

Social innovation and public administration reform: when good ideas travel (or not)

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This paper still needs a lot of work. For citations, it is better to wait for the final version.

Abstract

Social innovation refers to new services, products, processes and approaches that more effectively meet urgent needs and create new types of collaboration among (esp. local) governments, business, non-profit organizations and citizens. This paper examines how such innovations are diffused to other contexts and how this process is distinctive from the diffusion of innovations generally. The role of local public administrations in supporting or blocking new ideas coming out of local communities is a crucial one and specific attention is paid to how the process relates to public administration reform. The findings derive from the project Welfare Innovations at the Local Level (WILCO, www.wilcoproject.eu) is a three-year European Union-funded project (2010-2013) that brings together universities from ten European countries and the research networks NISPAcee and EMES. This text comes at an early stage of the empirical analysis and must be regarded as a first exploration rather than a finished product.

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1. Introduction

To start this paper, let me describe two examples of social innovation in the CEE region (drawn from Bezovan et.al, 2013; Simienska et.al., 2013).

„Parents in Action“ is a civil society organisation, founded in 2001 by a group of parents as a direct answer to the reductions of maternity leave benefits. These are concerned citizens interested in promoting and protecting rights to a dignified pregnancy, parenthood and childhood in Croatia. They systematically monitor the status of the rights of pregnant women, parents, families and children and they, in many ways, point out failures, suggest ways to correct flaws and actively work on social changes. Through numerous activities, they raise public awareness about the rights of (future) parents, especially regarding the healthcare system, and have engaged in the public debate on the Zagreb Mayor’s proposal for changes of the prices of kindergartens and nurseries. Alongside their advocacy work and services (e.g. different workshops for parents), they have recently engaged in the production of cotton diapers, which is recognized and stressed as a good practice within the increasing social economy in Croatia. This production is achieved in cooperation with a sheltered workshop in Varaždin, employing persons with disabilities.

The pilot program on social revitalization in the Polish town of Plock is implemented bas a partnership between the Municipal Social Assistance Centre, the Vocational Education Centre and the Innovation Centre of the Information Society and financed by the European Social Fund. The main aim of the project is to support the city residents, who are in danger of social exclusion. It links the issue of social exclusion with the spatial differentiation of Plock as the Old Town is considered as one of the deprived areas in the city. The project directed to the clients of the Municipal Social Assistance Centre, especially young people aged 15-25. It includes a variety of means related to social integration, labour market and local animation: workshops with psychologist, professional advisors, lawyers and social assistants; collective activities including sports, dance, photography, art and filmmaking; vocational trainings on several professions (e.g. hairdresser, construction worker, driver, cook) and

presentation skills, individual and group activities in the day room opened in the frame of the project.

These initiatives are examples of innovation, more specifically, of what is nowadays referred to as ‘social innovation’. This concept refers to new services, products, processes and approaches that more effectively meet urgent needs and create new types of collaboration among (esp. local) governments, business, non-profit organizations and citizens. In other words, they achieve what governments and markets are unable to provide in themselves. It is increasingly recognised that such innovations is crucial to help solve wicked policy problems like long-term unemployment and social exclusion.

This paper will focus specifically on how social innovations are diffused; in other words, how original ideas can spread to other places. For governments, this is a highly relevant issue. Of course, it is important for governments to encourage the emergence of innovations; but it is even more important for them to encourage the effective use of innovations once they have emerged, to make them spread around to other places. As will be noted later in the paper, the role of intermediary organisations between the innovators and potential adopters of an innovation is often crucial. Since governments are important as intermediaries, or as financial supporters of intermediaries, it is important for them to understand how the process of diffusing innovations works – it is certainly not straightforward. It is on this process that the paper will focus.

The findings derive from the project *Welfare Innovations at the Local Level in Favour of Cohesion* (WILCO, www.wilcoproject.eu) is a three-year European Union-funded project (2010-2013) that brings together universities from ten European countries and the research networks NISPAcee and EMES. This paper stands at the beginning of the long and difficult process of analysing a huge amount of data. The current version collects some of the first findings.

