

# A Thematic Analysis of Social Innovation as an Approach to Local Economic Development

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## ABSTRACT

Increasing evidence suggests that local actors in the European Union, China, Germany, South Korea, Brazil, the Netherlands, and Nordic countries are using social innovation for economic and social development, with much success. Likewise, the South African Ministerial Review Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation acknowledge social innovation's importance in addressing unemployment and poverty, both of which are fundamental to local economic development. However, social innovation is still not prioritised and optimally utilised for local economic development by South African municipalities. Further, there is a gap in South African literature regarding social innovation's use as an approach to local economic development. In a narrative literature review, this article addresses this gap with a thematic exploration of social innovation's use as an approach to local economic development. Through a qualitative research approach, a thematic content analysis of documents was undertaken of research concerning social innovation and local economic development. From this content analysis, emerging, prevalent, and common themes relating to the phenomenon were explored. Significantly, the findings illustrated that social innovation partnerships, networks, and stakeholders are the underpinning themes necessary to ensure outcomes of social innovation's use as an approach to local economic development. The findings of this article suggest that an improved understanding of themes supporting the use of social innovation could enhance its future application as an approach to local economic development.

## INTRODUCTION

The *South African Constitution of 1996* (hereafter referred to as the Constitution) set municipalities the objective of promoting social and economic development (section 152) 25 years ago. Subsequently, economic development was earmarked in the 1998 White Paper on Local Government as a developmental outcome for South Africa. Despite these legislative and policy directives, some municipalities have not made the desired local economic development (LED) impact in their communities, and successful LED practices are elusive in some. From this, it is apparent that deriving innovative approaches to ensure sustainable LED programmes in some South African municipalities remains a challenge. Further, rising unemployment resulting from the global Covid-19 pandemic that has affected South Africa's economy since 2020 has exacerbated LED challenges confronting South African municipalities (Francis 2020:103; Buthelezi 2021). Given these and other LED challenges that South African municipalities will have to address through their LED strategies, it is prudent to explore approaches to LED implementation, such as social innovation (SI).

Research highlights that local actors in the European Union, China, Germany, South Korea, Brazil, the Netherlands, and Nordic countries are using SI for economic and social development, with much success (Hart, Ramoroka, Jacobs, and Letty 2015:1; Biljohn and Lues 2016:72; Copus, Perjo, Berlina, Jungsberg, Randall and Sigurjónsdóttir 2017:17). Similarly, the South African Ministerial Review Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation acknowledges SI as a vehicle for addressing unemployment and poverty, which is fundamental to local government's LED strategies (Hart *et al.* 2015:2). However, SI is not optimally prioritised and used by South African local governments as an LED approach to mitigate a lack of expertise, resource and capacity constraints, and challenges associated with implementing their LED strategies (Nel and Rogerson 2015:5). Moreover, SI, as embedded in inclusive development and innovative solutions, could be beneficial to ensuring that municipalities achieve their LED developmental outcome in the 1998 Local Government White Paper and the LED objective in the Constitution.

This article does not deny that there may be different perspectives to SI's use as an approach to LED. Instead, it draws on common themes between the use of SI and of LED that are considered fundamental in operationalising SI as an approach to LED. As such, this article suggests that an improved understanding of themes supporting SI's use could enhance its future application as an approach to LED. In light of this, a thematic exploration of SI's use as an approach to LED by South African municipalities is provided. The research question posed in this regard is: What are the themes emerging in current research that could enhance the use of SI as an approach to LED? Through a qualitative approach, a thematic content

analysis of documents was undertaken of relevant research concerning SI and LED. By using a range of electronic search engines, the concepts of SI and LED in local government were respectively applied as search terms and adapted as required to identify research that could be included in a narrative literature review. From this content analysis of documents – such as peer-reviewed journal articles, published research, and government documents – emerging, prevalent, and common themes regarding the phenomenon were explored through an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006:83). Against this background, the first section of this article discusses theoretical underpinnings of LED and SI respectively. This is followed by themes arising from the analysis of the literature about SI as an approach to LED. The article concludes with an explication of the value in SI's use as an approach to LED.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL INNOVATION**

This section which elucidates theoretical underpinnings for LED and SI includes a discussion of the empowerment theory and the conceptualising of LED and SI respectively.

### **The empowerment theory**

According to Sekhampu (2010:39), LED has evolved from different economic theories as a response to modern-day trends of post-colonial challenges, increasing decentralisation of power and decision-making, globalisation, and rapid technological change. As a result of the changing forces of globalisation, LED has in recent times been elevated as an important notion for improved economic development (Sekhampu 2010:39). Though economic development occurred at different rates and stages globally, changing economic forces and globalisation of trade have helped ensure that self-reliance of local initiatives by citizens and municipalities are a noticeable occurrence around the world (Shareia 2015:79). Against this background, this article first reflects on the empowerment theory, which is considered part of the theoretical work underpinning LED. This article also deems this theory relevant for using SI to address societal problems given its focus on empowerment, which is likewise inherent to SI. Further, the key elements underpinning this theory are consistent with the use of LED and SI as expounded on in this section.

