a phenomenon under investigation lacks theorisation (Gehman et al., 2018). This is the issue with social innovation. Theory building from case study research is a rigorous mechanical method that formulates a critique of the dogmatic approach, implies moderation, and seeks a

sense of coherence by combining the rational, constructive, and imaginative aspects of research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). "Theory" is "a set of constructs linked together in relationships that are supported by theoretical arguments (i.e., mechanisms) that seek to explain a focal phenomenon" (Eisenhardt, 2021, p. 148). Thus, what is central in this approach is making theories emerge by using inductive principles (Charmaz, 2014) and focusing on multiple case studies that are rigorously selected (Yin, 1981). These two central components will be explored in the next sub-sections.

3.3.1 Inductive reasoning and theory building

Traditionally, inductive reasoning is associated with grounded theory, which consists of a systematic inductive, comparative, and interactive approach to inquiry; and offers several open-ended strategies for conducting emergent inquiry (Charmaz, 2008, p. 156). Grounded theory is a bottom-up approach that starts from observations towards theory by forming a conceptual category (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is based on two principles: "constant comparison", the simultaneous collection and analysis of data; and "theoretical sampling" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), which means that the theory in progress determines decisions about the collection of following data.

Even if the study is not based on a strict and traditional grounded theory method, the research approach uses principles of the grounded theory such as the inductive reasoning. Inductive theory building enables the exploration of the complex process of social innovation and is used to build alternative frameworks and calls into question conventional knowledge (Goulding, 2017). It can provide "a route to see beyond the obvious and a path to reach imaginative interpretations" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 81). In this sense, it is an appropriate relevant methodological approach through which to elaborate a critical analysis by exploring between the lines of data and developing interpretations for theory building (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

3.3.2 The case study approach

There is no single definition of case studies. Instead, various epistemological commitments impact the definition of case studies as a methodological research strategy (Yazan, 2015). Nonetheless, at its core, the case study approach offer a narrative within a real-life context and constitute a comprehensive research strategy (Yin, 2009).

Stake (1995) shows that case studies are empirical, interpretive and holistic because interpretive epistemology regards the social world as "a nuanced, multi-layered phenomenon whose complexity is best understood through a process of interpretation" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 8). Stake's perspective that considers a case as an integrated and complex functioning thing (Yazan, 2015) is relevant for studying the interactions between contexts and social innovation. From this epistemological perspective, qualitative case study is "holistic", "empirical", "interpretive" and "empathic". "Holistic" signifies that researchers should consider the interrelationship between the phenomenon under investigation and its contexts. It is based on researchers' observations in the field ("empirical") and relies on their intuition ("interpretive") and reflexive insights ("empathic") (Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). Case analysis helps to apprehend the actions and interactions between people, discourses, organisations, institutions, or symbols (Star, 2007). The case study approach enables a depth of investigation in which relationships and processes are brought to light in a holistic view.

3.3.3 Reconciling theory and context

The previous sub-section demonstrated the parallel between case and context. From Stake's viewpoint (1995), a case study is holistic and complex. This approach considers cases as intrinsic and contexts as explanatory to generate theoretical insights. In this regard, Welch and colleagues (2022), as management researchers, advocate reconciling theory and contexts by generating explanations. There is increasing recognition among these researchers "that

excluding or minimising situational and contextual detail (…) can jeopardise the quality of the theoretical output" (Welch et al., 2022, p. 6). Indeed, to ensure the quality of the theoretical output, context, and theory should go hand in hand as inseparable components rather than being treated as opposites.

From this perspective, context is not be relegated "to the status of background and boundary conditions" but rather, is "utilised to explain the findings" (Welch et al., 2022, p. 7). This bringing together of theory and context highlights the importance of social structures and mitigates the risk of focusing only on individual agency. Through this approach, social behaviours, actions, and practices can be explored in their social webs. By complementing traditional theory building with a case study approach, the resulting contextualisation contributes to developing a deep exploration of the context where the social phenomenon occurs. From this perspective, this methodological approach fits the conceptual principles of embedded social innovation practices – reviewed in chapter 2 – that recommend a rigorous study of the interrelations between the macro, meso, and micro levels. The decision to adopt the contextualised case study approach is thus pertinent to revealing how social, territorial, institutional, and organisational structures shape social innovation practices. Indeed, a case study method that considers the context helps to understand "how broader socio-material structures both shape and are shaped by micro-level situations of social interactions and events" (Bjerregaard & Klitmøller, 2016, p. 1278).

Finally, defining a methodological strategy is also a matter of decision-making. Thus, the following section will outline the practical steps that constitute the definition of the research strategy through case selection and framework design.

3.4 A practical and rigorous protocol: from case selection to fieldwork design

Case selection and definition need to be based on a rigorous and precise protocol. A fundamental approach in defining cases is "using numerous and highly knowledgeable informants who view the focal phenomenon from diverse perspective" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 28). For example, documentation and archival records are key gathering tools to define case studies (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2009). In this regard, Stake (1995) shows that case study definition is both an iterative and a flexible process; it also requires sensitivity and the acquisition of the necessary skills and sense of observation (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, in this section, the two case studies and their relevance for the research inquiry, will be presented. The first case study is a coastal conurbation in the north of France where a housing association has delivered social innovation activities. The second case study is a coastal county in the south of England where a housing association has also implemented social innovation activities. Specific contexts associated with culture, geography, sectors, institutions, or government policies, constitute these cases, and make them distinct.

3.4.1 Field sites and environmental contexts

In practical terms, the case could be associated with "the field site", which refers to "the [spatial] stage on which the social process under study takes place" (Burrell, 2009, p. 182) and defines the area where fieldwork is conducted. Or it could be defined as a network where individuals, culture and space interacts (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997).

In this regard, from a methodological perspective, the definition of cases requires certain practical strategies related to the definition and selection of field sites. In both cases, the housing associations selected have implemented social innovation activities. Indeed, the activities delivered by both housing associations are part of an EU-funded programme. This

similarity makes the cases comparable even though the contexts that define cases are radically different. In this regard, it is particularly relevant to focus on the interactions between social housing residents, local stakeholders, and their relationship with societal elements such as representations, symbols, and institutions. For example, the neighbourhoods where housing associations have implemented their social innovation activities are specific territories defined by limits and, in some cases, a strong sense of identity (Paasi, 2003).

As stated in the previous section, the design of cases is flexible (Stake, 1995). From this inductive viewpoint, the geographic delimitations of cases are different. In the French conurbation, the housing association implements social innovation activities at the neighbourhood level whereas in the English case, the area of intervention of the housing association is wider. In addition, as stated in the introduction, the interrelations between contexts and activities are central concerns of this study. Each case is marked by its cultural environment, institutional structures, and rules; and considering these contextual elements is crucial for the research. As well as helping in the design of cases, understanding their contexts is a condition to developing new theoretical insights about social innovation.

3.4.2 The object of analysis and the location of cases

Designing case studies demands a careful exploration of different methodological strategies which contribute to appraising the relevance of the places where fieldwork could be conducted. For example, Yin (1981, 2009) recommends using secondary data to select case studies' locations. Furthermore, the selection of case studies strongly results from a precise territorial diagnosis. Indeed, secondary data contribute to understanding territorial variations such as poverty, socio-economic deprivation, or economic activities. The review of secondary data reveals that the place is an essential contextual determinant for the research. Moreover, the selection of case study sites is an iterative process. It is a learning process of trial and error that

helps define the location of case studies with precision. For example, the first round of data collection with key informant stakeholders, conducted between May and November 2019, confirmed the appropriacy of a case study approach. Indeed, the first interviews conducted in the French conurbation revealed that the neighbourhood represents the key territorial unit where the housing association implements its social innovation practices. Regarding the English case, the territorial focus was refined and differently configured following key informant interviews. In the English case, the territorial unit refers to the whole county where the housing association developed its social innovation practices.

The two case studies also concern two different national contexts. Therefore, cultural, political, and geographical factors must be considered when analysing the contexts in which the social innovation practices have been developed. However, beyond these national variations, there are significant similarities between the national contexts of housing associations. For example, France and the United Kingdom are both parts of the global north and share political and socio-economic characteristics. Moreover, France and the United Kingdom have been deeply affected by the economic crisis in 2008 and, more recently, by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (Baldwin & Di Mauro, 2020). This context of uncertainty results in low investment, welfare cuts and productivity stagnation. Consequently, both countries' social vulnerability has significantly increased during the last five years. For example, secondary data suggest that the risks of social exclusion are rising, with 22% at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the UK and 18% in France (Eurostat, 2016). In this situation, in both countries, housing associations can play an important role in tackling social issues such as social precariousness, social exclusion, and poverty. Indeed, housing associations have an inherent social role that includes a social commitment and the provision of affordable housing. In the UK, in 2020, 17% of households (3.9 million) lived in social housing (Ministry of

Housing Communities & Local Government, 2020) whereas in France, data from 2018 showed that 16% of households (4.5 million) lived in social housing (INSEE, 2018).

In addition, the national contexts influence the understanding of social innovation. Even if the European Commission (2013, 2014) tried to give a universal dimension to social innovation, it is indubitable that the definition of the concept varies according to national contexts. Anglo-American countries are often known for being at the cutting edge of social innovation. For example, the NESTA initiative, launched during Blair's New Labour governments (1997-2007) in the UK, aimed to develop cooperation between the public, the private, and the third sector to produce alternative solutions for public services. This initiative stressed the crucial role of the private sector in supporting public services by advocating that profit-making enterprises could achieve social impacts. In France, social innovation is often associated with the *économie sociale et solidaire*, a principle that brings together structures that share the same value and pursue the same objectives. In July 2014, the *économie sociale et solidaire* (ESS) law was adopted to recognise ESS as an economic model that seeks to empower employees through creating specific organisational status (cooperatives or self-managed enterprises) and reinforce local and sustainable development policies. Therefore, social innovation is differently understood in France and the UK. National contexts, associated with cultural and political factors, underpin the understanding and application of social innovation.

Housing associations are also characterised by their local anchoring: they are key local stakeholders who play a crucial role in delivering social services at the local level. For example, in France, housing associations collaborate closely with local authorities such as county or city councils. In the UK, housing associations are also connected to local stakeholders even if the delimitation of their areas of influence is broader geographically speaking. Therefore, even if the national context is relevant to analysing housing associations' activities, exploring the local level appears more pertinent to investigate the social innovation practices developed by the

HA. Indeed, the localities where the housing association implements their social innovation activities have been selected as case studies.

As evidenced earlier in this chapter, the neighbourhood represents a precise and relevant territorial unit of analysis to investigate social innovation in the north of France. More precisely, three neighbourhoods were selected from the coastal conurbation of the north of France where the HA has developed social innovation practices. The *Contrat de Ville* (2015), a practical document that formulates the contract between local stakeholders for the conurbation's urban, social, and economic development, was helpful when selecting the neighbourhoods. Firstly, the *Contrat de Ville* shows that selected neighbourhoods share some geographic, social, and cultural similarities. Secondly, the housing associations had implemented the same social innovation activities in these neighbourhoods. Thus, the quartier du Belvedere, the quartier des Arbres and the quartier des Plantes [the names of the neighbourhoods have been anonymised] constitute the French case study. They are all *quartiers en veille*, meaning that despite recent improvements, economic and social issues are still recognised by the county council and the conurbation council. The neighbourhoods are also all located in the same conurbation, sharing some cultural features associated with its maritime identity and regional context. Finally, the neighbourhoods share the same architectural layout, namely multi-unit social housing buildings. For these reasons, the similarities between the three neighbourhoods (appendix 4 presents pictures of the three selected neighbourhoods) were significant enough to capture the contextual characteristics in the north of France and their influence on social innovation practices.

The second case study is a county located on the southern coast of England. Even if the socioeconomic indicators show a lower level of deprivation than in the French case, the 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2019) reveals pockets of deprivation located in the council's major cities. The index also

demonstrates substantial inequalities within the county but without any distinctive concentrations at the neighbourhood level.

3.4.3 The fieldwork design: a practical strategy

The fieldwork design is a rigorous and crucial step in the development of the research strategy for collecting and analysing data. It is a plan that helps to conduct fieldwork effectively. The research design helps to ensure a high level of preparedness, which is a condition for collecting data effectively at field sites. Designing a research plan is also a complex and meticulous process that requires strong organisational skills and follows a precise process in line with the case study approach. The first step concerns the definition of locations where fieldwork will be conducted. Then practical elements must be considered, namely, where, and when will the interviews and observations occur? Next, the researcher examines the different options to conduct interviews effectively. For example, the room and the availability of the room should be considered. In this study, the support of the housing associations was vital to ensure access to the rooms and to organise and conduct interviews. Other concerns such as travel planning or accommodation booking are also a part of the fieldwork preparation. The plan needs to be flexible so as to accommodate as much as possible unforeseen events such as a last-minute cancellation or confirmation for an interview.

3.5 Data collection: access to data and control of the data collection strategy

Data collection is an overlapping process (Patton, 1990) that integrates practical and methodological elements and, according to Eisenhardt (2018), the use of multiple types of data is a condition to revealing the focal phenomenon. A qualitative case study is a rich empirical instance involving multiple types and sources of data (Gehman et al., 2018; Yin, 2009). Using multiple data sources contributes to treating the context holistically (Welch et al., 2022) and

disclosing the micro-macro connections which may not be immediately discernible (Morgan, 2011).

There are practical elements that had to be considered for the data collection in this study. The EU-funded social innovation project, which fosters partnerships between the housing associations in France and the UK, enabled the data collection process. The housing associations themselves were also central to the elaboration of the data collection strategy. In this sense, the housing associations can be considered the "gatekeepers" in this study in that access to potential research participants, the social housing residents, or the project's beneficiaries (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016) was through them. The housing associations engaged in the social innovation project contributed to the feasibility of the research. In both cases, the housing association was an essential link between the researcher and participants of the social innovation activities (SI participants) under investigation. In other words, the housing associations were intermediaries between the researcher and research participants (De Laine, 2000). Communication with the housing association was therefore the first crucial step in the data collection process that subsequently relied on snowballing and ethnographic observations of the training offered to programme participants and the delivery of social innovation activities.

At the same time, gatekeepers have the power to give or deny access to the people required for the research (Clark, 2011; Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). Therefore, the power and authority of the housing association as a gatekeeper had to be considered as the organisation's potential influence on the data collection process. In the framework of the EU-funded social innovation project, the housing association only facilitated a few interviews with participants, which offered a gateway to data: it contributed to data collection by stepping into the field site and facilitating contact with selected people. Then, other data collection tools designed by the researcher helped to structure the data collection strategy independently:

informal on-site meetings, the feedback survey generated by the EU-funded social innovation project and snowballing were used to reach research participants. Consequently, the data collection strategy was built upon the enabling role of the housing association and the design of controlled data collection tactics by the researcher.

Two complementary data collection tools were selected for the research inquiry: in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations. The interdependency between the two data collection tactics enabled triangulation, which contributes to a comprehensive understanding of a social phenomenon (Patton, 1999) and implies more control over the data (Denzin, 2009). From this perspective, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations were both necessary to investigate the phenomenon of social innovation.

3.5.1 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were chosen to collect data and shortened interview guides (appendices 1 and 2) were used to broadly structure the interviews. The key principle of in-depth interviews is to consider that people's answers are the data source (Denscombe, 2017). Interviews elicit opinions, emotions, feelings, and experiences. They are thus suitable for exploring complex processes that include human interactions. Conducting interviews effectively requires specific skills, such as the capacity of the researcher to tolerate silences, be sensitive, and ask for clarification or details (Denscombe, 2017). Moreover, the quality of interviews depends on the researcher's preparedness level. In this regard, an interview guide was developed after exploring the literature and issues regarding social innovation.

The atmosphere during the interview is also a critical element to effectively gather data, requiring a trusting and open relationship between the participant and the researcher. The quality of an interview also lies in the ability of the interviewer/researcher to be non-judgmental (Denscombe, 2017) by allowing, for example, digressions. This helps to ensure a flowing

conversation in which the participant is comfortable and relaxed (Boyce & Naele, 2006). In this sense, an in-depth interview is often described as a form of conversation (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) in that it seems naturalistic and resembles an everyday conversation (Legard et al., 2003). Thus, the in-depth interview offers rich narrative data based on dense descriptions of a phenomenon, a context, or a personal story. It also requires specific skills and tactics to clarify respondents' statements, such as an active listening and the capacity to take notes, which contribute to a real-time analysis of data collected during an in-depth interview (Charmaz, 2006). From this perspective, in-depth interviews fit an inductive approach to theoretical development, an approach which begins during the interview. Given that a case study approach requires a deep exploration and understanding of the context and an iterative process of constant comparison of data and theory, in-depth interviews are an entirely appropriate form of data collection (Eisenhardt, 2021; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3.5.2 Ethnographic observations

Ethnographic observations on-site match the "scepticism" and "sensitivity" dimensions of the case study strategy (Stake, 1995). This form of observation necessitates a sense of observation (Merriam, 1998) to explore interactions between people and "what is going on" in field sites. Ethnographic observations enable to investigate a phenomenon in real life context (Yin, 1994). Ethnography is associated with the "real-world" environment, which is defined as a natural and authentic rather than an artificial situation (Willis et al., 2007). Thus, the ethnographic observations, as a data collection tool, correspond to the contextual nature of the case study (Meyer, 2001).

The authenticity of the ethnographic approach also implies a critical dimension: by exploring the "real-world" context, ethnographic observations seek to hear the voices of those who would otherwise be silent (James, 2007). In the same vein, Eisenhardt underlines the

ethnographic techniques as being particularly appropriate for studies that involve informants who "may not know or even if they do know, they won't tell you their thoughts" (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 288). It can help to reveal "the most profoundly buried structures" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 1) that cannot be disclosed through the sole use of interviews. Therefore, in this study, ethnographic observation incorporated a critical dimension to the data collection strategy. The objective of the researcher who conducts ethnography is to grasp patterns and routines that define the site identity. This also includes the researcher's own experience such as feelings and impressions. For example, within the ethnographic approach, the fear, discomfort, or embarrassment of the researcher are significant data that contribute to a better apprehension of a site.

In this study, data from field site observations were gathered in field notes (appendix 3), which were organised in a daily journal which included comments after a face-to-face interview such as feelings, sentiments, or moods as well as summaries of informal conversations with key quotes and facts from field site observations. Data from ethnographic observations are raw data that should not be pre-analysed; they are not speculative and emanate from empirical observations (Dey, 2007). Field site observations are processes that aim at collecting and analysing data simultaneously (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). For example, informal conversations on-site can contribute to developing patterns or associations of ideas that embody a first step in the data analysis process.

3.5.3 Sampling

"Sampling" involves the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are informed and have experiences in a "phenomenon of interest" (Palinkas et al., 2015). Therefore, to explore the phenomenon of social innovation, it was essential to identify for interview or observation, people who are involved one way or another, to the social innovation

activities delivered by the HA. The sample had to provide sufficient understanding of the local context where the social innovation activities were being implemented and shed light on the relationships between people, their networks, and their environment. Building a sample is a multi-step process. First, interviews were carried out with key informant stakeholders; this helped to capture "expert" opinions in order to understand "the 'state-of-the-art' information on a particular topic" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 207). The next step was to collect data from social housing residents (participants and non-participants of the social innovation activities delivered by the HA). In conducting an inquiry on social innovation practices, the use of "quota sampling" (Robinson, 2013) seemed relevant as it sets out to ensure that different categories of participants are represented in the data. This was a challenging task but snowball sampling proved to be an effective technique in order to mobilise interviewees' social networks or capital (Noy, 2008) and this way extend the reach of the study including non-participants of social innovation activities. Initial interviewees were asked "to nominate others who meet certain criteria for choice and certain conditions related to the research project and certain characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, or qualifications" (Denscombe, 2017, p.43). The feedback survey sent out to participants of social innovation activities also proved to be helpful in reaching further interviewees. This feedback survey asked for details of participants (names, phone number and email address) and ended with the question: "Would you like to be contacted by a researcher to discuss the experiences of the social innovation project?" While it is not a source of data, it was a helpful source of information for potential research participants. Thus, the access to interviewees was possible through a combination of support from the housing associations, snowball sampling and the use of the feedback survey.

Data collection in both case study sites was a two-stage approach. First, in-depth interviews were organised with key informant stakeholders between May 2019 and November 2019. Then, another round of interviews took place with participants (SI participants) and non-

participants of social innovation activities from the case study sites. Additional interviews with key informant stakeholders were organised during this second part of fieldwork (September 2020 and June 2021). Ethnographic observations were also conducted between interviews in each field site during the first and second round of data collection.

- *Sampling French case*

In the coastal conurbation of the north of France, 37 in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 key informant stakeholders (KI) (table 1), 12 SI participants and three non-participants living in the social housing neighbourhood (residents of the HA) (table 2).

During the first stage of fieldwork (May-July 2019), 15 key informant stakeholders were interviewed:

- seven employees of the French housing association – three of these employees were *gardiens* (KI02PDC, KI03PDC and KI04PDC) who have two main tasks: cleaning the buildings and ensuring a good relationship between tenants and the housing association by following-up tenants' complaints. *Gardiens* also have staff accommodation located in the neighbourhood where they work.
- one former employee of the housing association
- one housing officer of the local authority where social innovation activities have been implemented
- one elected person of the local authority where social innovation activities have been implemented
- two employees of two different local employment support organisations
- three employees of three different local business support organisations

During the second stage of fieldwork (September-October 2020), five more interviews were conducted with key informant stakeholders:

- one director of a local social centre
- one director of another local social centre
- one director of a neighbourhood house and employee of a local social centre
- one social advisor of the housing association

- one project manager of a local business support organisation

During this second stage, 14 social participants of social innovation activities (SI participants), and three non-participants (RI01PDC, RI11PDC and RI13PDC) were interviewed.

Table 1: Profiles of key informant interviewed in the north of France

Code	Gender	Organisation	Status in the organisation	Involved in social innovation activities with the HA	Involved in other social innovation activities
KI01PDC	Male	Housing Association	Research officer	Yes	Yes
KI02PDC	Male	Housing Association	*Gardien*	Yes	No
KI03PDC	Male	Housing Association	*Gardien*	Yes	No
KI04PDC	Male	Housing Association	*Gardien*	Yes	No
KI05PDC	Male	Employment support agency	Project officer	No	Yes
KI06PDC	Male	Local authority	Elected conurbation council	Yes	Yes
KI07PDC	Male	Employment support association	Director of the association	Yes	Yes
KI08PDC	Male	Other local organisation (urban planner)	Vice-director	No (was involved)	No
KI09PDC	Female	Business support agency	Project manager	No	Yes
KI10PDC	Male	Business support agency	Project manager	Yes	Yes
KI11PDC	Male	Housing Association	*Gardien*	Yes	No
KI12PDC	Male	Housing Association	Proximity team manager	Yes	Yes
KI13PDC	Male	Local authority	Housing department manager	No	Yes
KI14PDC	Male	Business support agency	Director of the local unit	Yes	Yes
KI15PDC	Male	Housing Association	Director of the innovation service	Yes	Yes
KI20PDC	Female	Business Support Organisation	Project officer	Yes	Yes
KI21PDC	Male	Social Centre	Director	Yes	Yes

KI22PDC	Female	Social Centre	Director of the neighbourhood house	No	Yes
KI23PDC	Female	Housing Association	Social Advisor	Yes	No
KI24PDC	Male	Social Centre	Director	No	Yes

Code	Gender	Age	Residential status	Employment status	SI participants
RI01PDC	Female	67	Social tenant	Retired	No
RI02PDC	Male	65	Social tenant	Retired	Yes
RI03PDC	Female	45	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI04PDC	Female	64	Social tenant	Retired	Yes
RI05PDC	Female	52	Social tenant	Employed	Yes
RI06PDC	Female	50	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI07PDC	Female	57	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI08PDC	Male	30	Owner-occupier	Employed	Yes
RI09PDC	Female	53	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI10PDC	Male	25	Social tenant	Employed	Yes
RI11PDC	Female	54	Social tenant	Unemployed	No
RI12PDC	Female	29	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI13PDC	Female	60	Private rental	Retired	No
RI14PDC	Female	39	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI15PDC	Male	55	Social tenant	Unemployed	Yes
RI16PDC	Male	50	Social tenant	Employed	Yes
RI17PDC	Female	35	Social tenant	Employed	Yes

During these two rounds of data collection, ethnographic observations were undertaken in the three French localities. This method of observation draws on the observation events

perspective developed by Quinn and colleagues (2021). Four specific "events" or "situations" were observed during fieldwork: social innovation activities (training and workshops); volunteering activities initiated by social housing residents; project meetings between the programme's partners; and on-site situations (table 3).

Table 3: Event and groups observations conducted in the north of France

Observations Groups	Social innovation Training	Volunteering activities	Partners' EU-funded project meetings	On-site interactions
Participants of social innovation activities	Observations of the workshops and training sessions. Observations of the interactions between participants. Participation in breaks (e.g., lunch).	Observation of activities: bread and water delivery for residents, repainting stairwells, craft workshops.	Participation in plenary sessions and workshops with local and non-local partners of the ERDF-funded project (e.g., English and French partners involved).	Informal discussions in the neighbourhood with participants outside the SI project activities.
Housing Association employees (Programme advisors)	Observations of the content of the training programme and interactions between programme advisors and participants.	Observations of the interactions between HA employees and volunteers including non-verbal cues.	Informal discussions with the project coordinators from the HA during workshops and breaks.	Informal discussion with HA employees (and more specifically with *gardiens* and the proximity team) in the neighbourhood.
Employees from other local third sector organisations	Observations of the interactions between other local organisations (partners) and the HA advisors.	Observations of the interactions between local organisations and volunteers including non-verbal cues.	N/A	Informal discussions with local organisation employees in the neighbourhood (advisors, social workers, neighbourhood houses' employees)
Neighbourhood's residents (non-participants)	N/A	Observation of the beneficiaries' reactions (e.g., elderly people in the case of bottled water and fresh bread delivery).	N/A	Informal discussions in the neighbourhood and observations to apprehend the feel and atmosphere of the neighbourhood.

In the coastal county of the south of England, 34 in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 key informant stakeholders (KI) (table 4) and SI participants (table 5).

During the first stage of fieldwork (September-November 2019), 10 key informant stakeholders were interviewed (table 4):

-    six employees of the housing association

-    two officers of two different local authorities (borough and city councils) where social innovation activities have been implemented

-    one project manager of a local business support organisation

-    one director of a non-profit organisation in charge of local communities' development.

During the second stage of fieldwork (May-July 2021), one more key informant stakeholder was interviewed (KI01HAM_1), an employee of the housing association, and 23 interviews were conducted with participants of social innovation activities (SI participants)

Table 4: Profiles of key informant interviewed in the south of England

Code	Gender	Organisation	Status in the organisation	Involved in social innovation activities with the HA	Involved in other social innovation activities
KI01HAM	Female	Housing Association	Innovation officer	Yes	Yes
KI02HAM	Male	Housing Association	Business advisor	Yes	Yes
KI03HAM	Male	Housing Association	Employment and training manager	Yes	Yes
KI04HAM	Male	Business support organisation	Project manager	Yes	Yes
KI05HAM	Male	Local authority	Employment and skills planning coordinator	Yes	Yes
KI06HAM	Male	Housing Association	Housing officer	No (another service of the HA)	Yes
KI07HAM	Female	Housing Association	Community investment team leader	No (another service of the HA)	Yes
KI08HAM	Female	Housing Association	Housing officer	No (another service of the HA)	Yes
KI09HAM	Male	Local authority	Project manager – economic development	Yes	Yes
KI10HAM	Female	Non-profit organisation	Managing director	Yes	Yes
KI01HAM_1	Female	Housing Association	Innovation officer	Yes	Yes

Table 5: Profiles of participants of SI activities interviewed in the south of England

Code	Gender	Age	Residential status/SI participant Y/N	Employment status
RI01HAM	Male	40	Private rental	Self-employed
RI02HAM	Male	57	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI03HAM	Male	36	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI04HAM	Male	65	Social tenant	Unemployed
RI05HAM	Female	24	Social tenant	Unemployed
RI06HAM	Female	41	Private rental	Employed
RI07HAM	Male	55	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI08HAM	Male	27	Private rental	Employed
RI09HAM	Female	59	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI10HAM	Male	53	Social tenant	Unemployed
RI11HAM	Female	44	Private rental	Employed
RI12HAM	Male	40	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI13HAM	Female	41	Owner occupier	Employed
RI14HAM	Male	46	Private rental	Self-employed
RI15HAM	Female	32	Social tenant	Unemployed
RI16HAM	Female	53	Owner occupier	Employed
RI17HAM	Male	60	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI18HAM	Male	44	Owner occupier	Unemployed
RI19HAM	Female	43	Private rental	Unemployed
RI20HAM	Female	43	Owner occupier	Self-employed
RI21HAM	Female	46	Owner occupier	Unemployed
RI22HAM	Female	51	Owner occupier	Unemployed
RI23HAM	Female	30	Private rental	Unemployed

Additionally, ethnographic observations were carried out in field sites to complete the data collection process. Three "situations" (Quinn et al., 2021) were observed: social innovation activities (training and workshops); meetings between programme's partners; and on-site interactions.