In this version, the leading questions will be the following:

1. How does the process of ‘sending’ a social innovation to potential users work?

2. How is the diffusion of social innovations distinctive from the diffusion of innovations more generally?
3. What are the implications of these findings for public administration reform?

Paragraph two covers the definition of social innovation. This is followed in paragraph three by a short description of the main relevant theories in the area of diffusion. Paragraph four explains how the research project was designed and what steps we have successively taken. Paragraphs five and six then describe the findings, respectively from the ‘sending’ and the ‘receiving’ end. The concluding paragraph seven gives a summary of the main points.

2. The meaning and relevance of social innovation

Before entering an analysis of social innovation, there are two important issues to settle: what is it exactly and why should we bother with the concept ?

The definition of social innovations is a bone of contention. Jensen and Harrison have referred to as a ‘quasi-concept’, a “hybrid, making use of empirical analysis and thereby benefiting from the legitimising aura of the scientific method, but simultaneously characterised by an indeterminate quality that makes it adaptable to a variety of situations and flexible enough to follow the twists and turns of policy, that everyday politics sometimes make necessary” (Jensen & Harrison, 2013, p.2). Indeed, it has achieved the status of a buzzword in national and European policy circles. US President Obama established no less than two offices for social innovation. The European Union has used the term to fund several initiatives, including the research project upon which this paper is based. It is then little wonder that its meaning has diluted, sometimes referring to anything that is considered new and that is not technical.

Although as an academic concept it is less wide-ranging, there still remains a broad range of interpretations. Some posit simply that it must constitute a new approach to a particular kind of problem. The Stanford Center for Social Innovation, for example, describes it as “the process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing

novel solutions to social needs and problems”. Others are more specific in circumscribing the nature of the innovation. For example, the Social Polis network defined it as “the satisfaction of alienated human needs through the transformation of social relations: transformations which ‘improve’ the governance systems that guide and regulate the allocation of goods and services meant to satisfy those needs, and which establish new governance structures and organizations (discussion forums, political decision-making systems, etc.)” (Moulaert, 2009). This implies not only that an innovation must be radical (transformative), but also that it changes the power structure within the system where it is introduced. It is a type of definition that sees the origin of innovations in social movements and civil society. Here I will follow the moderate definition of the Bureau of European policy advisors, which is “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations.” This recognises a process dimension to social innovation, acknowledging that it must entail a change or reform of relationships; yet recognising that other types of actors (e.g. governments) can also play a leading role in such reform.

A second question is why we should bother with the concept as academics. It is clear that it is seen as useful for policy and political purposes. However, given an already burgeoning literature on innovation, it is fair to ask why social innovations merit specific treatment. How are social innovations theoretically different from other ones? Recent work suggest several arguments for such a distinctive position:

1. They usually relate to services, not products. As Osborne (2012) has emphasized in recent work, this makes a difference in that it relates to on-going relationships rather than discrete transactions and to outcomes rather than outputs.
2. As a consequence, this type of innovations is usually embedded in specific social relations, which in turn means that they are more contextually bound than their technological counterparts. An iPad will work the same way when it is taken from Stockholm to Belgrade. The same cannot be said of approaches or schemes that work with people and rely on specific regulations and cultures to be effective. This is of course very relevant to the issue of diffusion, which becomes much more complicated both in terms of objectives and process.

3. They address a specific type of need, a social need not yet sufficiently addressed by government programmes and markets. By implication, many are non-marketable. While a number of social innovations originate from businesses, many if not most originate in non-market contexts, like organised civil society or social movements (according to some definitions, not followed here, exclusively so). Governments are also important players in social innovation. This again has consequences for processes of diffusion and scaling-up.

Of course this is a gradual and not an absolute distinction. Nor should social and technological innovations be seen as opposites, since in practice they are often strongly intertwined. But the arguments are sufficiently strong to suggest that a distinct discussion of *social* innovation is merited. While it can draw upon the more general literature on innovation, the applicability and relevance of the latter for this specific type of innovation need to be tested. This paper address the issue explicitly.

