The Design Thinking Umbrella for Inclusive Growth in India? Discussion and Case Study

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Abstract

India faces challenges in achieving sustainable inclusive growth. While business, finance, social and technical innovation and other reforms are necessary, stakeholder inclusion through participatory processes is essential for achieving inclusive development. Following decades of implementation globally, Human-centred Design (HCD) approaches are now being promoted in India as an answer to participatory and creative business, social and industry innovation, albeit less so as a tool for inclusive growth and innovation. However, there is a growing critique of HCD effectiveness, ambiguity about its role in the innovation process, and other questions. Enthusiasm in India for HCD and design thinking ignores this critique, and risks repeating history unless the benefits and limits of HCD for innovation generally and inclusive growth are understood. Following a review of the recent literature this paper identifies the role of HCD in an inclusive growth framework, highlights the real challenges, and presents an illustrative case of HCD application for slum redevelopment for discussion and development. This paper identifies design thinking as a vague umbrella term, highlights the need for an informed approach relative to inclusive growth, and suggests HCD is a potentially helpful adjunct to the complex process of inclusive growth.

Keywords: Inclusive Growth, Social Innovation, Human-centred Design, Case Study

1. Introduction

Many civil, business and government actors in India are focused on promoting and developing innovation for inclusive growth in what appears to be a more experimental period of collaborations between private, public and civil organisations towards or 'shared prosperity' (Aoyama & Parthasarathy, 2018, p. 3). However, despite concerted action on many fronts, through CSR, financial inclusion (Barua, Kathuria, Malik, 2016), grassroots innovation (e.g. Gupta, 2014), and government policy initiatives, e.g. MNEGRA (Fischer, 2020), recent inequality reports place India at the bottom of global rankings (Turaga et al., 2018). There are many historical, political and cultural

reasons for this state of affairs (Corbridge, Harriss and Jeffrey, 2013), and most recently unequal urban versus rural resourcing and inequality driving differentiated growth (e.g. Kundu, 2015). Beyond policy and other innovations, innovative participatory business models such as social enterprise, microfinance and cooperatives are being explored to promote inclusive growth (e.g. Aswathi et al., 2015). Latterly design thinking is being promoted particularly in business circles and media as the answer to innovation challenges in India[1]. In this flurry of enthusiasm, it appears business and industry supporters have not read the critique of this umbrella term that has developed over the last twenty years. The challenge remains that without an overall framework

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[1]See, for example https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/321446

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2. From Design Thinking to Human-Centred Design (HCD)

Design's remit has expanded in the twenty first century well beyond its original focus on product design. In the new landscapes of design engagement with service and systems design, co-creation and collaboration have come to play an important role (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). This is particularly true for design approaches, which emphasize on-going engagement with all stakeholders during the innovation process, particularly in social innovation (Brown and Wyatt, 2010). Since its popularization by IDEO design agency, Stanford D. School (Brown, 2008), and various management schools (Liedtka and Ogilvie, 2011; Martin, 2009), design thinking in various forms and interpretations has seen nearly two decades of growth and expansion, even into policy innovation, where some of the techniques of design thinking appear to work (Howlett, 2014; Mintrom and Luetjens, 2016). At the heart of the popular method toolkits distributed by IDEO, Stanford D. School, Frog Design Agency, and others are two basic premises: Engaging with the people (users and others) through the innovation process and employing design methods, e.g. prototyping, in a fail-to-learn culture, helps produce appropriate innovations. Beyond deploying the right methods during the process, the implication is also that such an approach develops into a mindset (Howard, Senova, and Melles, 2015). More recently, particularly under the epithet Human-centred Design (HCD), design thinking is addressing social innovation and impact challenges including at the MIT D-Lab, and The Acumen School for Social Change.

