

EDITORIAL

How to care for people suffering from dementia, supervise juvenile refugees, get people back on their feet again after a breakdown or educate street children? People talk about social innovation when social problems are solved in a new way. New forms of communication for instance, modern techniques and methods or novel cooperation between various institutions and others involved (Howaldt/Black 2010).

To think through new problems and to use social innovation – new social practices – to solve them, will certainly present a chance of dealing with current social challenges. There are therefore great expectations connected to social innovation: social change, relief of the welfare state in times of austerity, establishing the basis for new social partnerships, becoming more efficient. In short: making the world a better place. What can social innovation actually achieve and accomplish?

WHY SOCIAL INNOVATION – AND WHY NOW?

Everybody is talking about social innovation these days: it is suddenly not only a must-criterion for creation of services for the homeless, in terms of labour market integration or early advancement measures, but it has also become the core theme of the largest EU research program Horizon 2020. Within government departments on both sides of the Atlantic the emphasis in policy discourse about social innovation is increasing and social innovation centres at universities are being founded.

“Pathways to Social Change” or “Social Innovation to Tackle Future Challenges” are titles of conferences on social innovation and in the social sector “Social Innovation Awards” have recently been awarded.

The hype around the term and its increasing institutionalisation has a history: First mentioned in the 1970s (See Zapf 1989), up until 2000 the phrase was not particularly well known. At best the term was known within the field of urban policy (Baglioni/Sinclair 2014).

The leaning towards social innovation is a crisis phenomenon (Riedlinger, 2010). Beginning with the financial crisis 2007/8 and subsequent crises where the so-called “Big Challenges” such as climate change and resource scarcity were the precursor for the prevalence of the concept. The idea of being socially minded without asking questions about distribution of wealth or the balance of power, in the hope that to be socially minded without having to stop reductions in the social benefits, the intentions of being socially minded without questioning austerity – all this made the concept – attractive. Social innovation was thus taken up in the political mainstream to be held as the solution for all current problems.

The European Commission took up the idea and intensified efforts to promote the concept of social innovation. With numerous top-down approaches, including strategies prescribed from above, initiatives of the population should be encouraged. For example, within the Europe 2020 strategy that defines the guidelines of the European Policy for the next few years, social innovation takes a key role in economy and research.

Also within regional politics as part of the “Smart Specialisation Strategies” it is of enormous relevance. From a necessity – namely the lack of public funding – it became a virtue. The (co-)financing of public services by the private sector (e.g. by Social Impact Bonds) is referred to as social innovation, as well as the participative production of products (“Prosumer”).

“In the current economic climate, it is essential to do more with less and to do it better”. The EU shows this as a justification for social innovation (Bureau of European Policy Advisors, 2014: 93). The magic formula is therefore: more should be made with less. This is also clearly stating that cheaper solutions are sought, or more precisely: less solidarity financing, less ‘res publica’ based on social rights. Social innovation is traded as the solution that meets the demands from these expectations.

WHAT EXACTLY IS SOCIAL INNOVATION?

It is unclear what is hidden behind this catchword. Even if some of the criteria that are found in the most common definitions of social innovation - for example the new social practices, society benefits, scalability -the concept remains very vague and difficult to grasp. This ‘nailing jelly to the wall’ is therefore difficult. The vagueness is how-

ever an integral part of the concept: vague is, on the one hand, what the ‘social’ refers to, the relationships, cooperation, or social within the meaning of social services. On the other hand, also the understanding of innovation is vague. The problem is that suddenly everything is a social innovation, if the respective interested party so wishes. ‘...*social innovation is never neutral but always political and socially constructed*’ (Nicholls/Murdock 2012: 4).

This indistinct catchword allows you to take it and fill it with whatever meaning you wish. It is a collective name. It is about branding and the power of discourse, as to who defines social innovation as being what? Thus everything with the label ‘social innovation’ turns into something good, better, desirable.

Closely connected with this discourse is the Concept of Social Entrepreneurs (SE). It is somehow linked with the history of the social innovation. Definitions of SE sound very similar to those of social innovation; “*SE is generally understood to be a novel approach, to cope with social problems and social challenges. Social Entrepreneurs employ unorthodox, new performance and business models*” (Mair et al., 2010). Also in this case expectations are high; social entrepreneurs are traded as ‘change makers’. In practice colourful complexity takes precedence, the range of companies that are referred to as SE is wide. It is argued that the imprecision and diversity enriches the discourse. But with social camouflage it also allows the penetration into public services, their economisation and marketing that were, for good reason, hitherto taboo.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The problem is the normative definition of the concept. If one reads the reason for social awards, if you read management literature in any depth, if you believe the career pages in the newspapers, then you have to come to the conclusion: old is bad, new is good. One is from yesterday, the other points to tomorrow.

