

## Chapter 25

# The Good, the Bad and the Ugly in Social Innovation

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Social innovation is in several respects an ambiguous term. On the one hand, it purports to be a new development; on the other hand, it is as old as mankind. Arguably, today's innovations are less dramatic than those 100 or 200 years ago. It is a force potentially capable of changing social policy and society more generally. The hope of understanding social change as human progress, once focussing on technological and market-based innovations, is now pinned on social innovations that take shape in the realm of civil society. There is, however, no guarantee at all that innovations from the texture of civil society will have a happy end in the form of state powers adapting and strengthening them, since they rely on human relations and are therefore also prone to conflicts, failures and politics. Social innovation is at the same time a useful catch-all phrase for bridging theory and practice and a concept often despised as academically weak and politically ephemeral.

Researchers in the Welfare Innovations at the Local Level in Favour of Cohesion (WILCO) project have tried to balance the various demands on social innovation research, to be academically sound, while at the same time demonstrably relevant to practice. A key objective of the project was to contextualise social innovation: to

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T. Brandsen et al. (eds.), *Social Innovations in the Urban Context*,

Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-21551-8\_25

understand them in relation to the social, political and spatial context from where they originate and within the wider contexts that are so influential for their further development.

On the basis of the overall evidence, this concluding chapter discusses the implications of our findings and identifies key issues for discussion. To recognise the often overtly or implicitly normative nature of social innovation literature and to do homage to one of the most famous “Spaghetti Westerns”, we have ordered our argument in terms of the “Good”, the “Bad” and the “Ugly”. “Good” signifies what innovations can contribute to a society’s ability to cope with change and, more precisely, to do it in a way that change can be thought of as progress in civility. “Bad” signifies the shortcomings of social innovations—especially their limited impacts in an overall averse social and policy context. “Ugly” stands for discourses that regard social innovations as something else—usually as market-based products and technologies.

## 25.1 The Good

The first reason why we think that social innovations stand for something “good” has to do with the fact that *social innovations and much of the related debates underline the impact of democratic politics and active civil society—with implications on what innovation means and on what makes up the innovative capacity of societies.*

Traditionally, innovation discourse was guided by a strong focus on market-based developments, new ideas that get taken up by entrepreneurial capitalists who know how to turn a good idea into an innovative marketable product. In this perspective, societies based on market systems were considered dynamic societies, in contrast to traditional societies without market systems and to autocratic systems with centrally planned economies that failed to develop such dynamism.

However, markets have their own structural logic and so have political and societal systems. It was argued that the development and installation of guiding values, institutions and firm regulations need democratic politics and a guaranteed free space for society, with a double impact:

- The societal sphere, civil society in a more narrow sense and democratic institutions with their modern political administrations, became a field of and for innovations, creating forms of living and organisation such as urban lifestyles, new organisational forms like associations, which co-shaped ideas about progress as human progress.
- Welfare states and civil societies created a framework of orientations and rules, which influence the types of innovative market-based products that could be successfully sold to consumers that were also citizens. The culture of modern democratic and welfare societies, their proceedings and regulations, had both selective and civilising impacts on market-based innovations, strengthening their social use values and restricting their negative side effects.

The discourse on *social* innovations is different, since it expresses a different view of human progress. While acknowledging the importance of market systems in the generation of innovations, it also underlines the innovative potential of the civil sphere in society and of democratic state institutions. They have an impact by creating social innovations within their own domains and through their ability to civilise the social dimension of market-based innovations, products and technologies.

In our conceptualisation of social innovations, we expressed our sympathy with concepts of the social innovations that stem from neither the research and development (R&D) centres of big business nor technocracies of central state administrations. The social innovations we focussed on express the vitality of open and pluralist systems, representing hopes and aspirations that escape or even confront dominating concepts of progress and innovation. They show that not one economic (often called neoliberal) or political concept and logic (often labelled as *governmentality*) shape all spheres of society. They also show that market and state logics are not as per definition at odds with civil society initiatives, but that they are capable of producing links between agents and spheres in urban society.