Table 6: Event and groups observations conducted in the south of England

Observations / Groups	Social innovation Training	Partners' EU project meetings	On-site interactions
Participants of social innovation activities	Observations of the workshops and training sessions. Observations of the interactions between participants. Participation in breaks (e.g., lunch).	Participation in plenary sessions and workshops with local and non-local partners of the ERDF-funded project (e.g., English and French partners involved).	Informal discussions with SI participants after the recorded interviews.
Housing Association employees (programme advisors)	Observations of the content of the training programme and interactions between programme advisors and participants.	Informal discussions with the project coordinators from the HA during workshops and breaks.	Informal discussion with HA employees in the HA offices.
Employees from other local third sector organisations	Observations of the interactions between other local organisations (partners) and the HA advisors.	N/A	Informal discussions with organisation's employees (employment support advisors and business support advisors).
Inhabitants (non-participants of SI activities)	N/A	N/A	Observations to understand the atmosphere of the places where interviews were conducted.

3.5.4 Fieldwork during Covid-19: adaptation and contribution

To conclude this section, a description of the impact of Covid-19 on the data collection process illustrates the need for qualitative researchers to be prepared to adapt in a context of uncertainty.

In March 2020, the French government and – a couple of weeks later – the British government, had taken isolation measures against the spread of Covid-19. These measures disrupted data collection strategies for qualitative researchers who were conducting face-to-face fieldwork. They were forced to delay or to re-invent their methods until these measures were relaxed (Lupton, 2021).

Adapting the research design in the pandemic context was a critical decision. It was first crucial to consider all the consequences of the pandemic and of lockdowns on the research. The pandemic undeniably put into question all social relationships and communication methods. Lupton (2021) describes this disturbing context with the expression "affective atmosphere" in which routines are disrupted. The pandemic introduced new ethical considerations into the research design. For example, the targeted participants of the sampling were mainly vulnerable people, but Covid-19 increased the level of vulnerability of other potential participants. This high level of uncertainty caused by the pandemic seemed to entirely put at risk the collection of good quality data. For example, participants might refuse to meet the researcher for a face-to-face interview or might shorten the duration of the interview. The capacity of interviewers to be sensitive to the feelings of interviewees is in any case a key skill for face-to-face interviews (Denscombe, 2017). Nevertheless, while the researcher had some agency in creating a conducive atmosphere before the interview, no researcher could alter the deep impact of the pandemic on people's feelings and fears.

In this context, two plans were considered: either starting fieldwork in April 2020 online or postponing fieldwork when isolation measures had been removed. This dilemma also

raised important methodological considerations. First, in these troubling circumstances, it is crucial to position oneself as a researcher and explore opportunities to adapt and refine the research design. Adaptation is indeed part of the self-reflective approach, a critical dimension of methodological considerations.

Eventually, the decision to delay fieldwork was made for different reasons. First, moving all the fieldwork online was considered to be too risky in terms of preserving the quality of data. Indeed, vulnerable people are often on the wrong side of the digital divide and do not always have access to digital devices. Furthermore, ethnographic observations on site represented an important part of the data collection strategy, as portrayed in the previous sub-section. Waiting can be a source of anxiety for researchers and raise time management challenges. However, postponing fieldwork is not necessarily a waste of time: the researcher can use this time to develop new skills that could make future data collection possible through a comprehensive preparation for the fieldwork.

Postponing the fieldwork was therefore considered to be the right decision. However, alternative forms of data collection were explored before the lifting of isolation measures. For example, "digital ethnography" (Pink et al., 2016) or "virtual ethnography" (Ruhleder, 2000) or "cyber-ethnography" (Ward, 1999) can be a relevant data collection strategy. The net is "profoundly anti spatial", but "you can find things in it without knowing where they are" (Burrell, 2009, p. 184/185). The exploration of the net represents a first step before investigating a social phenomenon on the ground. Cyber-ethnography helps to gather information before conducting interviews. For example, for this study, the housing association online communication material (e.g., the housing association pages) proved to be useful to understand relationships between the housing association, their tenants, and participants of social innovation activities (SI participants). While it was not an alternative to "on site" observation, this approach allowed immersion into specific (non-spatial) social environment.

In the end, Covid-19 mainly impacted the research schedule, causing delays to the collection of data, transcriptions of interviews, and the data analysis. Indeed, despite stop-and-go strategies adopted by the UK and French governments regarding isolation measures, the fieldwork was completed in July 2021. From this perspective, "adaptation" contributed to reinforcing the self-reflective dimension of the research as regards the relationship between the researcher and their fieldwork. Similarly, while Covid-19 generated considerable anxiety and frustration, the self-isolation rules also allowed time to thoroughly prepare for the fieldwork and plan the data collection strategies. In this regard, the elaboration of different plans that include practical tactics can help to mitigate uncertainty. Adaptation of the research design in a context of uncertainty can also make unexpected methodological contributions. Indeed, questioning the relevance and effectiveness of alternative forms of data collection during the pandemic has raised crucial methodological debates. Moreover, discussions about strategies to make fruitful use of the waiting time during lockdowns remain of interest and relevance to qualitative researchers.

Fortunately, the impact of Covid-19 on the fieldwork was less important than expected. Reluctance of participants to meet the researcher and hesitation of a stakeholder to allow access to participants were the two main concerns. However, it appeared that interviews in both the north of France (after the first lockdown) and in the south of England (after the second lockdown) were not really disrupted by these two factors. On the contrary, people were rather delighted to meet someone face-to-face after a long period of self-isolation. For example, only two participants in the south of England did not want to meet the researcher because they were vulnerable and not fully vaccinated. In the north of France, the impression was mainly that people wanted "to breathe again" after "being locked up at home". During the interviews in the north of France, safety measures were applied: face covering masks were used and distancing between the interviewer and the interviewee was maintained by a Plexiglas. In the south of

England, measures were relaxed before the fieldwork and so most of those interviews were conducted in coffee shops. It is difficult to measure the impact of Covid-19 safety rules on the quality of the interviews, but it does not seem to have created any interactional issues. The Covid-19 pandemic was naturally central during interviews, but all the other topics were also raised.

3.6 Data analysis

Data analysis is an iterative process that implies a succession of moves between the data and the literature towards the emergence and consolidation of patterns (Eisenhardt, 2021; Gehman et al., 2018). The data analysis process aims at organising and grouping raw data to form more abstract conceptualisations (Walsh, 2017). This abstraction or "categorisation" (Eisenhardt, 2021) is a challenging process that reveals hidden and hard-to-describe theories. Data analysis is also described as a process or progression that starts from raw data to theoretical themes and dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013), an inductive process (Charmaz, 2014) that is appropriate for investigating relatively unexplored social phenomena.

The progression towards the emergence of theories is materialised and displayed through the coding process. Building theory from data involves dividing data into "first-order" and "second-order" codes (Gioia et al., 2013). This process also entails a systematic presentation strategy of both a "first-order" analysis (i.e., an analysis using informant-centric terms and codes) and a "second-order" analysis (i.e., one using researcher-centric concepts, themes and dimensions) (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 18).

Nevertheless, before presenting this coding system, it is essential to remember that the data analysis process is based on context-sensitive theory building (Welch et al., 2022); it is crucial to explore data in their context before considering the transferability of findings (Burawoy, 2009; Gehman et al., 2018). A within-case analysis of data is necessary to treat the

context holistically because the context "has explanatory power" (Welch et al., 2022, p. 8). It is certainly the case for a study that explores embedded social innovation practices at the local level and examines the interactions between contextual factors and social innovation. From a more practical perspective, a data structure was elaborated for each case study following the principles of the extended case study approach (figure 1). The data structure is a graphic representation of how the analysis progressed from raw data terms to themes and to dimensions when conducting the analyses (Gioia, 2021). The data structure is also an analytical framework built on the review of the literature. The data structure puts forward the notion of "embeddedness" as a heuristic concept contributing to build further theoretical understanding on "social innovation". In the literature review, different forms of embeddedness have been identified (social, cultural, local, and cognitive), and they are all useful to explore social innovation. The literature review has also helped to define social innovation as a multidisciplinary concept built around three approaches: the agent-centred, the territorial development approach, and the institutional theory perspectives. To investigate the complex concept of social innovation, a multi-layered approach is adopted to capture how the macro level (local context), the meso level (organisational context), and the micro level (individual context) forms of "embeddedness" shapes social innovation practices.

Figure 1: Data structure
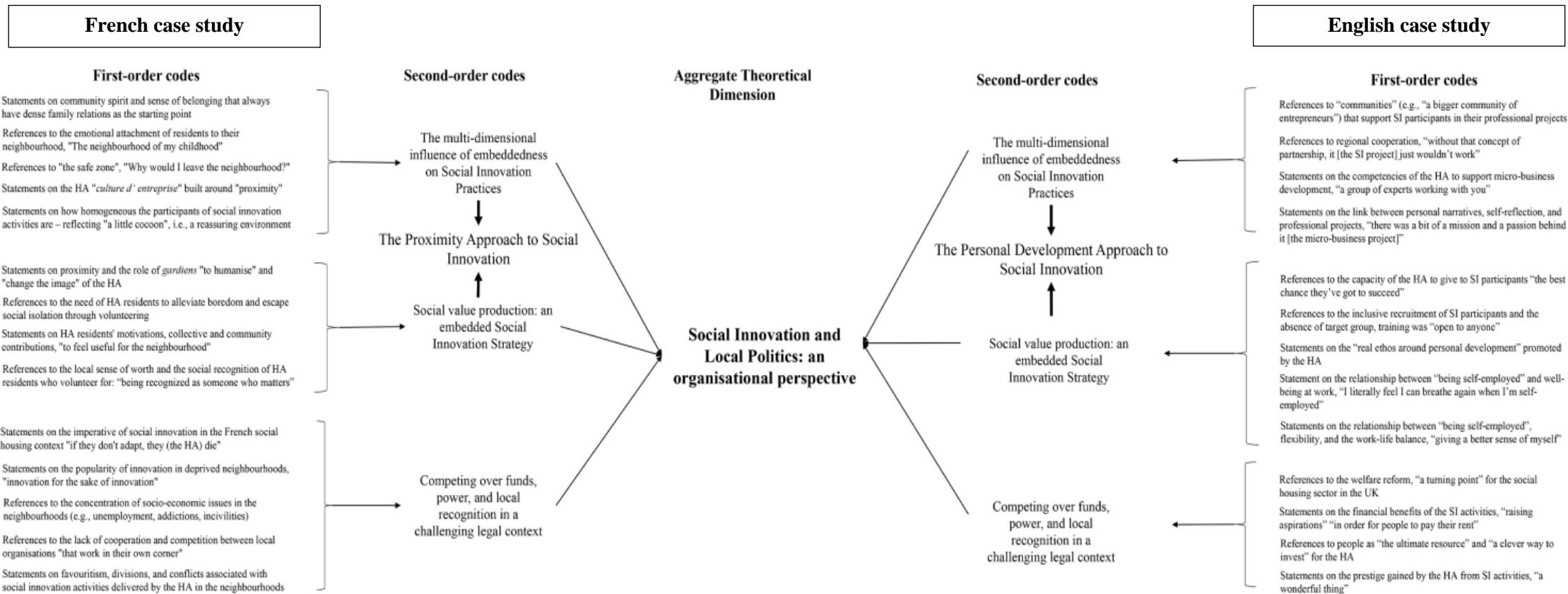
3.6.1 The coding system and process

A code in qualitative data analysis is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). Coding helps to make sense of the language-based data from interview transcripts and fieldnotes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is a progression from the factual to the conceptual to the interpretive (Saldaña, 2015) from the most substantive ("a code") to the most abstract ("a concept"). Through this process, codes capture patterns and themes which are then clustered under a "title" that evokes a constellation of impressions and analysis for the researcher (Elliott, 2018; Lempert, 2007).

The coding process for this study began with transcribing the interviews with key informant stakeholders and participants both during and after data collection. The qualitative software Nvivo was used for the data analysis. The first step was to define first-order codes (also called "open codes") through line-by-line analysis (Charmaz, 2006), slowly generating conceptual ideas from the chunks of data (Gibbs, 2007). After further analysis, the first-order codes were built into second-order codes (also called focused codes), which were most valuable and relevant to the research questions and characteristics of the enquiry, therefore facilitating sets of codes to develop new theoretical ideas (Saldaña, 2015).

The six steps of thematic analysis provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed: the first step concerns familiarisation with the data set through reading and rereading transcripts, listening to the recordings of interviews, and making notes and observations. The second step involves the "coding" itself, the identification of patterns in the data and then the identification of themes. Next, the themes were reviewed and checked. Potential themes emerged from the coded data and the data set. The next phase involved naming themes that

ensured conceptual clarity. Finally, these themes provided the analysis structure and the write-up's organising framework.

- First-order codes: capturing the essence of data

First-order codes aim to trace data patterns. They generate an initial overview of the data. Coding by using open codes (Strauss and Corbin, 2008), measures (Gehman et al., 2018), or first-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) is thus a first step in theory building from the data.

The number of open codes is a crucial question for researchers. There is no definitive rule but the method provided by Creswell (2015) seems relevant and helpful as it implies the progression from data analysis to the writing up of findings. Creswell suggests having around 20 codes which then "collapse further into about five or seven themes that become the major headings in my findings section of my qualitative report" (Creswell, 2015, p. 155/156). Practical codes and experiences from fieldwork (notes after an interview, impressions during on-site observation, or note-taking during the listening of a recording) contribute to the definition of open codes. They help to identify what matters and what does not in the data corpus. In this regard, 14 first-order codes were defined for the French case and 13 for the English case.

Codes should also help communicate the findings effectively and represent the starting point of the argumentation. Considering these coding precepts, two lists of first-order codes (open codes) were developed for the two case studies. Indeed, in line with the methodological approach that focuses on a contextualised analysis of social innovation (Welch et al., 2022), it is pertinent to elaborate, as a first step, a separate within-case analysis for each case study. Therefore, different first-order codes for both cases ensured a deep within-case analysis (figure 1).

The main principle of coding is the naming of codes. Therefore, the clarity and precision of names are crucial: "the codes should have names that capture the essence of their content" (Cunningham, 2004, p. 67). They should effectively communicate to the reader what the data say. To achieve this, a direct quote from the data should be used to give more precision to a code. For example, the quotation "the safe zone" to qualify neighbourhoods where the housing association has delivered social innovation activities (code 2) is a striking reference that seizes the territorial dimension in the French case. Regarding the English case, the quotation "I literally feel I can breathe again when I'm self-employed" (code 8) is relevant to capture motivations of SI participants. Therefore, these words were used to define these two first-order codes (figure 1).

- Second-order codes: elaborating categories

Axial coding is the process that contributes to developing "categories" or second-order codes. It is identified as an intermediary set of coding procedures (Kendall, 1999) and is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (p. 96). The main task in defining categories through axial coding is gathering open codes under second-order codes (Gioia et al., 2013). Indeed, the thematic dimension is essential in the axial coding process, which involves a hierarchical relationship between first-order and second-order codes. This process encompasses a set of codes through the identification of relationships and connections between open codes.

In this study, second-order codes offer a contextualised understanding of social innovation practices and reveal the two social innovation approaches adopted in both cases: the proximity and the personal development perspectives. In both cases, second-order codes are identical (figure 1): "The multi-dimensional influence of embeddedness on SI practices"

(first-order codes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 in the French case and first-order codes 1, 2, 3, 4 in the English case); "Social value production: an embedded SI strategy" (first-order codes 6, 7, 8, 9 in the French case and first-order codes 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 in the English case) and "Competing over funds, power and local recognition in a challenging legal context" (first-order codes 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 in the French case and first-order codes 10, 11, 12, 13 in the English case).

The axial coding stage aims to reduce the number of codes to reunite data that may have been scattered during the open coding stage. As stated above, second-order codes capture the core categories. According to Moghaddam (2006) these categories are identified to illustrate or describe a phenomenon's structure and process. Second-order codes in this study precisely describe the context and the process of the social innovation phenomenon. They are not too descriptive and represent the first level in the conceptual abstraction process.

- Aggregate theoretical dimension: establishing general principles

Theoretical or conceptual coding is the higher level of abstraction in the coding process that generates an aggregate theoretical dimension. Theoretical coding refers to the progression from data organisation to the elaboration of the main argument of the research. This process requires a broad theoretical background knowledge concerning the different theoretical perspectives (Kelle, 2014). That is why Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommend a deep exploration of the literature to develop a "theoretical sensitivity".

From this perspective, the data structure (figure 1) captures the data analysis process, from the development of open codes to the generation of theoretical codes. Theoretical codes are the foundations of argumentation, helping to form theoretical models or an integrated theoretical framework (Holton, 2007). Therefore, the data analysis process resulting from a within case (first-order codes) and cross case (second-order codes) analysis contributes to

building the core argument of the thesis: "social innovation and local politics, an organisational perspective" (aggregate theoretical dimension).

3.7 Ethical considerations

The study required careful consideration of research ethics. Most of the research participants are social housing residents who may be subjected to social exclusion, "a socially constructed perception (…) of a lack of social, political, and economic capital held by such groups when compared to the societal norm" (Von Benzon & Van Blerk, 2017, p. 898). From this institutional perspective, social housing residents who are looking for a job or another form of professional opportunity, fall into this category. Moreover, social exclusion is also based on stigma, discrimination, and delegitimating processes. In the French case, some participants are vulnerable and suffer from social isolation. The participants in the English case study were found to be less stigmatised due to their higher level of education, relative precariousness, place where they live, or other factors (Pain, 2004). However, in both cases, there were many research participants who suffered from severe health issues affecting their well-being. It was therefore crucial to adopt an approach that considers individuals' experiences (Goodwin & Tiderington, 2022) as a way of reducing power imbalances; researcher's reflexivity and positionality were important in this regard. For example, it was crucial to ensure that hard-to-reach individuals were also involved in research. It was also important to understand participants' context, identity, and backgrounds.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity is not only an ethical consideration: taking stock of "where the researcher is coming from" offers critical insights such as intuitions and perceptions that complement the data collection and analysis process. For example, feeling like an outsider in neighbourhoods where interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted provided important tools in interpreting the findings. These feelings reflected a

strong territorial identity and community spirit within the neighbourhoods, which creates a symbolic boundary between the insiders and the outsiders. This awareness of researcher bias is also fertile for developing theoretical positions (Holmes, 2020).

Another key component of research ethics is transparency. The researcher should explicitly describe what will happen at each step of the research process, explain the specific approaches in which the research is confidential and inform participants of how their response will be used and shared with others (Goodwin & Tiderington, 2022). Following these recommendations, the participants' information sheet and consent form documents were elaborated on before arranging the interviews. The consent form document includes key questions that inform participants about the research process: "What is the research about?", "Who is doing the research and how are they being paid?", "Do I have to take part?", "What will happen if I take part?", "Will the information I give be confidential?", "What will happen to the results of the research?", "Who has reviewed the study?" and "Whom do I contact for further information?".

Finally, the anonymisation of participants and places is a crucial step in research ethics. It was important to replace the participants' names with an identifier code matching the recording number, as displayed in tables 1, 2, 4, 5. Moreover, there could be some negative views about the places involved in the study which could damage their reputation. It was therefore necessary to use pseudonyms for all places. In the north of France, data were collected in *le quartier des Arbres*, *le quartier des Plantes* and *le quartier du Belvedere*. In the south of England, data were collected in both urban and rural areas of the county where the housing association has implemented social innovation activities. In addition, identifier codes (KI and RI followed by a number, and HAM for the English case, and PDC for the French case) were used in both cases to anonymise research participants.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has set out the methodological approach elaborated in order to better understand embedded social innovation practices developed by housing associations at the local level. This chapter has demonstrated that the theory building from case study approach is relevant to provide contextualised explanations to social innovation. As demonstrated in the previous chapter (chapter 2), a contextualised understanding of social innovation is required to provide new theoretical insights into social innovation. That is why the context has been introduced as a central element in the design of the methodological approach. It is also a crucial component that defines cases and elucidates the study's object of analysis: the social innovation practices developed by housing associations.

Within a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted in both case study sites, as data collection strategies. The data analysis approach followed a contextualised and thematic approach that generated key themes and theories throughout a rigorous coding process.

The research approach, detailed in this chapter 3, contributed to produce the findings by facilitating the collection and analysis of data. Therefore, in the next chapters (chapters 4 and 5), findings from the data analysis will be presented.

Chapter 4 – Findings - Embedding social innovation practices: producing social value, becoming social innovators

4.1 Introduction

The findings of this study emerged from a two-stage data analysis process, progressing from a deep within-case analysis to a cross-case analysis. This process, described in the previous chapter, enabled a contextual exploration of social innovation practices, through the lens of embeddedness. Both the review of the literature and the methodology chapter highlighted the relevance of embeddedness to the contextual examination of social innovation. "Embeddedness" in this study is a heuristic concept that contributes to understanding the interactions between agents, actions, practices and contexts, and as such, has been a helpful lens through which to understand how social innovation practices are shaped by "contexts". The different forms and levels of embeddedness identified in the literature review have contributed to establishing an analytical framework with which to explore social innovation. Thus, social innovation practices are analysed through a multi-layered lens that integrates the macro level, namely, the interactions between social, cultural and political forms of embeddedness which define the "place" as a context where social innovation practices have been implemented; the meso level, referring to the influence of organisational characteristics - shaped by cultural, local, and political factors – on social innovation practices; and the micro level, which relates to the individual level of embeddedness (such as cognitive factors, and emotions) and their influence on social innovation practices. Understanding the dynamic, processual, and multi-layered influence of embeddedness on social innovation practices

(Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022) is important for three reasons: to understand the way social innovation practices are embedded in different contexts; to discover how the outcomes of social innovation practices differ, according to how they are embedded differently; and to understand how this relates to the strategy of social innovation and its political nature.

The contextualised case study analysis reveals that social innovation practices are embedded through complex multi-layered processes that underpin two approaches to social innovation. The term "approach" refers to the way in which the housing associations under investigation, operate within their context. It is a more general term than "practice" as it relates to a strategy to develop "practices" which speaks to a deliberate intent. The notion of "practice" is inherently associated with the development of strategic actions by organisations (Jarzabkowski, 2004). With this in mind, the "proximity" (for the French case study) and "personal development" (for the English case study) approaches are reflective of how each case's social innovation practices are embedded and the actions they take to shape their social innovation practices. In order to implement their social innovation practices at the local level, the housing associations produce social value that is closely related to contextual factors. Indeed, in defining the practices developed by the housing associations as socially innovative, producing social value is a condition. In other words, how a housing association produces social value is a defining aspect of social innovation practices. The production of social value is also central to the definition of social innovation (Phills et al., 2008; Faludi, 2023). When associated with social innovation, the concept of "social value" refers to different notions such as "processes", "outputs" or "outcomes" that vary according to contexts (Westley & Antadze, 2010) and is a term mainly employed through practices (Mulgan, 2010).

The 'proximity' approach that emerged from the French data analysis, refers to the development of volunteering activities in the coastal conurbation of the north of France that were initiated by HA residents and supported by the housing association to animate and make

more beautiful the HA neighbourhood. This approach seeks to promote social integration in HA neighbourhoods where many families have lived for generations, dominated by traditional attitudes and an absence of either social or geographical mobility. In the south of England, "personal development" practices have led to the development of different activities: micro-enterprise and employment support services (MEESS), which are training courses delivered by the housing association for both HA residents and non-residents. This approach focuses on individuals' aspirations and seeks to improve well-being associated with professional pathways. Both practices are embedded in different ways at the local, organisational, and individual levels. These processes consolidate the social innovation role of the housing associations and how contextual factors underpin social value generation. In this chapter, the "proximity" and the "personal development" approaches are presented to show how embedding social innovation practices contributes to defining housing associations as credible social innovation actors at the local level.

4.2 The "proximity" approach to social innovation in the French case

This first section focuses on the analysis of the embedded social innovation practices developed by the housing association in the coastal conurbation of the north of France. Three levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro levels) help to understand the embedding process of social innovation, built around "proximity".

This section looks at the organisational context and its influence on social innovation practices. The data analysis demonstrates that "proximity" is a key aspect of the organisational culture that is part of the housing association's history. In this regard, the housing association has developed social innovation practices embedded at the organisational level, as the organisational culture is marked by "proximity". From this point of view, social innovation practices, based on "proximity", represent a manifestation of the organisational culture of the

housing association and point to its strategic orientation. The second contextual factor refers to the territory. The three neighbourhoods under investigation, the *quartier des Arbres*, *quartier des Plantes* and *quartier du Belvedere,* are all characterised by a strong territorial identity. In this sense, the proximity-based practices developed by the housing association, match the strong sense of territorial belonging shared by the neighbourhoods' inhabitants. Finally, the individual context is also crucial to understanding how social innovation practices are embedded. Emotions, judgments, and self-perceptions are micro-level characteristics that shape the social innovation practices developed by the housing association.

4.2.1 The organisational culture of the housing association built around "proximity"

The French housing association under investigation here is a large organisation that accommodates around 100,000 tenants in 40,000 dwellings across the county. However, the housing association has adopted a territorial and decentralised approach, based on "proximity", to develop social innovation practices. Proximity is described as "a very strong *culture d'entreprise*" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research Officer, HA, North of France] that defines social innovation practices in the north of France. According to a project manager of the HA, "proximity" is part of the HA's history:

> "We have local proximity teams related to the Housing Association's history. The HA remains very [much] in touch socially with the tenants. It is important to speak about this social side (…)" [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France].

This "proximity" approach relates to the social side of the HA that connects the organisation to the daily life of tenants. As such, it is associated with a certain social and territorial closeness. Indeed, a former HA employee shows that the "daily proximity" of the HA with their tenants is part of the organisational structure:

> "To get this daily proximity with tenants, day and night, they can call us if they need help, even during weekends and bank holidays. It is only us that

[we] can do that, even a retail trader, you see them every day, but you don't see them as much as the HA, which is always here, around your housing (…) it's always reassuring" [KI08PDC, Key Informant, Deputy Director, Government Administration Urban Planning (former HA employee), North of France].

This daily proximity is enabled by *gardiens* whose role is crucial to understanding "proximity" as a HA corporate culture. *Gardiens* are employees of the housing association: they are part of the "proximity team", their role combining maintenance, cleaning, and social support roles, as explained by the local proximity team manager of the HA:

> "Here, it is a team of 17 people's local *gardiens* and a point services assistant[1]. Our missions are also to process technical claims and deal with neighbourhood disturbances. This is the first point. Second point, it is also monitoring our heritage to ensure security, sustainability of the heritage and the housekeeping of the buildings. It is also the partnership and relationships; regularly we are in touch with local stakeholders, the town hall, the national police, municipal associations" [KI12PDC, Key Informant, Proximity Team Manager, HA, North of France].