The empowerment theory focuses on promoting and empowering individuals or communities to increase control over their lives by participating in their own development (Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, and Bird 2009:1; Kahika and Karyeija

2017:4). However, the concept of empowerment is not only part of the theoretical work underpinning LED but considered fundamental to the multidimensional nature and use of SI (Pel, Haxeltine, Avelino, Dumitru, Kemp, Bauler, Kunze, Dorland, Wittmayer and Søgaaard Jørgensen 2020:8). Calves (2009:736) and Kahika and Karyeija (2017:4) describe empowerment as a process during which marginalised community members' capacity to exercise their rights, acquire access to resources, and participate in the process of shaping communities and making decisions is improved. The empowerment theory aims at ensuring that these marginalised and poor members of a community have the correct skills, capacity, tools, expertise, and access to secure sustainable incomes and livelihoods to improve their lives by transferring power and resources to them (Fox and Romero 2017:1). This theory thus emphasises the economic enhancement of the poor and marginalised by increasing access to economic resources such as improving their economic skills, access to factors of production, and information that will enable them to participate in decision-making by government (Fox and Romero 2017:1).

Three key elements underpin the empowerment theory (Kahika and Karyeija 2017:4). The first key element attributes the persistence of underdevelopment and poverty to poor communities' lack of capacity and capability to create social and economic opportunities that will increase their standard of living (Calves 2009:737; Kahika and Karyeija 2017:4). Consequently, poor communities should be empowered by creating opportunities for them to participate in their own economic development by increasing their skills and access to basic services, and by strengthening and incorporating the abilities for self-sufficiency (Luttrell *et al.* 2009:1; Calves 2009:737; Kahika and Karyeija 2017:4). In this regard, LED is instrumental in creating a conducive environment for skills development and for local stakeholders to participate in identifying and implementing innovative and sustainable solutions to their local economic needs (United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) 2014:7). The creation of opportunities for communities to participate in their own development thus equally resonates with LED and the application of SI. Through their participation in SI initiatives, the latter facilitates opportunities and platforms for these communities to be empowered at an individual level and also as a collective (Dias and Partidário 2019:1; Pel, Haxeltine, Avelino, Dumitru, Kemp, Bauler, Kunze, Dorland, Wittmayer and Søgaaard Jørgensen 2020:4). Such empowerment occurs when these communities through the SI process develop the ability through skills and mastery, knowledge sharing and learning, to act on goals that matter to them, which is also coherent with LED (Pel *et al.* 2020:4,7).

+The second key element is aimed at accelerating community participation in matters that affect their lives. Empowerment in this context relates to communities having the competencies and opportunities to participate effectively in economic, social, and political activities that affect their own lives. Community participation results in community change, which can occur at an individual or collective

level (Luttrell *et al.* 2009:1; Brenyah 2018:565). Through LED, communities are not only beneficiaries of economic outcomes, but critical in initiating, narrating and constructing their own solutions to economic issues towards building economically viable communities (Phillips and Pittman 2009:5). Research proves how SI can enhance such an enabling environment for community participation in matters affecting their lives and to affect community change (Young Foundation 2012:22; Avelino, Wittmayer, Pel, Weaver, Dumitru and Haxeltine 2019). Such an enabling environment fosters community participation in the application of new practices, resources and knowledge towards achieving social and economic outcomes (Haxeltine, Kemp, Cozan, Ruijsink, Backhaus, Avelino and Dumitru 2017:10; Pel *et al.* 2020:7). Moreover, through their participation in SI, these communities shape and construct and deconstruct their desired solutions and futures (Wittmayer, Backhaus, Avelino, Pel, Strasser, Kunze and Zuijderwijk 2019:9).

According to the third key element, community development occurs through bottom-up skills development, which is driven by communities, targets community assets, and quickens participation of the local people (Kahika and Karyeija 2017:4; Brenyah 2018:565). As such, the theory is embedded in participation, capacity building, community change, and economic development, which are all key elements in LED (Luttrell *et al.* 2009:1; Brenyah 2018:565). Similar to LED, participation, capacity building, and community change are constructs underpinning the use of SI (Sirovatka and Greve 2014:81; Castro-Arce & Vanclay 2020; Marchesi and Tweed 2021:10). Thus through SI new roles and relations are created for communities to participate in deriving solutions for development and societal challenges whether of a social or economic nature (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2011:13; Young Foundation 2012:22; Boelman, Kwan, Lauritzen, Millard and Schon 2014:14; Avelino *et al.* 2019). Of significance about this participation of communities in deriving solutions is how they become the drivers of LED or SI which is coherent with this third key element of the empowerment theory.

The empowerment theory is relevant to LED and SI because it promotes the participation of individuals and communities in their own development through inclusive development processes. Therefore, the theory emphasises capacity building, transparency, participation, and democracy, which are not only key tenets of LED but are also consistent with the use of SI during development processes (Kahika and Karyeija 2017:4). In practice, however, this inclusive process to LED is currently lacking due to top-down approaches to LED in some South African municipalities. The use of SI during LED could thus contribute to enhancing the inclusive process to development proposed by this theory. In this regard, the empowerment process is directly related to LED because the latter seeks to advance economic development by allowing and encouraging communities to participate in their own development to achieve sustained economic benefits and an improved standard of

living. The use of SI will likewise aid in empowering community members to participate meaningfully in development issues with an economic, social, and/or political outcome that will contribute to their own development (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017:67; Kahika and Karyeija 2017:4). Against this background of the empowerment theory, it is important to consider how LED is conceptualised in the South African local government context and for this article.

