

Social Innovation - A development process

There is no single definition of social innovation, which dominates the field in Denmark. In the broadest sense, innovation is defined as “anything new that works” (Junge & Lustrup 2009), and the term is widely used to define a development process – from defining a problem to implementing a new product. This is transferable to the concept of social innovation. Social innovation is seen as a development process where a new law, strategy, method, procedure, technology or product is developed and implemented—a process that meets a social need and creates positive (and radical) change in society.

This leads to an important point: In Denmark, social innovation is primarily perceived as innovation in the social- and welfare sector. The three main challenges that social innovators face are:

- Inclusion, self-determination and empowerment of marginalised groups
- A growing ageing population
- Care and service provided for people with physical and/or mental disabilities

Focus on social innovation is constantly growing. The financial crisis and a decreasing workforce, combined with the high expectations placed on the welfare state have given force to calls for new solutions and radical changes in the welfare system in Denmark. During the past two years, Social Development Centre SUS has promoted social invention as a crucial aspect of the innovation process. Any innovation springs from an invention. That is why highlighting social inventions and the methodology of inventing – such as designing, prototyping and testing - is crucial to create new and radical social changes.

Social Innovation in a strong welfare state

Social innovation in Denmark needs to be seen in the light of a historically strong welfare state. The universal welfare system – a complex of social inventions in itself – acts as a safety net for all citizens, and is based on solidarity. The welfare system is constantly evolving, but this evolution happens in small, slow steps. There are a number of reasons, why the development is slow, such as:

- The size of the welfare state and public organisations creates inertia, holding them back in, for instance, the field of knowledge sharing

- The complexity of the public sectors task and work – many professionals and stakeholders are involved in developing new initiatives
- The fear of making mistakes minimizes risk taking – risk taking is an essential part of any innovation process
- The public sector are under financial pressure – few resources are left for development

So while the welfare state holds the main responsibility for solving social problems in Denmark – social innovation is under pressure because of the conditions in a strong public sector.

But those are not the only obstacles faced by social innovators. First of all, there is a lack of infrastructure supporting social innovators and social innovation. This means that there are:

- Only limited opportunities, when it comes to matching different competencies and resources to create social innovation – from defining a social problem, creating a new social invention and implementing and scaling the innovation.
 - A lack of tradition for documentation during the development process – the process, testing and method itself is only rarely documented thoroughly. This makes implementation and scaling difficult.
-

New sectors and new actors are getting involved

With the rising awareness and interest in social innovation in Denmark, a number of different sectors and actors are getting increasingly involved. For example, the private sector and the business sector are becoming involved in developing a social economy and small social businesses within that economy, for instance 'The Specialists' project – a self-sufficient private company employing only people with autism.

New initiatives aim to support social entrepreneurs – examples are the 'Center for social entrepreneurship' in Roskilde University and 'Center for Social Economy'.

The academic world also continues to show increasing interest in social innovation – opening new master degrees and courses within innovation and social innovation.

There is a growing interest in understanding how to increase the role of civil society in solving social problems and making social innovation. Denmark has always had a strong volunteer sector, supplementing the public sector's work for socially marginalised groups. But with the future challenges faced by the welfare state, there is a strong interest in finding new ways to activate civil society.

In addition, untraditional actors—by Danish standards—are finding their way into the field of social innovation. They come from engineering and technology, bringing together technological solutions to social problems and creating welfare technology to help the ageing population and people with physical and/or mental disabilities to become more independent.

Finally, artists and designers are becoming involved in social innovation – mainly by highlighting social problems, creating new social spaces in a city or by creating art projects with socially marginalised groups.

Based on positive experiences, Social Development Center SUS believes that the involvement of many different sectors and actors will boost social innovation. New actors bring about a new creativity and challenge the present ways of solving social problems. And new actors can lead to new opportunities in social innovation in Denmark. The key challenge will be to bring these different people together to enrich each other and create radical social innovation.

This document is based on the conclusions from the report 'Social Inventions' (Sørensen & Frederiksen 2010 - only available in Danish). The report discusses research, knowledge, experiences and methods generated in the project 'Social Inventions' led by Social Development Center SUS in 2009-2010.

References

- Junge, Dorthe og Lustrup, Peter, 2009: Social Innovation. En guide til rejse i ukendt land. Books on Demand GmbH.
- Jørgensen, Frank Ulmer, 2009: Fokus på sociale opfindere og entreprenører. (Upubliceret arbejdspapir).
- Reiermann 2009a: Politikere skal være entreprenører, i: Mandag Morgen, MM03, 19. januar 2009.
- Reiermann 2009b: Ny rollefordeling skal skabe innovation i det offentlige, i: Mandag Morgen, MM04, 26. januar 2009.
- Sørensen, Anne og Frederiksen, Andreas Hjorth, 2010: Sociale opfindelser. (www.socialinventions.dk)
- Social Development Center SUS, www.sus.dk.
- Center for Socialøkonomi, www.socialokonomi.dk
- Center for Socialt Entreprenørskab, www.ruc.dk/forskning/forskningscentre/cse/
- Servicestyrelsen www.servicestyrelsen.dk