3. The diffusion of social innovations

The innovation cycle

Earlier approaches to social innovation have drawn upon the concept of an *innovation cycle*, which suggests that the development of innovations follows a sequential series of conditions. There are different conceptualisations of this cycle, with differing degrees of refinement in distinguishing different stages and a differing emphasis on the (ins)stability of its dynamics (e.g. BEPA, 2011; Mulgan, 2012). One could identify five phases:

1. An unmet demand or contradictions within the current system come to be articulated and, over time, gains recognition. Such recognition of the need for social innovation is a crucial first step that often takes significant interaction between actors and may develop rapidly, e.g. in response to an emergency, or over a long period of time.
2. A concrete idea for an innovation takes shape in the form of an initiative. This

is rarely a completely new idea, but a composite emerging from old and new institutional elements, a process of *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

3. Collaboration leads to be the building and the consolidation of an innovation network and the procurement of resources.
4. There is wider recognition of the value of the innovation by other actor networks, institutions such as public authorities and/or markets.
5. Innovations are integrated into the wider social system, through scaling or transfer, which will in due course give rise to new cycles but also to a transformation of the status quo.

In practice, of course innovations do not neatly progress through successive stages and the cycle should therefore rather be understood as a composite of building blocks of innovation, as innovation pillars. The stages do not necessarily follow one another through fixed stages in time; nor do they necessarily build upon one another. A social innovation may be successfully diffused, remain limited to communities where it either serves a real need or turns out to have no further use at all. It is therefore an ideal typical concept that takes different concrete forms, rather than claiming to be a direct representation of reality.

This paper focuses on the fifth stage of the cycle, the diffusion of innovations to other places. There are both academic and practical reasons for this. To start with, given the already extensive literature on innovation, one must constantly judge whether studying social innovations leads to any distinctive findings. With regard to how local innovations originate, at this point we do not appear to have any truly original findings. The processes we have observed essentially confirm the insights from earlier literature. Of course, there are specific angles which warrant further exploration, yet I feel safe in stating that the dynamics of this phase of innovation appear to be broadly known. The stage of diffusion is less trodden and is one in which social innovation has more distinctive dynamics, as will be argued later in the paper. A practical reason for focusing on diffusion is that it represents a clear handhold for action by governments, even if they are not directly involved in the process of invention itself.

I will argue later in the paper, though, that seeing diffusion in this way is actually a little deceptive. It is a point which specifically applies to social innovation.

Theoretical basis

In the project we have drawn upon institutionalist theory to structure our analysis. This comprises several schools of thought and represents a broad movement that stretches across economics, sociology, political science, public administration and organisational theory. The institutionalist (or “neo-institutionalist”) tradition is so diverse that it is difficult to capture except in the simplest of terms. What unites all the streams is the claim that institutions matter, but this is not to say much, since the definitions and assumptions used by the various “institutionalisms” and the way that they break with previous work in these disciplines differ strongly. For instance, the purely instrumental definition of institutions in neo-institutional economics is incompatible with the cognitive focus of many sociological studies. There have been various attempts to describe neo-institutionalism, both on the basis of disciplines and of theoretical characteristics. Scott (1995) has ordered the diverse studies by focusing on the extent to which they are internalised. On this basis he distinguishes three dimensions or “pillars”: regulative, normative and cognitive. Hall and Taylor (1996) use a different type of classification, which is based on two main variables: (1) how the interaction between behaviour and institutions is conceptualised, and (2) how institutions originate and change. These overviews show the difficulties in bringing all institutional theory within one framework.

What mattered for our project is the insistence of institutionalist thought on the significance of understanding the effects of historically evolved structures and practices on the implementation of current welfare policies. It does not necessarily mean that everything is path-dependent, but it does point to the fact that we can never again see through a baby’s eyes. This also applies to any innovations that emerge bottom-up within cities or that enthusiastic policymakers and professionals may be willing to introduce. We must know the context. “Best practices” are not simply gems that can be taken from one place to the other and retain their value. This is, first of all, because basic conditions to make these innovations work are not in place. Second, the way innovative ideas are implemented may vary from one place to the other. They are adapted and transformed, a point which will show up again in the analysis.