The spread and popularity of the 'method' has led to vagueness about principles, definitions and practices. Recent discussions of the emerging discourses and practices around design thinking point to multiple versions often mixed together (Carlgren, Rauth, and Elmquist, 2016; Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, and Çetinkaya, 2013). Thus, Johansson *et al.*, (Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013) identify three current trends in the design thinking discourse as describing: a design company (IDEO) way of working; an approach to indeterminate organisational problems; and as part of management theory on strategy etc. Others also find widely diverging narratives about the approach (e.g. Carlgren, Rauth and Elmquist, 2016; Kimbell, 2011). In fact, the idea appears to have all the characteristics of an umbrella term. Such terms – like the recent circular economy model – gather together under one 'umbrella' different concepts and ideas. This can be positive – in catalysing dialogue around a new focusing (Blomsma and Brennan, 2017) or negative - in reinforcing 'tokenistic or harmful' activities under the umbrella (Preston, Lehne and Wellesley 2019).

Thus, following decades of enthusiasm especially driven by Stanford D. School and certain Business and Management Schools as a 'toolkit' (Liedtka and Ogilvie, 2011), criticism of design thinking is now persistent. This includes criticisms that the approach misrepresents creative design practice (Kimbell, 2011), is fundamentally conservative (Iskander, 2018), and demonstrates shallow links with business requirements and organizational culture (Kupp, Anderson, and Reckhenrich, 2017). A consequence of this broader design agenda and the use of design thinking methods in social innovation has lead toolkits that increasingly have less and less to do with design per se. The popular design thinking field guide on HCD by the global design agency IDEO (2015) now incorporates not only the typical marketing and design techniques of prototyping, customer journeys, etc., typical of design thinking, but also business modelling, project planning, secondary research, funding strategy, partnership building, impact measuring and evaluation and theory of change thinking. Even a superficial read of these tools questions the extent to which 'design' thinking is the dominant logic of the process (e.g. Laursen and Haase, 2019).

Given the current controversies around design thinking as toolkit, method, approach or umbrella there are practical reasons in the social innovation space to use Human-Centred Design (HCD) as the term of choice. While many treat HCD as a synonym for design thinking,

HCD has become the preferred term in social innovation and similar contexts for innovation addressing broad system constraints. Hence, it is the current preferred term for development organisations like Acumen, Grameem Bank, Ashoka, UNICEF, NESTA and others for community-oriented social impact programs. Henceforth we use that term in this paper.

Woudhuysen (2011) suggests that more humility of HCD relative to innovation challenges, clearer articulation of sustainability and more evidence about actual impact are required of HCD. Chen et al. (2019) compare HCD to CBPR (Community-based participatory research) in Public Health interventions finding value in *integrating* participatory HCD methods in CBPR. Bazzano et al. (2017) warn on the need for more evidence about the effectiveness of such approaches in Public Health (but see Vechakul, Shrimali, and Sandhu, 2015). Kumar et al. (2016) also show how co-design aspects of design thinking were used to *enhance* the outcomes of a slum redevelopment in India; ee return to this example below. One of the few systematic analyses of HCD in health notes – major problems with terminology and definitions, limited empirical evidence of evaluating the process and its effects, and multiple other weaknesses in the approach (Bazzano, Martin, Hicks, Faughnan, and Murphy, 2017).