A *gardien*, interviewed in the *quartier des Arbres,* adds details about the mission underlying their duties:

> "So then regarding the *gardiens'* tasks, we will say that there are fundamentals, cleaning the containers: picking up rubbish, cleaning buildings. And our role also concerns the relationship with the tenants following tenant complaints for example." [KI02PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

This quote shows that developing and strengthening social relations with tenants is central to the role of *gardiens*. It is part of "social proximity", aiming to solidify the links between the housing association and its tenants. In the same vein, another *gardien* from the *quartier du Belvedere* explains that they are live-in staff, which reinforces "proximity" as an inherent aspect in the HA culture:

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[1] The *Point Service* is a drop-in place for residents, managed by the Proximity Team of the HA and located in the neighbourhood

"As *gardiens* we have staff accommodation to be closer to the residents. To be nearby with residents" [KI11PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

As described by a social centre employee, who also operates in the *quartier du Belvedere*, "the main principle [of the HA] is that *gardiens* have to live in the neighbourhood, they have staff housing and they get a minimum wage" [KI24PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France]. *Gardiens* are therefore the real proximity employees of the HA. They constitute the key link between the housing association and their tenants, and help them by solving problems on the ground:

"Yes, we are part of tenants' everyday life. Concerning tenants' problems, there is a link with the HA. We try to solve the problems precisely on the ground by being as responsive and available as possible" [KI02PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

The role of *gardiens* demonstrates that "proximity" is a key organisational characteristic (*une culture d'entreprise*) that forges social innovation practices. Indeed, in the development of social innovation practices built on a proximity approach, *gardiens* (as so-called *agents de proximité*) represent critical assets for the housing association. This is explained by a director of a local social centre that operates in the *quartier des Arbres* and *quartier des Plantes*:

"They are lucky [the HA] to be real proximity actors. They were stronger than me when I arrived here. Why? Because they are properly in the neighbourhoods. They had *gardiens* so that was great for them [the Housing Association]" [KI21PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

Gardiens play a critical proximity role because they are always on-site, close to the tenants. This socio-territorial proximity contributes to giving them a deep knowledge of the neighbourhood's inhabitants, as explained by the proximity team manager of the HA:

"(…) it's the fine knowledge of the *gardien* and proximity agents who will perfectly know their inhabitants, and that will be our strength" [KI12PDC, Key Informant, Proximity Team Manager, HA, North of France].

From this perspective, their role supports the development of the HA's proximity practices. The HA manager supports proximity practices as a way "to implement innovation work on the ground" [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France]. Another key informant stakeholder who has partnered with the HA, explains that social innovation practices developed by the HA are situated within the "proximity" culture of the organisation:

> "Social innovation activities, I see it… In the sense that there is a relationship between the inhabitants and the HA organisation. The *gardien* who goes door-to-door to help people. I find it's wonderful because they do it well. They give information about employment events, things like that. They put posters in corridors, I think that the approach with the inhabitant is something that has not been developed everywhere. Myself, I say well done! I have never seen that before" [KI20PDC, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisation, North of France].

The proximity approach to social innovation is thus built upon this organisational context that offers assets to develop social innovation practices. The key practice of this social innovation approach is the creation of the so-called *collectifs d'habitants*. These local associations develop volunteering activities for the neighbourhoods' inhabitants, initiated and managed by the neighbourhoods' residents. However, it is the housing association, through the role of the proximity team (*gardiens*), that promotes and supports the creation of these *collectifs d'habitants*. This social innovation practice fits with the proximity approach by creating local communities that bring together residents and proximity employees (*gardiens*) of the housing association. The proximity employees are defined by the project manager as "a dream team" or "a resource" of the HA, contributing to enrolling tenants in the *collectifs* [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France]. Thus, the proximity team (an organisational asset) enables the creation *of collectifs d'habitants* and, more generally, the development of social innovation practices based on "proximity". In this respect, this approach to social innovation echoes the "territorial development" perspective of the concept that is

based on local community development, through the enhancement of social relations at the local level.

At the same time, developing social innovation practices based on "proximity", represents a virtuous circle for the HA. First, the proximity team enables the enrolment of tenants in social innovation practices by creating a reassuring environment. As explained by a tenant (and volunteer in the *collectif d'habitants*), in the *quartier du Belvedere,* having the support from the housing association (proximity team) contributes to attracting more volunteers:

> "Working in close collaboration with the HA, I would say that it reassures people, because they know and almost everyone knows people who take care of buildings. They are known and respected" [RI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed].

This "trust relationship", also mentioned by a *gardien* in the *quartier des Arbres* [KI02PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France], facilitates the implementation of social innovation activities. The proximity team manager of the HA explains the impact of the *gardiens* on the development of social innovation practices:

> "There is an evolution in the role of *gardiens* and local proximity (*agents de proximité*) employees, who are not only considered as maintenance workers (in the management of containers for example) but also as a proximity team, which is recognised for its daily work to improve the living environment and its relationship with the residents (…) for creating together [*gardiens* and residents] local projects such as a community garden or DIY workshops for example" [KI12PDC, Key Informant, Proximity Team Manager, HA, North of France].

Therefore, "proximity", as part of the HA culture, makes the HA a social innovator that fosters the participation of inhabitants in new projects by enhancing trust relationship between the HA and their tenants. In this regard, "proximity" is a contextual asset that enables the HA to develop social innovation practices, which is how they are embedded in the organisational context.

From this perspective, "proximity" also represents a fertile soil from which the HA produces social value, recognised by its tenants. As explained by a *gardien* in *quartier des Plantes*, "thanks to the proximity team [and the role of *gardiens*], the image [of the HA] has changed for residents who have participated in social innovation activities" [KI04PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France]. Because it is part of the organisational culture of the HA, proximity" is both a contextual asset and an embedded approach on which the HA has developed social innovation activities. "Proximity" has created a community spirit within the neighbourhood, *de la camaraderie*, as described by a *gardien* in the quartier du Belvedere [KI11PDC, Key Informant, Gardien, HA, North of France], and it has also improved the relationship between the tenants and the HA.

4.2.2 Proximity practices and the territorial sense of belonging: moving from community initiatives to neighbourhood's vibrancy

The data analysis demonstrates that social innovation practices are embedded in the specific territorial context of the French case study, marked by a local community spirit and a strong sense of territorial belonging.

The ethnographic observations, which set out to capture the neighbourhood's atmosphere, vividly illustrate this community spirit.

> Afternoon 03/09/2020 *Quartier du Belvedere* "I meet Louis [the name has been anonymised], an employee of the social centre. He says that in the neighbourhood, it is like an African village: 'everyone contributes to the education of children who play in public spaces'" [ME01OST, ethnographic observations in the quartier du Belvedere].

Family links contribute to building community spirit and a local sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Indeed, the role of families is crucial to understanding territorial identity. An inhabitant in the *quartier du Belvedere* expresses this socio-territorial element by showing that "family is everywhere":

"It's always the family. There is the brother who lives in front of my parents', down there, the son lives in front of… the square. So, it's the family. I have my uncle, it's the same, he lives in the building in the bottom of the neighbourhood on the corner, my cousin lives in front of the neighbourhood also. So, family is everywhere" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner-occupier, employed].

This quote links the territorial sense of belonging to family bonds in another neighbourhood, where a resident of the *quartier des Arbres* speaks about how family relations are everywhere:

"Family, I have my brother who lives in front, my mum who lives here, and my third… fourth sister she lives on the 6th floor. Family surrounds me, but I don't see them often; once a week, it's enough. I enjoy my freedom" [RI09PDC, female, 53, social tenant, employed].

This statement suggests that the family can sometimes be too intrusive. It also raises questions about the influence of a strong sense of belonging on individuals within the neighbourhood. In this regard, an inhabitant mentions both the positive and potential negative impacts of a strong sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and residents living in that neighbourhood. She shows that the impact of the fact that "we all know each other" (*on se connait tous*) is mixed. On the one hand, it fosters "mutual aid", but on the other, it can create "gossip" or potential conflicts between families:

"There are many mums in the neighbourhood, we see each other at school, after yes… Yeah, we all know each other; we even manage to say, "there are some new ones". We all know each other. It's a neighbourhood; for example, my daughter hurt her foot last year; we brought her back straight away… "Alexandra, we brought you Marie, she has fallen", no it's really, we can see that in the neighbourhood… It could be mutual aid, and sometimes, it could create stories because it's too much… we should find a middle ground" [RI12PDC, female, 29, social tenant, unemployed].

Therefore, the neighbourhood is characterised by a strong community spirit connecting family links to a robust territorial sense of belonging, as explained by a key informant stakeholder:

"The sense of belonging to a neighbourhood is very strong, and that is to say, we are inhabitants of a neighbourhood, we are not inhabitants of a city, we

hear that says I go to the city centre, people do not go… they don't realise that they go to the city centre of their own city (…) it's not their city their city it's their neighbourhood they live in a neighbourhood" [KI13PDC, Key Informant, Housing Department Manager, Local Authority, North of France].

However, this sense of belonging (*phénomène d'appartenance à un quartier),* which refers to the territorial identity, presupposes the identification of the neighbourhood as a "safe zone". The neighbourhood is a place where inhabitants feel secure and confident. This is what an employee of a social centre explained during ethnographic observations done in the *quartier du Belvedere*:

> Afternoon 03/09/2020 *quartier du Belvedere.* "Louis explains that the neighbourhood is a real comfort zone for young people: 'They act like bosses in the neighbourhood, but outside they are fags (…) even if they are bored at home, with their mother'" [ME01OST].

The neighbourhood is felt to be a comforting environment, which explains why most residents interviewed did not want to leave the neighbourhood. Two HA tenants from the *quartier du Belvedere* stated that they did not want to go elsewhere:

> "I will never leave the neighbourhood. We are going to spend the rest of our life here; I can't imagine myself elsewhere" [RI07PDC, female, 57, social tenant, unemployed].

> "People say we stay here, in this neighbourhood. They don't want to go elsewhere. Some people leave, but they come back, they moved out, but they came back because they were not happy there" [RI01PDC, female, 67, social tenant, retired].

For inhabitants, family bonds are spoken of like landmarks and the way in which they speak of their neighbourhood is imbued with emotional attachment. Two residents and SI participants (one from the *quartier des Plantes* and another one from the *quartier du Belvedere*) describe the neighbourhood as "the neighbourhood of my childhood" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner-occupier, employed] [RI17PDC, female, 35, social tenant, employed]. A young mother who had lived in the neighbourhood for more than ten years, referred to it as providing her with an

"anchor", demonstrating her attachment to her neighbourhood. After living several months in another area, she decided to come back:

> "It was impossible, we suffered from depression [in this area] (…) so we came back, and I think we won't leave because… I don't know, even with kids, it's, maybe because the neighbourhood has a strong family spirit, we are anchored, and even if we are looking to buy a property, we really want to buy in the area" [RI12PDC, female, 29, social tenant, unemployed].

The data analysis also reveals that these contextual elements are used by the housing association as the basis of their social innovation practices. The neighbourhoods' identity, the territorial sense of belonging and the territorial "safe zone", relate to the proximity approach to social innovation. Indeed, the key practice of the social innovation approach – the creation of the *collectifs d'habitants* – is closely related to the socio-cultural features of the neighbourhood. For example, a HA employee compares the *collectif* to "a community" of the neighbourhood:

> "It is a first step towards the creation of associations and *collectifs d'habitants* which are here for good. (…). It's a bit like [building] a community." [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research officer, HA, North of France].

Another employee of the HA, the project manager, further defines the creation process of the collectives that evokes "a sense of belonging":

> "(…) it means belonging to a local team; they belong to the local team they feel part of the collective of the HA. It is a feeling, a sense of belonging. So, it is sociological, social progress. Now, we don't know how to define it. It could be [defined] in community terms, [as a] collective, tribe, or group." [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France].

It is explicitly explained that the "sense of territorial belonging" shapes social innovation practices developed by the HA. This quote illustrates the local awareness of the importance of a sense of belonging and how it can shape social innovation practices.

In this regard, a SI participant in the *quartier du Belvedere* describes the *collectifs d'habitants* as "little cocoons". The term evokes the territorial "safe zone" identified previously in this section:

> "Ah yes, I tell you, the treasurer [of the *collectif*] is the mother-in-law of my son. We are really a little cocoon." [RI07PDC, female, 57, social tenant, unemployed].

The "safe zone" motivates inhabitants to participate in social innovation activities. For example, the same SI participant stated that she could be involved in the project, as long as "it's in the neighbourhood": "It's fine, as long as it's in the neighbourhood" [RI07PDC, female, 57, social tenant, unemployed]. This statement illustrates that the neighbourhood's inhabitants are willing to be involved in the social innovation activities because it is "safe", "reassuring", and they know the other people who participate in the project through family or friendships links. A participant says that they went together with a friend to the *collectifs d'habitants*' meetings:

> "My friend Valerie, my chick, she lives in the *quartier des Arbres* as well. Elise, she lives in the *quartier des Arbres* too. We form a group. That's us... We knew each other before and we went there together" [RI09PDC, female, 53, social tenant, unemployed].

> "Yes! It's Valerie who told me 'Come on, we go there, you don't know it?' I said OK, here we go, and we went" [RI09PDC, female, 53, social tenant, unemployed].

These territorial characteristics (family links, the territorial safe zone, and the territorial sense of belonging) influence the social innovation practices developed by the HA and enable the production of social value. In the coastal conurbation of the north of France therefore, social innovation practices foster local community development through neighbourhood – in other words, territorially embedded - events initiated by SI participants (HA residents). The main ambition of SI participants is to "animate" and "improve" the neighbourhood, as suggested by a SI participant in the *quartier des Plantes*:

"Myself, I am neither looking for a job because I am retired, nor an entrepreneur. I took part in SI activities when they asked me if there were volunteers to improve the neighbourhood or to create things to improve, so us, in the beginning, we asked to get benches (…). Given that, they explained [the HA] that the objective of SI activities was to do workshops to improve the daily life of the neighbourhood. Make the neighbourhood more beautiful as a retired person. Nothing stopped me, giving a hand to do things, like flower boxes" [RI04PDC, female, 64, social tenant, retired].

The improvement of the neighbourhood is a shared objective among the SI participants. The main actions of the *collectifs d'habitants* are local activities such as fairs, sports contests, sewing workshops or gardening activities, all seen as improving the living environment and the atmosphere within the neighbourhood:

"It enlivens the neighbourhood. Even for the *petanque* contest that we organise [the collective], [we see that] people [now] go out; before that, there was nothing in the neighbourhood, so people stayed at home" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner occupier, employed].

These initiatives to animate the neighbourhood also contribute to fostering local community development and a sense of solidarity within the neighbourhood. First, thanks to the SI practices, the neighbourhood has changed:

"Yes, it has changed a little. Before, there were not so many things. Now there are more things, it's better… The *collectif d'habitants* in the *quartier du Belvedere* has done beautiful things ... for sport [as well as other] activities, the president of the association tries to improve the neighbourhood and it works well" [RI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed]

In turn, this has created a commitment within the neighbourhood, as explained by a SI participant in the *quartier des Arbres,* who described the support from the neighbourhood's inhabitants in their efforts to create a community garden:

"First, I had a lot of help to set up flower boxes. We had to dig the soil because we had no materials (…) I got a lot of support from the inhabitants of the neighbourhood for cleaning the garden squares, for watering the seedlings. They said, 'do you need a hand?' For example, young people, when the saw me, they helped me with carrying buckets to water the vegetable garden." [RI06PDC, female, 50, social tenant, unemployed].

Finally, it has stimulated solidarity activities, closely associated with community development actions. Indeed, one of the main actions of the *collectif d'habitants* in the *quartier du Belvedere* is bread and water pack deliveries for elderly people:

> "My dad is the president of the *collectif*. I participated [in the *collectif d'habitants*] to help them with the delivery of water for people who need it" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner occupier, employed].

Other volunteers in the *quartier du Belvedere* are involved in this activity (bread and water delivery) [RI02PDC, Male, 65, Social tenant, retired; RI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed], which fosters solidarity within this local community and the development of the neighbourhood: "we do a lot of things for the neighbourhood" [RI05PDC, Female, 52, Social tenant, Employed]. The *collectifs d'habitants* strengthen this sense of solidarity, which is also a critical characteristic of the neighbourhood. For example, a *gardien* in the conurbation of the north of France mentions the strong sense of solidarity within the neighbourhood, even if the area is marked by social deprivation: "In fact we will say that precariousness stimulates this solidarity and this conviviality" [KI02PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France]. It seems that "precariousness" contributes to the development of solidarity between inhabitants.

Another stakeholder evokes the "human values" of tenants: "In the group of tenants (…), we have a lot of values, human values, values of mutual aid and the capacity to adapt." [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France]. In this light, the housing association seeks to build this strong sense of solidarity, in order to improve the living environment: "There is a great solidarity between these inhabitants and which the housing association promotes by different means" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research officer, HA, North of France]. Indeed, the social innovation practices developed by the HA, reinforce this solidarity between residents. The stakeholders and more specifically, the *gardiens* who also live next to the residents, show that this solidarity needs to be supported and strengthened: "We see that it comes back a little with the *collectifs d'habitants*, but people had

forgotten a bit, I think. Before, a resident would knock at a neighbour's door: 'you don't happen to have some butter?' Then this was no longer done. Here we see that it has started again thanks to the social innovation project" [KI03PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France]. Therefore, it seems that it is crucial to capitalise on territorial advantages such as solidarity or conviviality and to further strengthen, to develop social innovation practices that build stronger community ties. This "solidarity" demonstrates that social innovation practices are closely related to the neighbourhoods' characteristics.

Consequently, neighbourhoods where social innovation practices have been developed are characterised by a strong sense of territorial belonging and community spirit. These territorial characteristics forge social innovation practices that are based on territorial "proximity". These embedded practices generate social value, which is produced by the proximity approach. Indeed, *collectifs of inhabitants* aim to improve inhabitants' living environment through neighbourhood activities, initiated by HA residents, and supported by the HA proximity team. In the coastal conurbation of the north of France, the HA has developed a territorialised approach to social innovation. This approach produces social value by fostering social cohesion and local community development (Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013) in neighbourhoods where "community" initiatives are significant; it also offers a local response to local needs (Stott & Tracey, 2017).

4.2.3 The individual context of proximity practices: volunteering activities as a means of improving self-esteem

The embeddedness of social innovation practices in the French case is also dependent on individual factors. It is crucial to focus on these micro level forms of embeddedness in order to understand the attachment of residents to their neighbourhood and the motivation of SI participants. For example, residents in the *quartier du Belvedere* evoke their own personal "memories" associated with the neighbourhood:

"In the *quartier du Belvedere*. I have always lived there… I won't forget it, it's my neighbourhood of childhood" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner-occupier, employed].

"When I was younger, I remember, we were around 20 friends behind the basketball hall, down there, and we were drinking, we were bellowing, we were hanging out in the neighbourhood" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner-occupier, employed].

"I will never leave the neighbourhood. We are going to spend the rest of our life here; I can't imagine myself elsewhere" [RI07PDC, female, 57, social tenant, unemployed].

Residents in the *quartier des Arbres* expressed similar views:

"I always said when I was a kid, if I just moved, I would come back to the neighbourhood (…) We lived there being kids, we had good times, we played football." [RI17PDC, female, 35, social tenant, employed].

This emotional attachment to the neighbourhood is associated with the pride that they feel in living in "their neighbourhood" [RI005PDC, female, 52, social tenant, employed]; a neighbourhood which is perceived as a good place to live by residents: "It is enjoyable , we live well"; "It is not like neighbourhoods we can see in other regions, which are burning and everything" [RI01PDC, female, 67, social tenant, retired].

However, there are also negative perceptions of the neighbourhood. The data analysis reveals that HA residents suffer from stigma that is linked to the reputation of their neighbourhood. Even if residents in general like their neighbourhood, they are at the same time conscious of the negative perceptions of outsiders. This is also associated with how social housing residents are seen, often being stereotyped (by different audiences) as "*cas soc'*", which is an offensive and discriminatory label used to refer to those living on benefits, and which can be translated in English as "deadbeat":

"How to explain that? Often when we say housing association, it is poor people, who do not have the means, they're *'des cas soc'* we would say." [RI03PDC, female, 45, social tenant, unemployed].

Inhabitants refer to themselves as "*cas soc'*", conscious of how others perceive them, given that they are social housing residents who live in a deprived neighbourhood. A director of an association, offering employment support in such deprived neighbourhoods, explains that the neighbourhood's inhabitants stigmatise themselves by saying *"moi, je suis un cas soc'"*:

> "They both stigmatise themselves and are stigmatised because that is how it is. And thus, they also respond to the representation that people from outside the neighbourhood may have against them '*moi je suis un cas soc'* how many times we have heard it." [KI07PDC, Key Informant, Director, Employment Support Association, North of France].

This quote illustrates a connection between stigma and territory, identified by Jensen & Christensen (2012), and encapsulated here in the pejorative and offensive denomination of "cas soc'", referring to widespread social representations of a "social misfit" who takes advantage of the benefit system (Coquard, 2019; Bresson, 2019). Interviewees' reluctance to name the place where they live is a reminder of Bourdieu's "power of naming" (1991) and the discriminations associated with names and symbolic power.

Furthermore, both the *quartier des Arbres* and the *quartier des Plantes* are the focus of specific negative associations due to being close to the *donjon* neighbourhood (*Le donjon*), where a national scandal involving paedophilia took place. While the trial concluded more than 20 years ago, its impact on territorial representation is still significant. For example, an employee of a social centre suggested that half of France thinks that people living in this neighbourhood and in the town, are sexual abusers:

> "When you live in this town, you know that half of France thinks that you are a paedophile, that you can't express yourself, that you are unemployed, and you will do nothing in your life, and you know that half of France believes that" - "They pass judgement [on those who live in the neighbourhood]" [KI21PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

An inhabitant of the *quartier des Plantes*, who also volunteers in the *collectif* of the neighbourhood, supports this viewpoint. She describes how the stigma related to the affair has spread out to different audiences, even "a journalist from Paris":

> "Once we welcomed Benoît Hamon [a former candidate for the French presidency in 2017] or Minister Kanner [a former minister of urban affairs] I don't remember, and there was a whole bus of journalists, and there was someone who heard "We're going to this neighbourhood, we're coming to the paedophile district" on the bus with all the journalists, it was heard (…). Yeah, on the bus, there was someone who said, a journalist from Paris, apparently, "we are coming to the paedophile district and all that". And immediately the next morning, we called the mayor and a local journalist. We made a public renouncement. We must stop saying that this is the paedophile district" [RI17PDC, female, 35, social tenant, employed].

These discrimination factors, related to socio-economic deprivation, poverty and a national scandal that involved paedophilia, have reinforced the social exclusion of the neighbourhood's inhabitants. Excluded people, particularly social housing residents in deprived neighbourhoods, suffer from "stigma", an attribute that discredits a person or persons in the eyes of others (Franzoi, 1996). Stigma refers to a lack of legitimacy and people's perceptions and judgments (Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2006), while territorial stigma refers to the neighbourhood's reputation.

Consequently, in the French case study, participants of social innovation activities (SI participants) suffer from stigma related to both who they are and the place in which they live. They are also aware of this discrimination, which leads to a negative self-categorization (Hornsey, 2008) and a lack of self-confidence. One could argue that the housing association has developed a proximity approach, through volunteering activities, in order to valorise the neighbourhood's inhabitants. The negative perceptions of HA residents themselves can be seen as forging the social innovation practices delivered by the housing association, which are designed to improve the self-esteem of SI participants and make them feel useful to the neighbourhood through local volunteering. For example, a volunteer in the *quartier du*

Belvedere states that by participating in the social innovation activities, "we feel that we are useful" [RI12PDC, female, 29, social tenant, unemployed]. SI participants "make themselves useful [this way]" [KI24PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France], as explained by the director of a social centre. The contribution to the neighbourhood through volunteering is also a means to increase participants' feelings of self-worth. For example, as demonstrated previously in this chapter, the sense of solidarity is central to participants' motivation and is associated with a sense of worth. One of the activities conducted by volunteers from the *collectif d'habitants* in the *quartier du Belvedere,* is the delivery of water and bread to the elderly in the neighbourhood:

> "Everyone says it. Whenever people see us, they say, "frankly, what you do is good" because it didn't exist before. Fresh bread distribution, water packs. Doing things that people ask for (…)" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner occupier, employed].

> "And people are very grateful. Yes, we are well thanked (...) People understand that we try to do something" [RI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed].

This "feeling of being useful" to the neighbourhood has been identified as a primary source of motivation for volunteering. The usefulness of the volunteering activities that have been identified, is also a means to acquire social recognition for volunteers and to build a local reputation by improving the daily life of the neighbourhood's residents. An employee of a social centre clearly describes the connection between volunteering activities and social recognition:

> "It's a social recognition. It is the fact of being recognized as an adult by their neighbours, by their family, by their children, as someone who matters. Some people embark on politics for that. I have people on my board of directors; there is pride for them to be on the board of directors of a social centre. It's good, it's this need for recognition that exists, including for some young people. So, it can push them to volunteer" [KI21PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

Similarly, an employee of a social centre highlights the link between volunteering activities and "a kind of social status". Volunteering in a social centre or another local organisation, contributes to giving social housing residents "social status":

> "When we volunteer, we have a specific role. It's a kind of status, as if we were an employee of a business, I think we can volunteer in a social centre. It's also a recognition" [KI22PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre (in t*he quartier du Belvedere*), North of France].

Participants have "a role to play" in the neighbourhood. Volunteering activities provide them with local and social recognition. Therefore, these proximity-based practices generate social value. In turn, a changing social status acquired through volunteering, reinforces volunteers' self-esteem. A SI participant in the *quarter des Arbres* talks about a feeling of collective pride in the activities of the inhabitants:

> "Yes, it's true that we are proud of what we are doing. People see what we do; at least it ends in something. People are happy. When people say, 'that's beautiful, well done', it makes you feel good, (…). We are happy about what we're doing" [RI04PDC, female, 64, social tenant, retired].

This pride, which improves inhabitants' self-esteem, is even more noticeable when it concerns residents with learning difficulties and social issues. An employee of a social centre provides the example of a resident who also volunteers in the *collectif d'habitants* in the *quartier des Arbres*. Volunteering in the *collectif* as a SI participant, is a way to show everyone that he can manage gardening activities. Volunteering is also a way to prove himself to other neighbours:

> "Maurice is someone who doesn't know how to read or write. And his recognition to him is his pride in showing everyone that he is able to cultivate a garden…" [KI21PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France]

The last example helps to understand the rewarding effect of volunteering activities. Local leaders emerge within the neighbourhood that is associated with volunteering and *collectifs d'habitants'* activities. Ethnographic observations reveal that specific nicknames are given to representative volunteers to show their elevated social status: "the minister", "the

president" and "the ambassador". For example, during an interview with a participant, an employee of a social centre, in which the interviewee is volunteering, called the lady "*Madame la ministre*": "Sorry Madam Minister, you have to call [this person] … later" [RI01PDC, female, 67, social tenant, retired]. This nickname is given to the volunteer to show how busy and occupied she is in volunteering activities. Ethnographic observations show that she is recognised and hailed by everyone in the neighbourhood as a local leader.

Most volunteers are either unemployed or retired people who participate in the social innovation activities "to alleviate boredom" and "change the daily routine":

> "When we arrived here, it's true that after all, the days are long when your children left. I still have a girl at home, but she is 20 years old. She is at school. I was alone all day at home because she ate in the canteen." [RI03PDC, female, 45, social tenant, unemployed].

> "Well, to see people, like that, it changes the daily routine, it's better than being locked up at home, being alone. It's true that it's ... for us. It was a good break; we got together, drank coffee, and talked. It was like family if you like. Sharing our opinions, advice, we were in a group, we worked in a group, we helped each other" [RI04PDC, female, 64, social tenant, retired].

From a participant of the *quartier des Plantes*, this last statement highlights the importance of "groups" and togetherness in volunteering. These references also show that volunteering contributes to social inclusion by offering opportunities to socialise. In doing so, it addresses "loneliness" and avoids issues associated with having too much free time:

> "They always say that I'm always here. It's because I really want it, I am alone and I feel lonely, it's difficult for me, I need to share and even my know-how or whatever. It kills time" [RI13PDC, female, 60, private rental, unemployed].

One might argue that volunteering may be therapeutic for volunteers, as suggested by another respondent in the *quartier du Belvedere,* who states that "it's vital" to volunteer:

> "And it enriches me, I don't regret coming here and I say I couldn't do without it. Even though I will go back to full time work, for the moment I only want to start part-time precisely for this reason and at the same time keep the

link here [with the Social Centre]. No, it's vital" [RI12PDC, female, 29, social tenant, unemployed].

Another participant explains that she is volunteering "to take my mind off things" and "not to think about our misfortune" [RI13PDC, female, 60, private rental, retired]. In this sense then, volunteering is also a means to escape from social isolation:

> "There are many people who are isolated in the neighbourhood too. That's why I know what it is, I have a boy, but he's big now, so yes, we are a little bit isolated. That's why I'm trying to go to people. That's the point. It's not to stay at home and deliberate on our misfortune but rather go to others. It is important" [RI13PDC, female, 60, private rental, unemployed].

