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Public policy interventions for grassroots innovations: are we getting it right?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the socio-technical elements of Grassroots Innovations (GRIs) cases in Malaysia and draws lessons for public policy intervention by accounting for the contextual nature of the GRIs. Our findings on the four successful Malaysian rural GRIs indicate the following. First, carefully formulated level-specific policy instruments are needed to facilitate the smooth transition of the various stages of GRIs. Second, given the heterogeneity nature of GRIs, policymakers should avoid generalized, oversimplified and one-fit policy approaches. In turn, public policy intervention should be flexible and clearly suited to the aspiration of the founders and their missions. More importantly, attempts to commercialize, similar to the business-oriented innovation policy and in the name of creating value defeats the purpose of GRIs thus jeopardizing the true value of GRIs. Instead, the evidences suggest that strengthening the stakeholder-innovator partnership in co-developing and co-delivering adds value to the grassroots innovators and society at large. It also has larger benefits of application in providing greater social benefits especially in solving communal problems.

KEYWORDS

Social innovation; innovation policy; inclusive development; participatory policy; Yayasan Inovasi Malaysia

1. Introduction

In the mainstream public policy setting, supporting innovation activities mainly focuses on supply-driven instruments and to some extent, the demand dynamics that specifically support R&D activities, commercialization activities and market management of main economic actors. Nevertheless, Seyfang and Smith (2007) and Smith, Fressoli, and Thomas (2014) argue that such a policy would be irrelevant for Grassroots Innovations (GRIs) which neglect the grassroots innovation niches for sustainability and there is an urgent need to recognize the policy dimension that tailors to support GRIs more specifically. Indeed, we further argue, as shown by our cases, that it can also have space and country-specific characteristics that need further synchronization. The use of mainstream public policy to promote GRIs activities often can lead to confrontation which results in unintended negative consequences. It is in this context that we aim to study GRIs in