## **Local economic development**

In the local government context and for this article, LED is defined as an outcomes-based approach aimed at economic development that allows and encourages communities to work together to attain comprehensive sustainable economic growth and development, consequently bringing economic benefits and improved quality of life for all communities in the local area (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) 2019). It can be reasoned that LED is not a one-off process, but rather an ongoing process that incorporates diverse local stakeholders in the community. The aim of LED is therefore to address a variety of socio-economic needs in the community or challenges that are economically unacceptable. In addition to its local focus, LED is expected to contribute to the country's competitiveness in the global arena. In terms of defining LED, it is also important to reflect on what LED is not. It is often referred to as community development, due to its close association with community development initiatives (Meyer-Stamer n.d.; Nel and Rogerson 2015:111). However, LED is not merely community development projects or a focus on small-, medium-, and micro-enterprises, which are often part of the broader LED in supporting improved living conditions and the economic status of marginalised groups through job creation (Nel and Rogerson 2015:112). In the South African local government context, LED is prioritised in municipalities' integrated development plans, which are territorial planning instruments (Gardener 2014:6; Van der Waldt, Van der Walt, Venter, Phutiagae, Nealer, Khalo, and Vyas-Doorgapersad 2018:168). In this regard, LED becomes an economic approach to achieving some of the strategic priorities in these integrated development plans and directs how favourable conditions can be created through partnerships for the local economy to flourish (Meyer-Stamer n.d.).

## **Social innovation**

Against the background of LED, the remainder of this section reflects on conceptualising SI. SI has become a widely used concept to describe a combination of social programmes and initiatives to improve the lives of people (European Commission 2017:24). Although SI has a history of almost 200 years Pue, Vandergeest, and Breznitz (2016:2) note that there is no agreed-upon SI theory yet because there is

no single definition of SI (Pue *et al.* 2016:2; Anderson, Curtis, and Wittig 2014:3; Theoretical, Empirical, and Policy Foundations for Scoal Innovation in Europe (TEPSIE) 2014:10; European Commission 2017:24). A theory of SI requires the integration of several components of existing research and theories or disciplines on SI and related topics like economic development, business economics, political science, psychology, engineering, public administration, and others. Within the different disciplines, those focusing on territorial innovation, public management, and urban development are closely aligned with or part of LED (Pue *et al.* 2016:51; TEPSIE 2014:11). According to the schools of thought underpinning these different disciplines, the SI process is not necessarily an end result in itself (Pue *et al.* 2016:2). Instead, an SI process is completed when it culminates in or contributes to a social change in society, which is often also underpinned by a process (Popescu 2015:78; Pue *et al.* 2016:2). The process of SI thus begins when a group of stakeholders in a community devise socially creative strategies and solutions to solve societal problems, with social value creation being at the core of SI (Popescu 2015:78).

Devising strategies and solutions would represent one dimension of SI when it is applied for a particular goal or outcome (Biljohn 2017:58). Conversely, the interactions, collaborations, relations and networks between stakeholders in and across communities represent the second dimensions of SI of being process-oriented (Biljohn 2017:58). Both dimensions could include typologies of SI such as new services, practices, processes, products, rules, organisational forms (Dias and Partidário 2019:6). Of importance regarding SI's use is also the context in which it is applied and not only these dimensions. For this article that context is LED. This article, therefore, adopts the definition of Pel *et al.* (2020:8) as SI involving dimensions of new ways of doing, organising, framing and knowing to address societal challenges and through these dimensions to also facilitate individual and collective empowerment. This definition is adopted given its emphasis on empowerment which resonates with the empowerment theory.

## **FINDINGS**

Three key themes emerged from the literature. They were partnership formation, network building, and stakeholder participation. These themes were considered fundamental in operationalising the use of SI as an approach to LED and are discussed in this section.

### **Partnership formation**

The first theme of partnership formation is a central aspect in LED and occurs between local participants or actors, including local government, businesses or

the private sector, local communities, and non-governmental organisations and/or civil-society organisations (Marais 2011:60). A partnership is defined as a set of institutional collaborations between local government and several stakeholders in the private sector, communities, and non-governmental organisations for mutual benefit (Beyers, Peterson, and Sharma 2003:13; Cloete 2015:4). A partnership entails formal interactions of the relevant participants, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities based on the abilities of the partners, and it could be underpinned by the sharing of knowledge and resources (Beyers *et al.* 2003:13).

The purpose of partnerships in LED entails advancing additional resources for a local area, project, or association through collaboration and by linking various types of resources (Srinivas 2015; Ngcobo 2016:31). The results of these partnerships are the facilitation of the flow of knowledge and the encouragement of business opportunities and collaborative ventures between local government, the private sector, and communities (Srinivas 2015; Stibbe, Reid, and Gilbert 2018:11). In the local government context, these partnerships share information and coordinate their efforts, but do not necessarily share decision-making powers (KPMG International 2016:9). The decision-making process in LED partnerships depends on the creation of frameworks for participation and coordination, which must be effective and allow the active participation of various actors in the locality (Stibbe *et al.* 2018:11). Though the partnerships can be dominated by those with certain powers – like local government officials (policy direction and strategy), those with financial muscle (private sector), or those with knowledge concerning the process or the project – these frameworks are essential for maintaining a power balance between partners to attain partnership goals (Hofer and Juric n.d.:81). Further, these frameworks could aid in facilitating equal partnerships between local government and other stakeholders that are necessary to ensure that recurring challenges related to resourcing the partnership are solved (O'Donnell 2012:14; Cloete 2015:4). Consequently, LED partnerships are intended to go beyond mere top-down stakeholder engagement and participation or decision-making processes, and should be grounded in bottom-up participation processes that are essential for agenda-setting, resource mobilisation, and joint action (McQuaid 2000:10; O'Donnell 2012:14; Cloete 2015:4).

