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The Global Ecosystem For Social Innovation

Louise Pulford shares how the social innovation industry is applying its own medicine to accelerate social innovation globally.

The case for social innovation has never been clearer. The big issues—climate change, affordable health care, disconnected communities—are complex and it is widely accepted that they cannot be solved by doing things the old way. But whilst the “what” and “why” are more widely understood, the “how” and “who” of social innovation is less clear, and the “ecosystem” to support social innovation remains under-developed.

Support for Social Innovation

Businesses, global NGOs, local charities and governments alike are increasingly open to the idea of social innovation, but little work is being done on bolstering the institutions, frameworks and structures that will actually enable social innovation to happen. Spotting, supporting, measuring and financing social innovation is still no-one’s responsibility.

Those working to find and develop effective solutions often feel as if they are facing a series of brick walls—not only are the social issues complex and inter-connected, the knowledge of what works, and what doesn’t is not effectively shared. Many organisations lack the skills and capacity to be innovative, and there are a set of institutional barriers including the undervaluing of creativity, a lack of safe space to fail and little

appropriate finance. For those outside of organisations, there are few physical places to create, test and develop ideas. New or more effective solutions to some of today’s societal challenges would be less scarce if there were a framework or a system which supported the growth of new initiatives, i.e. if there was a social innovation ecosystem.

Ecosystems for social innovation are needed both locally and globally.

At a local level, physical infrastructures that provide a pathway between each stage of the development can be helpful, not least because support structures can be developed. DenokInn’s Social Innovation Park in Bilbao is a good example; here, a set of physical spaces create an infrastructure, or ecosystem, to promote and support social innovation throughout the city and wider region.

At a country level, whether through active community organisations in Milan or a strong public sector in Malmo, an anchor institution is often present as a key pillar of a social innovation ecosystem.

At a global level, networks of organisations to share learnings and practices, support and implement joint projects are needed



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Social Innovation Exchange (SIX)

As social innovation becomes more widely recognised, and the associated gaps in the social innovation ecosystem are highlighted, the role of the global SIX network is changing.

SIX was launched in 2008 as a global network of networks. It was designed as a one-stop shop for the few people involved in the field, as a place to connect existing networks, and aggregate the scarce social innovation resources. Today SIX’s focus is actively and deliberately connecting its 3,000 cross-sector members and supporting the development of the social innovation field throughout the world.

SIX convenes members with those who are new to the concept around themes such as ageing, social inclusion, or obesity. It hosts conversations on pillars of the social innovation ecosystem including new forms of social finance like the social impact bond. It also compares different kinds of intermediary organisations like living labs and venture supports, and tools such as design for social innovation and crowd sourcing.

to scale the social innovation industry. One of the most impactful of such networks, the Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) is evolving along these lines.

Gaps in the Social Innovation Ecosystem

But it is the softer, less tangible parts of a social innovation ecosystem that are often missing or underdeveloped. Specifically, the lack of learning and training, support structures at a policy level, and under-development of networks slow the effective development of new solutions. These three areas need more attention.

- **Gap 1:** Learning and training. A critical lesson from the fields of science and business is that successful innovation depends on skills—observation, learning, multiplying ideas, finance, design and growth. Creating new solutions to complex social challenges, therefore, requires a new level of expertise and creativity from the people who work across society, in government, business and the third sector. There is, currently, a distinct lack of training and capacity building in the field.

One response to this is the Young Foundation-led development of a Global Innovation Academy. This new approach to learning and training is due to be launched in spring 2012. With the help of a number of pathfinder projects taking place throughout 2011, the academy will work with a series of global partners to build the skills and capacity needed to accelerate social innovation. It will teach tools and methods for social innovation by identifying, borrowing and adapting global best practice solutions, as well as learning from successful local projects. With a structure of regional nodes and local delivery partners and a global faculty of experts, this model is, in of itself, innovative.

- **Gap 2:** Support structures at a policy level. Scientific and technological innovation is now supported by substantial funding flows, institutions and intermediaries. Innovation to meet social needs demands an equivalent level of commitment. Governments from Australia and East Asia to North America are starting to show support for social innovation by providing finance and establishing dedicated departments like the White House Office for Social Innovation.

However, the European Commission is leading the way. Following its recognition of social innovation, alongside science and technological innovation in the new Innovation Union Strategy, the European Commission appointed SIX to run a consortium made up of the likes of the Danish Technological Institute and the Euclid Network with the remit to build a social innovation ecosystem for Europe. Launched in Brussels in March 2011 by the

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President of the European Commission, the Social Innovation Europe initiative is charged with supporting social innovation across all 27 member states, across sectors, and across local and national governments. As identified by President Barroso, social innovation is necessary to create a better, smarter Europe.

- **Gap 3:** Networks and innovating as a global community. Behind every successful new movement is an effective network. The value of human interaction, whether online or face-to-face, should never be underestimated. Often, more is learnt through a conversation to share personal experiences than is learnt by reading the literature or browsing a “PDF graveyard” on a website. More opportunities for real collaboration and informal knowledge sharing on a global level are needed to get people talking together, face-to-face, to discuss, decide and take action. Through a series of events—online, virtually through Cisco’s TelePresence facility and with partners Dialogue Cafe, and physically in the form of SIX Summer and Spring School events—SIX, for instance, facilitates interaction by people from very different sectors, backgrounds and cultures.

An ecosystem is a set of complex, interdependent relationships that function best through effective networks and communities. It is not enough to recognise, for instance, that South Korea can learn from South America and London. More structured opportunities for sharing and community building must be created. An integral element of any ecosystem is the ability of people to connect and talk in an attempt to fill the gaps.