In general, this relativisation of HCD and 'evidencing' is necessary to retain the value of HCD. For inclusive growth and social innovation this includes seeing the approach from the broader framework of inclusive growth principles.
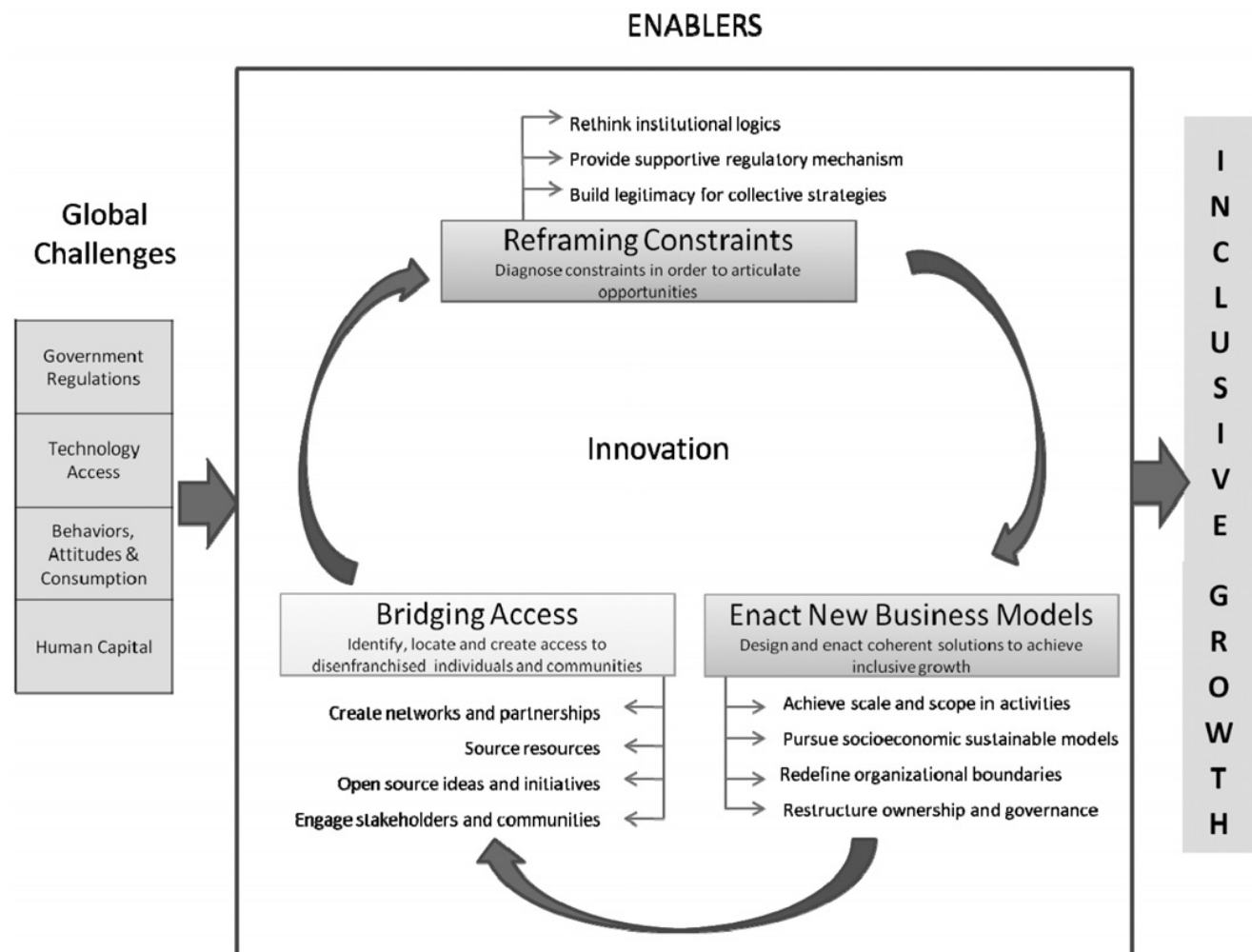

Figure 1. Constraints and enablers of inclusive growth (George et al., 2012, p. 674).

3. Understanding Participation in the Context of Inclusive Innovation

For inclusive growth social innovation is essential, where social innovation refers to 'innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social' (Mulgan, 2006, p. 146). The adjectives 'primary' and 'predominantly' in the above definition deliberately signal activities that are not primarily or not only about cooperate profit. George, McGahan and Prabhu (2012) suggest, 'Inclusive growth can be viewed as a desired outcome of innovative initiatives that target individuals in disenfranchised sectors of society as well as, at the same time, a characteristic of the processes by which such innovative initiatives occur' (George et al., 2012, p. 661). They visualise the processes as in (Figure 1) above.

