

WHAT CITY PLATFORMS BEST SUPPORT SOCIAL INNOVATION?

REPORT ON THE ONLINE CHAT SESSIONS ORGANISED ON THE 29 SEPTEMBER 2014

Moderated by Fabio Sgaragli (Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini)

Topics covered

This session has sought to answer questions related to:

- The need to set up specific platforms for the development of social innovation in cities
- The role of physical space for the development of social innovation
- The potential weight of technologies and social media in supporting social innovation in cities
- Other forms to foster interaction, promotion and use of social innovation be observed

Participants

The following people took part in the chat:

- Emma Clarence, Principle Researcher on Social Innovation, Nesta and friend of URBACT
- Louise Pulford, Director of SIX, Social Innovation Exchange
- Fabrizio Montanari, Prof. of Creative Industries and Territorial Development, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia
- Claudio Farina, Member Impact Hub Trieste and involved in several projects involving the Municipality and the Region on Urban Regeneration through Social Innovation
- Matteo Bina, Manager Social Incubation Process at FabriQ, the Incubator of Social Innovation of the Municipality of Milan
- Chris Sigaloff, Kennisland.

Summary of discussions

Context

European cities have a special role to play when it comes to delivering on Europe 2020. Investing in cities will lead to the Europe of tomorrow. In comparison to other regional settings, cities' high population concentration leads to specific challenges but also provides the critical mass and creative potential to find needed answers. In particular the need for social innovation challenges the integrative power of urban spaces not only financially, but also conceptually. In short: new approaches are needed. Combining social change with innovation and technology is the key to more and better jobs for young people, social innovation and growth. Social enterprises, the market model approach to social innovation, are spurring in all member states bringing a wealth of innovations to challenges in health, welfare and a whole range of other public areas of concern.

Rationale for the set-up of platforms

The setting up of specific platforms for the development of social innovation is a real opportunity for urban renewal and regeneration, and for the revitalisation of the local economy.

This is consistent with extant literature on economic geography (and in particular cities) which suggests that policy makers should focus on the development of 'soft' infrastructures, which facilitate information exchange, enhance people's social networking, and promote collaboration among interconnected actors, thus contributing to the development of a highly connected, collaborative and creative environment.

These platforms could range from physical spaces (cafes, libraries, co-working, incubators, accelerators, etc.) to online spaces (social platforms, apps, etc.) to temporary events (e.g., festivals, workshops, etc.).

With regard to which platforms are best, it very much depends on what type of social innovation is being sought. For example, platforms that encourage citizens' involvement or large groups of people working together on open innovation processes can be helpful, but other types of tools or resources may be more amenable to more face-to-face forms of engagement.

Various forms of platforms

Local administrations should encourage in any way the realization of these platforms through for example the provision of unused public spaces to organised groups of citizens, with lean processes for the assignment. Hard infrastructures should be aimed at creating the contextual conditions that can support a bottom up approach to finding shared answers to common challenges. These are currently the only resources available in large quantities to cities and requiring an affordable level of investment and/or the possibility to ignite public/private partnerships for their requalification and re-purposing. But how to identify the most promising ones? And how to manage the matching process between available spaces and interested parties? The following two examples represent potential answers to these questions.

Trieste, Italy

<http://www.pso-trieste.eu/>

Some results after three years of work are: other working groups in Italy sharing our project, our strategy, our tools; an agreement with the Trieste County Administration; a private bank foundation funding; several workshops, training and teaching courses in schools and universities; a starting agreement with the Trieste Municipality Administration to build a public/private platform to start recovery of unused spaces with the aim of hosting new economical and social innovation activities; a [Facebook community](#) with nearly 3000 members (as a tool for the discussion and the collaborative participation to the project).

Porto, Portugal

<http://www.arrebata.org/en>

Arrebata is based on the idea that by creating win-win exchanges between different parties we can refurbish derelict buildings for free! It targets owners without means and runs on the basis of a collaborative network linking international young architects and engineers, supplier companies of construction materials, professors from technical universities and distinguished charitable institutions. The underlying objective is that all win on top of the social value created by the project and that everyone can join in and contribute to create the change we all seek in this city.