That relates, for instance, to characteristics of the political-administrative system that determine which aspects of generic reforms are accepted and implemented - and how. For example, differences in administrative culture will encourage national or local governments to focus on one type of reform, whereas for another it is of relatively little interest. Instead of an automatic process of implementation, the realization of a particular reform will differ depending on the internal attributes of the system into which it is imported. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2006) name five institutional variables that affect the shape of innovations in public management: state structure (e.g., federal or unitary), the nature of executive government at the central level (e.g., majoritarian or consensus-based), relationships between political executives and civil servants (e.g., politicized or not), administrative culture (e.g., *Rechtsstaat* or public interest oriented) and the sources of policy advice (e.g., civil servants, consultants, and/or academics).

The literature on policy diffusion has examined how policies have diffused within such institutional conditions. For instance, it has been used to explain the diffusion of monetary policy across member states of the European Union, each with our formal structures and administrative cultures (Radaelli, 2000). The literature has systematically analysed a number of key aspects that are at play in policy transfer (see Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), which will also come back in the empirical analysis in this paper. They include:

- Motives for diffusion, e.g. problem-solving, political gain.
- What is diffused, e.g. objectives, contents, concepts, structures, instruments.
- The degree to which something is diffused, ranging from straight copying to light inspiration, with various hybrid variations in between.

The literature has also identified a number of obstacles to diffusion. Generally, the more complex the innovation (in terms of goals, assumed causalities, effects) is, the harder it is to take from one place to another. The more resilient the context where it is to be transferred to (e.g. because of dominant discourse or top-heavy regulation), the less likely it is to succeed. The lower the capacity and resources available, likewise. Over time, this type of analysis has become more refined. While early work on policy transfer was primarily concerned with the process of diffusion and on voluntary adoption of reforms or innovations, there is now also more attention for

content. Indeed, this is essential when discussing the diffusion of innovations or reforms which carry a strong value-laden content (which is usually the case in public administration). Authors like Fischer have argued that, exactly because diffusion inherently implies the transfer of values, it is a tool in power struggles between different coalitions.

In that respect, it is of course interesting to consider what the diffusion of innovations could lead to. Much literature on social innovation sees it as a means to change the balance of power by puncturing dominant ideologies and change. Yet it is conceivable that diffusion of such an innovation leads to convergence and the emergence of a new dominant model. Particularly noteworthy in such a discussion is the classic work of DiMaggio and Powell on institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). They argued that in each organisational community there are a few true innovators who have the desire and the capacity to improve their performance by coming up with innovations. Other organisations will copy the ideas of these innovators, rather than innovate themselves. Particular innovations will thus gradually spread throughout the field. The aggregate effect of change will be diminished diversity, if not outright homogeneity, in the community that shares the innovations.

In the analysis, I will refer to key concepts from institutionalist literature to relate the empirical findings to known mechanisms of diffusion and to indicate how the diffusion of social innovations compares to policy diffusion more generally.

4. Methodology

The findings of this paper derive from the research project WILCO ('Welfare Innovations at the Local Level in Favour of Cohesion', 2010-2013). The project is funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme and is coordinated by Radboud University Nijmegen. Its objectives were twofold:

- a. To chart patterns of social inequality and exclusion in European cities.
- b. To identify (socially) innovative practices in European cities. It is on the second objective that this paper focuses.

The first part of the project consisted of mapping the context of social innovations at the local level.

Institutional comparison

National welfare systems vary strongly and it is necessary to clarify this historical background against which our analysis of the macro, meso and micro levels within cities will be set. We described the historical-institutional background on the basis of two dimensions, the structure of the overall welfare state and the degree of centralisation and the position of 'the local' in shaping welfare. For this purpose, we made an inventory of variables that must be regarded as formal pre-conditions for local welfare policies and initiatives. These variables will include, at least, key regulations, financial provisions, contractual arrangements and entitlements. Because at this concrete level there were many changes in key variables (e.g. in financial and regulatory conditions), we set a time frame covering the last 10 years. The variables were specified for three policy fields central to the project: child care, employment and housing.

First, a literature review was conducted. Then, to be sure our information is up-to-date, there were 6 interviews per country (2 in each of the three policy fields, with public officials and professionals), 60 overall.