In this model of innovation enablers are three interacting drivers or processes - Reframing Constraints, Bridging Access and Enacting New Business Models – with their respective activities. This is the framework within which to understand specific approaches to inclusive growth. The primary role of HCD is in Bridging Access (Engage Stakeholders and communities) although it may contribute to other activities across the overall process. Thus, many see an intrinsic link between social innovation and participatory co-design, which is a central principle of Human Centred Design Thinking (e.g. Britton, 2017). This initial framing helps relativize and situate HCD relative to the overall innovation processes and enables us to ask what more can HCD do?

3.1. Design and Enact New Business Models?

In India new more inclusive business models such as social enterprise, micro-finance, etc. are enjoying success as a solution to disparities especially for particular social groups, e.g. women (Torri & Martinez, 2014). Such new business models often build on the power and value of culturally significant social networks and formations, e.g. Self-Help Groups (SHG)

in India, that help generate the social and political capital required for typically excluded populations to participate more effectively in the economy and create sustainable livelihoods. While business modelling initially seems out of scope for HCD there is potential to 'design' social enterprise business models (Burkett, 2009) and planning has now become integrated into toolkits of design thinking (e.g. IDEO, 2010). What this practically means is that the widely known Business Model Canvas (BMC) is a tool within the method umbrella of HCD, more specifically including in its newer forms integrating social and environmental impact (Joyce and Paquin, 2016).

3.2. Reframing Constraints

Approaches and innovations, which challenge existing institutions, have clear social outcomes, including structural change, may lead to the social transformation that can underpin inclusive growth (Haugh and Talwar, 2016). As Alvord, Brown and Letts (2004) have shown, however, very few social enterprises achieve the social transformation and innovation required, and only then where institutional innovation, e.g. micro-finance, has happened. As Aoyama and Parthasar (2018) note 'Social innovation lies at the intersection of changing state–market relations, institutional design and technological innovation' (Aoyama and Parthasarathy, 2018, p. 3). Social enterprise is one 'designed' business model attempting to reconfigure relations towards social transformation and sustainable livelihoods, including in India, and at the policy and institutional level there is potential for design thinking to challenge existing constraints (Mintrom and Luetjens, 2016). Pansera and Owen (2018) in their case study in India warn however that inclusive innovation is sometimes co-opted by market-based firms to create the illusion of inclusion.

Overall, HCD tools and approaches might help facilitate discussions about institutional change but clearly much more is required to effect this. Middleton (2018) finds high potential for HCD in active use scenarios of innovation but only moderate and low capacity in other dimensions, including changing preconditions

for potential users, developing and implementing access and trials, and promoting account opening. For these other dimensions of digital services, a network of government and private institutions, including financial services take the lead role. Mitra (2017) meanwhile discusses the benefits of HCD approaches for technical and non-technical design for a hard copy tool for pregnant women in Bihar with anaemia that has had considerable success. Success here required the direct engagement processes recommended by HCD but clearly much more, such as a systems perspective on the relevant institutions, e.g. primary health care centres, local government, gender rules and roles. Finally, Bauer (2017) recently praises the potential benefits of HCD for India while emphasizing the need for and expanded version to achieve scaling, that attends to the broader cultural, political and institutional embeddedness of innovation. Specifically, she suggests that five factors define this embeddedness, four of which (not cognitive embeddedness) are formal and informal institutions in the sense above.

1. Structural embeddedness affects users' ability to access resources such as money or knowledge; networks and "social capital" affects ability of users to act.
2. Cognitive embeddedness influences how people process the information around them.
3. Cultural embeddedness shapes how people conceive, define and rationalize decisions, categories, assumptions, routines and rituals.
4. Institutional embeddedness includes the rules and roles that shape the cost of action and set categories of how people think and interpret their social worlds
5. Political Embeddedness refers to the relations and motives of power that influence distribution of resources.

Her argument is that unless HCD is accompanied by or integrates thinking about these factors then it will not create sustainable social innovation. In collaboration and co-creation processes of locals with designers cognitive and cultural understanding, e.g. taking advantage of the SHG institution, under the right circumstances can lead to socially responsible

design (and see Melles, Vere, and Misic, 2011). This seems to indicate one of the practical advantages of an experimental approach such as HCD in broader initiatives. In sum, HCD may be a necessary but is not a sufficient condition and process for successful social innovation.

