

SPRU Friday seminars

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Speaker Shyama Ramani (UNU-MERIT)
Title Where is the toilet please? Or why the sanitation sectoral innovation system failed to perform in Rural India

Abstract

The role of social entrepreneurship within a national system of innovation is to generate and ensure efficient adoption of innovations that address underserved needs of society. However many of the innovations that aim to address such underserved needs do not achieve the expected social impact. Often, it is not technology which poses the greatest challenge, but catalyzing demand and effective adoption of pro-poor innovations. This premise is explored in our paper by considering 'toilets' as an innovation for those who had no prior access to a functioning sanitation service. Tracing the evolution of the Indian sanitation sector and then delving into the process of sanitation coverage in a typical Indian village, we show that what matters most is the 'intention' behind the social enterprise, but the innovation system cannot evaluate this ex-ante. The innovations of social enterprises that prioritise revenue maximisation or other organizational objectives may not be efficiently adopted and sustained in the medium run, even while making an immediate social impact. Therefore, to ensure sustained social impact, the national system of innovation must facilitate catalysing social entrepreneurship that goes beyond the adoption of management principles to integration of monitoring mechanisms and sustainability audits.

Research highlights:

- ▶ Social entrepreneurs/enterprise/entrepreneurship cannot be referred to interchangeably.
- ▶ Business opportunities for social enterprises are mainly provided by the state and public agencies.
- ▶ The 'intention' behind the social enterprise matters most, but NSI cannot evaluate this ex-ante.
- ▶ NSI must integrate monitoring with continuous audits to ensure effective social entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Social enterprises also require NSI support to forge 'demand' for 'quality' pro-poor innovations.

Bio

Shyama Raman is a Professorial Fellow at the UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER). Her research focuses on the relationships between technology, innovation and development, drawing upon the evolution of the biotechnology sectors in India and in Europe as illustrative case studies. Her past work has primarily revolved around three themes: the impact of the national system of innovation on the creation of industrial competence; the use of patent and publications statistics as indicators of competitive position and comparative advantage for investment; and the creation of incentives for cooperation and coordination. Her methodology is varied, ranging from contextual analysis and case studies to the use of game theory to study strategic problems related to innovation creation. She is currently studying the role of technology and innovation to attain the millennium development goals, and the corporate social responsibility of firms with respect to innovation. Dr. Ramani holds a Ph.D. in economics from Cornell University, USA.