Examining the social context of innovations

After we had mapped these national backgrounds to social innovation, we moved to the local level. We chose twenty European cities (two per country) on which we will focus our remaining research. This was of course an important choice and one on which we spent considerable time. The chosen cities were: Münster and Berlin Friedrichshain – Kreuzberg (DE); Zagreb and Varazdin (HR); Amsterdam and Nijmegen (NL); Barcelona and Pamplona (ES); Milan and Brescia (IT); Stockholm and Malmö (SE); Birmingham and Medway area (UK); Warsaw and Plock (PL); Lille and Nantes (FR); Bern and Genève (CH).

For the twenty chosen cities, we gathered data about social inequality and exclusion in the local labour market, housing market and child care facilities, as well as more general data on patterns of social cohesion. Specifically, we identified the relative position of age, gender and migrant groups with respect to general patterns of social inequality and exclusion.

Data collection consisted of two parts. The first was an analysis of the Eurostat Database Urban Audit, that includes data for more than 200 European cities, constituted the background for our comparative analysis. The following aspects were analysed: the structure of the labour market (employment by sector, activity rate by gender and age, unemployment rate by gender and age); the demographic structure (changes in the population over the last ten years, the structure of the population by age, proportion of immigrants on the overall population, old age dependency ratio), the inequality structure (gaps in the unemployment rates between centre and periphery, inequalities in the education level of the population, gender gaps in the activity rate and employment). The second part consisted of 360 intensive interviews, 36 in each country (6 interviews for each group mentioned above in each city). The analysis was aimed at describing the living conditions of these people experiencing difficult situations and at identifying the strategies they adopt in order to deal with these situations. Special attention was paid to the factors preventing these people from getting social benefits and support from public, private or non-profit services.

Examining social innovations in European cities

Having identified the context of innovations in local welfare in the first part of the project, the project turned to the innovations themselves. In order to do so, a distinction was made between the core ideas behind local welfare and the concrete approaches and instruments through which local welfare is implemented.

The first part of the analysis focused on discourses about social inequality and social cohesion in the three policy fields mentioned above, revealing the core ideas that drive innovations in local welfare. The key methods used were:

- An analysis of documentation, including policy documents produced by the stakeholders in the chosen policy fields; parliamentary protocols produced at

the local level discussing choices taken in the policy fields; newspapers articles produced in the local press concerning the policy fields.

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with stakeholders both within the analysed fields and at the level of general policy, with policymakers, civil servants, representatives of civil society organisations and representatives of our three chosen groups. In total, we carried out about 12 interviews per policy field per country, 360 interviews overall.
- To involve stakeholders in the progress of the research, focus groups were organised in each city to invite policymakers, civil servants, representatives of civil society organisations and representatives of the three groups of interest.

In addition to discourses, we describes instruments and approaches that are used to fight against social inequality and stimulate social cohesion. By virtue of the knowledge accumulated in previous phases of the research, we could assess how instruments and approaches were innovative in their context and whether they would be so in another context.

In total, we gathered information about 81 social innovations. This was done primarily through an additional 180 interviews.

The analysis will here focus on the last part of the research, which is nearing completion at the time of writing. The findings are preliminary and still remain to be analysed fully. Therefore this is only a first impression of the findings., which must be read with caution at this point.

5. At the sender's end: the process of diffusion

To structure the analysis, I will use the metaphor of a message sent from one person to another. It is useful metaphor to work with, not because it is accurate, but because it is familiar and therefore a good handhold for structuring the analysis of an opaque process. Many diffusion strategies are informed by this basic view of how the communication of ideas works. What I will show in the next two paragraphs is that, in the case of social innovation, it is misleading.

The (un)willing sender

As a starting-point, one would often take it for granted that the person who sends a message wants to send that message. In other words, we would assume that the innovator has an interest in getting a message across. That makes perfect sense in a market context, where diffusion often comes with profits. But this is usually not the case for social innovations, which often tend to be generated by actors who have no direct interest in profits. A detailed look at the cases shows that these are often groups of people or organisation who took action in the face of a pressing local need: children went hungry, women were abused, men wandered the streets aimlessly. They have devoted great energy to get their initiative off the ground, scraping together resources and building on local knowledge (comp. Scott, 1998). Their original interest was not to 'sell' their innovation in another country.

