

Social Innovation in Croatia

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Definition of social innovation in Croatia:

Social innovation is a relatively new concept in Croatia and the broader Western Balkan region, and as such has not been defined by any particular actors. For that reason, there is a need for first of all defining and promoting this concept, and then developing a network of social innovators that will be involved in the process of mapping and promoting new concepts, tools and practices to socio-economic challenges. Additionally, since this concept is already underway in Europe and the USA, there will be a need for connecting with those networks and promoting contextualized good practices in this region.

Growth:

Most of the growth in Croatia (in science and technology but not social innovation) could be seen in the academia and the business sector (to some extent) through the projects financed by the pre-structural funds in the fields of science, R&D and innovation, but not necessarily social innovation (for example, Intellectual Property Infrastructure for the Research and Development Sector (CARDS 2003); Technological Park Net (INTERREG III C – CADSES); Joint European Project entitled Stimulating Croatia's Entrepreneurial Activities and Technology Transfer in Education (TEMPUS). There are also some projects focusing on the strengthening of the SME sector and the creation of new jobs, especially in the lagging areas through the investment in the development of new and existing infrastructure in business zones, the development of new and existing incubators and other SME support institutions as well as the development of tourism infrastructure. Additionally, there are programmes implemented through the national government agency, Business Innovation Centre of Croatia (BICRO), which is primarily oriented towards technology and innovation in the SME sector without direct application to socio-economic challenges. These projects are targeting employment and other economic issues, and as such could be seen as examples of social innovation. However, since there are no baseline and the methodology for mapping social innovation in Croatia, it is difficult to say to what extent will those innovations have an impact on the betterment of life of citizens in Croatia.

Additionally, civil society organisations and public sector have some solutions and good practices that could be defined as socially innovative. However, those examples have not been documented, as there is no baseline for mapping and accessing social innovation in Croatia and the broader Western Balkans region yet.

Innovators face key challenges:

Challenges in Croatia, as well as in the Western Balkans relate to the fact that so far, the applied methodologies, concepts and practices for socio-economic development have more or less struggled to achieve results and benefits for

the targeted groups, especially women, youth and/or people with disabilities as the most vulnerable groups. Despite a large number of international aid organizations, capacity building workshops and technical assistance methodologies, they have generally failed in the most important goal - improvement in the quality of daily life and increase in employment.

Obstacles to social innovation:

First of all, the general environment is yet not stimulating enough to enable the appropriate development and mapping of social innovation. This is due to the lack of evidence based policy making knowledge and practice, lack of consistent and coherent, innovative policymaking practices that will create optimal conditions for open dialogue on pressing policy issues with key actors on all levels, including national and local governments, civil society organizations and private sector, as well as lack of adequate and broadly understood mechanisms, tools and innovative solutions that will put the accelerated process of adopting the principles of democratic governance and the European Acquis into practice.

As in Europe, the most challenge that Croatia is facing related to social innovation will be first of all accessing social innovations. As in the broader region, there is also the lack of active, cross-border partnerships and networks that promote innovative, community-based solutions, share of experiences and best practices. Also, community leaders often do not see themselves as social innovators and do not promote those practices. For all these reasons, the greatest challenge will be in defining socio-economic challenges, creating a baseline for mapping social innovation and then defining methods for promoting those practices to broader public in order to make it more clear to various groups and broader public.

Historical Context:

Innovation policy and National Innovation Systems are, in Croatia, still not recognized as tools for socio-economic development and as the essence of strategic policy. Despite traditionally been a research and science oriented society, Croatia with its both traditional and alternative institutions have not made a shift from the socialist-style science policy towards a modern innovation policy oriented country, which uses the R&D for the socio-economic challenges.

As described by Ms. Jadranka Svarc[1] in her article "Innovation Policy in Croatia: the First 10 Years", "the idea of the integration of science and innovation, as well as of the integration of science policy and industrial and technology policies, has, in Croatia, been poorly received and understood. From the socio-economic and cultural point of view, it has hardly been accepted at all. The last two decades of the 20th century spent in the majority of the developed countries in making the necessary shift from the standard research and industrial policies to the innovation policy, have, for Croatia, been lost" despite some efforts by the National government and other stakeholders. These and above explained factors, in addition to the lack of clear understanding about the importance of social innovation could be seen

as influencing the impact of social innovation into different aspects of socio, cultural, economic, political life in Croatia today.

[1] *Jadranka Švarc, "Innovation Policy in Croatia: the First 10 Years" Institute of social sciences "Ivo Pilar", Zagreb, Croatia.*