The second aspect of the “good” in social innovations has to do with the fact that *local social innovations can foster debates about new instruments, approaches and coping strategies dealing with challenges to inclusive social and urban development.*

They do so because they show that there are alternatives to prevailing orientations the path-dependent welfare states offer and to making public management similar to business management. The cases studied and presented in this book result in a kind of mosaic. They direct attention to a cultural turn in public services, regulations and governance, something illustrated by our case studies both of cities and of local innovations. The summary of major policy trends in the 20 cities in the introductory chapter of Part II, and the analysis of recurrent patterns found among the local social innovations in the introductory chapter of Part III point to the same key-issues:

1. Service innovations invest in capabilities; pave ways from mere protection to co-production; open approaches avoiding stigmatizing effects; bridge gaps, reconciling professional services and people’s life worlds; create bundles of personalised support in order to meet users’ complex needs.
2. Innovations in regulations upgrade forms of ad hoc support by offering time-limited loans; offer individually tailored combinations of services and benefits to curb new social risks; and work with “social” contracts that relate access to welfare support to people’s commitment—to work for themselves and the community.
3. Innovations in governance offer co-production and partnership by fostering units and types of organisation that operate in more socially embedded ways; promoting recognition of new groups and themes; building issue-related inter-sectorial partnerships and platforms that work on “hot” items; favouring democratic decentralisation through participatory mechanisms in neighbourhoods.

4. Innovations in modes of working and financing consolidate forms of multi-professional teamwork including volunteers and civic commitment of supporters; produce new professionalism, combining formerly fragmented knowledge through dialogue with and involvement of users; operate on mixed funding, merging resources from stakeholders across sectors.
5. Innovations in how to conceive of (local) welfare systems focus on welfare mixes, reaching out to all sectors of local welfare systems and upgrading its community component; less standardised, more diverse and localised welfare arrangements; a welfare beyond established demarcation lines, that opens up to environmental and lifestyle politics, bridging economic and social policy concerns, welfare and urban politics, focusing less on groups and more on situations and territories.

The key words and issues as they are recollected here can be viewed and taken up both as promising solutions to local problems and as messages to all those who are interested in changing the cultural orientations and policy frameworks of local welfare, services and urban governance.

This leads to a third argument: *social innovations offer good chances for promoting change since they can be quite easily spilled over to similar milieus and settings in other spots and localities.*

As argued above, it takes specific constellations of factors for local social innovations to emerge—not only pressures and needs but also aspirations and openness of actors in the local context (see Chap. 2). In the academic debate on enabling conditions for social innovations, it is common to point out factors that seem to be specifically local, such as social and cultural movements, traditions of solidarity within the local community, an urban texture where unconventional attitudes merge with entrepreneurial readiness and local elites that open up to new ideas and attempts.

This is however slightly misleading, as discussed in Chap. 3 of this book. None of these factors are exclusively local. Movements and projects in a city are usually related to social trends and strands of thinking, values and assumptions present at different points of society. Local experts taking part in innovative processes are usually members of networks that operate on (inter)national levels. Programmes with funding possibilities and their local nudges are often the result of initiatives by state experts at national level that encourage new approaches. Social innovation is multilevelled by nature.

Altogether, this points towards a process of social innovation that relies on interplay and contagion across domains, logics and multiple levels.

## 25.2 The Bad

What is the “bad” side of social innovations in the sense of short-lived and limited impact? In local welfare, we identified several negative aspects, of which we stress three: the short lifespan of most social innovations, the limited interest in transfer-

ring them and the aspects of social innovation where the social dimensions appear more threatening than promising.

To begin with, *most local social innovations are precarious*. Like butterflies, they are pretty, but they lead a short life. There is a tendency in publicity on social innovation to discuss successful cases that become part of standard practice. Based on our evidence, we conclude that the reality of local social innovations is a different one. The majority remain local and last only a limited number of years. The emphasis on success stories and scaling up is an important one, with implications for the direction of future funding; but it is equally important to realise that the majority of local innovations (especially those not originating in professional organisations) do not fit such a pattern of growth and one should not disregard the cumulative effect of the many small, temporary initiatives that are of high value within their local context.

