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Social Innovation in the Czech Republic

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The history of social innovations in the Czech Republic is not long. The concept was first mentioned in the evaluation of innovativeness of the Operational Programme Human Resources and Employment (OPHRE) published in 2012. The guidelines for systemic support of social innovations, formulated by the researchers at the Centre for Innovation Studies in Prague, included 60 steps to be undertaken in coming years. One of the recommendations included organizing pilot calls for social innovation projects, which were indeed launched in 2013 and 2014.

Altogether 17 projects were supported in OPHRE, the first in the country, which specifically targeted solutions of social problems through social innovations. The pilots were quite important as they offered a unique learning opportunity – how to develop the systemic support of social innovations, which would reflect the country and local specifics. Not only the novelty of the social innovation concept itself was important but also the implementation of self-evaluation of social impact as an instrument of learning and improvement. A comprehensive toolbox (together with an intense and individualized support) was created to guide the social innovators through the process starting with evaluation plan and finishing with final evaluation report. All the social innovation actors were learning continuously which practices work and which do not, what risks are imminent, what constraints are threatening.

The second important (and to a certain extent parallel) factor contributing to development of social innovations in the Czech Republic included the international prize, SozialMarie (<http://www.sozialmarie.org>), awarded to social innovators by the Austrian private foundation Unruhe since 2005. The projects from all the Czech Republic became eligible for submissions since 2013. Step by step the reputation of the prize has been increasing in the country. In 2015 four presentations of the Czech social innovators were organized in Prague, attracting representatives of non-profits, government and foundations. In 2016 a more active engagement of business sector is targeted, especially through innovative approaches to still prevailing traditional view of corporate social responsibility (the platform of Association for Social Responsibility, <http://www.spolecenskaodpovednostfirem.cz>, can contribute in these efforts as it connects actors from diverse institutional sectors). Meanwhile a close informal link

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between the OPHRE and SozialMarie activities has developed, based on sharing of expertise and experience.

So far the role of business sector in social innovations has been rather limited in the Czech Republic, though some examples of good practice can be identified. Vodafone Foundation started the programme supporting technology-based solutions of social problems which was turned in Vodafone Lab (<http://www.laboratornadacevodafone.cz>), since 2013 supporting selected social business/innovation projects through mentoring and financial incentives. Recently a similar programme was started by Ceska sporitelna/Erste Group, called Impact First (<http://www.impactfirst.cz>). The Social Impact Award for student social businesses has been organized by Erste Group in the Czech Republic since 2012 (socialimpactaward.cz), gradually focusing more on the accelerating activities. All the mentioned initiatives make the social innovation ecosystem in the country richer, however, only exceptionally the supported projects have been able of generating a long-term sustainable impact or upscaling capacity.

The key role in the support of social innovation in the Czech Republic has been played by the structural funds. After the above-mentioned pilot calls in OPHRE, in the new programming period the systemic support of social innovations is to start from 2016 within the Operational Programme Employment and its Priority Axis Social innovation and international cooperation. Besides the continuing funding of social innovation projects, a new call will be open to support ecosystem of social innovations (ESI) in 2016. It is to address four key pillars of the ESI – data platforms, exploiting open data and other data sources for evidence based initiatives and policies, knowledge platforms (inspired by What Works Centres in UK) for exploitation and development of existing knowledge with strong application focus, incubators/accelerators to support economic sustainability and upscaling capacity of social innovations, and investment platforms which are to connect investors and social innovators. The call is to strengthen the existing actors and their cooperations and interactions. They were created from below and reflect the existing innovation capacities. However, due to the limited resources, both knowledge and financial, their impact has been improving rather slowly and remains weak, especially in the later stages of innovation cycle. Consequently, the hitherto undertaken social innovation activities can be considered as vibrant but mostly shallow. It became obvious that without a more systemic and specific support of social innovation ecosystem the current social innovation intensity in the country will not develop to a further level – neither in quality nor scale.

The current limitations of social innovation capacities in the Czech Republic have been identified in the undertaken research activities and in the evaluations of the innovation projects themselves. In 2014, the first country-wide survey of social innovation capacities was undertaken by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and will be repeated bi-annually to make the comparison of development in time possible. In 2014-2016, the Centre for Innovation Studies participated in the FP7 project SIMPACT (www.simpact-project.eu) which identifies factors boosting economic impact of social innovations, specific attention has been given to the peculiarities of the new EU

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members. Based on the international comparative analyses undertaken within the SIMPACT project, the position of the Czech Republic in terms of social innovation capacities is quite favorable, though more can be done to turn the existing potential into measurable social innovation performance.

Other links:

Ashoka Czech republic, <http://czech.ashoka.org/>

Impact Hub Praha, <http://www.hubpraha.cz>

People, Planet, Profit, <http://www.p-p-p.cz/>