This again points to the essential difference with other types of innovations. Apple designed iPads not primarily for the local Californian market, but in the hope of selling them in other places as well. In fact, they would not have done so if they had not been confident that they could sell them in a great many places. By contrast, many social innovations tend to have no market value and there is no financial incentive to spread them. This does not mean that there are no incentives at all: social status and - may one say it ? – idealism can go a long way. Nevertheless, many of the original innovators have no basic interest in diffusion.

The diffusion strategy and intermediaries

Earlier work has shown that the effectiveness of a process of diffusion depends, not surprisingly, on the nature of the diffusion strategy that the original innovator or intermediaries is important for determining the nature of the diffusion process (Bekkers & Korteland, 2007), including the availability of resources, the codification of tacit knowledge during the innovation process itself and the nature of the communication.

However, the more relevant finding for public administration research concerns the role of intermediaries. More so than for other types of innovations, the diffusion of social innovations requires intermediary agents, who kick-start the process of diffusion. Given that the innovators often lack the willingness or resources to engage in diffusion, it often falls to other actors to take this upon them. The empirical material shows that this can be governments, businesses, social enterprises or professional groups. In Poland, for instance, it was interesting to see the important role of lawyers. In dealing with a legalistic administrative culture, they were the right people to make the translation between bottom-up initiatives and government officials. If governments take up this intermediary role themselves, then of course this has consequences for how they relate to civil society and active citizens. We are currently researching for patterns between types of governments and their role in relation to innovation.

6. At the receiving end: the process of adoption

And then others adopt the innovation and all its beneficial effects with it. Or perhaps not? Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that, because the process of adoption is at least as complex as that of ‘sending’ an innovation. In fact, it is here that social innovation is the most distinctive.

Where we lose the metaphor: the diffuse nature of diffusion

This is where the sender-receiver metaphor crashes completely. Because however bad the connection, however confusing the conference call, one usually knows who is at the other end of the line. Not so for diffusion, because the process is terribly hard to trace. Many may be talking about an innovation, but few know from whom it originated. It was somehow ‘in the air’. Just as the innovators may not be very much interested in becoming known as innovators, the adopters are often not much interested in who the innovators are. Here again it must be remembered that social innovation is often essentially local in focus, at both ends.

Indeed, cases where a clear origin was pinpointed may be deceptive, for several reasons. To begin with, these are usually national examples, by virtue of familiarity and language. Furthermore, the fact that respondents attribute an innovation to a particular project or locality does not mean that it was necessarily the only or even the original source of an idea. While certain projects can be exemplary, several similar schemes are often pioneered elsewhere, with little exchange between them. The most probable explanation for such parallel developments is that there are often similar economic and social conditions underneath these schemes. That one particular scheme becomes emblematic of the trend does not necessarily mean it is the source of it. Also, the same label may cover different purposes and meanings. The same applies to a widespread notion like “activation” in employment policies. It can related mainly to a strengthening of a sense of duties and commitment to goals set by the administration; but it may as well mean strengthening capacities for individual and joint action, activating not only individual competence but as well sources of support and solidarity.

In view of this, there is some ambivalence about innovations that have recently been introduced in local welfare. On the one hand, such items represent new elements that are real. On the other hand, their ultimate meaning only shows when taking into account the discursive framework in which they are used and applied.

Adoption as bricolage

If one sends a message, one is usually concerned that it arrives as one wrote it. It would be intolerable if someone took it and rephrased it in her or his own words. Yet this is exactly what must happen in a successful process of diffusion. It is rare for a certain project or approach to be copied from one place to another unchanged. If so, this usually concerns simple schemes that can be implemented more or less independently from regulation or policy and which require only limited collaboration between local actors. An example are the ‘neighbourhood mothers’, a Dutch scheme in which migrant women were used as intermediaries to counsel other migrant women (a notoriously difficult group for authorities to reach) on issues such as social security, healthy lifestyles and parenting. Dealing with similar constituencies and relying little regulatory support, it was easy to spread around.