This statement emphasises the role of volunteering activities in fostering social inclusion, which is a critical issue within the neighbourhood. Volunteering initiatives, developed and promoted through proximity-based social innovation practices, are central actions that help to address this challenge. In this regard, the social innovation approach developed by the housing association in the coastal conurbation in the north of France, generates social value by improving well-being and combating social exclusion. Moreover, the data analysis shows that the social value produced matches the contextual factors of the neighbourhood.

Finally, the findings show that social innovation practices contribute to embellishing the neighbourhood's image and those who live there, through volunteering activities initiated by residents. For example, the director of a local social centre explains that the improvement of the neighbourhood's image helps to also valorise social housing residents:

> "And as soon as you work with them on valorisation, recognition, I say it all the time here. We have to work on the image. It's really important to valorise all knowledge. I really want to show that in this town, each resident knows how to do something. It's important, whatever, whether you're an artist or a sportsman, that's not a problem, there are enough structures, but even the guy who knows how to repair a television, a coffee maker, anything, you have to highlight it. We will show that in this town, we find many people who master a lot of knowledge. And for me, that's needed. I always say to those elected, we will change the image of this town because we will change the image of its

residents. It is by starting from its residents that we will improve the town"
[KI21PDC Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

This last reference demonstrates that social innovation practices are closely interconnected to neighbourhood characteristics, social representations, and personal feelings. The proximity approach to social innovation generates a social value which is both related to the territory (neighbourhood activities, improving the neighbourhood) and HA residents (social valorisation, increasing self-esteem). Social innovation practices are embedded at the territorial, organisational, and individual level, whilst "proximity" emerges as the characterisation of this embedding and shapes the SI practices that make the housing association a social innovator.

4.3 The "personal development" approach to social innovation in the English case

The second section focuses on the analysis of the embedded social innovation practices developed by the housing association in the south of England. These practices are embedded through a "personal development" approach to social innovation. Three contextual factors, at the macro, meso, and micro levels, help to examine embedded social innovation practices.

First, the data analysis demonstrates that the "personal development" approach is related to the HA structure and culture. The HA in the coastal county of the south of England provides a MEESS (Micro-Enterprise and Employment Support Service), an organisation that focuses on professional development through the delivery of training and workshops for HA residents and non-residents across the county. Thus, the social innovation practices are based on this organisational competency which defines the "personal development" approach. In the English case study, the HA has delivered MEESS throughout the county in the south of England where the organisation has dwellings. The local context relates to partnerships, local networks and cooperation between different organisations involved in employment and self-

employment support at the county level. Indeed, the personal development approach connects social innovation practices and these local characteristics. Local embeddedness of social innovation practices refers to a more fluid understanding of space and place, where territorial characteristics (identities and boundaries) have less influence on social innovation practices. Finally, the individual context is also crucial to understanding the embedded social innovation practices in which people's wellbeing is a central characteristic.

4.3.1 The housing association: a MEESS organisation with a strong ethos around personal development

The housing association in the English case study has been providing micro-enterprise and employment support training since 2012 by a specific and dedicated Employment and Support Team (EST). The data analysis demonstrates that social innovation practices developed by the HA are integrated into these existing support services, for those seeking support in their professional development (job seekers and would-be entrepreneurs). The housing association is experienced by SI participants as a MEESS organisation, rather than a housing organisation. The housing side is "pretty irrelevant" with regards to what the housing association delivers in terms of micro-enterprise and employment support training:

> "Because it's to do with social, which is the housing and they have seen a need and okay, it doesn't appear to be directly connected to housing, but that doesn't stop them presenting, which they did very well, this particular course. The fact that it's housing is pretty irrelevant, actually. It's just an organization that saw a need and is providing meaningful and pretty inspiring lectures, talks. I enjoyed all of them" [RI14HAM, male, 46, private rental, self-employed].

Indeed, MEESS are experienced as "a separate thing" [RI18HAM, male, 44, owner-occupier, self-employed] to housing, by SI participants who are, in a large majority, not HA residents. However, a HA employee explains that the EST team is a specific service of the housing

association, which develops social innovation practices and their outputs even if it is not specifically related to housing:

> "The Employment Training Support team, we do employability skills training, confidence building. So yeah absolutely. So that's what's great working with a team that's also specialized in employment support and training because when some of that might not be suitable for us to start business because it's self-employed, but we then refer them to the Employment Support Team. Beyond that, we help them with CVs. But also, employability training confidence" [KI02HAM, Key Informant, Business Advisor, HA, South of England].

The ethnographic observations carried out during the EU-funded social innovation project partner meetings (see table 6) helped to gain an understanding of the social innovation practices. The "personal development" approach includes three steps. First, a one-day seminar provides information to interested participants about the courses available and what the HA can offer them. Step two involves four sessions consisting of group workshops, one-to-one mentoring, home study, and market research. These are designed to provide SI participants with tools ranging from initial market research to formulating a business plan. Alternatively, SI participants can undertake a short two-day course which covers self-employment advice for contractors. The third step consists of post course support for up to two years, to help the start-up grow through, for example, marketplace events and one to one business mentoring with business experts. MEESS delivered by the HA are thus based on a methodology that fits the expertise of the HA.

Based on statements from SI participants, the organisation is highly competent in delivering micro-enterprise training. For example, the participants below explain why the HA is a credible and trustworthy organisation for delivering this type of training:

> "It was surprising. I didn't understand really why they were doing that, but it seems like that's, it's almost like a group within the business that is really specialized just on that. I would have expected it to be a professional, we help businesses organization rather than a housing organization, but honestly, it didn't really make an impact on the course itself or it didn't ever feel like you're actually

working with a housing organization. It felt like it's a separate thing. It was really, really, really well done, I have to say" [RI18HAM, male, 44, owner-occupier, self-employed].

"It wasn't apparent that they're a housing association. What it was clear was you're getting good competent training from people who knew what they were talking about, were willing to listen to what you were doing, and you were in that environment with other people in the same position as you, so yes, I really enjoyed it. I thought it was really, really valuable, and I'm still doing more development stuff, but that was a really strong foundation, a really strong foundation." [RI07HAM, male, 55, owner-occupier, self-employed].

The EST team thus represents a clear organisational asset for the housing association in terms of delivering these social innovation activities. Micro-enterprise services are embedded practices that match the organisational structure and culture. In this regard, the manager of the EST team describes the HA characteristics and confirms that this service which delivers micro-enterprise training, is not "a separate thing", but an integral part of the HA:

"So, I manage the employment support and training team we`re integral part of the housing association. There's 18 members of the team now we support residents into employment training or self-employment. Or mixture of the three" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

"Yeah, [we've got] a little bit of experience. I think that's put us in a good position for delivering social innovation activities. We had seen other training providers do it, so no it's not good enough and then developed our own. So, I think we were we, were lucky from that experience. But we've had that bit of experience prior to coming into the programme. (…) I'm really lucky. I have a team that passionately believe in what we do and that makes a big difference" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

Furthermore, these organisational characteristics, such as services being provided by experienced and passionate training providers, represent a cornerstone for the development of social innovation practices. The approach developed by the housing association is "all about people" and "built on people", which shows that these practices are closely related to the personal development approach. On this point, the EST team manager evokes this central dimension of the social innovation approach implemented by the housing association:

"And I think with any social innovation if the ideas have come from people that are going to be involved then you're building a model that will work because it's being built by people" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

From this perspective, the personal development approach refers to the capacity of people to determine their own lives and enhance their capabilities or agency. It is a person-centred approach focusing on individuals, as a local authority employee, who had partnered with the HA, explained [KI05HAM, Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England]. It also aims to support "people who have a different outlook on life" [KI06HAM, Key Informant, Housing Officer, HA, South of England]. The approach seeks to foster the self-fulfilment of SI participants. Another HA employee explains that the role of MEESS is "to ensure that we [the HA] give them the best chance they've got [to succeed]" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

Accordingly, SI participants recognise that this person-centred approach generates "social value", which is associated with personal development. For example, two participants explain that MEESS target the improvement of people's lives and situations:

"I think the social value … it is very important. I think people who are struggling possibly with mental health problems, you don't really know much about that side of people's lives in the HA, but I imagine that people are feeling quite vulnerable, have been very grateful to the HA to be there, and they can just join in the Zoom meeting [MEESS training delivered online]" [RI21HAM, female, 46, owner-occupier, self-employed].

"I think from a social perspective, I really like that, that it's not about. It's trying to help people improve their situations and strive for more, give them the confidence that they could go and do something they've always wanted to do, perhaps haven't even thought about it before. I really like that aspect of it" [RI13HAM, female, 41, owner-occupier, self-employed].

This "social perspective" encapsulates what another SI participant calls "the real ethos around personal development" [RI22HAM, female, 51, owner-occupier, unemployed] associated with the social innovation practices developed by the HA, which is perceived as a social services

provider that "really wants to help people" [RI20HAM, female, 43, owner-occupier, self-employed]. These references, which stress the social dimension of services provided, are also supported by more vulnerable people who evoke the impact of activities on their "mental health" and "self-confidence". For example, a male participant, who suffers from severe health issues, evokes the personal development side of support services that go beyond micro-enterprise and employment support:

> "Obviously, with my situation, I'm stuck at home and it's just that I'm looking at four walls. So, this was just something different and something to literally look forward to. Because of my foot, I couldn't go walking around or anything. It was almost like sounding like a kid, something to look forward to. It was helpful, informative" [RI10HAM, male, 53, social tenant, unemployed].

> "Even mental health is gaining off the chart. So, I think something like the HA doing it. Considering that they might have someone who wants to get out, who wants to do something but it's almost like myself. Sometimes, I literally have to rack myself to go out because it's almost like you can't go out. (…) I think for things like your mental health as well, I think the HA should be pushing more of that" [RI10HAM, male, 53, social tenant, unemployed].

In the same vein, a younger participant endorses this personal development approach, making a strong statement about the value of such HA services. She describes the impact of "the meetings" with the HA on her personal life, asserting that "it just changed me as a person" [RI05HAM, female, 24, social tenant, unemployed], adding that:

> "The social innovation activities, it helped me a lot with it. It's made me more confident, more happy along with that. (…) It clicked something inside my mind, so it's made me more open about the idea, it's inspired me it's me and it just made me more positive, and my friends or families notice that (…). Before, I was always miserable, I didn't talk to anybody. After this, this has helped me. I think it's made me a better person than what I was before" [RI05HAM, female, 24, social tenant, unemployed].

Thus, through delivering MEESS training, the housing association has developed embedded practices that are built around a personal development ethos. Indeed, in the south of England, the HA concentrates on the capacity of people to determine their own lives. This

personal development approach, centred on individuals, defines the methodology used by the HA to implement social innovation practices and produce social value. In emphasizing the crucial role of individuals in developing innovative solutions to social problems, it is reminiscent of the entrepreneurial approach to social innovation (Mulgan, 2006).

4.3.2 Facilitating the development of social innovation practices through local partnerships and cooperation

In the English case study, the personal development approach to social innovation is based on local partnerships and cooperations across the county in which the HA carries out its activities. The data analysis demonstrates that the HA has established solid and trustworthy relationships with local organisations who are involved in professional development programmes, such as local business support organisations [KI04HAM Key Informant, Business Support Manager, Business Support Organisation, South of England] or local authorities [KI05HAM Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England] [KI09HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager- Planning and Economic Development, Local Authority, South of England]. The EST team manager of the HA explains that partnering through the development of partnerships, is part of the HA method in the implementation of social innovation practices:

> "In the all, it is very positive. So, we try, in establishing any areas we're working on. We are always trying to establish that relationship with jobs centres or training providers. We have run work programme initiatives so where we've teamed up with the work programme provider and we've provided 40 placements for young people. Over a two-and-a-half-year period. Worked incredibly well. So, we're always open to partners. Both with local employers, with job centres and other employment support providers would always be really happy. I formed in January this year I formed a multi housing association group. It was for the leaders of their employment support services to meet on a bimonthly basis to discuss who's doing what how it's going (…) And it's been very positive" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

In the south of England, to enable the development of social innovation practices, establishing local partnerships is crucial. As explained by a partner of the housing association from a local authority, "what you need to find [is] to enable that partnership to work has a common goal" [KI09HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager- Planning and Economic Development, Local Authority, South of England]. Social innovation practices are thus embedded in a local context that is marked by local partnerships and cooperations, which are in turn essential to the effective development of MEESS: "I think partnership is, without that concept of partnership it just wouldn't work" [KI05HAM, Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England].

The data analysis also shows that the method used by the housing association to target and recruit SI participants, is based on these local characteristics. Partnerships between the housing association and other local organisations, contribute to recruiting participants for MEESS. For example, one participant heard about a MEESS training at an event organised by a local city council:

> "I went to the S-city council. They held a job fair. The HA had a stand there. I was looking for any job. At this point I needed something, so I was looking. I'm open" [RI02HAM, male, 57, owner-occupier, self-employed].

Another participant heard about the MEESS training at a job centre:

> "From the job centre. I told them that I would like to have my own business to do with the Egyptian culture because I've always loved it. Then they put me on to a place called The PCMI Centre where they helped along with the social innovation activities" [RI05HAM, female, 24, social tenant, unemployed].

These examples demonstrate that partnerships are crucial to recruiting SI participants across the county, and that they facilitate the development of social innovation practices.

Another element of this local embeddedness approach is the community-based dimension of social innovation activities delivered by the housing association. In the south of

England case, "communities" are broadly defined, referring to social structures but not necessarily local ones. Indeed, "community" is a fluid notion that is not limited to a territorial dimension, as explained by a participant who states that "you can't get too specific about it" [the community]" [RI14HAM, male, 46, private rental, self-employed]. This broad understanding of "community" is also mentioned by a HA project manager who associates "community" with personal development characteristics such as "self-employment", "self-improvement" and "starting a business"; so, the ties that bind this community are an orientation towards personal development. This notion of community is not directly associated with a particular location in the south of England context and may be quite dispersed in a geographical sense:

> "Your own community is about self-employment, self-improvement and starting a business. You're not part of a community because "Oh I live here" [KI01HAM_1, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England].

For these participants, the community refers to a supportive group of people who share "a common purpose". For example, the EST team manager of the HA describes the "online community" of SI participants as a supportive community, not necessarily associated with a territorial feature:

> "It doesn't have to be. I don't think. I mean it's great if you've got a local community in that community strongly support one another. And I think you can have an online community as well. Because you've all got that common purpose. The common purpose is you're setting up a business as it is the other hundred and four people in that in that community. So, you've got an instant support network. Which I think is key" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

Thus, the social innovation practices delivered by the housing association recreate the spirit of a community of people who share "a common goal". Even if self-development is central to this social innovation approach, building communities is also a focal point in that it supports participants' aspirations to develop themselves. For example, two participants point out the

importance of being part of a "likeminded group of people" to get support for their professional (self-employment and employment) projects:

> "Community. Well, being a part of like-minded group of people, thinking the same, exploring the same ideas or problems, trying to solve, giving, and doing things without-- Giving back without expecting anything is very liberating and that's a new thing for me (…). It was just meeting other people like myself, thinking, "Oh, there are other people like me who are trying to do their own thing, looking for---"" [RI06HAM, male, 41, private rental, employed].

> "I've worked in the past as a freelancer writer and worked on various arts projects, and I found a spring to life as soon as I'm around like-minded people, so the most valuable thing about the social innovation programme was right from the get-go. You feel like you've come home and it's not just you, having a crazy idea, there are other people out there doing those things as well" [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed].

This sense of community that gathers people with the same objective, is crucial for participants, offering them support and confidence. From the HA point of view, creating communities is a critical achievement. An employee of the HA explains how, during training sessions, the HA team underlines the importance of the community spirit and of participants, feeling that they are part of "a bigger community of entrepreneurs":

> "I always, at the beginning of the project, on the first day, on the first course workshop, I explain that "You are part of a larger project. This is not just about you, 10 people who are on this course now. You are a part of 500 people we've trained. Those 500 people are part of a cross channel project that is delivering different models to different people in different areas," so that they realize that this is a much bigger thing than what they're doing. What they're involved in is a little-- We're building that community. I always say to them, "Your little group will become a bigger group, and then you'll be part of a bigger community of entrepreneurs." Yes, it's just about really reinforcing that to people" [KI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England].

Therefore, building communities is part of the social innovation approach. Communities represent a critical resource for participants and belonging to the community fosters

confidence-building and knowledge development. Thus, the community-based approach promoted by the housing association, is closely related to the personal development lens. For example, a participant demonstrates that the "friendly" and welcoming environment has contributed to giving him confidence and motivating him:

> "What did really affect me and motivate me a lot was just the friendly accepting manner of the people who were teaching. I felt as though I was very welcomed there, it was very much making in those terms" [RI04HAM, male, 65, social tenant, self-employed].

The focus on community shows that the housing association wants to create a supportive environment between participants, rather than a competitive spirit. Participants describe this mutual help between attendees, based on interactions between individuals who follow the same objective as building a community of entrepreneurs. Indeed, the different statements from participants indicate that, in many cases, these peer interactions are more important than the training delivered by the HA. This level of interaction, described as "respectful" and "enthusiastic" by a participant [RI22HAM, female, 51, owner-occupier, unemployed], encapsulates the uniqueness of the services delivered by the HA. For example, a participant explains that "it was [not] just listening to a course online" [RI13HAM, female, 41, owner-occupier, self-employed]. Similarly, a participant who has developed and established his business, stresses the "family" spirit offered on the course:

> "Almost it feels a little bit like a family, which is important when you're in a situation where you're really not confident of, will I do it? Will I be successful? They help you. They really help you on many different levels, technical skills but also in here" [RI18HAM, male, 44, owner-occupier, self-employed].

In this light, the social innovation activities delivered by the English HA are firmly founded on a community-building approach that matches the personal development approach to social innovation promoted by the housing association. Collaborations and communities generate social capital and self-confidence among SI participants and, in this sense, these social

innovation practices are embedded. The findings show that this community-based approach of embeddedness goes beyond a purely territorial (local) perspective of communities. It is a dimension that is a critical element in the oft-cited definition of social innovation formulated by the European Commission, which emphasises the development of new social relationships, collaborations, and partnerships to tackle social exclusion (European Commission, 2013).

Finally, the inclusive recruitment of self-employment support training is another element that reinforces the personal development approach elaborated by the housing association. These self-employment courses are "free and open to anyone" [RI13HAM, female, 41, owner-occupier, self-employed], strengthening the community spirit and encouraging social value generation.

> "You don't have to pay for the workshop. You have a group of experts working with you and you don't have to pay for their help. They're offering their help" [RI21HAM, female, 46, owner-occupier, self-employed].

This crucial characteristic reinforces the social dimension of self-employment support services, and highlights the inclusive approach implemented by the housing association at the level of personal development. One participant, describing the personal development dimension of social innovation activities, stated that she felt "accepted" by the HA during support training, which had fostered her self-confidence:

> "With the housing association, they're more professional and they help. They treat me like I'm an adult, but with the job centre as I was there as a kid growing up, they all require-- You're not going to do anything. With the HA, it just helped because they accepted me for who I am and treated me like I was a part of the team. With the job centre, they're just really rude" [RI05HAM, female, 24, social tenant, unemployed].

Throughout this comparison, the participant underlined the HA's inclusive recruitment practices. An employee of the HA shows that the diversity of participants is very intentional, and an important characteristic of the social innovation activities delivered by the housing association:

"Again, there's different diversity there. I think it's very much a geographical thing for us and working with our stakeholders and our different organizations that's allowed us to really bring in people from different backgrounds, both different ethnic backgrounds, different financial and economic backgrounds" [KI01HAM_1, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England].

Participants also commented on this diversity, positively perceiving the "good mix of people" during business support courses. Indeed "the good variety of people" [RI21HAM, female, 46, owner-occupier, self-employed] is seen as enriching the course by bringing different ideas and perspectives:

"It was a really good group because we had some similarities but essentially, we were all running quite different businesses which is really good because then you're bringing different ideas and bringing different perspectives. We had a bakery business, a men's coaching business, t-shirt designer, a couple of food cooperative shops, and then obviously me doing the paintings so quite different participants. The good thing is we were all bringing different ideas to the table and seeing things from different perspectives as well" [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed].

Consequently, the social innovation practices are embedded in a specific local context, characterised by local partnerships between the housing association and local stakeholders across the county. This partnership approach enables the development of social innovation practices because it facilitates the recruitment of SI participants from different backgrounds (HA residents and non-HA residents). However, the findings also reveal that cooperation and mutual help between SI participants is not necessarily related to local characteristics. Indeed, the different quotes from Key Informant stakeholders and SI participants, suggests a broader meaning of supporting "communities" which are not necessarily local. For these participants, "communities" can simply refer to groups of people who share similar interests and objectives, associated with personal development. However, although these communities are not territorially embedded, they are supported by local partnerships between the housing association and other local stakeholders. From this perspective, the local context still shapes

this broad definition of "communities". Consequently, the relationship between social innovation practices and the local context is complex in the coastal county of the south of England: the local context facilitates the development of social innovation practices but does not define the community spirit that characterises the activities delivered by the HA.

4.3.3 Personal development as a matter of belief and wellbeing

As identified in the previous sub-section, the housing association delivers MEESS which are free and open to anyone. These key characteristics define the cohort of SI participants, and therefore lead to a group which is highly diverse. This inclusive dimension in the recruitment of participants relates to the personal development approach that focuses more on "individuals" who share a common goal: launching and developing a professional project (micro-business or other forms of employment) that fits their lifestyles. In this regard, motivational factors, beliefs, and values, are crucial elements that must be considered in order to understand how the personal development approach is embedded and leads to social innovation. The housing association develops practices – MEESS centred on individuals' professional projects - that suit micro-level factors. Furthermore, this micro-level form of embeddedness enables the housing association to produce social value through personal development-based practices. This social value is therefore closely related to the individual level, namely work-life balance, and wellbeing.

First, the data analysis shows that most SI participants are would-be entrepreneurs. In view of this, several participants associate their entrepreneurial journey with their personal circumstances. Entrepreneurship represents a mission or a belief. For example, a male participant, who has set up a mental health first aider service, explains that this business is closely related to his personal story. More precisely, he had a traumatic experience – the loss of his girlfriend:

"18 months ago, my girlfriend was murdered. Over the road there. It's real. I still hurt, there's still memories, I still walk around, and I see things and it triggers, so I feel down, but I know why I feel down, right? So, I think of happy times that we'd had together, and how she'd tell me not to be daft or laugh, a memory, so I keep going. (…) It's about them being aware of, one, that it's okay to not feel okay, and two, that there's no judgment involved and that people, loads and loads of people, everybody in fact, to varying degrees, has some sort of bad day. Some days, you're feeling good. Some days you're feeling bad. It's what you do with it or what you support people who are feeling that way, how you support them to help them get past or live with the upset, that slight imbalance of well-being" [RI14HAM, male, 53, private rental, self-employed].

A younger participant also evokes personal stories or narratives to explain her motivation to start a business. Her entrepreneurial intention reflects a belief, a long-term project; she connects her entrepreneurial ambition to her personal story:

"When my dad was alive, we had the idea of having our own business. I wanted to carry on with that to make him proud, because when he passed away, I found it hard. This is something that we discussed, so I'd like to make it real, so it's like he's still here with me" [RI05HAM, female, 24, social tenant, unemployed].

The ways in which SI participants' entrepreneurial projects are forged by personal circumstances, demonstrates that micro-level factors, such as individual backgrounds or trauma (e.g., the loss of a relative), impact the actions of SI participants. To a certain extent, it also impacts the social innovation practices developed by the HA, built around personal development. Another participant, a climate crisis activist, connects this ethics to his business: a gardening training service that helps people to grow their vegetables. There is "a bit of a mission and a passion behind it [his business] as well" [RI04HAM, male, 65, social tenant, self-employed]. He explains the purpose his business in the context of his non-conformist lifestyle:

"The interesting thing about them was that they had an extremely strong ethic of not getting involved in mainstream (…) Eventually, my family, the kids grew up and it fell apart. I ended up back to England living on a river side with basically what would be-- it was a tribe of people, like post-punk rocker tribe and they were living in benders and homemade houses and shacks and anything

like that (…) I was growing some vegetables for the community and topping up with collecting scrap metal and making music on the street" [RI04HAM, male, 65, social tenant, self-employed].

The micro-business he set up is based on his lifestyle, beliefs and ethics. Indeed, "looking after the planet" [RI04HAM, male, 65, social tenant, self-employed] is at the heart of his motivations and aspirations:

> "The ethics that I have are based on looking after the planet. That's the major motivation, really, at the moment-- not at the moment, it's a lifelong thing" [RI04HAM, male, 65, social tenant, self-employed].

Statements from an HA employee confirms that "narratives" and "story telling" are crucial components for nascent entrepreneurs. This "personal" dimension to the entrepreneurial journey is encouraged through MEESS training. Indeed, according to the HA employee, SI participants (would-be entrepreneurs) need to "have a story to tell" to succeed:

> "We say to people, "If you have a story to tell about your business, if your unique selling point is you and your journey, you need to let people know that because people invest in people. They love that idea of, 'I've done this. I've been there. I've done that,'" thing. We've got a lovely lady who came through on the course last year, had very, very, very severe postnatal depression following the birth of her child. Her business called Soap and Hope came from that experience of this very dark, dark time that she was in during post postnatal depression" [KI01HAM_01, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England].

In this regard, analysing entrepreneurial intentions contributes to seeing the micro-level dimension of the personal development approach developed by the HA in the south of England. As explained by Trajano and colleagues (2022), becoming an entrepreneur is a voluntary and conscious decision, influenced by specific personal factors such as attitude, subjective norms, desires or beliefs. These personal features, identified at the level of SI participants, demonstrate that social innovation practices are embedded in an individual context.

Furthermore, these embedded practices enable the production of social value at the microlevel. More precisely, the housing association develops social innovation practices that

aim at raising aspirations among SI participants who associate entrepreneurial ambitions with wellbeing. SI participants expect to improve their wellbeing by embarking upon an entrepreneurial project. The data analysis demonstrates that wellbeing at work and work-life balance are two key factors that motivate participants to join the MEESS training. According to a HA employee, SI participants are deeply attached to "a sense of wellbeing", which explains why they participate in MEESS training [KI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England]. For example, four SI participants ([RI07HAM, male, 55, owner-occupier, self-employed] [RI20HAM, female, 43, owner-occupier, self-employed] [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed] [RI18HAM, male, 44, owner-occupier, self-employed]) evoke the drawbacks of being employed and compare their current working situation (as self-employed) with their previous one (as employed). A male participant mentions his previous working environment and states that he "didn't like most of the people" he "worked for". This situation represents a motivating factor for being self-employed:

> "That's what I need because that's the contrast to what I had before. To be honest, I didn't like most of the people I worked for anyway. Now, that will be, if I don't like my clients, I keep smiling, and remember they're paying me money" [RI07HAM, male, 55, owner-occupier, self-employed].

Another participant who has started her own business, associates "being employed" with a lack of agency which generates frustration:

> "Also, just sometimes the frustration when you're employed of feeling like what you're doing isn't making a difference because everything's so slow to enact change sometimes. I think when you work with people who don't really care about what they're doing, it's hard to achieve any change at all" [RI20HAM, female, 43, owner-occupier, self-employed].

Along the same lines, the findings reveal that participants perceive and feel self-employment as "liberating" and associate it with "flexibility". For example, two participants saw becoming self-employed is an opportunity to escape harmful working conditions. The first one, a female

participant who works in a festival theatre, explains that the behaviour of her manager was the motivation to launch her own business:

> "It almost spoils the working environment. It has been a source of unhappiness to me, actually. In 2019, I made a complaint about him, and he apologized, but then, before Christmas, he appeared to be going back to his old behaviour again (…) Yes, because I'd be my own boss and the problems that I've described to you, like with the manager at the Festival Theatre, I wouldn't experience that because basically, it's down to me. My mistakes, I can't blame anyone else for them, but also my successes, I'll know that they are my own successes that I have created" [RI11HAM, female, 44, private rental, employed].