During SI the forging of partnerships serves the purpose of addressing complex societal issues and is in keeping with the demands of globalisation and 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, which require multisectoral and multidisciplinary efforts (Garcia and Macharia 2014:14; Findik 2018:3). SI partnerships could be cross-sectoral, since they push new frontiers through innovative arrangements to current and future issues by sharing decision-making powers and risks while encouraging exploration of differences and how to overcome them (Le Ber and Branzei 2010:141, 162; Garcia and Macharia 2014:15; Leenders and Dolfsma 2015:1; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017:70; Findik 2018:8). These SI partnerships permit



the development of more divergent viewpoints of a problem (Le Ber and Branzei 2010:142; Garcia and Macharia 2014:15; Leenders and Dolfmsa 2015:5). As a result, SI partnerships improve the quality of solutions by distinguishing areas where different issues intersect, as they encourage a broader analysis of issues and opportunities through comprehensive considerations and decision-making (Garcia and Macharia 2014:15). Hence, these partnerships can improve participants' capabilities by exposing them to diverse people or sectors, and consequently change the way they conceptualise and solve problems as co-producers and consumers of public goods and services (Le Ber and Branzei 2010:166; Sonne 2015:214; KPMG International 2016:9). The value of these partnerships during SI thus lies in enabling different people and organisations to support each other by leveraging their capabilities, taking advantage of their strengths, and combining it all for the benefit of the partnership (Sonne 2015:214). This is made possible by combining the resources from different organisations capable of addressing societal issues and facilitating catalytic change across a locality (Garcia and Macharia 2014:16).

The significance of SI partnerships in LED lies in its purpose of leveraging additional resources for a project or association and maximising local resources for economic development. Hence, the results may be that things start to be done in a way that is more effective and efficient for LED. While both LED and SI could potentially have similar participants in a partnership, the difference is SI's focus on social entrepreneurs, who take the risk of starting businesses with the aim of social benefit, though profit is involved to a certain extent. Whereas LED partnerships lean more towards a top-down approach to the partnership, in SI a bottom-up approach is adopted, even though both approaches are evident in both LED and SI. The partners in LED share information and coordinate efforts but do not always share decision-making powers or the risk involved in the partnership. In contrast, in SI, partners collaborate in the decision-making powers of the partnership and they also share the risks. Some LED partnerships may result in limited learning exposure, while SI partnerships are grounded in learning as part of the outcome for the partners. On the one hand, in LED there may be a high degree of autonomy with little commitment at an organisational level. On the other hand, with SI, there is a high degree of leveraging of core competencies to achieve partnership aims and to address societal issues in order to enable catalytic change across a local area.

## **Network-building**

The second theme is network-building. The interest in and study of networks in LED have grown considerably in recent years (Ha, Lee, and Feiock 2016:15). According to existing literature, networks contribute to enhancing economic development and are important from an organisational governance

perspective (Ahuja and Carley 1999; Wart, Rahm, and Sanders 2000). Networks are described as the sharing of knowledge and ideas, typically in an informal social setting, among individuals with a shared occupation or special interest (Investopedia 2020). LED networks are purposeful for sharing good/best practice, tools, new trends, awareness of news, and guidelines for success; building trust; and reducing transaction costs related to LED (Feiock, Steinacker, and Park 2009, in Ha *et al.*, 2016:15). Networks comprise a range of interactions among the participants, with a focus on LED and the use of institutions and structures of authority and collaboration to allocate resources and to coordinate and control joint actions within the network (Venter 2019:61). Though it is implied that the nature of networks is informal and that they are held together by mutual cooperation, they are still to a large extent coordinated by the local government, with a top-down approach. The initial inception of programmes requires crucial assets that are supplied by the networks and institutions within networks that give access to resources otherwise not realisable or unavailable to them outside the network (Ha *et al.* 2016:17; Venter 2019:67). This means that the success of LED is intertwined with the success of networks for the successful delivery of its programmes.

SI is embedded in collaborative networks where existing knowledge and ideas (formal and informal) are merged into new solutions, and sometimes brings about the creation of new knowledge (Leenders and Dolfma 2015; Sonne 2015: 213; Popescu 2015:79; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017:72). SI networks are more cooperative and innovative, and aim to stimulate innovative problem-solving through the co-production and delivery of new and/or innovative solutions that have a positive impact on the community's livelihood (Sonne 2015:2014; Pulford 2018:211). These networks – which include individuals, communities, teams, formal organisations, coalitions, civil society, local government and public institutions – connect stakeholders in different ways and can be directed or collated (Sonne 2015:14). As such, SI networks provide stakeholders with social capital or the opportunity to secure benefits, such as accessing information and knowledge about unique ventures or business prospects and connections; financing, markets and consumers; and technology, contacts, suppliers, markets, technology, customers, and credibility (Sonne 2015:214:227; Popescu 2015:79 ). The whole process of networking in SI is a bottom-up affair that strengthens and motivates stakeholders in the network to draw on each other's resources and promote self-discovery and learning (Pulford 2018:212).