Of the innovations we studied, many were either discontinued after a few years or faced an uncertain future in the short term. Cutbacks in public sector funding no doubt play a part in this, but the underlying structural dynamics (such as project-based funding, dependence on charismatic initiators, high mobility in cities that disengages people and shifting political fashions) suggest that the underlying conditions are of a structural nature.

A second “bad” aspect of social innovations is that *the innovators themselves often give little attention for diffusing them*. In a market context, diffusion comes with profits and is the point of the initiative. The social innovation literature stresses the entrepreneurial and leadership side of the phenomena, and it goes without saying that innovators aim at popularizing widely what they are doing. This perspective suggests that social innovation comes with the inherent desire to spread the message and change the world. Looking at the usual examples of scaled social innovations, one could almost believe it. Our findings show, however, that this assumption cannot be maintained for a considerable part of social innovations in local welfare. Many tend to be generated by projects, initiatives and actors from the third sector, who have no direct interest beyond their local context.

A detailed look at the cases shows that often groups of people or organisation took action in the face of a pressing local need: children went hungry, women were abused and young men wandered the streets aimlessly. They devoted great energy to get their initiative off the ground, scraping together resources and building on local knowledge. Their original interest was not selling their innovation in another city, let alone another country. This can be interpreted both as admirable commitment to local needs or as a lack of interest in problems beyond the borders of the community. Either way, it limits the impact of social innovation to a far greater degree than its advocates usually admit.

A third element that we consider as “bad” is related to the fact that *a significant part of social innovations represent cultural, economic and social aims and practices that are highly controversial or even seen by many as threatening rather than promising*. For instance, there are consumer goods such as new technological devices that generate personal information through apps and social media. They allow more (self-)control of health and performance, progress going hand in hand with the

risk that businesses or the state abuse data for their own purposes. Yet, such risks have not stopped such devices from spreading like wildfire. Likewise, businesses in the sharing economy like *Uber* are very ambivalent in their effects. Furthermore, new innovative instruments for the diagnosis of genetics, aiming at new forms of preventing health risks (including for the unborn), raise complicated ethical and social questions.

Socially threatening innovations like the ones mentioned tend to be ignored by the mainstream academic debate on “social” innovation, which prefers to focus on innovations with social dimensions largely considered as “good”. However, they have both a technical and a social dimension. Their social impact is high and their implicit aim is to encourage a certain style of living, working and consuming. Due to their controversial social impacts and aims, they neither fit in the pool of social innovations seen as basically good nor do they count as clearly unsocial innovations.

Working with a broad notion of social innovations calls for research that systematically studies how to deal with controversies on social innovations with varying balance sheets of possibly good and bad social goals and impacts, depending on context and nature, and how this influences their development.

### 25.3 The Ugly

The “ugliness” in social innovation is to misrepresent them as something they are not. Probably *the most common misrepresentation of social innovation is to implicitly treat them as similar to business innovation* and, as a result, ignore many of the special conditions needed to make them flourish. Sure enough, many social innovations originate from businesses, yet those in local welfare mostly originate in nonmarket contexts like the third sector or social movements (according to some definitions of social innovations, exclusively so). More importantly, there are fundamental differences compared to other types of innovations. For a start, they usually relate to services not products. This makes a difference in that it relates to ongoing relationships rather than discrete transactions and to outcomes rather than outputs. Furthermore, they are usually embedded in specific social relations. This, in turn, means that they are more contextually bound than their technological counterparts. An iPad will continue to function in the same way whether it is used in Stockholm, Dover or Belgrade. This is not the case for approaches or schemes working with people that rely on specific regulations and cultures to be effective. Finally, they tend to address social needs not sufficiently addressed by government programmes and markets. Indeed, local governments can even use such initiatives to justify their own inactivity or, through a symbolic financial gesture, construct political legitimacy by appearing to respond to social challenges.

As discussed in Chap. 3, all these have consequences for the emergence and development of social innovations. The implicit use of business models as a benchmark strengthens the already strong tendency to emphasise successful and scaled

examples. Though scaling is important, it concerns only a relatively small proportion of social innovations and one that appears to be based primarily on a selective use of case studies. It also strongly underplays the significance of the vast majority of social innovations that are not or only partially diffused, remain restricted to a local area and last only for a relatively short period of time. Arguably, the cumulative effect of such small initiatives is of far greater importance to society than the few star examples that achieve a wider impact. The emphasis on widely dispersed social innovations also tends to highlight the role of professional organisations and networks, given the importance of intermediaries for diffusing social innovations. By implication, it downplays the role of third sector organisations and citizens' initiatives, whose roles are often confined to a local setting.