Similarly, a female participant described the terrible working conditions in a call centre, stating that it was riskier to stay employed in a call centre than to become self-employed:

> "I was working in a call centre and just reached perhaps the limit with KPIs targets and having no lunch break (…) To me, it's more of a risk to die in a call centre. [laughing]" [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed]

She went on to describe the liberating effect of being self-employed:

> "I literally feel I can breathe again when I'm self-employed. I feel so caught up and so not myself when I'm in an office, told when I can go to lunch, told when-- how many calls I've got to take a day in so many seconds" [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed].

The different statements from SI participants seem to demonstrate that being self-employed is more likely to deliver good working conditions than being employed. Participants describe becoming self-employed as liberating, as the following statement from a male participant illustrates:

> "The first word that comes to my mind is liberating. It's possibly not the first word that many people would say, but it is liberating because you see every decision you make has an impact" [RI18HAM, male, 44, owner-occupier, self-employed].

Other statements from SI participants show that work-life balance is also an objective that drew them to the MEESS training. Being self-employed or a micro-business manager, is experienced as a way to "have more freedom over my life" [RI02HAM, male, 57, owner-

occupier, self-employed], "juggle parenthood", "spend more time with the family" [RI03HAM, Male, 36, owner-occupier, self-employed] and "get that flexibility":

> "My children have both had some health difficulties, which means that whenever I'm employed, I've felt this constant battle between wanting to be a good employee, but also needing to take time off to go and take my child to the hospital or things like that. It goes against my nature to not-- Yes, I want to give it my all and I didn't feel like really I was able to and it became quite stressful to juggle that (…).
>
> I guess, working for yourself, I can pick and choose. If I know that something's going on with the children, now I can work the hours that suits me. Yes, I get that flexibility (…).
>
> I think probably one of them would be what I mentioned earlier about the juggle of parenthood, especially when you got children who have lots of medical appointments. Having that flexibility so that I don't let people down" [RI20HAM, female, 43, owner-occupier, self-employed].

Therefore, flexibility, work-life balance, and the need for decent working conditions, represent critical motivations associated with wellbeing at work. These stated outcomes show that MEESS are clearly associated with wellbeing and a desire to regain agency in working lives. In this regard, the HA in the south of England has developed a personal development approach to social innovation that generates social value that is bound up with improved wellbeing. In this sense, the HA in the coastal county of the south of England, assumes a social innovation role. Indeed, from an agent-centred perspective, wellbeing improvement is one of the main objectives of social innovation (Fulgencio & Le Fever, 2016).

4.4 From housing associations to social innovators

This in-depth exploration of two cases reveals the complex interactions between contextual factors and social innovation practices. The two cases under investigation differ: they are marked by specific contexts that shape the social innovation approaches developed by the housing associations. As regards the French case study, strong territorial identity, the proximity of HA services and the residents' motivations based on neighbourhood activity and self-esteem

improvements, are the key contextual characteristics that forge the proximity approach. Concerning the English case study, the partnership approach to place embeddedness, the Employment Support Service of the HA, and the entrepreneurial ambitions of SI participants, ambitions that are associated with their values, beliefs, and well-being, are contextual features that forge the personal development approach. The interactions between the micro, the meso, and the macro levels help to understand the embeddedness of social innovation.

At the same time, the findings from the within-case analysis reveal some similarities between the actions undertaken by the housing associations in the two contexts. Although as local non-profit organisations, the housing associations have always had a strong local presence that has affected residents, the development of embedded social innovation practices is giving them a new role. This key finding reveals the crucial role that organisations play in the social innovation process.

In the coastal conurbation of the north of France, the housing association is an OPH (*Office Publique de l'Habitat*), a specific type of housing association that "accommodates the most vulnerable people who live sometimes not just in poverty, but in a situation of social exclusion" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research officer, HA, North of France]. Thus, before developing its social innovation practices, the housing association was already providing affordable housing to excluded people, in financially precarious situations. However, the housing association has capitalised on this existing role and used contextual constraints to become a social innovator. The HA research officer explains that the housing association has developed social innovation practices that are particularly suited to economically marginalised people:

> "Of course, that is to say that we are going to specialize with the development of social innovation practices in the creation of so-called specific training courses which are particularly suited to audiences far removed from the economic cycle. We have a 70 to 90% unemployment rate in the prototype areas

[where social innovation practices are implemented]. (…) They must be supported by their *gardiens* in order to help them to have more initiative" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research officer, HA, North of France].

The housing association has adapted its social innovation practices to produce social value and become a social innovator.

In the coastal county of the south of England, the housing association has been providing micro-enterprise and employment support training since 2012. However, the development of social innovation practices is helping the housing association to target a wider audience, as explained by the project manager of a business support organisation [KI04HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business support organisation, South of England], with a person-centred training course. Indeed, MEESS courses are attended by both HA residents and non-HA residents: "if they are non-residents, we still support them" [KI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England]. The housing association gives "everybody the opportunity to take those businesses forward as much as they can (…) We can't run it for them, but we will help if we can"; [it provides] "the building blocks" [KI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England] and "the best chance they've got [to succeed]" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England]. In this regard, the housing association capitalises on its experience to develop social innovation practices.

Table 7: Two embedded approaches to social innovation across England and France, evidence table for cross-case comparison

Embedded approaches / Levels of embeddedness	**The proximity approach (French case)**	**The personal development approach (English case)**
Macro-level	**The territorial sense of belonging**	**Local partnerships and cooperation**
Local context and cultural aspects associated	"The sense of belonging to a neighbourhood is very strong, and that is to say, we are inhabitants of a neighbourhood, we are not inhabitants of a city, we hear that says I go to the city centre (…) they don't realise that they go to the city centre of their own city" [KI13PDC, Key Informant, Housing Department Manager, Local Authority, North of France] "(…) it means belonging to a local team; they belong to the local team they feel part of the collective of HA (…) It could be [defined] in community terms, [as a] collective, tribe, or group" [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France] "The *collectif d'habitants* in the *quartier du Belvedere* has done beautiful things… for sport [as well as other] activities, the president of the association tries to improve the neighbourhood and it works well" [RI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed]	"I think partnership is, without that concept of partnership it just wouldn't work" [KI05HAM, Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England] "So, we're always open to partners. Both with local employers, with job centres and other employment support providers would always be very happy" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England] "Your own community is about self-employment, self-improvement and starting a business. You're not part of a community because 'Oh, I live here'" [KI01HAM_1, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England] "Community. Well, being a part of a like-minded group of people, thinking the same, exploring the same ideas or problems, trying to solve, giving, and doing things (…). It was just meeting other people like myself, thinking 'Oh, there are other people like me who are trying to do their own thing'" [RI06HAM, male, 41, private rental, employed]
Policies and legal context	**A changing and challenging policy context** "Especially concerning the financing of social housing, housing associations are generally in difficulty because, for example, the housing association will lose 17 million euros compared to the state financing. This new finance law has put it in difficulty" [KI06PDC, Key Informant, Elected Representative, Country Council, North of France] "It is the housing association, who will be impacted by this law. There are gaps to compensate. So clearly, clearly, it will have an impact for the future in terms of strategy" [KI13PDC, Key Informant, Housing Department Manager, Local Authority, North of France]	**A changing and challenging policy context** "(…) So that reform only began in 2010, so it is still quite young. But they're generally called welfare reform and the mechanism is Universal Credit. (…) So, you know rightly housing can feel a bit squeezed on those two realities. (…) So, it's a challenging time. And there are some persistent before communities. So that's us" [KI10HAM, Key Informant, Director, National non-profit Organisation, South of England] "The honest answer is I suspect, it's not terribly innovative. But it's needed. You know I think it's packaged in a way. That makes it valuable and needed. And there's very little else as an alternative for the people that we're trying to help. If this wasn't here. I think they

	"We must invent something else" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research Officer, HA, North of France]	would suffer" [RI04HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisations, South of England]
Meso-level	**The organisational culture built around "proximity"**	**A MEESS organisation with a strong ethos around personal development**
Organisational dynamics	"We have local proximity teams related to the Housing Association's history. The HA remains very [much] in touch socially with the tenants" [KI15PDC, Key Informant, Director of the innovation service, HA, North of France] "We try to solve the problems precisely on the ground by being as responsible and available as possible" [KI02PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France] "(…) it's the fine knowledge of the *gardien* and proximity agents who will perfectly know their inhabitants, and will be our strength" [KI12PDC, Key Informant, Proximity Team Management, HA, North of France] "Working in close collaboration with the HA, I would say that it reassures people, because they know, and almost everyone knows people who take care of buildings. They are known and respected" [RI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed]	"So, I manage the employment support and training team, we're integral part of the housing association. There's 18 members of the team now we support residents into employment training or self-employment. Or mixture of the three" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England] "The Employment Training Support team, we do employability skills training, confidence building. So yeah absolutely. So that's what's great working with a team that's also specialized in employment support and training because when some of that might not be suitable for us to start business because it's self-employed, but we then refer to the Employment Support Team." [KI02HAM, Key Informant, Business Advisor, HA, South of England] "I think from a social perspective, I really like that, that it's not about. It's trying to help people improve their situations and strive for more, give them the confidence that they could go and do something they've always wanted to do" [RI13HAM, female, 41, owner-occupier, self-employed] "[They have] the real ethos around personal development" [RI22HAM, female, 51, owner-occupier, unemployed]
Micro-level	**Volunteering activities as a means of improving self-esteem**	**Personal development as a matter of belief and wellbeing**
Values, beliefs, and emotions	"Everyone says it. Whenever people see us, they say: "frankly, what you do is good" because it didn't exist before" [RI08PDC, male, 30, owner occupier, employed] "People are very grateful. Yes, we are well thanked (…) People understand that we try to do something" [KI16PDC, male, 50, social tenant, employed] "Yes, it's true that we are proud of what we are doing. People see what we do; at least it ends in something. People are happy. When people say: "that's beautiful, well done!", it makes you feel good. We are happy about what we are doing" [KI04PDC, female, 64, social tenant, retired]	"We say to people, 'If you have a story to tell about your business, if your unique selling point is you and your journey, you need to let people know that because people invest in people. They love that idea of, 'I've done this. I've been there. I've done that' thing. We've got a lovely lady who came through on the course last year, had very, very, vey severe postnatal depression following the birth of her child. Her business called Soap and Hope came from that experience of this very dark, dark time that she was in during postnatal depression" [KI01HAM_01, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England] "When my dad was alive, we had the idea of having our own business. I wanted to carry on with that to make him proud, because when he

		passed away, I found it hard. This is something that we discussed, so I'd like to make it real, so it's like he's still here with me [RI05HAM, female, 24, social tenant, unemployed]
Aspirations	"When we volunteer, we have a specific role. It's a kind of status, as if we were an employee of a business. I think we can volunteer in a social centre. It's also a recognition" [KI22, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France] "There are many people who are isolated in the neighbourhood too. That's why I know what it is, I have a boy, but he's big now, so yes, we are a little bit isolated. That's why I'm trying to go to people. That's the point. It's not to stay at home and deliberate on our misfortune but rather go to others. It is important" [RI13PDC, female, 60, private rental, unemployed]	"I was working in a call centre and just reached perhaps the limit with KPIs target and having no lunch break (…) To me, it's more a risk to die in a call centre" [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed] "I literally feel I can breathe again when I'm self-employed. I feel so caught up and so not myself when I'm in an officer, told when I can go to lunch, told when—how many calls I've got to take a day in so many seconds" [RI16HAM, female, 53, owner-occupier, self-employed] "The first word that comes to my mind is liberating. It's possibly not the first word that many people would say, but it is liberating because you see every decision you make has an impact" [RI18HAM, male, 44, owner-occupier, self-employed]
Discourses and stigma	"How to explain? Often when we say housing association, it is poor people, who do not have means, they're 'des cas soc'" we would say" [RI03PDC, female, 45, social tenant, unemployed]. "They both stigmatise themselves and are stigmatised because that is how it is. And thus, they also respond to the representation that people from outside the neighbourhood may have against them 'moi je suis un cas soc'", how many times we have heard it" [KI07PDC, Key Informant, Director, Employment Support Association, North of France]	"I spoke about this lady before who was living in a care. She wants to start a business where she's going to be dog walking and house sitting and doing all that sort of thing. And certainly, she comes from an area of deprivation, but she's come to the course without… She brings that with her, that homelessness and that background (…) I don't think people generally bring that stigma of being from social housing with them" [RI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England]

In both contexts, therefore, the within-case analysis reveals the consequences of social innovation practices being embedded differently. The cross-case comparative table or evidence table (table 7) is used to explore similarities and differences across cases (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020) contributing to reveal two embedded approaches to social innovation across England and France. Based on the findings, this chapter has thus answered the "how" question, which leads to additional questions:

- Why is embedding social innovation practices important for the housing association? For what reason does the housing association embed social innovation practices?
- Why is it important for the housing association to become a social innovator?

The next chapter presents the findings resulting from the cross-case analysis related to these questions. The second key finding of the study is also proposed in this chapter which is that social innovation practices at the local level have a strategic dimension.

Chapter 5 – Findings - The strategic side of social innovation practices at the local level: local recognition, power, and necessity

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the within case analysis contributed to understanding how housing associations become social innovators when they develop embedded social innovation practices. This chapter 5 focuses on the "why" questions; specifically, it is organised around the following questions: "For what reasons do housing associations seek to influence how social innovation practices are embedded?" and "What are the advantages of different forms and levels of embeddedness for housing associations?".

Firstly, the data analysis reveals that social innovation is necessary (5.2). In a changing policy context, the housing association must develop a social innovation strategy built around an understanding of how it is embedded. Indeed, the embeddedness of social innovation practices enables housing associations to gain local recognition, which is a strategic advantage (5.3). Building credibility as a social innovation actor through the implementation of embedded social innovation practices, improves the relationship between the housing association and its service users, thereby achieving the intended social outcomes. This strategy is thus beneficial for the housing associations and service users: it contributes to secure tenancies and reduce anti-social behaviours.

However, the data analysis also reveals that the way in which practices are embedded, determine the financial and political stakes at the local level which are associated with social innovation, (5.4). Thus, the second key finding of the study will be presented in this chapter. It

highlights the crucial of the organisational level to understand the strategic dimension of social innovation. Examining the embeddedness of social innovation practices exposes its political dimension when developed at the local level. Housing associations can use this understanding of embeddedness to implement a social innovation strategy that can secure their power base, by ensuring their credibility as social innovators.

5.2 The economic necessity of social innovation in a changing policy context

The economic necessity of social innovation is a crucial theme that concerns both cases under investigation here. It also confirms existing literature that has argued that social innovation can be driven by "necessity" (Sharra & Nyssens, 2010) in a context governments struggling with budgetary austerity (Voorberg et al., 2014). This section presents findings that speak to the "challenging times" that housing associations face in both the French and English social housing sector, given wider policy changes. The data analysis reveals that the implementation of social innovation practices is experienced as a much-needed strategy for the housing associations.

In the UK, a key informant stakeholder from a national non-profit organisation evokes the welfare reforms initiated in 2010 affecting housing benefit and Employment Support Allowance, introduced primarily to reduce the UK's budget deficit. Therefore, 2010 represents "a turning point" for the social housing sector and, more generally, the social sector:

> "Maybe since 2010. I mean before, but really a turning point in government investment and housing that is stepping into community development and investment, increased heavily from 2010, and the reason was political and financial. So definitely, housing is one of the last major sectors that can invest in communities. I mean, I've not talked about cuts into local authorities, cuts to the voluntary community sector. So there used to be quite a lot of government grants given. You had to apply for them, but you know, that was there, the money was there to create what's called the third sector. But lots of that has gone, and that means it's either housing or local authority or smaller charities on the whole. So yeah, that's happened. There's been a bit of an

acceleration in this country I think, because of welfare reform and universal credit.

(…) So that reform only began in 2010, so it is still quite young. But they're generally called welfare reform and the mechanism is Universal Credit. (…) So, you know rightly housing can feel a bit squeezed on those two realities. (…) So, it's a challenging time. And there are some persistent before communities. So that's us" [KI10HAM, Key Informant, Director, National non-profit Organisation, South of England].

The changing of the broader policy context has had a double impact on the social housing sector. First, reducing government investments generates more challenges (e.g., the impoverishment of social housing residents through the reduction of benefits). Secondly, the role of housing associations has recently evolved towards investment in community development. The housing association in the English social housing context under investigation, is increasingly oriented towards community and social capital development. This has been through the development of services (social innovation activities) that have expanded the role of HA beyond the provision of affordable housing (Mullins, 2010; Walker et al., 2022). With the retreat of direct state provision, civil society actors and non-profit organisations like housing associations, have become more involved in an effort to counterbalance the reduction of resources available in different areas of UK social policy (Roy et al., 2014). In this context, the social housing sector and housing associations are "squeezed on these two realities", to use the words of the key informant stakeholder quoted previously [KI10HAM, Key Informant, Director, National non-profit Organisation, South of England]: investing in social housing and in community development with less resources. Thus, social innovation is an economic necessity. On this matter, a project manager from a business support organisation, which has partnered with the HA, explains that social innovation practices developed by the HA are "not terribly innovative", but they are needed:

> "The honest answer is I suspect, it's not terribly innovative. But it's needed. You know I think it's packaged in a way. That makes it valuable and needed. And there's very little else as an alternative for the people that we're trying to help. If this wasn't here. I think they would suffer. I don't think that's innovative at all. It's a reason to do it" [KI04HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisation, South of England].

This quotation echoes the literature review: socially innovative practices are not necessarily new (e.g., Hillier et al., 2004). It also demonstrates that social innovation relates to the need to adapt to the British social housing context. Taking into account the policy context in which the wider social housing sector is itself embedded, contributes to understanding social innovation as an economic necessity rather than a novelty.

Similarly, local key informant stakeholders in the French case study also emphasise the economic necessity of social innovation. Indeed, the new legal framework pushes housing associations to innovate. The ELAN law (The law on changes in housing, land management, and digital technology), adopted in November 2018, is a new reference law that has disrupted the operation and organisation of the social housing sector, as explained by a project manager of the HA:

> "The reference law is the ELAN law, which means that since 2020, organisations with less than 12,500 housing units must join forces with larger HAs. This will imply change and national restructuring of social housing. Therefore, from 800,850 HAs, we will go down to 400. This greatly changes the role of the HA. In the end, housing associations will have the right to create intermediate structures and portfolios of investments, such as training, social services for the elderly, and organisations that liaise between social housing and different audiences" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research Officer, HA, North of France].

The *loi ELAN* has financially impacted the housing association in that it involves a budget cut related to the APL (*Aides Personnalisées au Logement*) [Personal Housing Allowance] reform. A former employee of the HA explains this financial mechanism at the national scale, with a political assertion:

"[French President] Macron who milks 1.8 billion euros from APL, and it is the organisations [the Housing Associations] that will have to compensate [for this shortfall]" [KI08PDC, Key Informant, Deputy Director, Government Administration Urban Planning (former HA employee), North of France].

This statement is supported by an elected representative of the local authority where social innovation practices have been implemented by the housing association:

"Especially concerning the financing of social housing, housing associations are generally in difficulty because, for example, the housing association will lose 17 million euros compared to the state financing. This new finance law has put it in difficulty. There was indeed a drop in APL, but the donors were forced to try to manage" [KI06PDC, Key Informant, Elected Representative, County Council, North of France].

Therefore, the changing legal and policy context in the French social housing sector generates financial difficulties for the housing association. Moreover, it is even more challenging for the housing association in the coastal conurbation of the north of France. The housing association is an OPH (*Office Publique de l'Habitat*) that accommodates vulnerable people. In this respect, an employee of the HA notes that:

"The HA is an OPH, we have 40,000 homes, about 100,000 inhabitants, and we are considered a big landlord. The third choice is OPH, the public office [A type of HA in France that accommodates the most vulnerable people]. A characteristic feature of the public office is that it welcomes the most socially and economically fragile people. (…) there is nothing left after it except charities and the like. We really welcome poor audiences. This is the characteristic of OPH" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research Officer, HA, North of France].

Through this description, the key informant stakeholder shows that social innovation is "a question of survival" for the housing association. As explained by the Housing Department Manager of the local authority, developing social innovation practices is vital to ensuring the survival of HAs. Indeed, the key informant stakeholder asserted that "if they [the HA] don't adapt [to the changing policy context], they die":

"They [the HA] have to adapt; if they don't adapt anyway or else, they die, they have to find solutions at some point" [KI13PDC, Key Informant, Housing Department Manager, Local Authority, North of France].

In this context, "adaptation" means "inventing something new". Along the same lines, a project manager of the HA explained that the HA must invent an innovative socio-economic strategy:

> "We must invent something else. Those who will not succeed will be short-circuited or even no longer exist. It is a question of survival. If you don't question the legislative context, the organisation of HA, or the influence of what it develops in structural terms on their territory (…). If we do not do this, we will lose some of our colleagues because we will no longer have the financial means. There is not enough money coming in" [KI01PDC, Key Informant, Research Officer, HA, North of France].

Developing social innovation practices is a "strategy" for the housing association in its search for new solutions for its future:

> "It is the housing association, who will be impacted by this law. There are gaps to compensate. So clearly, clearly, it will have an impact for the future in terms of strategy" [KI13PDC, Key Informant, Housing Department Manager, Local Authority, North of France].[i]

Consequently, these challenges associated with a changing policy context, mean that social innovation represents a necessary alternative for housing associations, over and beyond the French social housing context; it represents a critical financial alternative to sustaining the activities of the housing association. Similarly, the housing associations in the UK context need to look at "how [support services for tenants] are financed, and that may be, followed by a social business model or something like that" [KI04HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisation, South of England]. This statement, from a project officer of a business support organisation, demonstrates that within the English social housing context, the housing associations also need to adapt to support their tenants, communities, and clients. Adaptation to the changing policy context represents therefore, a strategy for the housing association, which can be understood through the examination of how social innovation practices are embedded.

5.3 The benefits to the housing association of local recognition as social innovators

This section highlights how housing associations benefit from embedded social innovation practices. The data analysis demonstrates that there are advantages in social innovation practices being embedded in a particular way, and why this helps to build the housing association's local credibility. The local recognition of housing associations as social innovators offers both social and financial benefits: it encourages the improvement of the housing association-client relationship, which results in securing tenancies and reducing anti-social behaviours. Furthermore, the changes to the policy context around housing associations, outlined in the previous section, highlight the increasingly competitive nature of funding and the need to demonstrate value through social innovation. From this perspective, the findings show that the development of embedded social innovation practices is a beneficial strategy for the housing associations in both contexts, even if the new policy frameworks they face are different. As shown above, in the French context, the new policy is driving a reduction in funding for housing associations, whereas in the UK, housing associations are filling the gaps left by reductions in other welfare services, albeit with some of their tenants being exposed to greater vulnerability because of cuts to benefits.

5.3.1 Building credibility and hyping their role as social innovators

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the development of embedded social innovation practices enables the housing association to become a social innovator. This sub-section focuses on the capacity of housing associations to build a reputation as social innovators. In both contexts, building credibility is associated with the creation of social value, which is promoted and locally recognised by SI participants and local partners. Building local credibility is thus part of a strategy related to the development of social innovation practices.

Concerning the English case study, the development of social innovation practices generates a symbolic impact that makes the housing association a credible social innovator. Indeed, the housing association is perceived by both SI participants and local stakeholders as an impactful self-employment support provider that fosters wellbeing. Evidence of this credibility is found in the praise offered by other local stakeholders, who recognise the social innovation approach developed by the HA as "wonderful". A local authority officer stresses the added value of this person-centred approach promoted by the HA:

> "The person-centred way to help them achieve, which has been one of the wonderful things, is that if they don't go for self-employment, now they can go through the whole thing [e.g., including employment support] and then go self-employed. And they're going to think, oh do you think employment is for me? Yes. Okay. What's your pathway for that? We will support you to do that" [KI05HAM, Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England].

Thus, the housing association focuses on the economic integration of their training participants, via self-employment and entrepreneurial support. They provide employability skills training and confidence building, focusing on individual support and opportunities that also positively impact participants' wellbeing. Therefore, the English housing association is recognised by other local stakeholders as employing best practices and as a credible social innovation actor.

In addition, the glowing terms used by the SI participants to describe their experience during micro-enterprise and employment support training, demonstrate that the housing association has acquired prestige through the development of social innovation practices. As explained by a SI participant, the housing association is "genuinely passionate about it [MEESS]", adding that:

> "I don't get the impression they're just running this course because they have to (…) Lots of them [SI participants] are extremely creative but they just need that right outlet for somebody to see it and help them to really make something of it. They're hitting the ceiling. The job centres don't see it, basic level employment doesn't see it. It was the same situation I was in. You have to

find a way up and out of it. This course [MEESS] is ideal for that. It really is"
[RI01HAM, Male, 40, Private rental, Self-employed].

This positive assessment of MEESS training delivered by the housing association, which is also based on a comparison between what offers the housing association and job centres, is echoed by another participant, for whom the course offered exactly what she needed:

> "What they do is, they can give you the direction that you should be moving to. That's exactly what I needed, where to go, this is how you get this done, yes?" [RI17HAM, Male, 60. Owner occupier, Self-employed].

Based on these statements, the housing association promotes itself as a "best practice" organisation. Indeed, the ethnographic observations (e.g., participation in plenary sessions and workshops with local and non-local partners of the EU-funded project) reveal this dimension in the "role models" and "success stories" presented during housing association partner meetings. The narratives around "success stories" often emphasise the most challenging experiences of SI participants, who, for example, started from the bottom to reach their professional target. An HA officer evokes the case of a participant (Jennie [name anonymised]) who was given support by the housing association, to overcome financial difficulties:

> "(…) and so going on financial difficulties. And then we've just been supporting her back into employment or self-employment. So really does really a lot. And then you do get then some that feel like it's a good idea and you work with them and actually try to be more realistic" [KI02HAM, Key Informant, Business Advisor, HA, South of England].

Another HA employee tells the story of a homeless lady who started the MEESS course to set up her dog sitting business:

> "I spoke about this lady before who was living in a car. She wants to start a business where she's going to be dog walking and house sitting and doing all that sort of thing. And certainly, she comes from an area of deprivation, but she's come to the course without… She brings that with her, that homelessness and that background (…) I don't think people generally bring that stigma of being from social housing with them. They might start with it. And they might feel like "Oh I'm a HA resident" but that's. When they get into the group, it

makes no difference" [KI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England].

The HA employee uses this example to demonstrate that people in dire straits can also participate in MEESS courses and go on to pursue professional aspirations. Therefore, the housing association gains credibility and prestige through the promotion of these role model and success stories. This credibility as a best practice social innovation actor is built around personal development, a strategic approach that is embedded in the context in which the housing association operates and that concentrates on individuals' employment aspirations.

Similarly, concerning the French housing association, the data analysis highlights the role of communication in building prestige and local recognition. The proximity team manager of the housing association also communicates "success stories" to show how successful social innovation practices are for the HA tenants. For example, an HA employee describes the difficulties faced by the young son of tenants who committed petty crimes:

> "We have another case, it's a young man in his twenties, 24 something like that, who lives here in the neighbourhood (…) He is a young person who I met up with a few years ago in a basement with his friends, and in the morning, we found cans of rubbish or vandalized equipment, etc. One day I went to knock on his door at 10 a.m. and it was his mother who opened the door, and I asked him, "Is Melvin (his son) [anonymised name] there? Yes, he is sleeping, I say listen, go wake him up, we have to talk". She went to wake him up and he was pretty pissed off because we woke him up but we put things straight because we have a partnership with the national police. I can have information on the identities of the people who were there when the police raided the basement. It allowed me to go see him and tell him that I had information that he was in the common areas and that I expected him to repair what he had damaged, broken and if he could ask his friends to help him. I gave him two days. He cleaned the basement. And this young man, I hired him for a community service (TIG: *Travail d'Intérêt Général)*. And afterwards, as the TIG went well, I had him on an internship via the local Mission (*Mission Locale*). He is engaged, he came to the training workshops for the creation of *collectifs d'habitants*. He was highlighted in particular in "the social innovation project News" magazine and he is proud to share this magazine through Facebook" [KI12PDC, Key Informant, Proximity Team Manager, HA, North of France].

This example shows how the French housing association also deploys personal success stories, but rather than directed toward a personal employment pathway, they are directed towards being a responsible member of a community, in line with the 'proximity' approach. The housing association at times also inflates "success" stories when promoting its role as social innovator, in the French context under investigation here. An HA resident who is not involved in the *collectifs d'habitants,* reflects on the inaccuracies of one of these success stories as promoted by the housing association on social media, and how this makes people feel used:

> "(Sigh) Not at all. So there, they [the HA] took pictures of young people and said: "We created jobs for these young people" that's not true. These are young people who have never had anything from them. It wasn't them who gave them a job. They wanted to gain prestige" [RI01PDC, Female, 67, Social tenant, Retired].