The significance of the LED networks and the SI networks thus lies primarily in their purpose. Both of them are concerned with the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and good practices that could occur in formal and informal settings to improve the quality of life of communities. The participants are similar, to a large extent consisting of the public-sector institutions, individuals, communities, non-governmental

organisations, and private-sector organisations, and SI extends its participation to teams, coalitions, and civil-society groupings. This is because SI is by nature a multidisciplinary affair with multiple participants drawn from different disciplines and who are mutually drawn in by the same idea. The participants in SI cooperate and innovate by creating new networks that are responsible for stimulating problem-solving through creative thinking, co-design and co-production, and the delivery of new solutions that have a positive impact on communities' standard of living. SI networks strengthen partners and support individual partners by encouraging and motivating them to take risks (Pulford 2018:212). The networks in SI encourage the building of trust so that members can draw on each other's resources and promote self-discovery, learning, and democratisation in the process (Pulford 2018:212; Easterday, Gerber, Rees, and Lewis 2018: 68). The networks in LED are more of a top-down approach to development, whereas the SI process is a bottom-up approach.

## **Stakeholder participation**

The third theme is stakeholder participation, which is described as the active engagement of people in communities, organisations, and local government in order to shape decisions that influence their own lives (Sibanda 2011:23). Decision-making in stakeholder participation includes preparation, execution, growth, and evaluation within projects or programmes in which the stakeholders participate (Sibanda 2011:23). Participation entails stakeholders exercising the power to behave and regulate their acts within a collective (Mngoma 2010:2; Sibanda 2011:23; Initiative for Climate Action Transparency (ICAT) 2017:8). Stakeholders in LED partnerships include public-sector institutions, local government, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, donor organisations, civil society organisations, and communities (Sibanda 2011:23; ICAT 2017:3). During LED, stakeholder participation is important because it assists in the formulation of goals and strategies for LED, and ensures increased relationships and interactions between stakeholders, which will assist in carrying out LED activities (Sibanda 2011:23; ICAT 2017:10). The importance of stakeholder participation is that it helps transform stakeholder needs into organisational goals and creates the basis for effective strategy development (Sibanda 2011:23; Freeman 1984, in Journeault, Perron, and Vallières 2021:3). Stakeholder participation is valuable because it helps turn the needs of stakeholders into local government organisational priorities and provides the basis for the successful development of LED strategies. It thus helps local government recognise who its LED stakeholders are and, if coordinated effectively, stakeholder participation brings together participants to pool information, experiences, resources, and skills to co-produce or co-create LED solutions (Crowe 2017; Journeault, Perron, and Vallières 2021:3). Stakeholder

participation in LED thus builds local cooperative partnerships and new relationships that generate economic and social value.

In SI, stakeholders include local government, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, civil society, public institutions, communities, teams, and community organisations that are interested in the progress of SI in some way or another (Noked 2013; United Nations Environmental Management Group (UNEMG) 2019). The primary objective of SI stakeholder participation is to engage stakeholders to establish relationships in order to better understand each other's views and concerns about key issues or challenges affecting their lives, and to incorporate those views and concerns as part of a solution (Noked 2013). Stakeholder participation is important because it allows more ideas to be realised than if the programme or project creation and implementation were only limited to one organisation (UNEMG 2019). Hence, these stakeholders engage and collaborate in various roles and use various methods to create social value by offering a range of viewpoints from diverse community contexts (Phillips, Lee, James, O'Regan, and Ghobadian 2015:444; Drake 2018:215; UNEMG 2019). Not only does this give stakeholders a sense of ownership, and thus develops an interest in making the project succeed, but opportunities for engaging with and learning from the project enhance capacity and responsibilities (Crowe 2017; UNEMG 2019). The social resources contributed by stakeholders include both tangible and non-tangible resources (Webel, Sattar, Schreiner, and Phillips 2016:206).

Significantly, in stakeholder participation, LED and SI both establish relationships in order to have a positive impact on communities' development objectives. The LED stakeholders, through their participation, assist in the formulation of goals and strategies for development purposes, while SI partnerships are used to engage the stakeholders to better understand communities' views and concerns so that they may be incorporated into the LED and SI strategies. Both LED and SI use similar stakeholders (local government, public institutions, non-governmental organisations, civil society, local politicians, and the private sector), except that in SI there is the addition of teams and engagement with partners. The difference between the two is the approach to stakeholder participation. In LED the stakeholder participation helps turn the needs of stakeholders into organisational priorities for developmental success. The goal of stakeholder participation is thus to engage stakeholders so that their needs are incorporated into organisational goals, and creates the basis for an effective strategy for LED. Similar to SI, LED aims to bring stakeholders together to pool information, experiences, resources, and skills to co-produce and co-create for LED. Compared to LED, during SI the process of stakeholder participation offers a better view of community context and provides social value to communities. During SI, it is an opportunity for engagement and learning within the project while co-creating and co-producing, thus enhancing the capacity and responsibility of communities. SI is thus embedded in engaging

stakeholders in the creation of social value and is driven by a bottom-up approach during which stakeholders play an active role.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

