

## **Social Innovation in Finland**

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The definition of social innovation still has to continue to evolve in Finland. Hämäläinen (2011) makes the point that “definitions and the field of action are in constant flux as the challenges of society change, so it is impossible to give one concise interpretation.” One definition that has been used in the context of social innovation in Finland is Zapf’s (1989) interpretation: “Social innovation can be defined as new ways of reaching specific goals and they include new organization forms, new regulations as well as new life styles that solve problems better than traditional practices do and that are worth imitating and/or institutionalizing. Innovations have to change the direction of social development”. Other definitions in the field of innovation emphasise rather the technical dimension but not the social dimension.

The most significant achievement and strength of Finland’s society is its free general education, small income disparities, little poverty and the wide participation of women in working life (Sitra 2005, 6). According to Tekes, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, are Finnish companies and scientists precursors in various fields of technology and innovation. The focus is predominantly on forest, chemical and metal industries, ICT, new materials, environmental technologies, functional food, and biotechnology and diagnostics. Technological development and technological innovations are generally considered the strongest area of Finnish innovation. As yet Finland has no clear development strategy for social innovation (cf. Science and Technology Policy Council of Finland, 13). Therefore, the area of social innovation will have to continue to evolve in order to improve the quality of life and the performance of society. Problems Finland is faced with and which have to be tackled in the future are: unemployed, demographic ageing & labour shortage (Sitra 2005, 6). A part of unemployment and also high youth unemployment is structural and coexists with a labour shortage. Further issues are the health and care sector and the viability of the rural areas and failing communities (Bland 2010).

In the health and care sector social innovation has already begun to make progress but will still be an issue in the future. Even though there is yet to be an actual breakthrough according to Hämäläinen (2011) regarding social innovations in Finland there are examples of social innovations in the past.

Already in 1972 Finnish citizens played a critical role in redesigning the public health system. A petition was launched to get help to reduce the high incidence of cardiovascular disease. The result – the North Karelia Project – was collaborations between local and national authorities, experts, and local citizens. The project has had a dramatic impact, helping to reorganise the health system around prevention and healthy living, and by involving citizens in the design and implementation of the programme, served as a process for community learning (The Open Book of Social Innovation, 250).

Finland has a couple of institutions to drive social innovations in the country. There is Finland's Innovation Fund (Sitra), which is conducting research and development (The Open Book of Social Innovation, 289). The fund is independent and public and overseen by Finland's Parliament, its responsibilities are now stipulated in law (Study on Social Innovation). The current focus of the fund is on municipal, energy, landmarks, public leadership, management programmes and a growth programme for the mechanical industry. In the past the focus was on food and nutrition, environment and health care (Sitra).

In addition, there is Finland's new Aalto University, which was launched in 2010 as a result of the merger of the Technical University, the Business School, and the School of Arts and Design. Aalto is an innovation university and a research department. It shall become a centre of expertise and training for civil servants, social entrepreneurs and non-profit organisation managers. (The Open book of Social Innovation, 295).

Obstacles for the implementation of social innovations can be encountered in difficulties to implement laws but also in a strong technological focus in the Finnish innovation policy. For example, Finland's attempt to implement a social firms law, which was meant to give a subsidy for companies employing disabled and disadvantaged people, was not successful (Bland 2010). Hämäläinen and Schienstock (2001) see a "major problem of Finnish innovation policy in the strong technical orientation, while the social dimension of innovation has been given less attention." The focus on social innovation has not yet taken a centre stage in the Finnish innovation policy (cf. Hämäläinen 2011 and Science and Technology Policy Council, 16). Technological innovation is a precondition for social development, but needs to be supported by effective social innovation in all sectors of society (Science and Technology Policy Council, 16).

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