"Gaining prestige" is the central purpose of the social innovation strategy developed by the housing association. However, when the narrative of success does not align with the proximity approach, and how social innovation activities are actually embedded, then this may undermine the housing association, as the quote reflects. The findings show that the proximity approach is a way to fulfil this purpose of gaining credibility, in that it improves the image of the housing association. Having said that, the strategic change in the HA's portfolio of activities has also been acknowledged by the social housing residents themselves, who have started to realise that the social landlord now has a human side:

> "For people, the HA is the social landlord, that's all. That's true; [but] they [now] realised that [HA staff] are human beings. They saw that these are human beings, the president of the collective of inhabitants, but also the proximity agents, these are human beings" [RI06PDC, female, 50, social tenant, unemployed].

For this reason, the image of the housing association has changed, thanks to the development of social innovation practices built around proximity. For example, the *gardien* in the *quartier des Plantes* gives a specific example to demonstrate how the image of the local organisation has changed:

"Thanks to the proximity team, its image has changed. Not for everyone, be careful, but for people who have already integrated the SI project and they might be reluctant about the HA for x reasons, and we see that now they are even defending from time to time, the *gardiens*" [KI04PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

"Yesterday for example, I was picking up my daughter at 4:30 pm at school. I was in non-uniform clothes, and I spoke with a woman, and I saw two people from the *quartier des Arbres*, they started talking and then; as soon as they arrived at my height, one of them said "yeah but in the neighbourhood, they [the HA] can't do everything", but he said it loudly enough for me to hear him. I even laughed, I told myself, "He had to do it on purpose". He defended the *gardien*, actually. Why? I don't know. I didn't understand everything … but it's an example that shows that the image [of the HA and *gardiens*] has changed." [KI04PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

Therefore, in both the French and the English cases, the housing associations have built credibility as social innovators through the development of embedded social innovation practices and their promotion. In the coastal county of the south of England, the expertise of the housing association and the person-centred method, have contributed to building the credibility of the housing association around the personal development approach. The housing association promotes success stories through narratives to demonstrate the effectiveness of their approach. In the coastal conurbation of the north of France, this strategy is built around the proximity approach that has contributed to changing the image of the housing association to a social landlord with a "human" side.

5.3.2 Improving the HA-service user relationship, securing tenancies, and reducing anti-social behaviours

The findings presented in the previous sub-section lead to additional questions: Why is building credibility as social innovators beneficial for the housing association? Why is gaining prestige crucial for housing associations? What kind of benefits does it bring to the organisation?

The data analysis shows that in the north of France, building credibility as a social innovator through proximity practices, has helped the French HA to improve their relationships

with their tenants. Their social innovation practices have contributed to building trusting relationships, based on mutual respect between the housing association and their tenants. Two *gardiens*, one in the *quartier des Arbres* and another in the *quartier des Plantes*, describe the influence of social innovation practices on the improvement of the HA-tenant relationship:

> "We, as *gardiens*, have a relationship of trust with them because precisely they [the tenants] see us not only as the pusher of containers, but as someone who wants to help them. It's just a relationship of trust between the two sides [the HA and the tenants], we know their problems and their life, and they can refer to us. This relationship is important (…) and the social innovation activities delivered by the HA have further improved this relationship" [KI02PDC, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

Along the same lines, the other *gardien* in the *quartier des Plantes* explained that since the launch of their social innovation activities, the *gardiens* have "another relationship":

> "The same thing with gardiens and tenants, we [as gardiens] have another relationship. It's not bad, they don't see us only as the boss or the guy who gets out the garbage cans, they see us as another person, a support. For some residents, a confidant, for other tenants it's something else" [KI03PDC, Key Informant, Gardien, HA, North of France].

Indeed, the improvement of the relationship between the housing association and their "residents" is the key benefit for the HA, as stated by an employee of the local social centre in the *quartier du Belvedere*:

> "They [the HA] they'll win probably, they'll certainly improve their relationship with residents" [KI22PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre (in the quartier du Belvedere), North of France].

Furthermore, the data analysis demonstrates that this improvement engenders additional key benefits for the housing association. By developing the "proximity" approach, the French HA intends to animate the social housing neighbourhood, through volunteering activities initiated by their residents. Findings demonstrate that improving the neighbourhood's image also leads to financial benefits. In this regard, the HA proximity team manager explains that social innovation activities (the creation of *collectifs d'habitants*) have contributed to

reducing the number of acts of vandalism, which is financially beneficial to the housing association:

> "We created collectives; we had this desire to create *collectifs d'habitants* in the neighbourhoods. There are two main axes. There is an axis to try to ensure that the residents regain control of the common areas so petty thieves do not take over, and there is a communication and a social link. This has paid off. For example, between 2017 and 2018, the number of acts of vandalism was halved, and the creation of *collectifs d'habitants* plays an important part in this reduction. We went to look for delinquents; we created this bond of trust with them" [KI12PDC, Key Informant, Proximity Team Manager, HA, North of France].

These benefits of social innovation practices, based on the proximity approach, are also mentioned by a *gardien* in the *quartier des Plantes* and in the *quartier des Arbres,* who confirms that the creation of *collectifs d'habitants* has reduced anti-social behaviours:

> "In the *quartier des Arbres*, we see that. It's the *gardien*, my colleague, who sees it. What did he tell me? It was halved. There were 100 acts of vandalism and they have been reduced to 77, I don't precisely remember the figures. The tenants take care of their neighbourhood. We can't reach zero, it's impossible, but it's very good. Thanks to the association [*collectif d'habitants*], people who participate in social innovation activities, they pay more attention" [KI04, Key Informant, *Gardien*, HA, North of France].

Therefore, proximity practices encompass communication and social links between the housing association and residents, which reduce anti-social behaviour (for example vandalism) and secure financial resources.

Concerning the personal development approach, the English HA intends "to raise the aspirations" of the HA residents. "Raising the aspirations" of SI participants is a social value which is also strongly related to financial stakes. The HA EST team manager explains this connection:

> "Again, I think I think the more you can raise the aspirations of your, of your customers of your residents and the more they respect their properties, the more they expect that number of neighbourhoods, the more they understand the

importance of building that community spirit" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training manager, HA, South of England].

This quote underlines the beneficial impact of the personal development approach, an embedded social innovation strategy. It is interesting to note that residents are associated with customers. Indeed, service user satisfaction contributes to the organisation's financial stability. In this case, because the housing association seeks to raise residents' aspirations, the residents will respect their properties, which is financially beneficial for the housing association.

Moreover, social innovation practices represent "a clever way to invest in people". This idea is highlighted by a participant who summarises the HA strategy based on the personal development approach. The housing association invests in the people by developing social innovation activities:

> "You have to invest in the people and usually the poorest people, the less educated people. I think that's good because housing association, if you say they're funding employment, they'll think, why? What's in it for them? Long term, they'll get the benefits because now everyone is paid more, always in jobs, and they make more money, they pay more tax, you get more money in the end. I think it's a clever way to invest, you're investing in people. You're investing in maybe buildings as well, but I think people are the ultimate resource." [RI08HAM, male, 27, private rental, self-employed].

The conviction that "people are the ultimate resource" is a central tenet of the social innovation strategy developed by the English HA. In fact, "investment" suggests that "people" are central to the social innovation approach, bringing financial benefits to the housing association. For example, a key informant from a local authority reveals the benefits of this social innovation strategy for the housing association:

> "I think the housing association has acted to an extent as a lead in the employment practice in this coastal city. So, they're all here socially to house people. I think the housing association a number of years ago took some brave steps in saying it. In order for people to pay the rent, people need to be in work. Therefore, the housing association should help their residents to be in work. (…) You've got to help in all kinds of other ways. And I think all of the other housing

associations have now begun to follow that" [KI05HAM, Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England].

Therefore, social innovation services provided by the housing association are vital for the organisation. They improve the housing association's resources because they help residents "pay their rent". Investing in self-employment support or micro-business development training (embedded social innovation practices in the south of England), is "clever"; it is also financially beneficial for the English HA. From this perspective, the embedded personal development approach shows that social innovation is a strategy associated with financial drivers. Indeed, the English HA "should help their residents to be in work", "in order for people to pay the rent" [KI05HAM, Key Informant, Economic Development Manager, Local Authority, South of England]. Even if the level of unpaid rents is very low in the coastal county of the south of England, helping tenants into work or towards work, "helps to secure tenancies" [KI10HAM, Key Informant, Director, National non-profit Organisation, South of England]. Therefore, the social innovation practices developed by the English HA are related to the financial dimension of social innovation, as they contribute to increasing the number of working tenants and thus secure tenancies.

In both contexts, the embedded social innovation practices contribute to improving the HA-service user relationship, which is also financially beneficial for the housing association. The next section further explores the financial dimension associated with the social innovation practices developed by the housing association.

5.4 Competing over funds and power

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, European institutions now finance activities that are labelled "social innovation". As shown in the previous section (5.2), developing social innovation practices is necessary for non-profit organisations such as housing associations, to cope with financial uncertainties in a context of policy changes. This section presents findings

that demonstrate how social innovation is closely related to financial incentives. Indeed, in a challenging context for the social housing sector, the housing association has developed social innovation strategies in order to secure funds. The status of housing associations as social innovators is thus an asset and a condition in competing over funds.

In the French case study, the data analysis demonstrates that embedded social innovation practices have firstly contributed to improving the HA-residents relationship and secondly, have helped the housing association recruit participants; this has significant financial implications. Moreover, attracting volunteers is a prerequisite for the HA's ability to build its reputation as a social innovation player. As explained by a local social centre director, this reputation is also closely related to "financial incentives":

> "It took me a long time to understand that in these areas there were financial incentives to help one succeed in [social innovation] projects with residents, to organise a neighbourhood party, to share a Christmas snack" [KI24PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

The key informant argues that this is also a "tick box exercise for your funder" [KI24PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France], suggesting that social innovation practices have to conform to the various funders' framework, which is often assessed using quantitative indicators such as the number of volunteers. From this standpoint, the HA's strategy is to initiate 'top down' social innovation practices that match the criteria required by the funders:

> "There is a lot of employment support [in neighbourhoods], sometimes you meet the young guy, and you say that he has to get a job, the HA officer is gonna put a cross on the list for your funder" [KI24PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

This statement echoes the words of another key informant stakeholder who explains that "innovation" is inherently perceived as good and positive in deprived neighbourhoods. That is why activities that support social inclusion and employment are often associated with "innovation", the "magic word":

"That's it, in deprived neighbourhoods, the magic word is always "innovation". But it's good to have innovative actions that come on top. But not at the cost of [past] activities that [already] work for deprived neighbourhoods" [KI14PDC, Key Informant, Business support agency, Director of the local unit, North of France].

"Innovation" is a key word for local organisations involved in activities that seek to foster social inclusion and therefore needs to be central in the strategies developed by local non-profit organisations. Housing associations are also key stakeholders taking part in the race for (social) innovation in deprived neighbourhoods. Indeed, housing associations want to be recognised as credible innovators. This strategic dimension explains the competitive environment and the local battle for hegemony that are associated with social innovation. The data analysis reveals conflicts at the local level. These are the result of the social innovation strategy developed by the housing associations in the north of France, where a variety of third sector organisations working in the same neighbourhood, compete with one another [KI21PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

In this respect, a local stakeholder, the social/community centres (*centres sociaux*) perceive the HA's strategic initiatives as competition. Moreover, they evoke "competition" to critique the social innovation activities and to question the credibility of the housing association as a social innovation actor. The director of a business support organisation also describes this competition between the housing association and the social centre, two third-sector organisations that deliver social services in the same neighbourhood:

"To put it simply, the [new] social innovation practices developed by the HA are perceived negatively by some social centres. In fact, you [the HA] are doing their [social innovation] job. That's it; these are preconceived ideas and everyone tries to work in their corner. Defend your turf. The problem is that the partners who are in the deprived neighbourhoods think, often, they think for them. So, we don't necessarily even have access. Nicolas (a colleague from the organisation) has been there since September 2018; we will be in September 2019. In a year, we have not been able to go to all the neighbourhoods. At the end of September, we had a meeting in a neighbourhood in another town, and it

took a year to be taken seriously (...). Obviously, the environment has an impact. The brake can therefore come from the partners" [KI14PDC, Key Informant, Business support agency, Director of the local unit, North of France].

In the same spirit, a volunteer illustrates the lack of cooperation between organisations by stating that "everyone works in their own corner" and adds that "there are conflicts between the social centre and the housing association" because "each organisation defends their [portfolio of] activities" [RI17PDC, female, 35, social tenant, employed]. Indeed, this fierce competition also leads to replication. A particular example is given by an employee of a business support organisation who has worked in close collaboration with the housing association (through social innovation activities) and the social centre in the *quartier des Arbres* and the *quartier des Plantes:*

> "Thanks to a business support workshop supported by the HA, there is Madame, an entrepreneur who is a beautician. Her name? How? 'Or' What? Her name is Elodie, she lives in the quartier des Plantes, (…) she was spotted by the HA (…) [KI20PDC, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisation, North of France].

Indeed, the respondent gives an example of a self-employed woman who wanted to start activities with the housing association:

> "The HA spotted her, but a little bit was stolen by the social centre (…). We were about to create [in partnership with the HA] our micro-business development training programme. However, Claude [from the local social centre] has done his activity factory [social innovation activity created by a local social centre that supports micro-enterprise development in local deprived neighbourhoods] behind everyone's back, not putting everyone in the loop. The HA and the business support organisation did not like it because he mixed the economic model of the business incubator [An idea developed by the HA that would have supported volunteers in their projects] with that of the school shop [A social innovation activity created by the business support organisation, a micro-business support programme for residents in deprived neighbourhoods] [KI20PDC, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisation, North of France].

> "It is both for financial and political reasons. It's only that, it's terrible, ugly… *Vive la France*!" [KI20PDC, Key Informant, Project Manager, Business Support Organisation, North of France].

Even though the HA's new embedded social innovation strategy benefits the neighbourhood and its residents' well-being, by attracting a "little" investment [RI03PDC, female, 45, social tenant, unemployed], both participant respondents and key informants alike have criticised HA's strategy. For example, the director of the social centre states that the HA's promotion of *collectifs d'habitants,* built around a "safe zone", can somewhat "imprison" people in their social housing neighbourhoods:

> "There [with all the social innovation practices implemented by the HA], we lock people up in their neighbourhood, we ask them to do really good things compared to what they know how to do. Then, that's it and it doesn't go any further, so I think that today what is important for me is to make people winners" [KI21PDC, Key Informant, Director, Local Social Centre, North of France].

Another key informant from the local social centre feels that the HA's social actions "missed an opportunity" (*'une occasionne manquée'*) to develop a "culture of mobility" and better physical mobility for the residents. In this highly politicised environment, competition over funding is undeniably one element driving these criticisms. There are deep tensions between the local social centres and the housing association, which are both local non-profit organisations that deliver social innovation activities. In addition, key informant stakeholders evoke the potential duplication of activities and occasional imitation of ideas. Additionally, there is the sense that the HA's social innovation practices have failed to consolidate and strengthen the good work already underway in these neighbourhoods through a full partnership with the other local non-profit organisations. The social centre director is particularly vocal on this point, saying that the activities developed by the housing association came five years too late; indeed, they accuse the HA of using their residents to raise funds to "line its own coffers". Consequently, building a reputation as a social innovator is a deeply political process: as the French case study vividly illustrates, seeking credibility as a social innovation player generates ongoing contestation between local actors in the third sector.

In the English case study, the data analysis shows that social innovation funds boost the prestige of the housing association. A council officer in charge of the economic and planning development, explains that "They [the HA] need the red tape" [KI09HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager- Planning and Economic Development, Local Authority, South of England]. Investing in MEESS is seen as "an ointment" to get funds and that is why the housing associations are putting resources into these services:

> "I was going down to what's the ointment and self-interest. It might be doing the housing association and services but I'm assuming that the reason why they're putting resources into employment support teams. Self-employment is that ointment they need the red tape. So, I'm not trying to be cynical …" [KI09HAM, Key Informant, Project Manager- Planning and Economic Development, Local Authority, South of England].

Indeed, thanks to the EU-funds, the housing association can reach a wider audience and delivers MEESS to "lots of different people" across the county:

> "For us [the HA] you know we obviously are working, we are quite involved with social value. And so, at the end of the [EU-funded] project we can say to the HA and the powers that be at the HA, look this is what we've been able to do. There will be issues over, do we continue to deliver to everybody, or do we then have to change that model to just residents because you know the social innovation project obviously the funding is enabling us to deliver to lots of different people" [KI01HAM, Key Informant, Innovation Officer, HA, South of England].

Along the same lines, the EST team manager of the HA explains that the opportunity to deliver MEESS training to a wider audience "wouldn't have been available without the [EU] funding":

> "I think the social innovation project, it's enabled us to deliver a project that we wouldn't have been able to do from a financial point of view. OK so it's enabled us to deliver and improve our self-employment programme which I thought was good. That opportunity wouldn't have been available without the funding, we wouldn't have had that level of support for my organisation the HA, as we have had through the social innovation funding. I think it's very positive around some of the crude offsets as brought to the HA. We've achieved well throughout the programme and that's a good support, a positive publicity for the HA" [KI03HAM, Key Informant, Employment and Training Manager, HA, South of England].

These findings thus reveal that social innovation is also highly strategic in the south of England. Developing social innovation activities is a condition to get funds and, at the same time, an opportunity to develop MEESS on a large scale. Social innovation is thus beneficial for the housing association. Developing social innovation activities helps the HA to get social innovation (EU) funds, which offer the HA the opportunity to gain prestige or, to use the words of the key informant stakeholder, "positive publicity for the HA".

In sum, embedded social innovation practices represent a virtuous circle for both housing associations. Social innovation practices help the English HA in partnership with other local stakeholders, to build its social innovation reputation, which contributes to the acquisition of financial benefits (through subsidies, funds, and the increased number of tenants in work). In turn, this enables the HA to develop additional social innovation activities, which contribute to maintaining the HA's power base. In the north of France, the French HA competes against other local third-sector organisations, in a battle for local hegemony to be recognised as a credible social innovation player. This competition is necessary for financial reasons, and indeed, social innovation is closely associated with financial and political incentives at the local level. Thus, for different reasons related to contextual factors, the findings demonstrate that the embedding of social innovation practices in both contexts is driven by strategic interests to maintain organisational stability and consolidate or increase their power base. However, there is no guarantee of success: especially in the French case, through a 'proximity' approach, some of the data suggests that social innovation activities can be perceived as limiting the mobility of residents. Data further suggests that a balance must be struck between making use of the context and driving change that is perceived as valuable. The political dimension of social innovation revealed throughout this study, refers to credibility, power, and local competition over funds and recognition. From this perspective, social innovation is a strategic initiative.

5.5 Conclusion

Whilst social innovation practices and approaches vary according to their particular contexts, the findings demonstrate that the strategic dimension of social innovation is a common feature across cases. Social innovation practices are embedded through multi-layered dynamics (at the macro, meso, and micro levels). The nature of embeddedness also influences the type of social value produced by housing associations. The findings reveal that the production and promotion of social value, through embedded social innovation practices, engender benefits for the housing association. Indeed, because social innovation is necessary, to shape its reputation as a social innovation actor, the housing association develops an embedded strategy.

In addition, the findings show that building a social innovation reputation is a shared objective across both cases under investigation here. This reputation is a condition to engendering benefits, which concern both financial and political stakes. For example, the development of a local sense of worth (in the north of France) and raising entrepreneurial aspirations and well-being at work (in the south of England) are contextual social values, produced by these two differentially embedded social innovation approaches. From this perspective, the embeddedness of social innovation practices is primarily beneficial for the organisation that seeks to build an effective strategy as a social innovation player. This strategy helps the housing association to establish and maintain credibility and to strengthen its power and stability at the local level.

Thus, embeddedness reveals the political dimension of social innovation at the local level. In the French social housing context, social innovation is a matter of organisational survival for the housing association. Therefore, it is associated with financial and political incentives. In the English case, the changing broader policy context encourages the housing association to develop socially innovative initiatives so as to diversify its funding sources and

maintain its credibility as a social innovation player: self-employment and micro-business development support organisation with a social side and an ethos around personal development. In this sense, both housing associations have developed social innovation approaches that are embedded in the contexts in which they work, aimed at strategically coping with budgetary austerity, legitimacy challenges for social services providers, and broader societal upheaval.

Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to discuss the findings of the study and their contribution to building further knowledge about social innovation. By using "embeddedness" as a lens for exploring social innovation, the study has responded to recent calls for more empirical studies and investigations of social innovation, in specific contexts (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012; Voorberg et al., 2014). As suggested by Suddaby (2010), to reinforce concept clarity, "the contextual characteristics should be clear in terms of when and where the concept applies" (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012, p. 26). Exploring the way in which social innovation practices are embedded helps to identify the interactions between social innovation and contexts at the macro, meso, and micro levels more comprehensively. This in turn sheds light on the process ("how" social innovation practices are embedded) and to identify what social innovation is.

The key findings of the study provide answers to the research question, "how does the way that social innovation practices are embedded, define the strategic and political dimensions of social innovation at the local level?" Findings from within individual case analyses have shed light on the interactions between the macro, meso, and micro levels of embeddedness and social innovation practices. The investigation of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional process of embeddedness, has helped to identify two approaches to social innovation: the "proximity" approach in the French case and the "personal development" approach in the English case. In addition, results show that social innovation practices are purposefully embedded by the housing association. Examining the way that social innovation practices are embedded also contributes to understanding the underlying intentions of the housing associations in their development of social innovation practices. Consequently, the way

housing associations shape these approaches elucidates the strategic extent and intent of social innovation.

In this regard, chapter 5 focused more on the question, "why are social innovation practices embedded?" The study's results evidence that embeddedness as a multi-faceted and multi-level process (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022), reveals the strategic dimension of social innovation at the local level. Embeddedness helps the housing association to produce social value and build credibility as a social innovation actor. In other words, housing associations strategically embed their social innovation practices to reinforce their credibility and prestige. In this regard, the analysis of the embedded social innovation practices reveals the close connection between social innovation and local politics. Implementing social innovation practices is therefore an economic necessity for the housing associations, in the challenging policy context of budgetary austerity in which the social housing sector is embedded.

Based on the findings presented in the previous chapter, the research's main arguments and core contributions are highlighted here. The key elements of the literature review, methodology and findings are mobilised in this chapter, to formulate theoretical contributions and policy/practice implications.

The key argument of the thesis relates to the proposal that social innovation is a strategic concept that is closely connected to local politics. This argument forms the basis of a critical perspective in the conceptualisation of social innovation. It shows how housing associations are shaped by different contexts, but at the same time, deliberately direct their approach to social innovation, according to contexts. By revealing the way in which housing associations compete over funds, power, and local recognition, the study challenges the normative perception of social innovation as inherently 'good', instead showing how this is questionable at the local level. In addition, embeddedness helps to build a holistic understanding of social

innovation, an understanding that transcends disciplinary silos by revealing the interconnections between individuals, territories, and institutions. The "personal development" and "proximity" practices are embedded social innovation approaches. The examination of these practices helps to discern the relationship between contexts and social innovation; it also elucidates how social innovation is contextually shaped in different ways at different levels. Therefore, the study of practices reveals the interactions between the fragmented dimensions of social innovation identified in the literature: the agent-centred, territorial development, and institutional theory perspective.

The second section of this chapter (6.3) will present the policy/practice implications by focusing on two main recommendations for social innovation organisations: fostering effective governance for social innovation actions; and up-scaling social innovation so local non-profit organisations think beyond the local. Finally, the strengths and limitations of the research (6.4) and the directions for future research (6.5) will end the thesis.

6.2 Contributions to the social innovation literature

This analysis of the embedding of social innovation has shed more light on the concept of social innovation. Exploring how and why social innovation practices are embedded in various contexts at the local level, helps to answer the question, "what is social innovation?" Having examined in the findings chapter, "how" and "why" social innovation practices are embedded, this section will answer the question "what" does embeddedness reveal about social innovation? The focus on the processual dimension of social innovation, explored through the lens of embeddedness, gives more clarity to the concept of social innovation. This section demonstrates how the study's findings elucidate the under-theorised notion of social innovation.

Social innovation has been perceived as an umbrella concept (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012) which is "used loosely to encompass and account for a set of diverse phenomena (…)" and "includes too many elements and means "all things for all people" (Hirsch & Levin, 1999, p. 210). Therefore, the findings contribute to questioning this umbrella construct of social innovation, by focusing on "the scope /conditions and contextual characteristics" and to be clear "in terms of when and where the concept applies" (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012, p. 26). Therefore, based on the conceptual limitations identified by Rueede & Lurtz (2012), this section demonstrates that the study's findings have contributed to elaborating more specific statements about the breadth, depth, scope, conditions and logical consistency of the concept. They do so by building an awareness of "which elements are core to the concept" (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012, p. 29).

In both case studies under investigation, embeddedness has revealed the strategic and political dimensions of social innovation. The findings demonstrate that the housing associations in the French and English cases, have developed embedded social innovation practices for different reasons. These relate to contextual factors, as part of a strategy that helps the organisations to maintain and improve their fragile power base, in what is a changing policy context in which the social housing sector is embedded. The political dimension of social innovation revealed throughout this study, consists of three elements: the construction of social innovation credibility; the power and stability of the organisation; and competition over funds and local recognition.

In this regard, the key theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. Firstly, the findings have contributed to defining social innovation as a strategic concept that is reconfigured through the notion of embeddedness. The housing associations capitalise on contextual factors to produce social value and build their reputations and credibility as social innovation actors. The study illuminates the relationship between social innovation and power

dynamics at the local level from an organisational perspective. Along the same lines and the proven strategic dimension of social innovation, the study has contributed to recoupling social innovation with local politics. In doing so, the study's results challenge the "denial of politics" in the conceptualisation of social innovation (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016). This key contribution to the literature also questions the normative dimension of social innovation and therefore, its intrinsic morality (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019; van Wijk et al., 2019). Secondly, the findings have contributed to building an interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation, built upon a multilevel analysis. The examination of the influence of embeddedness on social innovation, has helped to integrate the different and fragmented approaches to social innovation. Therefore, through these two inputs, the study has contributed to addressing the "conceptual ambiguity" of social innovation, flagged up in the literature, by revealing what are the consequences and purposes of social innovation, and under which circumstances they operate (Oeij et al., 2019).

6.2.1 The connection between social innovation and local politics

Firstly, it is crucial to remember that the findings corroborate the economic necessity of social innovation established by the literature (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016; Sharra & Nyssens, 2010). Social innovation is part of the political claim on grand challenges (Moulaert et al., 2013). It is a "magic concept" (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011) which has been adopted as "a new reform strategy" in the context of "budget austerity" within which "governments are wrestling" (Voorberg et al., 2014, p. 1334). However, this perspective has mostly been explored at the European level, to justify EU austerity policies (Fougère et al., 2017). Other organisations also make social innovation a driver for change for sustainable development. For example, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have explicitly made innovation the key means for tackling sustainability challenges of numerous sorts, by stating that "without innovation, there is no way to overcome the challenges of our time" (UN Secretary-General, 2017) (Tesfaye & Fougère,

2021, p. 439). Moreover, recent studies conceive social innovation as a political tool at the service of the third sector or public bodies to "prove their capabilities to adapt to the new era" (Abad & Ezponda, 2021, p. 224). There is, therefore, an emerging awareness of the economic necessity of social innovation for third sector organisations.

Housing associations must therefore adapt to the changing policy context. National policies (such as legal codes or national settings) impact organisational actions (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). This then elucidates the influence of the macro-level on social innovation management and organisational policies (Nowak & Raffaelli, 2022). In the case studies under investigation, findings show that budgetary austerity and various political challenges (such as the *loi ELAN* in the French case or the welfare reform in the English case), impact the social housing sector. Thus, the changing policy context in which housing associations' actions are embedded, represents both a pressure and a drive for housing associations to develop social innovation practices.

