



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

# Social innovation and environmental sustainability

## Towards strongly sustainable social innovation

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Social innovation and environmental sustainability: Towards strongly sustainable social innovation

**Abstract**

Environmental challenges, like climate change, are becoming increasingly more severe. The current solutions, which have mainly relied on market-driven, technology-based innovation to address environmental challenges, have proven insufficient. Instead, solutions must focus on altering the problematic activities and behaviors that have put our planet on its current unsustainable trajectory. One concept with potential to describe how activities and behaviors can be altered is social innovation. Social innovation is defined here as innovations in social practice that have relevance for addressing societal challenges. Social innovation can be enabled by social innovation initiatives, intentional attempts to alter problematic social practices with the aim of addressing a societal challenge. This dissertation aims to increase the understanding of how social innovation can address environmental challenges. To fulfill this purpose, this dissertation explores how social innovation can alter social practices to address environmental challenges. Then, to scrutinize this potential, the consequences of a strong sustainability perspective on social innovation are investigated.

Four articles were written to help fulfill the aim of this dissertation. First, an empirical paper explored how social innovation initiatives in the Nordic countries can potentially alter social practices to address the sustainable development goals. Second, a literature review scrutinized the current social innovation literature in relation to strong sustainability, leading to a research agenda. Third, an empirical paper focusing specifically on climate change as a pressing environmental challenge investigated social innovation initiatives' potential for altering social practices. Fourth, social innovation is conceptualized according to strong sustainability. The main findings indicate that social innovation initiatives' potential for addressing environmental challenges stems from them having a purpose that focuses on addressing societal challenges by introducing solutions that can alter social practices to be relevant for addressing environmental challenges. Through initiatives' social ends and means, they alter the given meanings, competences, and materials used in social practices. Further, social innovation has potential for strong sustainability when social practices are innovated to recognize the criticality of nature, protect vital environmental functions, the hierarchy of importance, and lead to coexistence with nature. Finally, through social learning new social practices can be scaled and potentially lead to social change that can help provide a pathway for enabling an imaginable strong sustainable society.

**Keywords**

Social innovation, social innovation initiatives, strong sustainability, Environmental sustainability, social practices

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