

Policy support for social innovations: what do policy makers need to consider?

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Why should a policy maker or public administration official even start thinking about supporting social innovations? This question stood central in the SI-DRIVE work package on policy and foresight. At first sight, this question seems easy to answer. If citizens are helping the social good, and if they in their actions help to reduce the impact of public policy on our day-to-day lives, why should not a policy maker not support social innovations? A society in which the citizens take their responsibility and support each other to overcome the major challenges we are confronted with, seems a very attractive society. Social innovations that do just that help to achieve the social change many researchers and policy watchers are hoping for.

The question is clear and easy, the answer is somewhat more complicated than just formulated. Our analysis in the project has shown that social innovators are aiming for the social good indeed, but that their actions rarely achieve the upscaling one would wish for. Our current understanding is that citizens generate an enormous amount of energy to change society, but society remains very much as it is. The challenges remain the challenges. Policy makers should not just stand by when thinking about social innovation. If policy makers take social innovations seriously, then a serious support policy needs to be developed. And this was the core of our work package.

To develop recommendations for policy makers, we conducted a lot of research steps. These steps were focused at delayering the factors that surround effective support to social innovations. The factors that play an enormous role for effective support are the following:

1. The biased relationship between policy makers and social innovations.
2. The type of policy intervention and the impact of the democratic process.
3. The relationship between the social innovators and the elites in the policy fields we are looking at.
4. The policy systems in which social innovations are operating in.

First, we need to understand that the relationship between policy making and social innovation will never be a neutral one. Designing a (policy) support needs to consider that policy makers remain at a distance of the social innovations, if the risk of just instrumentalising social innovation is to be avoided. But at the same time, such policies should allow for changing support over time. Support systems should allow for such change.

Second, policy support for social innovation can take on many forms, depending on the democratic results chosen and the mode of governance preferred. Many solutions are possible.

Third, the relationship between social innovations and the dominant elites in a policy field varies according to the policy fields. In the policy fields environment and climate change, mobility and transport, and energy, for example, market players are dominant actors. Market players protect their current power on innovations, on relationships with customers and on the major infrastructures. Social innovators are constantly struggling to survive the pressures from these dominant elites when upscaling their social innovations. In the other policy fields (health and social care, employment, poverty reduction and sustainable development, education and lifelong learning), we see social innovations connected to important and direct social needs. Citizens are patients, students and clients, not so much customers. These policy areas are important for policy makers because they are a direct connection to the citizen as a voter. Policy makers remain much more connected to actions from the dominant institutions in these fields: policy is far from neutral. The 'state' is very much the main spokesperson for the institutions in discussions with the social innovations. Social innovations are very much subjected to the rules of the dominant institutions. For example, in the health and social care, social innovations are very much subjected to what the professionals (e.g., doctors) think is acceptable. Most social innovations in this policy field are run by leaders coming from the dominant institutions.

Fourth, in different global policy contexts, the relationship between policy makers and social innovations is very different. As world citizens, we live in very different policy contexts. In Western-European countries, we see policy makers and public administrations as quite neutral actors. These actors focus on what the voters say, but there is quite some respect for minorities. In these countries, we are used to seeing social innovations not trying to get connected to one or the other political party. Social innovations wishing to survive, aim for a broad network approach including policy as just one stakeholder. But in other parts of the world, policy makers operate quite differently. In the Eastern-European countries, policy makers still struggle with the legacies of the past. Policy makers in these countries also have to deal with very limiting funds. Social innovations are confronted with explicit

corruption. Outside of Europe, some countries operate with multi-party systems which offer more opportunities for social innovations to find support. In other countries, major parties are dominating the whole policy process. In such countries, social innovations are much more seen as an instrument of the ruling party. Social innovations that do not want to follow the main elite have a hard time surviving. In developing recommendations, we need to consider these policy contexts. We could have distinguished more policy contexts than that, but in our discussions among the 25 country partners, this seemed a workable situation.

Social innovations are part of our societies. Social change can be achieved, but it will be different according to the context factors we have described.

What does this mean for our recommendations to policy makers and other stakeholders in society? In fact, we think that there are ten points that policy makers should consider. These recommendations deal with three major lines:

- the relationship between social innovators and public policy makers;
- the different types of social innovations that policy makers are confronted with in phase of development and focus on market or public value;
- and at the type of resources policy makers should use in supporting social innovation.

In Western-European countries, social innovations need to develop contacts with a broad set of actors. The mirror of this situation is that policy makers are only one of the actors to support social innovations. More governance approaches are needed for policy makers. In Eastern-European countries, social innovations are distrustful about possible policy support. These social innovations are using technologies to develop their upscaling. These social innovations are inspired by what is happening in Western-Europe, but the actors are looking for solutions in which they do not need direct support from their policy makers. In policy systems in which one party is dominating all issues, social innovations are very much dependent on what these dominating parties want. The freedom to choose is quite limited. Our recommendations take these elements into account. In more multiparty systems outside of Europe, the main issue is limited funding. The room to support social innovations is very limited. Policy makers have little idea what is needed for social innovations to grow.

If policy system context is such an issue, then it is clear that a supranational institution such as the European Union needs to deploy a very thought through approach towards social innovations. Current EU policy is in support of social innovation, but lacks the competencies and the will for funding to move this agenda forcefully forward. The content of this support needs however more clarity. EU policy makers need to have good standing with national policy makers. The conclusion is that the EU can help in delivering more resources, but not only that. It is equally important to deliver better concepts, information and examples of social innovations. It should be clear that there are many barriers for social innovation, so elimination of these barriers for social innovations (for example regulations) is needed. Also, in support of social innovation, there should be ecosystems (and public-private partnerships, like Factories of the Future projects) to support in a broad way social innovations. The EU should offer impact assessments and evidence development. This should be done together with the national governments.

Our starting question was simple, our answer is more 'it depends'. Social innovations are an important means for social change. More support from policy makers is needed, but not any support is fruitful. Our recommendations take the policy context into account. Social change is thus far from a clear outcome.