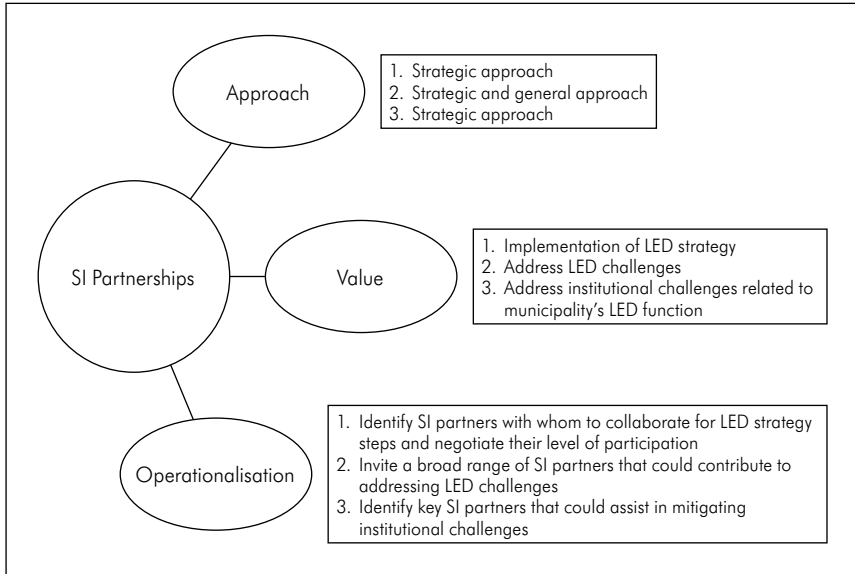
The themes identified in the previous section (partnership formation, network-building, stakeholder participation) were used as the basis from which to propose the themes of SI partnerships, SI networks, and SI stakeholders to operationalise the use of SI as an approach to LED. This section discusses the value of these partnerships, networks, and stakeholders for the municipality as an approach to LED, as well as how a municipality can operationalise them, as illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

### SI partnerships

Regarding SI partnerships, it is apparent that at the centre of using SI and LED is the formation of partnerships. In terms of SI, this stems from its being embedded in collaborations that would be grounded in aspects of either formal or informal partnerships. Likewise, LED's success and the implementation of municipal LED strategies often depend on the nature and extent of partnership involvement as well as reliance on partners. While it is apparent that using SI partnerships during LED is fundamental to leveraging resources for projects or programmes and maximising local resources for economic development, it can be deduced that SI partnerships would be of value for South African municipalities. This value is based on the contribution that such a partnership makes to achieving a municipality's implementation of its LED strategy and delivering on its legislative and policy mandates related to LED. The value generated from the SI partnership could be in respect of contributions made to (i) developing the municipality's LED strategy, (ii) addressing LED challenges confronting the municipality's communities, and (iii) assisting the municipality with institutional challenges related to its LED function.

Concerning developing the municipality's LED strategy, the SI partners can play an important role in its respective steps. These stages include organising the LED effort (step 1), conducting an LED assessment (step 2), developing the LED strategy (step 3), as well as implementing (step 4) and reviewing (step 5) the LED strategy (Van der Waldt *et al.* 2018:171). In terms of operationalising SI partners' role in the LED strategy steps, a strategic approach would have to be considered. This could involve a municipality not only identifying SI partners with whom to collaborate for these steps, but also negotiating their level of participation during the respective stages. What is more, some SI partners would be part of each step while the municipality would identify other SI partners for specific steps only.

**Figure 1: SI partnerships**



Source: (Authors' own depiction).

When addressing LED challenges confronting the municipality's communities, SI partners are important in respect of actively contributing to finding, designing, and implementing solutions for LED challenges in the municipality. In this regard, these partners could offer their time, resources, skills, and ideas as part of a community of social innovators. Depending on the nature and complexity of solutions, a municipality may have to adopt a more strategic approach to selecting SI partners that could contribute to addressing LED challenges. However, in terms of finding solutions to LED challenges, a general approach may suffice in which a broad range of partners that could contribute are invited. In respect of institutional challenges related to a municipality's LED function, SI partners become an important resource in terms of offering expertise and providing skills where these may be lacking at an institutional level in a municipality. Therefore, to operationalise this value, the municipality would identify key SI partners that could assist in mitigating institutional challenges related to performing their LED function. In an advisory capacity, these LED partners would offer specialised LED skills and expertise, and the municipality would require a more strategic approach to identifying SI partners that could contribute such specialised LED skills and expertise.

From the value and operationalisation of SI partnerships, their importance and the gains for the municipality have been highlighted. However, the onus is on a municipality to initiate such partnerships. The importance of SI partnerships for