From this viewpoint, understanding the way social innovation practices are embedded arouses a paradox: social innovation practices maintain organisational continuity rather than enabling changes when these practices are embedded at the local level. This paradox revealed by the findings is formulated as follows: innovation can take on a conservative nature because it plays a legitimising role in the organisation (Abad & Ezponda, 2021). In other words, institutionalised and structured social innovation practices consolidate the embedded power of the organisation. In this regard, this understanding of social innovation helps to expose the question of organisational stability, which implies critical perspectives regarding the radical or transformative dimension of social innovation (Vercher et al., 2022).

Social innovation is thus instrumental rather than "radical" or "disruptive" (van Wijk et al., 2019). Embedded social innovation practices maintain an established routine, stabilising

the social structure of pre-established institutions (Abad & Ezponda, 2021). This argument challenges the predominant definition of social innovation, a notion framed by contemporary innovation discourses as an agent of intrinsically positive social change and progress (Pel & Kemp, 2020). This echoes Schubert's (2019) contention that social innovation operates as a form of "disruptive maintenance, which entails an element of conservatism to compensate, repair or resolve the manifold "lags" found in contemporary societies" (Schubert, 2019, p.45). Thus, the embeddedness of social innovation practices relates to the instrumental perspective of social innovation, which is "present in most policy and practitioner narratives, related to the social services provision addressing to societal needs and social market failures" (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017, p. 73). Indeed, in a time of budgetary austerity, the power of the housing association is frail, and the organisation must therefore implement and develop a social innovation strategy that can contribute to improving its power base. It is a statutory obligation for the housing association to carry on delivering social services. Consequently, the study's findings reveal that the development of social innovation practices is necessary, instrumental, and strategic, but not necessarily radical or transformative. In other words, these three characteristics are central to the concept and enhance the conceptual clarity of social innovation.

In the same vein, the social innovation literature usually frames the concept "in a highly positive fashion" that "tends to ignore a number of existing and more critical conceptions of social innovations" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016, p. 294). Social innovation has been favoured by political institutions (such as the European Union) for its inherent 'goodness' (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019). The instrumental use of social innovation has been explored at the European level (through the analysis of European public policy and discourses) to stress the consensual and apolitical dimensions of the notion (Edmiston, 2016). Social innovation is apolitical because it is an unquestionable concept,

recognised as a policy paradigm that could contribute towards inclusive growth at the EU level. However, there is a lack of theoretical and practical understanding of this normative assumption, associated with social innovation at the local level (Abad & Ezponda, 2021).

The relationship between social innovation and politics is paradoxical, "ironically, in its denial of politics, social innovation literature is profoundly political" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016, p. 297). The findings challenge the apolitical dimension of social innovation by revealing the political dynamics of the social innovation process at the local level. "Local politics" is traditionally associated with local governments or the increased dissemination of the political authority among state, market, and civil society actors at the local level (Harriss et al., 2005; Jessop, 2002). However, in this study, "local politics" assumes a symbolic form: it refers to the distribution of power within the local community. "Local politics" is thus linked to horizontal and vertical forms of power relations, marked by competition for local hegemony, credibility, and durability. In addition, social innovation as a political discourse associated with a certain "morality" (Ziegler, 2017) is also used by local organisations such as housing association, to build their credibility and prestige; this helps them to maintain and improve their power base. This approach offers a way forward to understanding social innovation as a political concept (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020).

This study's findings further demonstrate that social innovation practices are closely associated with conflict between local organisations that compete over funds and reputation. In this regard, the findings offer a local understanding of the critical perception of social innovation that has been developed by Abad & Ezponda (2021): "SI acts as a process to mobilise and accumulates resources and capacities for social action" (Abad & Ezponda, 2021, p. 225). Building a social innovation reputation generates both financial and political benefits, and these are interconnected. The prestige of the organisation, obtained through the development of embedded social innovation practices, contributes to attracting external funds,

thereby acquiring vital financial resources for the organisation in times of uncertainty. There are both financial and political stakes around the notion of social innovation, therefore, and the lens of embeddedness clarifies these dimensions.

Social innovation implies political turbulence and dynamics that relate to power relationships. Indeed, the findings also demonstrate that "power" is central in the definition of social innovation practices and is closely related to discussions around normativity (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012). In this regard, power issues also question the normative dimension of social innovation because they generate adverse effects such as antagonisms, between local third-sector organisations and conflicts between social housing residents. These adverse effects are particularly visible in the French case study. In this respect, the findings have contributed to developing a necessary and explicit "positioning towards normative aspects and power issues" (Rueede & Lurtz, 2012, p. 29). From this perspective, local politics and power dynamics are central components of social innovation, which brings clarity to the concept by challenging its normative and apolitical dimensions.

Finally, the findings challenge another assumption formulated by the social innovation literature. Usually, the association between social innovation and embeddedness is positively perceived in the literature (Galego et al., 2022). The literature shows that social innovation initiatives are successful because they are socially, culturally and territorially embedded (Galego et al., 2022; Moulaert et al., 2017); however, it does not ask "who" benefits. Based on the findings, the argument is made that embedded social innovation practices benefit the housing association organisation because they contribute to consolidating its structural power. Therefore, the findings have contributed to questioning the distribution of benefits generated by social innovation practices. From this point of view, the study critically challenges the "naïve" stance (Lawrence et al., 2014) associated with the positive impact of social innovation.

Indeed, developing social innovation practices is a strategic and political process which is preliminary beneficial for social innovation organisations.

To summarise, by challenging the "denial of politics" in the conceptualisation of social innovation (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016), the study has contributed to reconnecting social innovation with local politics. Furthermore, the study's findings offer a critical understanding of social innovation by questioning the normative dimension of social innovation and its inherent "goodness" (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019) and "morality" (van Wijk et al., 2019). It is argued that the housing associations are driven by contextual political considerations that determine their strategic approach to social innovation. This in turn helps them to compete over local recognition and external funds, and to build their credibility as social innovation actors in a challenging context, marked by budgetary austerity and societal upheaval.

6.2.2 The strategic configuration of social innovation: an organisational perspective

Analysing how social innovation is employed by French and English housing associations has contributed to discerning the rationale for their social innovation practices. Based on an understanding of how their social innovation practices are embedded into the context in which they operate, the housing associations leverage strategic advantages. From this perspective, the embeddedness of social innovation practices is no longer taken for granted but purposefully reconfigured by the housing associations.

In this regard, social innovation is not a neutral or passive process that fits contextual structures. Instead, as illustrated by the findings, social innovation activities are intentionally driven, based on an understanding of embeddedness. In the coastal conurbation of the north of France, proximity is the approach that captures how practices are embedded. In the coastal county of the south of England, social innovation practices are also strategically reconfigured,

but through a personal development approach. This argument answers the question, why social innovation practices are embedded in a particular way.

Therefore, by revealing the strategic configuration of social innovation as built upon embedded practices, the study has responded to the call for more studies that critically comprehend social innovation as an essential process to mobilise capacities for social action at the organisational (meso) level (Abad & Ezponda, 2021; Moulaert et al., 2017). The findings demonstrate that third sector organisations such as housing associations, develop innovation practices to counterbalance their increasingly shaky power base, in the face of budgetary austerity and legitimacy challenges. The study evidences the close connection between social innovation and strategic actions undertaken at the organisational level.

Moreover, the findings show that embeddedness varies according to context and is dependent on strategic reconfiguration. For example, in the north of France, the local context is characterised by territoriality, the strong influence of the territorial sense of belonging, and the neighbourhood's identity on social actions. Thus, the housing association capitalises on these contextual features to implement social innovation practices that concern volunteering activities and the animation of the social housing neighbourhoods. In the south of England, this local context refers more to a regional partnership approach. The local environment is an area where the housing association engages in community building that includes people from different areas, with different backgrounds. This approach to local embeddedness is more relational and provides opportunities for social capital creation. Thus, the partnership perspective on local embeddedness underpins the personal development approach, which the English HA capitalises on to develop social innovation practices.

Consequently, the cross-case analysis contributes to understanding the benefits and interests produced by embedded social innovation practices for the housing associations. The

findings reveal that embedded social innovation practices help housing associations to create social value and build a reputation. As a social innovation actor, building this reputation through contextual political considerations, is the cornerstone of a social innovation strategy. Moreover, the production of social value is a condition for the housing associations to be recognised by participants and local stakeholders, as credible social innovation actors. Social innovation scholars believe that social innovation addresses societal needs and thus improves human and social life (e.g., van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). Indeed, from a Schumpeterian perspective, social innovation is closely related to social value creation (Phills et al., 2008; Faludi, 2023). Schumpeter (1909) differentiates between individual and social values and demonstrates that social value is associated with altruistic or social wants. Because producing social value is the condition for the housing association to be recognised as a credible social innovation actor, the local non-profit organisations seek to produce social value deeply bound to the local context, through the development of embedded social innovation practices.

In both cases, social innovation practices improve well-being and quality of life of SI participants (e.g., self-esteem improvement, work-life balance). By promoting well-being through embedded social innovation practices (personal development and proximity practices), the housing associations build their image and their credibility as social innovation actors. Indeed, improved well-being is central to the definition of social innovation and is often identified as the key expected outcome (Dawson & Daniel, 2010). This focus on well-being improvements delivered by housing associations, contributes to understanding the interactions between the micro, and meso levels; and how they forge social innovation practices. Findings show that the housing associations capitalise on participants' ambitions, reflexivity, and narratives (micro level of embeddedness) to develop social innovation practices which are then embedded at the individual level. Indeed, the housing associations have built their social innovation practices around these personal features, to support the entrepreneurial projects of

participants. In other words, practices initiated at the meso-level are associated with micro-level processes (e.g., judgements and reflexivity) and individual action (e.g., attitudes and storytelling).

Furthermore, both the findings and the literature review confirm that focusing on the social housing sector is relevant to investigating the strategic scope of social innovation. The housing associations have a key role in achieving social innovation ambitions. Therefore, investigating the role of the housing association as a crucial social innovation actor, sheds light on the organisational perspective of social innovation. This focus on housing associations supports the theoretical proposition in the study of social innovation whereby organisational and management perspectives are deeply relevant. Understanding how organisations act when they are embedded in ecosystems - marked by interactions between contexts - is beneficial in the investigation of social innovation (Henriques et al., 2022). Additionally, social housing is a pertinent sector in which to investigate the social innovation practices undertaken by local non-profit organisations. Specific research fields such as urban planning studies, have stressed the appropriateness of studying social innovation in the housing sector (Marchesi & Tweed, 2021; Raynor, 2018); yet, despite the wide variety of fields to which social innovation has been applied, housing does not feature among these (Czischke, 2013). For example, the role of social innovation in the management and governance of different forms of housing has not been investigated to date (Czischke, 2013). Thus, a case study approach that focuses on the social housing sector, helps to bridge this research gap. It also contributes to building further knowledge about social innovation when the phenomenon is embedded in local contexts and strategically developed by local non-profit organisations.

Finally, the concept of embeddedness is more established in the entrepreneurship literature than in the social innovation literature and is often related to strategies or tactics for resource acquisition (Davis & Aldrich, 2000; Newbert & Tornikoski, 2012; Uzzi, 1999). In

line with the entrepreneurship approach, the local non-profit organisations leverage strategic advantages, based on an understanding of how their social innovation practices are embedded. In this regard, the findings also respond to the recommendations for future research as formulated by Moulaert and colleagues (2017). They point out the need to concentrate social innovation research on the organisational (meso) level to "critically assess the normative content of concepts such as 'good' and 'new'" (Moulaert et al., 2017, p. 30). The analysis of cases (especially the French one) reveals that the housing associations tell a story of success, strengthened by contextual factors, which make their activities fit the expectations of funders such as local authorities, national bodies, or European organisations. However, this does not necessarily map onto positive outcomes and nor are these narratives universally accepted by residents or other local organisations. Thus, the findings bring a critical management perspective to social innovation research (Fougère et al., 2017), which demonstrates that social innovation practices can be beneficial to housing associations, at the cost of other stakeholders such as other local stakeholders or residents. The investigation of the benefits of social innovation management for the local organisation must incorporate "an explicit concern for its politics and ethics" (Lawrence et al., 2014, p. 15).

Nevertheless, the critical management perspective targets the strategic dimension of social innovation as undertaken by third sector organisations. It is "a political project in the sense that it aims to unmask the power relations around which social and organisational life is woven" (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 19). In this regard, critical management and organisation studies have a role to play "in pursuing more progressive" understandings of SI in context" (Fougère et al., 2017, p. 879). Connecting social innovation to local politics and questioning the normative scope of the concept is the central outlook of the study's contributions. Therefore, the research has provided "organisational" and "management" perspectives that help to define social innovation as a strategic process.

6.2.3 A critical and interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation: enhancing the theoretical coherence of the concept

The social innovation literature is fragmented and dispersed across different research fields and disciplines (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Lawrence et al., 2014). The review of the literature identified three broad perspectives: the agent-centred approach, the territorial development perspective, and the institutional theory lens. The review also demonstrated that social innovation studies are rooted in different social science disciplines that provide substantial insights and a plethora of new approaches and frameworks (Pel et al., 2020). Grimm and colleagues (2013) go further in this analysis by showing that the varied understandings and conceptualizations of social innovation have stretched the concept in "so many directions that it is at breaking point" (Grimm et al., 2013, p.440). By offering a multi-level examination of social innovation through the notion of embeddedness, this study has contributed to bridging these three approaches. The research findings, which have elucidated the way social innovation practices are embedded at the local level, have helped to amalgamate these three perspectives of social innovation, thereby building an interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation.

The study of embedded social innovation practices also contributes to understanding the interactions between agency, institutions, and territories. It offers a comprehensive thinking which replaces "a worldview where simplifying causal relations, a linear time concept and predictability are emphasized" (Grimm et al., 2013, p.449). In both cases, the housing associations have developed embedded social innovation practices, shaped by local, organisational, and individual factors. Both the "personal development" and the "proximity" approaches are shaped by complex interactions between contexts. The agent-centred, territorial development, and institutional theory perspectives are all useful in understanding these approaches. Therefore, the study underlines the need to adopt a holistic thinking to investigate social innovation, one that transcends the compartmentalised monodisciplinary approach to

social innovation that tends to focus either on individuals, socio-cultural structures or territories. In this regard, the results of the study fulfil the call "for a structurally embedded interpretation of SI, focusing on dynamic features of societies (actions, social movements, power relations, and social creativity) but also patterns of stability and structuration" (Abad & Ezponda, 2021, p. 234). The study's results have thus helped to connect social innovation dynamics to social structures and factors of stability, such as the history of the organisations involved in social innovation activities; the characteristics of place where social innovation activities are implemented; and the background of participants who benefit from social innovation activities.

Along the same lines, the multi-faceted dimension of structures that influence social innovation practices, highlights the association between social innovation and the interdisciplinary nature of the process. Indeed, the analysis of embedded social innovation practices has connected three theoretical perspectives. The first one is the territorial development approach that relates to the influence of "place" on social innovation practices as both a moveable and rooted notion. The second one refers to the agent-centred approach. It underlines the influence of micro-level factors, such as individuals' judgments, emotions or motivations about/towards social innovation practices. The last one is the institutional theory lens that emphasises the influence of norms, values, and wider structures on social innovation practices. In this sense, the findings answer the calls for communication and interaction between disciplines (Abad & Ezponda, 2021).

To summarise, this study has contributed to embracing a more comprehensive approach to social innovation by revisiting its multi-layered embeddedness, albeit without adopting a singular theoretical focus on actors, institutions, or territories. Furthermore, this interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation also represents an opportunity to build a critical analysis of social innovation. On this matter, Beckman and colleagues (2023) write that

exploring social innovation in "disciplinary silos" is a trap that limits the critical inquiries around the concept. Therefore, building a holistic understanding of social innovation, which highlights the interconnections between disciplines, is not an end in itself, but a way to further conceptualise social innovation. This holistic approach, resulting from a multi-level investigation of embedded social innovation practices, has shown how social innovation is closely related to local politics and strategies. In other words, the analysis of the way social innovation practices is embedded has avoided "the social innovation trap" (Beckman et al., 2023). As such, this analysis has contributed to formulate further critical knowledge on social innovation.

6.3 Policy implications and recommendations

Implications for policy and practice are closely tied to theoretical contributions. The different chapters of this thesis have recognised the practice-led nature of social innovation (Taylor et al., 2018). Moreover, social innovation scholars have called for "a specific operationalization of SI (…) both to increase the understanding of SI at the scientific level and to provide policy-making tools useful for making decisions" (Campomori & Casula, 2022, p. 2). The methodological perspective of the research is founded on "pragmatism", which advocates a theory-practice interplay. In other words, the study offers a "pragmatic" understanding of social innovation. It does not provide an "essentialist" definition of social innovation and does not judge definitions as correct or incorrect, but only as being helpful or unhelpful in guiding research and deriving sound policy implications (Pol & Ville, 2009). From a pragmatic point of view, "theory is always oriented towards practical problems" (Strübing, 2007, p. 595). In the literature, social innovation is perceived more as a new practice to tackle societal problems rather than a uniform academic concept (Chandra et al., 2021). Therefore, the findings and the discussion of the study's results, contribute to formulating recommendations for enhancing the

effective implementation and dissemination of the social innovation practices developed by local stakeholders.

The policy implications are centred on the notion of local politics, the development of strategies and local governance for social innovation actions. More precisely, the policy implications are twofold and take the shape of practical recommendations (policy-making tools) for social innovation actors: firstly, capitalising on "local politics" to foster effective social innovation governance; and secondly, the need for local third sector organisations to think beyond the local to up-scale social innovation.

6.3.1 Fostering effective governance for social innovation actions

The findings demonstrate that politics and strategy are co-related in how housing associations develop social innovation practices. Social innovation is a political process associated with power dynamics, strategic orientation, and organisational continuity. The first policy recommendation is based on this connection between "local politics" and social innovation practices. More precisely, local third-sector organisations should capitalise on "local politics". including methods of governing at the local level, services management, policy networks or partnerships. In this regard, "local politics" assumes a positive sense which local social innovators should benefit from in building effective governance for social innovation actions.

The study's results and the literature underline the crucial role of local third-sector organisations (such as housing associations) in delivering social innovation activities (De Wit et al., 2019). In this regard, the intervention of non-local public institutions is considered a hindrance and a risk to the autonomy of civil society and local organisations (Abad & Ezponda, 2021). As explained by Campomori & Casula (2022), local governance is not only central in the definition of social innovation, but also defines social innovation processes (Avelino et al., 2019). Social innovation is "a strategy with which to overcome the bureaucratic rigidities of

the public sector, which is considered unsuitable for dealing with complex problems" (Campomori & Casula, 2022, p. 5). From this perspective, to ensure the effective distribution of benefits generated by social innovation activities, social innovation practices should be embedded in local networks and supported by cross-organisational and cross-sector cooperation. Indeed, the link between politics and social innovation should be reinforced and defined around the notion of governance, which implies making decisions in groups to tackle a shared challenge.

"Local governance", in turn, relates to a collective process. It is defined as a process of coordinating actors, social groups, and institutions, to attain clear goals that are discussed and defined collectively (Borraz & Le Galés, 2010). For example, to tackle the issues of unemployment in social housing neighbourhoods, housing associations should be assisted in effectively designing actions, by employment support organisations, community centres, local authorities, or charities. These stakeholders from different sectors (housing, employment support, community development) bring different forms of expertise that can enhance the effectiveness of social innovation actions. In this sense, socially innovative governance is helpful in addressing "growing social challenges that neither government nor citizens have the necessary resources to solve on their own" (Pestoff, 2012, p. 1106). This governance is also a way to avoid duplication of activities, which has been observed in the French case: social centres and the housing association were found to be competing for local recognition as the best social innovation organisation, through the development of the same activities based on volunteering and community development. By mitigating this risk of duplication, local governance contributes to enhancing community and territorial development, rather than the prestige of local third-sector organisations.

Moving towards local and cross-sectoral governance in the delivery of social innovation activities represents a fundamental change in the scope of social innovation. More precisely,

the delivery of social innovation activities should be based on a fair local and polycentric governance that includes more interactions between a large range of actors at different levels; it should also involve the redistribution of authority through negotiation and cooperation between local stakeholders "based on interests but also on trust and values" (Le Galès, 2001, p. 169). Indeed, governance networking and communication between diverse actors "strengthen actors' interaction and contribute to improving the quality-of-service delivery" (Galego et al., 2022, p. 283). From this perspective, changing governance practices is a social innovation initiative that effectively mobilises human and material resources in order to satisfy human needs (Swyngedouw & Moulaert, 2010).

For example, the findings show that in the English case, social innovation practices based on networks and partnerships, contribute to attracting a wider group of beneficiaries, a consequence of cooperation between actors and agencies that connect different sectors in a governance networking system. On the other hand, in the "proximity" approach developed in the north of France, key social innovation players struggle to cooperate because of financial incentives which create conflicts and battles for hegemony between local third sector organisations. However, the network system of local governance can raise the capacity of the organisation to acquire resources and improve "organizational sustainability" (Galego et al., 2022, p. 283). Furthermore, it emphasises "collaborative governance models" defined by mutual respect and trust among partners, rather than making deals with other organisations and competition (Campomori & Casula, 2022). In this context, governance refers to different means of coordinating social action in a complex situation. It fosters "horizontal communication to agree on a common objective among stakeholders through continuous negotiation that changes the objective as circumstances change" (Moulaert et al., 2022, p. 28). Furthermore, social innovation in governance is a source of hope for marginalised areas and communities. There is thus a need to acknowledge local politics in social innovation activities that aim to limit the

negative impacts of the deficit of welfare benefits and present an organisational preservation strategy for housing associations.

Finally, to develop effective local governance, local third-sector organisations should adopt a needs-based approach that can generate the commitment of local stakeholders from different sectors. For example, addiction is a critical issue in the deprived neighbourhoods under investigation in the coastal conurbation of the north of France. This issue is one of the main barriers to employment and social inclusion. Thus, specific governance that involves the housing association, drug prevention organisations, employment support organisations or community centres, should be implemented. Each stakeholder can thus bring their expertise in a cooperative manner, to effectively tackle this issue. Indeed, the findings have demonstrated that housing associations build their social innovation strategy around contextual assets. However, needs should also be considered in the governance process that includes coordination between social groups, actors, and institutions "to attain clear goals that are discussed and defined collectively" (Le Galès, 2001, p. 172). Innovation is a process of implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems (Phills et al., 2008). Therefore, local and fair governance can effectively support the objectives of social innovations by encouraging cooperation and interactions between a large range of stakeholders from different sectors, collectively aiming to tackle common social needs.

6.3.2 Up-scaling social innovation, thinking beyond the local

This study has addressed a number of questions but also generates others. For example, does the promotion of local governance and the development of social innovation action through embeddedness, mean that the state's role should be ignored? The findings stress the importance of the local level to understanding the relationship between social innovation, strategy, and politics. Analysing the way social innovation practices are embedded is relevant to formulating

a critical approach to social innovation. However, the study's results lead to question the dichotomy between the local level and the power of trans-local connections (Avelino et al., 2019) in the strategic development of social innovation practices. Transcending the local level leads to the possibility of scaling up social innovation to encourage socio-political change at regional or national levels (Moulaert et al., 2022). Therefore, whilst the findings show the strong interconnection between social innovation and the local context, thinking beyond the local is also necessary if social innovation actors are to generate socio-political changes that impact the territory, organisation, and the people. Thinking beyond the local is therefore, a necessary condition for organisations to have an impact.

Scaling up solutions and ideas generated by social innovation practices, is central in the definition of social innovation success (Chandra et al., 2021). Indeed, scaling up represents an ultimate objective of social innovation: "to spread strategies that work across populations and places" (Beckman et al., 2023, p.14). Nonetheless, the condition to ensuring the long-lasting effect of social innovation activities is for local actors to find a complementarity between "scaling up" (towards geographical expansion through the exchange of practices) and "scaling deep" (toward locally anchored endurance) (Kim & Kim, 2022). Therefore, to maximise their impact, social innovation actors should embed their activities at varying levels.

Moreover, thinking beyond the local also questions the state's role in implementing social innovation practices. The findings have highlighted the economic necessity of social innovation in the context of budgetary austerity, and its impact on housing association organisations that compete over recognition, power, and funds to carry on delivering social services to their residents. In this context, the findings and the literature reaffirm the crucial role of the state and public institutions in promoting social innovation, "including improvements in social relations, structures of governance, greater collective empowerment" (Campomori & Casula, 2022, p. 5). Indeed, effective social innovation governance should

include the state so as to create a fruitful relationship between state and non-state stakeholders, including residents, local organisations, and beneficiaries of public policies (Campomori & Casula, 2022). Firstly, this relationship between state and non-state stakeholders at the local level is needed to generate more systematic and transformational changes. More precisely, the state offers opportunities to local stakeholders to develop social innovation practices that produce social value at the local level. Secondly, the integration of the state in local governance is needed to encourage "policy diffusion", "policy transfer", and "lessons drawing" from experiences, in order to disseminate successful social innovation actions (Campomori & Casula, 2022). The state's role is thus to scale up "what works" and what should be included in the policy process (Coletti, 2013).

Finally, capitalising on trustworthy local governance, using contextual assets, integrating the state in social innovation practices, and up scaling these practices, can generate broader systemic impact. Social innovation is a long-term process that necessitates time to evaluate and institutionalise its practices. In this regard, local non-profit organisations involved in social innovation activities, should challenge the "innovation for the sake of innovation" paradigm. The data analysis has shown that promoting a short-termist approach to social innovation prevents the long-term development of social innovation. Indeed, the policy/practice implications generated by the discussion of the study's findings are based on the scalar dynamics, namely "the (de)institutionalization processes, the networking processes involving diverse agents and institutions, the cultural life, etc.", which are "essential in evaluating the relationships between SI and political transformation" (Moulaert et al., 2022, p. 22). This multi-scalar approach is the practical form of a transdisciplinary approach to social innovation which helps to understand social innovation as a holistic and long-term process.

6.4 Strengths and limitations

The study reconciles theory and contexts by adopting a contextualised case study analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989, 2021; Welch et al., 2022). The research methodology, which is one of the main strengths of the study, has examined the context as a causal factor that shapes social innovation activities rather than just a setting where activities are implemented.

The methodological contributions result from the multiple case study analysis that has strengthened evidence and enhanced context-sensitive theorising, by exploring how social innovation practices are embedded in local contexts. Indeed, the methodology's core is its contextual nature that contributes "to reconcile theory and contexts by generating explanations" (Welch et al., 2022, p. 5); in this regard, the context does not surround the phenomenon under investigation, but "it is constitutive of it" (Welch et al., 2022, p. 7-8). Rather than considering the context as the local and institutional settings where social innovation activities are implemented, the research methodology has examined the context as a causal factor that underpins these social innovation activities. This approach has fostered the generation of evidence to endorse the multi-dimensional embeddedness and its influence on social innovation activities. Indeed, the findings reveal that such embeddedness contributes to understanding the links between social innovation, culture, institutions, and power relationships within a context (Foucault, 1983). This "contextual" perspective suggests that "all knowledge is situated" (Haraway, 1999, as cited in Clarke & Friese, 2007). In this regard, "context" should be understood as multidimensional. Embeddedness explores the interactions between contextual factors and social phenomena. In the investigation, the methodology has helped to identify a place, a sector, individuals characteristics and political circumstances, as critical contextual factors that define the embedding process of social innovation activities.

Another strength of the methodology is the comparative approach between two countries that show how state tradition or governance structure influence social innovation processes. The cross-case comparison represents a critical methodological contribution. Although the specificities and differences between the two cases have largely been identified, a comparative study enhances the dissemination of best practices that can contribute to the reinforcement of civil society and community life (Abad & Ezponda, 2021). Furthermore, empirical testing is indispensable "to take distance from the rhetorical discourses that surround" the notion of social innovation (Abad & Ezponda, 2021, p. 237). Cross-case comparison supports a critical thinking approach to social innovation from this perspective. Indeed, exploring the context-specific notion of social innovation in two different national and regional contexts, appears particularly relevant to building critical thinking. Thus, using multiple case studies provides a strong base for theory building (Yin, 1994). This is particularly true for social innovation, a concept that requires comparative approaches (Voorberg et al., 2014). In short, multiple case studies imply cross-case comparison and enable a broader exploration of theoretical elaboration (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Additionally, the cross-case analysis of social innovation practices delivered by housing associations in two specific local contexts, represents a critical starting point in consideration of the embeddedness of social innovation strategies by third-sector organisations.