As things get more complicated, however, this no longer works. Approaches or projects will in some way need to be adapted to the context into which they are adopted. For instance, what is originally a project to keep young people socially active may elsewhere be ‘sold’ under the discourse of unemployment or crime prevention. The shape of a collaborative arrangement may have to be altered, for example, because responsibilities for a certain policy area are distributed differently over governments at different levels, or because services are provided privately in the country and publicly in the other. The innovation will need to be re-shaped. This adaptation, to refer back to the policy transfer literature, may concern the content of a scheme, but also the underlying regulation, its instruments or its discourse. Innovations are therefore usually hybrids of different ideas and inspirations. Whether or not they are explicitly inspired by examples from elsewhere, they are formed through a process of *bricolage* (a term from the famous anthropologist Lévi-Strauss) that constructs a new entity out of (mostly) old pieces. Social innovations, like the conventions or regimes they run counter to, are patchworks and may or may not become institutionalised.

The (un)willing receiver

Given that such a process of reconstruction and translation must take place, it requires new ways of collaboration, for example, between governments and citizens, and new ways of thinking. The empirical material shows that this process does not start when an innovation is introduced, but usually well before that. Rather, it is the other way round: an innovation is adopted when minds are ripe. A good idea is not convincing in itself – it comes when people are open to it.

What this means is that adopting an innovation from elsewhere is, from the perspective of the adopting parties, not fundamentally different from inventing one. After all, it requires similar breakthroughs in institutional routines, whether of content, collaboration, or other aspects of working. Innovation is an activity that by its nature demands more effort than following routines. Actors will therefore, according to institutional theory, usually innovate only when they have a strong incentive. In many organisational studies, this sense of urgency is created by the market incentive.

In the case of social innovation, it can be pressing social need, e.g. high levels of unemployment or crime.

Theoretically, it means that the analysis of diffusion must start before the actual adoption of an innovation. Research on diffusion tends to focus on the process after the adoption, and then especially at successful cases of adoption. Methodologically, one should ideally also examine failed cases or cases where an innovation could have been known, but never came into consideration. The underlying question is what extent the innovative capacity is reflected in what is adopted (a specific approach to solving a problem) or rather in the groundwork that is done before the adoption (getting the right people together, getting minds ready for new options, and so forth). This is very relevant to public administration reform because it means that simply finding the right kinds of policy approaches or instruments is in itself not enough.

7. Conclusion: in what the diffusion of social innovations is distinctive

This paper examined how innovations spread from one place to another, based on the findings of a large European research project. Specifically, it discussed so-called social innovations, which involve not only a new approach to a problem, but also a change in underlying social relationships. For instance, it may involve local governments working with non-profit organisations to realise a social ambition, or give a leading role to citizen groups. This type of innovation therefore links clearly to discussions about new types of governance (e.g. Osborne's New Public Governance) that assume a change in governments relate to other actors in society.

All innovations in the context of public administration are to some extent context-dependent, but social innovations even more so. Exactly because they evolve within social relationships, and rely upon the collaboration of various different actors, they are relatively hard to transplant from one context to the other. Yet if we wish to learn from one another and not reinvent the wheel, that is exactly what we must do. If it is possible, for example, to copy successful reforms in the approach to youth unemployment from one country to another, then that would help to make labour

market policy more successful. The relevance of this in the context of public administration is clear.

In the paper, I have addressed how such a process of transferring a social innovation to other potential users works. Although it is tempting to regard this as communicating a message from one actor to another, this is too simple a metaphor. The type of innovations we are here discussing are very locally oriented. Those who invented a new approach are often not interested in whether it is used elsewhere. If it is adopted, it must be adapted to local circumstances; and it takes a transformative process prior to adoption to make this possible. All this may prevent good alternatives to the status quo from ever gaining wider recognition.

In the case of social innovations, there is often no market incentive to diffuse innovations. In such a context, the role of governments as intermediary organisations is an important one. They cannot force innovations to emerge, but they can encourage their wider use. In order to do so effectively, a sound understanding of how a process of diffusion works is essential. Based on a deeper analysis of the WILCO project's research findings, we hope to come to clear recommendations as to how governments can best be involved.

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