

Social Innovation in Poland

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In Poland there is no accepted definition of social innovation. The most common one comes from the European Union and describes such activity as innovations that are both social in their ends and in their means. Social innovations are new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations (Open Book of Social Innovation, Murray, Calulier-Grice and Mulgan, March 2010). In Poland social entrepreneurship is noticed usually as social innovation.

Social entrepreneurship is seen as a way of solving social problems with business tools. Social entrepreneurs are the local leaders who access the new resources and activities required to respond to challenges such as rising unemployment, social exclusion and limited access to affordable housing. In Poland social enterprises seek innovative solutions specifically within the areas of an aging population, youth employment and environmental problems.

History

Social innovation is relatively new idea in Poland. But social enterprises (to a large degree workers' cooperatives) historically have been grassroots-initiatives, operating in Poland since XIX century and developed to an important part of local market in the interwar period. During that time other entities, based on the mutuality principle, have also gained importance, such as insurance companies, and so on. However, communism distorted social entrepreneurs within a framework of centrally organized economy. After socio-political transformation (that started in 1989) Poland rather ignored the idea of social entrepreneurship. A large part of the workers' cooperatives did not survive the process of economic restructuring. The social sphere was not seen as a development policy but rather as a set of actions that compensated for the side-effects of the economic reform which was necessary after the communist system. It took time—until end of 2003—to establish a new law on public benefit work, where the rules of cooperation between public and civic sectors were established.

In a way to new life of social enterprises/innovation

The aforementioned law was the beginning of revival of social entrepreneurship in Poland. New initiatives have been established ignoring the Polish tradition. They have been focused on the concept of social cooperatives (introduced with the new law in 2006), not-for-profit companies and nongovernmental organizations.

Since 2009 the Polish government has recognised the important role of social entrepreneurship in the reduction of unemployment and in sustainable development. As a result, this sphere of activity has gained support within national and regional structural programmes financed by the European Social Fund. In 2009 the Polish prime minister established the group whose priorities are the improvement of the conditions of the social entrepreneurship development in the country (with respect to educational, legal, financial and institutional frameworks).

However, until now the results of its work has not bring any fundamental breakthroughs in Polish social entrepreneurship. Poland is still in need of implemented national policies and strategies to promote social innovation and social entrepreneurship in a more systematic way.

Large potential and good examples in the market with old problems

Although the social enterprise sector in Poland is still developing, it shows their growing potential to address current challenges, which Polish society is facing, as the lack of work opportunities for people with disabilities, long-term unemployed or students entering job market. Operating within different legal forms, social enterprises not only create work places but also provide professional activation services such as therapy, civic education and vocational activation programs. Additionally social enterprises also have positive social impact on local communities especially in deprived rural areas by delivering affordable services in the fields of education, culture, sport or social care and health. There are entities in the sector that try to implement innovative solutions for problems within each of these spheres of activity.

In spite of the growing popularity of social enterprises and social innovation, we can still observe a problem with lack of trust in the society in Poland . As this is the basis of cooperation, further work on that aspect is needed. Up until now, this growth within social enterprises market is manifested to a large extent in declarations rather than in real actions. That is the situation, even though, several good examples of sustainable and efficient entities can be observed within all the sectors of the market, as mentioned in the paragraph above.

In addition more socially innovative initiatives are dependent on the structural funds. Because these structural funds are managed by the public administration, it inhibits innovative development. And one of the great challenges of social innovation is to increase its popularity among Polish society. This is one of the aims for our sector to be reached within next EU multiannual financial perspective.