Open innovation processes led via online platforms by city administrations are spreading fast across European cities, here follows a good example.

URBACT Genius

<http://urbact.eu/en/projects/innovation-creativity/genius-open/homepage/>

The URBACT GeniUS: Open project is a great example of using open innovation to engage citizens - using both online and offline methods - to identify and solve city challenges. The project is now being piloted in Siracusa, San Sebastian and Tallin.

The City of York has a legacy of social innovation throughout its history and we believe that this remains key to securing the future prosperity of the city. This cannot be achieved effectively in isolation. We are already using Open Innovation to engage a wider range of people to create more potential to achieve great things. Expanding this to include the URBACT city network is the next step on the journey.

York's open innovation approach is now a systematic solution for solving challenges and engaging residents, communities, companies and academics in that process. We hope that our three partners will benefit from the transfer of the GeniUS! process to their cities.

Throughout the project, we will review and refine the model and the transfer process, in order to make it as suitable as possible for a range of cities, within Europe and beyond. We hope that the URBACT network will benefit from what we learn about the conditions needed for successful transfer of practice from one city to another. In sharing the GeniUS! process with others, the practice will be strengthened and improved, which will also bring benefits for York and its residents.

Interventions using a blend of digital and physical (analogical) tools and environments are the best form in which social innovation can be experienced. On one side we have the web 2.0 and the social network as Facebook, Google+, Twitter and Instagram as working tools; on the other side peculiar environments as abandoned or unused buildings, public venues or open spaces could host and stimulate discussions and projects, useful for the citizenship to share questions, to learn different skills, to develop 'sense of belonging', to understand how the urban/social/environmental systems of the city work, trying to set up different scenarios to improve them.

Sometimes the support can be quite small - there is an interesting (and admittedly small approach) in the UK called 'code club' which uses volunteers to teach young children how to code. Schools provide the space, a teacher volunteers to contribute and volunteers come in to teach. Very small contribution by schools/local authorities, big impact on kids. There is another example in prisons/probations that is contracted by the prison or probation service to set up a council to engage with offenders to improve the outcomes. This is a contract between the provider and the prison or probation service based on the belief (and growing evidence) that it is having short medium and long-term positive impacts on offenders. They are small examples but show how things can be done using different means of support. On the larger scale social impact bonds are being widely used, but I think we need to be careful about assuming that they could be used for all types of social innovation support.

Key messages

Developing platforms for social innovation processes can be an opportunity for cities to ignite bottom-up change processes, but some obstacles stand in the way of the adoption by more local administrations, such as:

- a lack of technical and organisational capacity, and less resources available in public budgets;
- a lack of evidence on positive results (and this is an issue for social innovators as well as for policy makers) which generate the need to place a greater focus on developing evidence;
- an absence of a 'culture' of innovation, which is very hard to develop (not just in public administrations) as it requires an entirely different way of thinking and working with people;

A few recommendations can be put forward in order to face some of the obstacles outlined above, in particular:

- co-creation and collaborative processes are key in order to set up and make available platforms for social innovation; there is a new and evolving role here for public administrations as enablers and facilitators of networks;
- involving Universities, by for instance engaging University students in working with administrations and other stakeholders with a role of providing fresh R&D perspectives and a "can do" attitude to the processes;
- key for any platform is that it is not outside the system but that the system participates in it; in this way also the government can experience and learn new mindsets and behaviours;
- public-private partnerships are proving to be the right approach in providing resources for social innovation processes and platforms; there is a crucial role still to be played by public money when it comes to real experimentation, but when it comes to scaling up innovations private funding has to come into the equation;
- we need to re-think about public procurement and how it can support social innovation and how governments can facilitate change using this leverage;
- social finance and new forms of financing (crowdfunding, alternative currencies, sharing economy) can contribute to the development of more and smarter platforms for social innovation;
- we can be more creative and develop coalitions of funders, where foundations, alongside businesses, communities and governments) create funding platforms and schemes together; the EU is already promoting this approach at a strategic level.