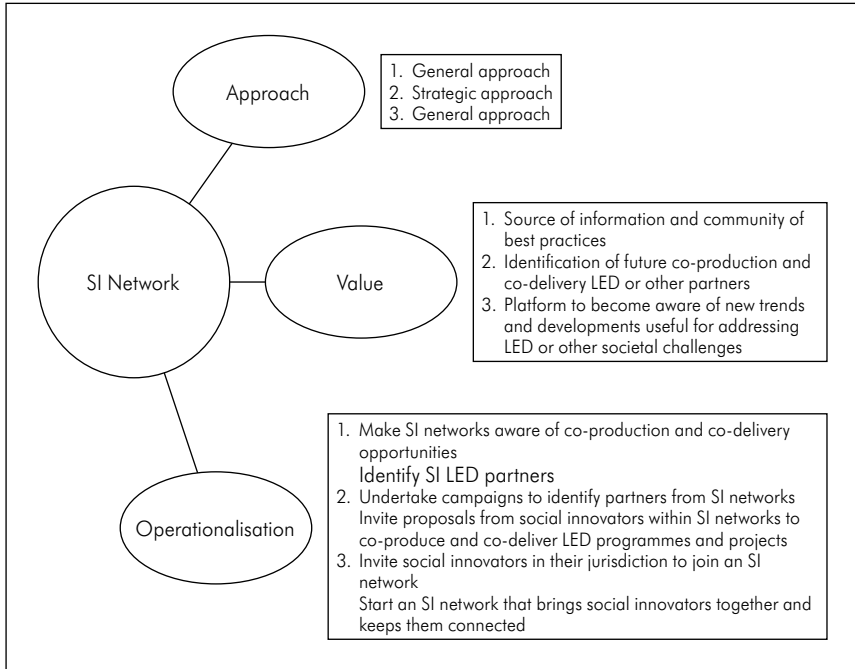
LED is therefore grounded in that it is purposefully initiated and undertaken by a municipality with clearly defined objectives and outcomes linked to its formation. While a municipality may take a general approach for working with some SI partners, they should also strategically choose with which SI partners to collaborate. This is of importance given the fact that SI partners will contribute resources but may also share risks. It is important for municipalities, in agreement with their SI partners, to establish what these objectives and outcomes will be from an institutional perspective but also for the mutual benefit of the partnership. Against this background, Figure 1 illustrates the value, approach and the operationalisation of SI partnerships (each item numbered 1–3 corresponds to the same numbered item under subsequent headings).

## **SI networks**

SI networks are fundamental to the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and good practices to improve the quality of life of communities. The first value of SI networks for LED is that it serves as a source of information and community of best practices into which municipalities can tap to address LED challenges. Further, the municipality could use its SI networks as an important consultative forum to advise it on the best approaches and solutions to address LED challenges. These SI networks stimulate problem-solving through innovative thinking, but could also serve as an important source of co-producing and co-delivering LED solutions. Municipalities, therefore, not only benefit from the problem-solving capabilities of the network but also from the capacity this network offers to the implementation of LED solutions. To operationalise this first value, the onus is on a municipality to make these networks aware of such co-production and co-delivery opportunities. In this regard, a general approach to creating awareness would suffice. These co-production and co-delivery opportunities, which could result in the identification of future partners with whom a municipality can work in terms of LED or other service delivery areas, is another value of SI networks. To operationalise this second value, a strategic approach will have to be adopted to identify future partners. Consequently, a municipality can undertake campaigns specifically aimed at identifying such partners from its networks or invite proposals from social innovators within networks with an interest in co-producing and co-delivering LED programmes or projects.

A third value of these SI networks is that they provide a platform for the municipality to become aware of new trends and developments that could be used to address LED or other societal challenges. This is because such SI networks would not only comprise of social innovators with an interest in LED, but also of social innovators who innovate across various sectors of society. This offers broader perspectives to finding the best solution to an LED challenge, as opposed to merely viewing it from the perspective of a social innovator with a sole interest

**Figure 2: SI networks**



Source: (Authors' own depiction).

in LED. Of further significance would be the divergent perspectives and experiences that such social innovators would contribute from their area of specialisation or sector, and how this could be used to overcome societal challenges across sectors. A municipality could also benefit from these shared experiences and best practices and even learn of new social innovators that might be useful for other service delivery challenges it has to address. To operationalise these SI networks, municipalities can adopt a general approach by playing a central facilitating role in terms of (i) inviting social innovators in their jurisdiction to join an SI network and (ii) starting an SI network that brings these social innovators together and keeps them connected. Against this background, Figure 2 illustrates the value, approach and the operationalisation of SI networks (each item numbered 1–3 corresponds to the same numbered item under subsequent headings).

## SI stakeholders

The value of SI stakeholders in LED is threefold. In the first place, these SI stakeholders would have a vested interest in LED that is undertaken by a municipality.