Inevitably, the study is not without its limitations. The first limitation concerns the limited generalisability of the research related to the contextualised nature of the investigation. The study only focuses on two local contexts where a housing association has delivered social innovation activities. Although the context is a focal point of the research, it is used as a defining element of the embeddedness process of social innovation practices (Welch et al., 2022). Therefore, the generalisability of the results needs to be put into perspective because the

contextualised case study approach "invites the reader to evaluate the applicability of their results in other situations" (Piekkari & Welch, 2011, p. 775).

In the same vein, the focus on the social housing sector also represents a limitation. Even if the review of the social innovation literature and the findings have shown that the social housing sector is a relevant setting to study social innovation (Glanville, 2016; McDermont, 2004; Mullins, 2010), concentrating on a single sector represents a limitation. Therefore, the study fits in with the debate associated with the generalisability of case study research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The cross-case comparison provides a solid methodological strategy that enables theoretical elaboration (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007); the generalisability of the results and conclusions are applied in the French and English social housing contexts. Consequently, the study does not generate statistical generalisation, but generates theoretical nuance (Baškarada, 2014). In this regard, the exploratory and contextualised study has generated theoretical insights that lay the foundations for future investigations (Stake, 1995).

Secondly, the Covid-19 pandemic and the series of national lockdowns undeniably disrupted the research process. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the data collection was discontinuous, which disrupted the temporality of the research process. When the data collection strategy was designed, the data collection was supposed to be a two-step approach with a narrow time gap between the first round (Key Informant Stakeholders' interviews) and the second round (Participants' interviews). However, more than a year passed between round one and round two for the French and English cases: in the north of France, the fieldwork started in May 2019 and finished in October 2020; in the south of England, it started in September 2019 and finished in July 2021. The impact of Covid-19 on the fieldwork had unintended consequences for data collection. More specifically, it impacted the research time frame's temporality and confused the participants' temporal orientation. It created memory issues because SI participants could not remember exactly what they did. Indeed, a shorter time

between the two rounds of data collection would have probably helped to deepen the evidence of participants' experiences, especially regarding the progress and variation of participants engaged in social innovation activities. For example, during interviews, participants (both in the north of France and south of England cases) did not always remember the activities in which they had participated. In addition, some participants expressed their frustrations, explaining that they could not carry on their activities with the housing association: "It broke up the momentum" as stated by a participant [RI04PDC, female, 64, social tenant, retired]. Therefore, the disruption of participants' experience during the Covid-19 pandemic should be considered as a study limitation. The national lockdowns (in both countries) impacted the data collection process and some features of data associated with participants' experience in the social innovation activities delivered by the housing associations.

6.5 Directions for future research

The findings challenge the "denial of politics" associated with the conceptualisation of social innovation (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016). It is argued here that social innovation is profoundly political in that it entails power relationships, competition, and conflicts between non-profit organisations at the local level. However, the study has also revealed the local dimension of politics, identified in the implementation of social innovation practices and the embedding process of these practices in local contexts. Thus, the study's arguments offer theoretical and methodological foundations around which future research should be built.

First, the study mainly focuses on the processual dimension of social innovation, by understanding social innovation as a strategic process implemented by housing associations at the local level. In the literature, social innovation is perceived as "a combination of processes and practices that aim to meet human needs" (Galego et al., 2022, p. 268). Thus, the processual dimension is crucial to understanding social innovation. Nevertheless, future research should

be more focused on outcomes. The study provides little evidence about the benefits of embedded social innovation practices for neighbourhoods' residents, territorial development, or local communities' engagements. An outcomes-focused investigation could reveal the positive impacts of embedded social innovation practices on people's well-being and local communities.

Secondly, because the study's results reveal that embedded practices maintain organisational stability, rather than bringing about real changes and local benefits, further investigations should question the inherent goodness and effectiveness of embedded practices to satisfy neglected basic needs and human rights (Galego et al., 2022; MacCallum, 2009). Indeed, according to recent studies, social innovation activities have the greatest chances of success when they are "territorially and socio-culturally embedded (…) to trigger institutional changes in public policies" (Galego et al., 2022, p. 226). Therefore, there is a need to explore the impact of embedded social innovation practices on local communities and people's well-being by adopting an outcomes-focused approach. For example, analysing the outcomes of strategies developed by local non-profit organisations to generate benefits (e.g., empowering local communities) represents an interesting perspective from which to understand social innovation and transcend the process-focused perspective adopted in this study.

Moreover, the argument developed through the study's results calls for more cross-comparison, between different types of organisations rather than between countries. Therefore, exploring and comparing social innovation activities delivered by different third-sector organisations would increase understanding about the influence of embeddedness on social innovation practices. Moreover, third-sector organisations' responsibility in delivering social innovation activities is key (De Wit et al., 2019). Therefore, exploring social innovation in different contexts (for example, another sector or other non-profit organisations) could further enhance the generalisability of the research findings.

Finally, the findings suggest that employing an organisational perspective is crucial to understanding further the relationship between social innovation and politics at the local level. In this respect, adopting a critical management lens (Fougère et al., 2017) could be beneficial in capturing this political dimension, and pursuing a more progressive understanding of social innovation in context (Adler et al., 2007). The critical management perspective refers to four specific perspectives that should be considered for social innovation studies: "challenging structures of domination"; "questioning taken-for-granted assumptions"; "going beyond instrumentalism"; and "paying attention to power and knowledge" (Coule et al., 2022, p. 480). This study has laid the foundation for future research that incorporates critical management thinking in social innovation management, by questioning the "goodness" and "normative" dimensions. This approach challenges "taken-for-granted assumptions about management, taking a sceptical stance" on management practices (Coule et al., 2022, p. 491), showing that social innovation is never ethically or politically neutral (Lawrence et al., 2014).

In addition, critical approaches to social innovation mainly shed light on the legitimisation of neo-liberal policies through social innovation practices (Peck, 2013), by offering a critical analysis of EU SI policy discourse (Fougère et al., 2017). However, this critical lens should pay more attention to the local level by investigating SI policy discourses formulated by local organisations that deliver social innovation activities. In this regard, there is a need to embrace a critical approach to explore social innovation practices developed by local non-profit organisations. Indeed, the non-profit field is characterised by the limited implementation of critical approaches: "only 4% of all the articles published across three key non-profit journals over four decades adopted a critical approach" (Coule et al., 2022, p. 499). In the same vein, the critical management approach can also contribute to examining hegemonic discourses of social innovation and their influence on local politics (Seeck et al., 2020). The research findings (presented in chapter 5) have revealed the relationship between

social innovation discourses and prestige of local third sector organisations, when housing associations "hype" their role as social innovators. However, future social innovation studies should further investigate this dimension by paying more attention to the "discourses" employed by local social innovation actors. These investigations would contribute to developing further critical knowledge about social innovation. The aim of critical work would help to connect social innovation to more equitable and sustainable practices, rather than the conservation of unjust social systems (Coule et al., 2022).

To summarise, directions for future research are threefold. Firstly, future research should further explore social innovation in different contexts (another place, another organisation, or another sector) to enhance the generalisability of the study's results. Secondly, future research should understand further the relationship between social innovation and politics at the local level, when the organisational actor's future is not necessarily invested in the area. Thus, exploring social innovation practices delivered by organisations other than housing associations should help to bridge this gap. Thirdly, the study showed how benefits generated by embedded social innovation practices helped the organisations maintain and foster stability, through the strategic production of social value. However, it did not explore in depth the long-term impact of practices on local communities and people's well-being. In this regard, it is crucial to explore social innovation through a critical management perspective to further explore the relationship between social innovation and political politics. This will further help to build knowledge about the strategic management of third sector organisations involved in the development of social innovation practices at the local level.

6.6 Conclusion of the thesis

To conclude this thesis, it is critical to recall the research question: "how does the way that social innovation practices are embedded, define the strategic and political dimensions of social innovation at the local level?" This question concentrates on the processual dimension of social

innovation, along with the actions of housing associations that leverage strategic advantages based on an understanding of how their social innovation practices are embedded. From this perspective, embeddedness reveals the strategic dimension of social innovation. More precisely, the study of the way in which social innovation practices is embedded has revealed two specific approaches to social innovation that are contextually shaped and strategically developed by the housing associations: the "personal development" approach in the south of England and the "proximity" approach in the north of France. Three levels of embeddedness (at the local, organisational, and individual levels) contribute to shaping these approaches.

It is evident from the existing literature that social innovation activities are contextually shaped (Moulaert et al., 2005; Steiner et al., 2021; Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013). By revisiting the multi-layered embeddedness of these activities, albeit without adopting a singular theoretical focus on actors, institutions, or territories, this study has shed light on the nature and the precise influence of embeddedness on social innovation practices. Indeed, identifying these multi-layered processes provides an interdisciplinary understanding of social innovation, by incorporating organisational, geographical, psychological, sociological, and political issues in the conceptualisation of social innovation.

This embeddedness lens is, therefore, conducive to building further knowledge on the weakly conceptualised notion of social innovation. Moreover, understanding why social innovation is employed by organisations helps to address the key concern formulated in the literature: "what" is social innovation? (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020; van Wijk et al., 2019). In this regard, exploring the embedding processes of social innovation practices has contributed to reconnecting social innovation with local politics, by revealing the strategic dimension of the concept for organisations at the local level. Social innovation is thus a process that local housing associations strategically employ through embeddedness to counterbalance their

increasingly shaky power base, in the face of budgetary austerity, legitimacy challenges, and broader societal upheaval.

Thus, the study has laid the foundation to further integrate the critical management perspective in analyses of social innovation. The management of social innovation is a critical component of the strategy developed by third-sector organisations to cope with contextual challenges. Therefore, the research has reaffirmed the necessity to adopt critical thinking in exploring social innovation, by questioning the normative dimension of social innovation and its inherent "goodness" (Fougère & Meriläinen, 2019), and "morality" (van Wijk et al., 2019). Social innovation shows signs of being a "quasi-concept" (Ziegler, 2017), a mental construction shaped by two characteristics. A quasi-concept is a notion that benefits from an aura and a validity. A quasi-concept retains a certain vagueness, making the notion adaptable and flexible, and one that can fit with and validate policy discourses (Bernard, 1999). Through investigating social innovation practices at the local level, this study contributes to the questioning of social innovation as a quasi-concept.

On a more general note, the role of social science research is to critically examine concepts that are still embryonic, particularly those employed strategically by local organisations. Therefore, research on social innovation is much needed because "research should resist political attempts to forge a consensus" (Ziegler, 2017, p. 297). In this regard, this study has clarified the definition of social innovation by disclosing its close connection with local politics. In re-conceptualising social innovation, this exploratory study provides a necessary critique. In an increasingly challenging and uncertain context, marked by budgetary austerity and sudden policy changes, it also lays solid theoretical foundations from which to call for new theory-practice investigations that can inform policy recommendations for the management of local non-profit organisations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Shortened interview guide in English – SI participants and HA residents

Outline Details for the Case Studies

Investigating social innovation practices, experiences, and contexts

This interview guide was used for both cases.

[***The in-depth interviews need to keep getting the respondents to be specific and use examples***].

In-depth Interview Question Guide – Case Studies

The questions are about you and your experience as a volunteer, entrepreneur, employee, jobseeker, and your experience as a participant of social innovation activities delivered by the housing association in your neighbourhood/town/region. There is no right or wrong answers, I am just interested in your story.

Background (life history and working situation)

- **Individual background? (Gender, age, migrant background, ethnicity, social identity, childhood, family circumstances etc.)**
- **How do you normally make ends meet? When did you become unemployed? Why did you choose to set up or find a job in this line of business? Please tell me a bit about your background.**
- **Can you describe a regular day at your home, community, work or in your business or your job? (What is your work situation? E.g. Employed; Self-employed; Unemployed; Retired; A student; A Home-maker/not seeking work; Unable to work due to sickness or disability)**

Gathering information about the year the interviewee was born in, their highest educational qualification and their employment history when they talk about their life history.

Location (Living environment, characteristics of the neighbourhood/town/region, sense of belonging)

- **Have you always lived locally?   If not, where else have you lived?**

- **What led you to move here? Business/personal/family/previous connections or other reasons?**
- **How would you describe this place?**
- **Good/bad? Opportunities/Fears? How do you feel about living here?**
- **Do you think about moving? Why? Why not?**

Networks, support, and critical moments

- **Who and what helped you and in which way in setting up/taking on the business, starting volunteering activities, finding a job or changing your work situation?**
- **Did anyone else help or advise you or take an interest in your job search or business start-up? Who? How? Why? What sort of advice, resources or practical help was most useful?**
- **What is the best/hardest thing about introducing this change in your everyday life? (setting up/taking on the business, starting volunteering activities, finding a job…)**
- **Did you find you lacked certain knowledge/skills now in doing this if compared with the past?**
- **Could you find people to help you overcome problems? What helped you now in doing this if compared with the past? Why? How? In what context?**
- **Are you involved in/what is your opinion of business or employment support organisations/networks?**
- **Which networks precisely? When did you use them? How much involved are you in them? Why? What does this involvement mean for you?**
- **Would you say your most important business or job search connections are local to here or further afield?**

Local Contribution and personal life in the local area (neighbourhood/town/region)

- **Do you feel you play an important role in the community (local, business, occupational or other)? How do you see this?**
- **Do you support the local, business, occupational or other community? Provide a service? Provide jobs? Sustain the local economy? How and why?**
- **Do you personally participate in any local activities**

- what has changed over the last 10 years in relation to this? More/less local activities? Why?

- Do you have any caring responsibilities? (E.g. children, sick, elderly, partners, in-laws)

- Do you consider yourself to be an active member of the local community?

- Do you enjoy being part of the local community?

- Does this help your business or job search?

- Are there a lot of new people moving into this area? Why? What do you think about the integration of newcomers? Did you feel integrated when you arrived here?

-

Experience and opinion about social innovation activities delivered by the housing association

- When did you hear about the social innovation activities? What did you hear about it? Why did you express interest? How did you find it? How did MEESS support you to get a job or start a business or change your work situation? How and why did you join a *collectif d'habitants*?

- What did you like and dislike about your experience? What was a breakthrough or set back point for you in this experience?

- How do you find working with the HA on job search/business start-up or changing your work situation more generally? How do you compare working with the HA on this as opposed to working with the Job Centre? Or *Centres Sociaux*? Do you prefer it or not? How? Why? Should or did the HA change something in how it delivers the programme or have the HA changed anything since you registered?

Identity of the housing association

- What is your HA like, what they aim to do, how they behave and the kind of relationships that HAs have with you or that clients like yourself have with HAs?

- How far the HA (and its social innovation activities) has reached social housing residents who are long term unemployed and been able to help them?

- Have the HA influenced the venture creation, the job search process, your participation in volunteering activities or lifestyle change in your case?

Appendix 2 – Shortened interview guide in English – HA and key informant stakeholders

The objective of the interview is to get a picture of how the HAs perceive their residents/clients and how they have designed their social innovation activities to support them; and their reflections on their experience of delivering these services and of how they are received by clients and the outcomes they do (or don't) generate.

Background on housing associations and social innovation activities they develop to support their residents/clients

- **Description of the HA, role, and responsibilities of the KI – Can you please introduce yourself and explain your role within the organisation (HA or other organisations)?**
- **What are your main approaches to providing social innovation activities over the last five years (or more historically)? (I.e. identify the strategy of the social innovation practices on offer that includes the objectives, the process and the outcomes expected by the HA)**
- **Why were these approaches chosen rather than others?**
- **What are the main strengths in using these approaches?**
- **What are the main challenges?**
- **What type of social innovation activities do you deliver?**
- **What are the objectives of the social innovation activities?**
- **Can you measure the impact of these activities?**
- **How are these activities different to what you did before?**
- **Did you get (financial) support to develop these activities?**
- **Do you partner with other organisations? How?**
- **What were the key policies underpinning these social innovation activities (e.g., social housing context, legal context, welfare reforms)**

Beneficiaries of the support of the social innovation activities

- **Who is the target group for the social innovation activities and why?**
- **Where are they living?**
- **How do you identify them, approach them and/or recruit them? (We want to know about how far the HAs decide who to target and then how they approach them and what sort of reactions they get – are most disinterested or are certain sorts of people keen and others not? What is the process of recruitment and are there dropouts even before the training beings and if so, why?)**

- **What are the expectations of participants? In what type of social innovation activities are they involved (e.g., MEESS, volunteering activities…)? Do they match their expectations?**
- **How do the general public see HA residents? How do potential employers see HA residents? Why? (We want to know what are the dominant cultural representations of your housing association residents (e.g. cinema, television, press, literature, and digital journalism), and how widely these representations circulate?**
- **How do residents see the place where the HA is located?**
- **How do you encourage and support 'those who are furthest away from the labour market' and do come on the training to succeed? (We want to capture their understanding of what special support this target group might need to be able to make good use of social innovation activities)**
- **Are there specific challenges to attract people furthest away from the labour market?**

Length of the social innovation activities

- **How long has this project been operating?**
- **If it was finished, why? Was it successful? Why or why not?**
- **How did the organisation evaluate the effectiveness and the result of this project?**
- **What if anything, did you learn from it?**
- **In cases where there is a low likelihood or it is particularly difficult for 'those furthest away from the labour market' to engage in micro-business or job search, what support, if any, is available for them to escape social exclusion and 'get out of poverty' (or even simply just to get along in poverty)?**

Key analytical priorities

1.   What are the discursive frameworks that underpin the housing association officers and training providers' representations of who are their residents, what they are like and how they should interact with them? (an understanding of underlying rationalities that connect otherwise disparate representations of social housing and how social power is reproduced or resisted through social housing officers' representations) (We need to take cues from the HA material and from the key informants themselves on the terminology to use and to establish what they mean by it; we use the phrase those 'furthest away from the labour market' but we want to get to know what words do they use to talk about those who are hard to reach. We do not want to 'coach' them into using our language but to give them the space to elaborate using their language as far as possible)

2.   What are the material conditions (including the economic, the social, the spatial, the political, the ideological, the cultural, the technological and other energy related tools) within which social housing residents are currently engaged in social innovation activities?

Appendix 3 – Examples of field notes

20/05 – Field notes – Coastal town of the south of England

Jeremy [name has been anonymised] in the neighbourhood in the coastal city of the south of England. The city is modern and lively with a strong Eastern European immigration from the beginning of the 20th century because of the harbour and the docks: labour immigration. The neighbourhood in S-city is characterised by this ethnic diversity: Portuguese, Polish mostly. Jeremy was so emotional, especially when he spoke about confidence building and his family background. Teers of Pride. He was really friendly with a strong sense of empathy. He was getting emotional when I mentioned my fieldwork in France, in my native town. He was really open-minded, and he insisted on a strong human dimension. He chose the café, a new business run by one of this friends' friend. It was a bit noisy, but he felt confident in this place. He told me that he appreciated my company several times. We walked together to the station to finish our discussion (more informally). I missed my train to Winchester, but we could discuss about different things, his Irish background. Hi granddad and his dad were born in the same bedroom, but not in the same country: Northern Ireland/Ireland

Martin [name has been anonymised], in a small town of the county. We started the interview in his car because he was in a hurry, the interview took place in this workplace (atelier). Quick and interesting interview, his employee was working at the same time. I was stand up, like a journalist with a microphone. Strong words about Poland and a real admiration for England and the opportunities the country has given to him for his business development. A country where everyone can be an entrepreneur, if they've a good mindset: individual factors and personality. Social value is indirect, but I understood it: giving confidence to people through a collective workshop based on participants' diversity and strong human relationship. According to Martin, the MEESS training was a bit too basic. He could only give me 40 minutes of his time. He was too busy. Interesting point of view: being self-employed helps to create a good balance between personal and professional life. More time for the family: managing their own life, social dimension? Yes, because it is an individual need, improving life condition, associated with social innovation. Social value can be linked to individual needs and aspirations: improving living conditions, well-being at work, and work-life balance. Personal development approach?

Observation dans le quartier du Belvedere 20/08 à 18h

Sunny weather, very lively neighbourhood, many young people talking at the bottom of the buildings. Some of them play football (the youngest, between 8 and 12 years old). Lots of dogs, some chatting about their dogs. People greet each other, it gives the impression that everyone knows each other, some greet from their window, they chat. I meet Louis [name anonymised], an employee of the local social centre, in charge of employment support for young HA residents. We meet at the premises of the social centre, at the bottom of a building. He is part of the neighbourhood, many of them know him. He warns a lady that her window is open and that she must close this window in case of a storm.

I meet a fairly talkative young man whose name is Adrien [name anonymised] (Louis has already spoken to me about this young man), I ask him if he would be okay for an interview with me, he is okay, but I must contact Louis as he said. His friends greet me, they are courteous, I hear about a certain Steve [name anonymised] who came to see Louis and said to him: "If you ever see something, you let me know", he seems to be interested in the social centre, Adrien had to tell him about the support that can offer the social centre. Another young man asks Louis: "Can we have a look at my CV

together?" This illustrates the statistics to suggest significant youth unemployment in the neighbourhood.

Louis seems to be an attentive ear to the expectations of young people. We are talking about Ynes [name anonymized], many do not know her. I then met Mireille [name anonymised] the vice-president of the social centre in the *quartier du Belvédère*, she is 67 years old and is passionate about history, she is rather critical about the social innovation activities implemented by the housing association. I asked her for an interview for the week coming, she accepted.

I leave the neighbourhood around 7:30 p.m. I greet Louis who tells me that it's Okay for the interviews, he authorises me access to the premises of the Social Centre. It would be better to avoid contact with the housing association as they didn't arrange this interview with someone from the social centre, I feel, sometimes, conflicting relationship between the housing association and the social centre.

Today, I rediscovered the district, more lively, younger, and far from the image conveyed by some interviewees: "Young people don't want to do anything". Apparently, some (young people) are not invited to the activities delivered by the housing association... Adrien talks to me about volunteering, he speaks on behalf of "young people": "we are tired of always having to do voluntary work", "if we work, it's to earn a living", Adrien is a temp worker, I should talk to him next week. Adrien is wearing sunglasses, a white polo shirt, his hair slicked back, he exudes a certain self-confidence, he seems to know what he wants. The interview is likely to be rich.

This visit offered another viewpoint at the district, younger, I did not meet anyone from the collectif d'habitant in the *quartier du Belvedere*. I almost only met young people, single mothers with their child(ren), adults around 25 years old. Planned to return to the neighbourhood on Thursday, August 27.

Appendix 4 – Pictures

Neighbourhoods in the North of France where fieldwork was conducted:
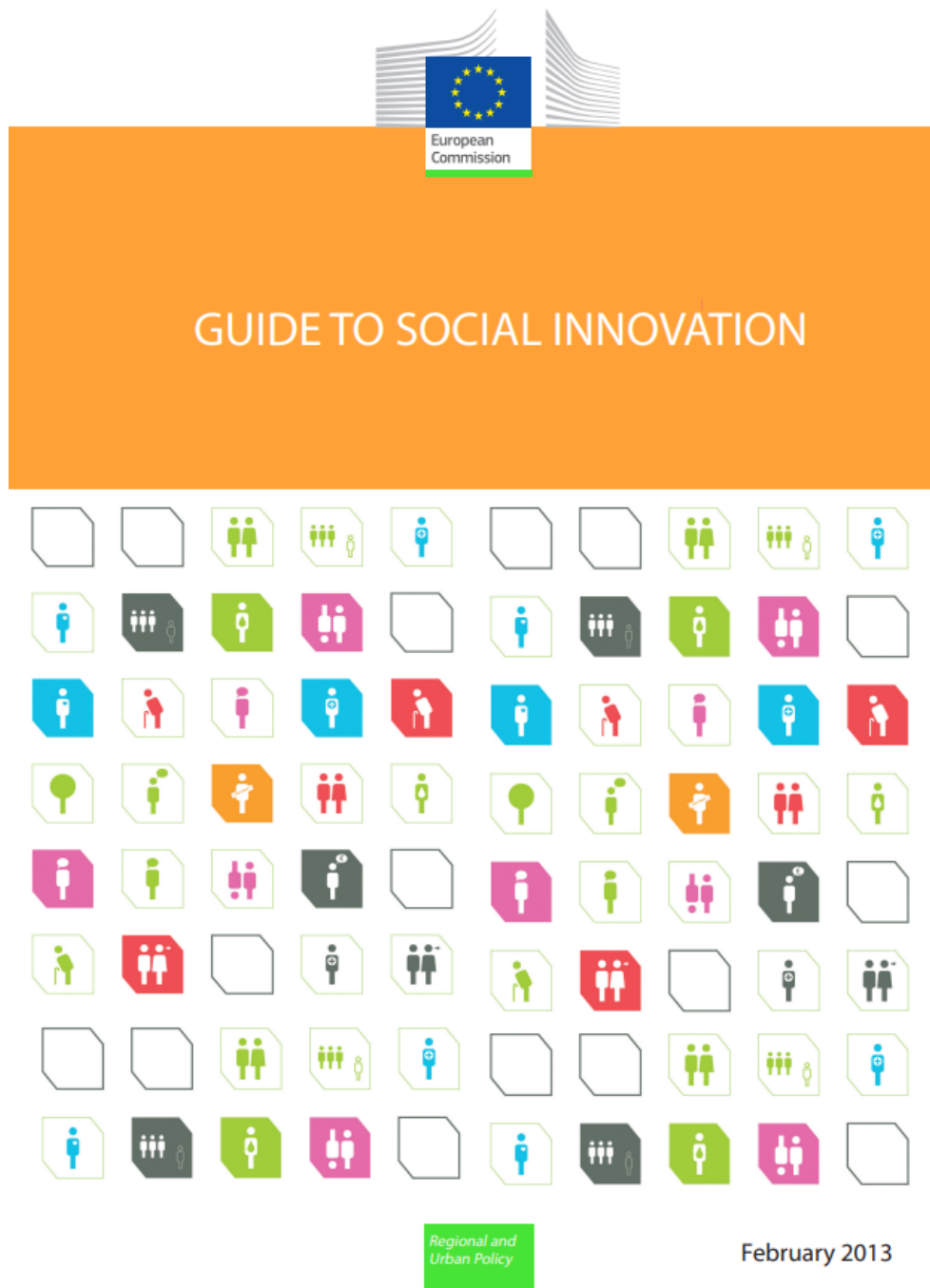

Quartier des Plantes
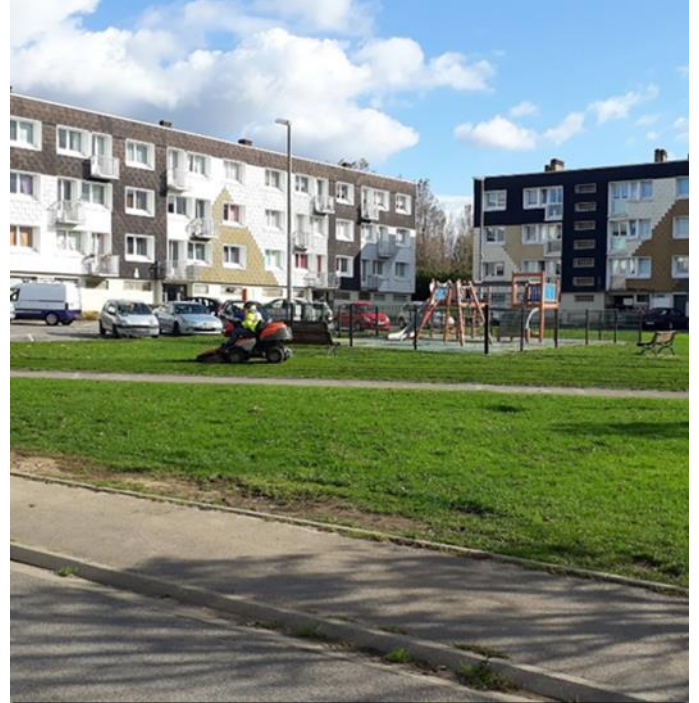
Quartier du Belvedere

Quartier des Arbres

Appendix 5 – Examples of policy-oriented publications about social innovation provided by the European Commission

GUIDE TO SOCIAL INNOVATION

Regional and Urban Policy

February 2013

Appendix 6 – Ethics approval

The UEA academic lead of the impact evaluation of the social innovation programme associated with this PhD study applied and received ethical approval from the Norwich Business School Ethics Committee in 2018 before any data collection took place.