Of course good ideas and the courage to make change happen are needed. But is “novelty” the deciding criterion? Behind the perceived obligation towards innovation hides a tentative portion of ideology. What goes under the banner of “innovation”, on closer examination is nothing new under the sun. It is made to appear ostensibly original and cut off from all that has gone before – although it often draws from the old. In this novelty mania, the present crises, mistakes, fal-

se developments or wrong decisions cannot be explained, argued the philosopher K.P. Liessmann. Crises using such interpretations are always and exclusively the result of a contemporary flaw. It was not 'new' enough. The 'new' in question here has replaced the old questions of reality and the question about the good life. What is not new, or what cannot be presented as new, has no value – regardless whether it is still good or functional. The only thing that is weighed against the old is not that it is better, but just that it is something new. For the provision of good services and measures for the benefit of all the people, what then should apply? Should it be that it is new or it is for the better?

WHAT IS IT GOING TO BE ABOUT - WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

Searching for the correct definition of social innovation is futile – and also ultimately superfluous (cf. Borzaga/Bodini, 2014: 411). The much more relevant questions in the discourse about social innovation are as follows: For whom are these social innovations of benefit? And what goal is envisaged? The fact that Goldman Sachs is looking for investors for pre-school education in public schools in Chicago, investors who will then receive income-return, provided that the development of the school children goes to plan, is actually innovative (cf. Goldman Sachs, 2016). But the question who will benefit (and for whom will it be lucrative), is written on another page. To think through new problems, to find solutions using new or old social practices and here to ask the question – where we are going with the solutions we want – is crucial.

It is about focused questions and objective conflicts. To disclose this but not to disguise it with the buzzword 'social innovation' and to use this information as a basis to decide where the journey is supposed to end. That is what it is all about. The 'new' alone, is in this case not a criterion for something to be evaluated.

Social innovation must also in terms of continental European social policy be considered differently than in Anglo-American countries where collective social safeguards play a subordinate role. The focus can therefore not lay - as in the current discourse – with Social Entrepreneurs. The good life, high quality social services and their (further) development as well as the participation of those directly affected, their relatives and self-representation associations, as well non-profit organizations or the public sector. This does not include a further eco-

nomisation or marketing of benefits that are at present still supported by the society as a whole.

The thesis of the British historian David Edgerton, stated that there was a poor fusion between “technology” and “innovation”. This fusion was difficult because it is only the view on “technology”; that being the view of the method and its use, that was in focus. It is first of all the view of the use of “technology”, which in turn enabled us to understand its history and was consequentially essential for further development, improvement and adaptation. Or in other words: “*Invention and innovation rarely lead to use but use often leads to invention and innovation.*” (Edgerton 1999:123). Within the centre of service sector development this is therefore the applied application or the usefulness. If social services improve the standard of living through people’s use, then it is irrelevant whether these can in retrospect be seen as innovative.

Innovative in the positive sense of the term, seems therefore ultimately to focus on those methods, techniques and policies that on the one hand are used by the people and on the other enable a good life for all. The ‘new’ alone is not good enough. With care of the homeless, refugee work, social-work or education that is not what is ‘new’, but what is ‘better’ that is crucial.

Katharina Meichenitsch, Michaela Neumayr, Martin Schenk
Vienna 2016

Translation from German into English by Gerald Raho, BSc. 20.09.2016

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Borzaga, Carlo / Bodini, Riccardo (2014): What to Make of Social Innovation? Towards a Framework for Policy Development, in: *Social Policy and Society*, 13:3, 411–421.
- Bureau of European Policy Advisors (2014): *Social Innovation, A Decade of Change*, herausgegeben von der Europäischen Kommission, Luxemburg.
- Edgerton, David (1999) From innovation to use: Ten eclectic theses on the historiography of technology, in: *History and Technology*, 16:2, 111–136.
- Goldman Sachs (2016): *Impact Investing: Social Impact Bond to Support Early Childhood Education in Chicago*, <http://www.goldmansachs.com/what-we-do/investing-and-lending/impact-investing/case-studies/chicago-social-impact-bond.html>, abgerufen am 12.07.2016.
- Howaldt, Jürgen / Schwarz, Michael (2010): “*Soziale Innovation*” im Fokus. *Skizze eines gesellschaftsinspirierten Forschungskonzepts*. Transkript-Verlag: Bielefeld.

- Mair, Johanna, Meyer, Michael, Millner, Reinhard, Vandro, Peter (2010): Social Entrepreneurship: Hype mit Substanz?; <http://sciencev2.orf.at/stories/1658085/>, abgerufen am 08.06.2016
- Nicholls, Alex / Murdock, Alex (2012): The nature of social innovation, in: Nicholls, Alex, Murdock, Alex (Hrsg.): *Social Innovation: Blurring Boundaries to Reconfigure Markets*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.
- Zapf, Wolfgang (1989): Über soziale Innovationen: *Soziale Welt*, 40 (1/2), 170–183.
- Riedlinger, Denise (2010): Eine gute Zeit für soziale Innovationen. Interview mit Josef Hochgerner, <http://sciencev2.orf.at/stories/1707801/>, abgerufen am 12.07.2016.