4. Case Study on Slum Redevelopment: Description and Analysis

Kumar and colleagues from IITM (Kumar et al., 2016) have shown how participatory design thinking, provide more appropriate inclusive solutions to urban design slum redevelopment. In this context inclusiveness refers to both process (participation) and outcomes (social impact). They note that 'While it is well accepted that stakeholder involvement in the planning process is critical to the development of sustainable and acceptable solutions, there is a lack of understanding on the methods by which stakeholders can be effectively involved in the design process leading to successful outcomes' (Kumar et al., 2016). Here we see how the umbrella of design thinking describes the application of co-design, including prototyping solutions, and participatory elements of a broader urban renewal process – (participatory) urban planning – to develop. Given the context and intent we see this case study as an example of HCD for inclusive growth.

As outlined in the article and further developed on the project website by IFMR Finance Foundation promoting the project[2] – this HCD engagement – was only one component of a complex community development approach to slum redevelopment. The project began in 2012 with a comprehensive socio-economic survey of the wards in the town (population 25,000) with a view to establishing need (IFMR Finance Foundation 2012). The IFMR has a clear inclusive growth and long-term vision and began the project with clear research-based needs analysis. Centring on a particular ward (75 households) and deploying Android based

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[2]See http://financingcities.ifmr.co.in/blog/2014/04/09/envisioning-a-slums-future/

survey collection instrument – face to face surveys with residents was undertaken. Then working with designers and residents model plans were developed to share back with residents – this was where the HCD approach but particularly co-design framed the process of design and feedback. In a follow up article, the IFMR team drew lessons for the whole of India with respect to similar project needs[3].

Questions and principles for the reader to consider:

1. Based on the sources above outline the process and the role of HCD within it
2. What principles from the inclusive growth framework were applied here and how?
3. How important is a relevant finance organisation with mission important here?
4. What conclusions do you draw about the role of HCD in inclusive innovation?
5. Consider another context you know and outline the process of engagement and partners.

Note finally that although the article and case describes application of design thinking methods to slum redevelopment in fact only several methods, prototyping, community workshops, co-design are employed within the process. This is a typical selective approach of HCD in such settings and reveals much about its characteristics and employment.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we have reviewed the current enthusiasm for design thinking in India with respect to innovation approaches required to further inclusive growth and social innovation. Despite recent rhetoric to the contrary in India, rapid adoption of design thinking in its popular form will probably not be the necessary catalyst for mainstream business let alone social innovation (e.g. Carlgren, Elmquist, and Rauth, 2016; Kupp, Anderson, and Reckhenrich, 2017; Merholz, 2009). Thus, the discussion here is not about whether India can reproduce the excitement and critique of

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[3]See https://archive.indiaspend.com/special-reports/from-srirangapatna-a-data-lesson-for-indias-cities-54705

twenty years of use of the umbrella concept of design thinking globally. There are other goals for markets and industry which might be served by different versions of design thinking. The paper suggests adopting HCD as a preferred term and seeing the approach in its proper light as a potential adjunct to other development and innovation processes and requirements.

There is a danger that the current enthusiasm for design thinking in India repeats the history of a movement that began about four decades ago, especially in the USA. There has been too date limited acknowledgement of the critique that is mounting about certain 'light' versions of design thinking. Those working in more embedded social contexts of change have begun asking questions about a relevant model. The answer to this question in this article is that there is need recognize its limits as a useful adjunct to other development and innovation processes. Specifically, the approach is beneficial where direct engagement with stakeholders is sought and sharing and development of prototypes is important. Current discussions about human centred design thinking for India need to integrate the critical literature and the broader processes of innovation and inclusive growth. It is naïve and disingenuous to promote HCD as the key to social impact and transformation. Hopefully, there will be more informed discussions in future about an appropriate model and application for India.

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