A second misrepresentation concerns the relationship between economic and social innovation. *The underlying assumption of several studies and public statements is that prevailing politics of economic and urban growth and social innovation in cities go easily together* and that they are complementary and part of a single strategy to make cities more attractive, competitive and liveable. Even supporting this perspective, one would concede that the diffusion of innovations that challenge routines is problematic due to procedural and managerial difficulties, calling for effective strategies that strengthen acceptance. However, disregarding innovative attempts or picking up only certain parts and aspects points to a kind of selectivity of contexts related to controversial interests, priorities and strategies. Generally, local authorities tend to favour innovations complementary to their urban growth strategy, aimed at making the city more dynamic and attractive according to their terms. The fact that the most sustainable innovations in our sample were those either fully integrated into the local welfare administration or even initiated by the local authorities deserves closer examination. The case studies on Milan and Münster offer good examples of the selective nature of such strategies, favouring innovations that were complementary to their growth strategy. Local social innovations fit to different degrees with the strategies of cities to become globally competitive places, attractive for urban elites. Urban gardening is one such example. However, innovations focussing on people at the fringes of urban society are of minor relevance for such strategies. Such types of innovations have proven especially vulnerable to cut-backs and shifts in political mood. The British examples of local social innovations are good illustrations of this.

The third "ugly" trait that makes it difficult to find appropriate ways of dealing with social innovations in public policies is *the one-sided presentation of welfare state reform as a primarily top-down process, giving priority to regulating and standardising over securing open spaces for social innovation*. This state-centred concept of change and reform is historically untrue, as many social innovations *avant la lettre* were incorporated into state-sponsored schemes and reality is more hybrid than often acknowledged. The focus on welfare regimes in academic debate has all but written bottom-up innovation out of a welfare state and presents the history of social reform history as top-down process of large-scale institutions and regulations. It ignores the basic role of experimentation and bottom-up innovation in nudging and realising successful reforms.



## 25.4 Finally

Research on social innovation has progressed slowly in recent years, caught between many imperatives. In particular, it has hovered unsteadily between highly abstract (meta-)theories and conceptualisations, a flood of interesting illustrative examples and a barrage of practical guidelines with a largely intuitive basis. There are few signs that the social innovation literature has already got a firm place in academic debates in established disciplines. As a matter of fact, there is not much debate, the points of contention have not crystallised clearly. This, however, is a necessary precondition for the state of the art to move forward. We need scepticism and disagreement.

It would certainly help if research on social innovation more wholeheartedly embraced failure and thwarted ambition. The road to realising social innovations is a rocky one, and many are left behind. One reason is that they get embroiled in “legitimate controversies”. Social innovations are political in nature and not all political initiatives survive. But our evidence shows that the failure of social innovations is also due to widespread risk-averse attitudes when it comes to social experimentation. Despite paying lip service to innovation, authorities tend to prefer what is known and tested—be it in the tradition of state regulation and standard setting or through a swing towards approaches working well in the business sector. Innovations guided by other social values and assumptions than those prevailing traditionally in administrations and business have a harder job. They need supporters that show some readiness to take a risk and help to realise at least some kind of open space, some clearings within the otherwise rather dense jungle of regulations and standards.

In the face of innovations with the potential to revolutionise the economy and areas like labour market relations, it would be silly to argue that new common rules and large-scale regulations are not needed. The social innovations covered in this book, however, need another kind of state intervention. They are local, often dispersed and precarious. They call for enabling welfare policies that give room for experimentation, listen to the messages of innovators and find ways for using their expertise. For decades, welfare has been linked to universality, but it should be linked to diversity as well. Welfare policies must practise experimentation and think in terms of dilemmas to get the best of both worlds. May this book encourage researchers, policymakers and professionals to take steps in that direction.

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