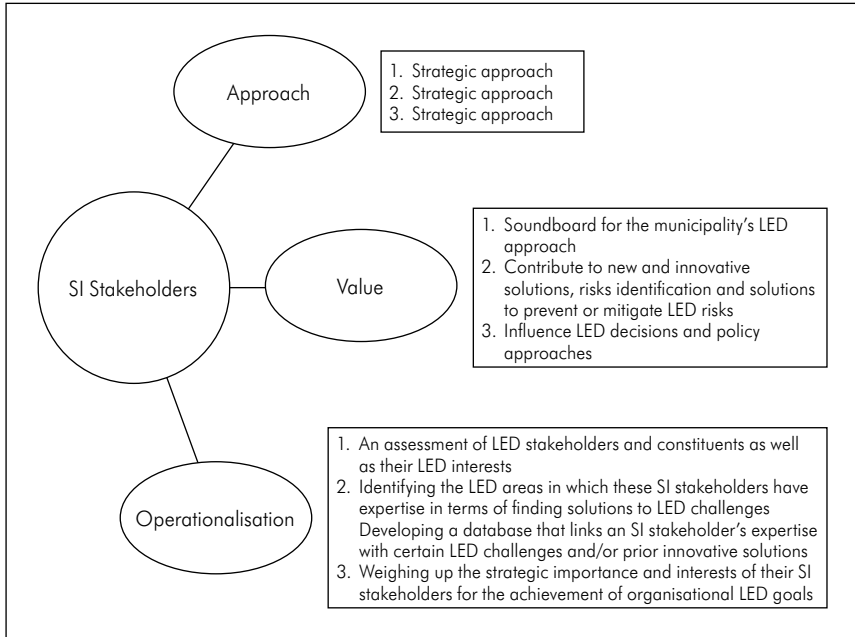


It is this interest that makes them an important sounding board for the municipality in terms of the latter's approach to LED. In this regard, SI stakeholders could be directly or indirectly affected by an LED outcome, LED programme or the municipality's LED strategy. Given their interest in LED, SI stakeholders would offer their views and expertise concerning the municipality's LED strategy and outcomes emanating from it. Though some SI stakeholders may have a higher level of interest in a specific LED outcome, others may have a lower level. This is because their interest might be influenced by the extent to which an SI stakeholder or its constituents are affected by an LED outcome. Based on an SI stakeholder's level of interest in an LED priority and/or their interest in an LED challenge, a municipality could identify with which SI stakeholders to consult. Operationalising this first value of SI stakeholders could be achieved through an assessment of who their LED stakeholders and constituents are and by identifying their specific LED interests. A strategic approach is therefore required by a municipality to identify these SI stakeholders, in particular their specific LED interests.

The interest of SI stakeholders in LED is not limited to their offering views and expertise, but also includes contributing to the municipality's quest to finding new and innovative solutions, and identifying potential risks and solutions to prevent or mitigate LED-related risks. This is where the second value of SI stakeholders in LED lies. SI stakeholders play an important role in co-creating and co-producing solutions to LED challenges or the implementation of an LED strategy and its programme or project outcomes. Since these stakeholders represent constituents from the community, they could ensure that solutions that are derived are aligned with LED challenges. This would make LED strategies more legitimate in the eyes of the communities these SI stakeholders represent. In turn, the SI stakeholders, based on their interest in LED, could also play an oversight role by holding the municipality accountable for the decisions it makes concerning LED. Moreover, decisions should be made based on the extent to which such decisions affect the stakeholders and their constituents directly or indirectly. The first step for a municipality would be operationalising this second value of SI stakeholders by identifying the LED areas in which these SI stakeholders have expertise in terms of finding solutions to LED challenges. Developing a database that links an SI stakeholder's expertise with certain LED challenges and/or the identification of previous innovative solutions could be useful. This also aids the municipality in adopting a strategic approach to identify SI stakeholders who could contribute to using SI to find LED solutions.

The interest of SI stakeholders in LED expands beyond the benefit a municipality may derive from its relationship with these stakeholders. Therefore, SI stakeholders could leverage their relationship with a municipality to have their needs prioritised in the municipal LED strategy or objectives. Leveraging their relationship with municipalities is where the third value of SI stakeholders in LED

**Figure 3: SI stakeholders**



Source: (Authors' own depiction).

lies. Through their relationship with a municipality, these SI stakeholders could influence decisions about the municipality's LED strategy as well as policy approaches adopted to implement the municipality's LED strategy. Through a strategic approach, municipalities will have to determine how to prioritise the needs and interest of their SI stakeholders in their LED priorities, strategy and associated outcomes. This could be operationalised by weighing up the strategic importance and interest of their SI stakeholders for the achievement of organisational LED goals. This becomes an emerging benefit for SI stakeholders, as they can influence municipal decision-makers in decisions that would in turn benefit them as well as their constituents. Against this background, Figure 3 illustrates the value, approach, and the operationalisation of SI stakeholders (each item numbered 1–3 corresponds to the same numbered item under subsequent headings).

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided a thematic exploration of SI's use as an approach to LED by South African municipalities. The research question posed in this regard

was: What are the themes emerging in current research that could enhance the use of SI as an approach to LED? The aim and research question were addressed through a qualitative approach and thematic content analysis of documents that posit relevant research concerning SI and LED. Through an inductive approach, this content analysis resulted in the identification of themes such as partnership formation, network-building, and stakeholder participation, which were the key themes that emerged from the literature that underpins the application of SI and LED. These themes were thus considered fundamental in operationalising the use of SI as an approach to LED.

From the content analysis, the themes of SI partnerships, SI networks, and SI stakeholders were proposed to operationalise SI's use as an approach to LED. This article has argued that the significance of SI partnerships, SI networks, and SI stakeholders lies in the value they potentially hold for South African municipalities using SI as an approach to LED. This article recommends that a municipality will, however, only benefit from the value of these partnerships, networks, and stakeholders if it purposefully, from an institutional perspective, operationalises steps and practices to exploit this value. In this regard, integrating SI in how and when a municipality undertakes LED is considered prudent to SI's successful use during LED, to enhance SI's use during LED, and to benefit from the value SI holds during LED. From this, it is apparent that changes in a municipality's external environment are warranted and depends on making an impact in that environment through SI. Given SI's significance in addressing societal challenges, its potential to contribute to social value creation, and its value as an approach to LED as highlighted throughout this article, empirical research that could enhance its future application by local government will be beneficial.

## NOTE

- \* This article is based on an unpublished mini-dissertation: Social innovation and local economic development: A South African local government perspective (2021) submitted to the University of the Free State, under the supervision of Dr M Biljohn.

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