SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands is catching up with social innovation. In the former century combating social problems was a task of public organisations and government, largely carried out top down. Today the responsibility to tackle social issues is partly shifting to public-private partnerships, social enterprises and communities.

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SOCIAL INNOVATION: A DYNAMIC CONCEPT

Social innovation has developed in a particular way in the Netherlands. During the 1980s and 1990s a policy driven approach dominated the combat of social problems in Dutch cities regarding social exclusion, housing, poverty, education and employment which was called 'social renovation' (sociale vernieuwing) [1]. Whilst the social renovation policy in those times was based on a rather elaborated welfare state model and carried out by public organisations, today's social innovation presents another picture. Economic and technological changes propelled more market driven and bottom-up initiatives, limiting the role of public bodies. Social innovation in its current definition actually supports innovation in the economy.

Consequently, social innovation in the period 2001 - 2012 in the Dutch context strongly focussed on how new ways of organising, employment and industrial relations, deploying human talents, and enhancing labour productivity could support organisational performance and the implementation of new technologies. Then labelled social innovation, the (English) term today used for these practices is workplace innovation. Its social element is to take employee engagement and participation as a point of departure and to strive for a good quality of work [2]. A concrete result was the foundation of the Netherlands Centre for Social Innovation (where 'social' must be read as 'workplace') and, more recently, the development of sectoral policies to combine technological innovation with workplace innovation (so called 'top sector policy' [topsectorenbeleid]).

Following what other countries started with earlier, since 2010 social innovation initiatives and policies from the perspective of the broader European definition of social innovation have been developing in the Netherlands. Thus far these initiatives included processes and activities which were (only) covered by other concepts such as active democracy, citizens' initiatives, social enterprises and social infrastructure. Still to this day (2017), however, social innovation is neither embedded comprehensively in policies on innovation and knowledge, nor in the creation of public value in combination with market failure. One example is that it is not possible for MyWheels – car sharing – to acquire an official registration as 'social innovation' in The Netherlands, opposed to other countries such as the UK. Perhaps some forms of car sharing are just a commercial innovation and not a social innovation.

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Despite the emergence of many examples of activities and initiatives that we today would label as social innovation, the Dutch government is just starting to develop strategies to guide and encourage these initiatives, by creating the infrastructure and funding opportunities needed to further boost social innovation.

MANIFESTATIONS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Dutch advisory council for Science and Technology mapped social innovation in the Netherlands and identified four forms of manifestation of social innovation [3]:

1. Individuals or organisations directed at specific social goals. These are initiatives like self-managing cooperations aiming for goals such as small scale energy production, elderly care, collective disability insurance, local currency

Example of urban gardening in Rotterdam (photo: Peter Oeij)

systems for local trade, and ensuring the public service of a local town centre. Social enterprises sometimes emerge from these initiatives.

2. Innovative virtual networks/platforms directed at (non-specific) social goals. The goals are less specific compared to their form, which is all the more innovative. Examples are guerrilla gardening (in city areas) and transition towns (sustainable and social townships). This form uses online platforms to exchange knowledge and design collective action.

3. Consortia or alliances directed at specific social goals. These are partnerships, often including public organisations and public means to cooperate regarding a social goal. Also ecosystems of private partners can be part of these alliances, such as the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition, in which multinationals strive for sustainability; or the Alliance Citizenship, in which schools and scientists develop what the role of citizenship can look like for the educational system. Workplace innovation is regarded as exemplary for this manifestation form as well.

4. Consortia or alliances directed at (non-specific) social goals. These are organisations or networks whose aim is to experiment with social innovation and innovative processes for diverse goals. Examples are social labs, living labs, field labs and impact hubs, which function as incubators. Such

Car sharing

consortia bring designers, scientists and practitioners together to develop prototypes and pilots for various social issues, ranging from ethics, big data, bioscience, to safety. Academic workplaces, for example, are networks of practitioners, researchers, policy makers and educators that carry out research for practice. They gather questions from the public and return the knowledge to them after the research has been carried out.

Unfortunately no quantitative overviews of social innovation in the Netherlands are available that inform on the empirical incidence of social innovation or that present a systematic analysis or evaluation of the field [3].

GOVERNMENTAL ACTIVITIES

Thus far governmental interference seems to have stressed only workplace innovation and the 'do-democracy'. Workplace innovation has been stimulated via the European Social Fund which has been subsidizing projects in relation to human resources, labour relations, labour productivity and social dialogue, all under the banner of workplace innovation. Do-democracy refers to citizen participation in solving social problems and new forms of governance, in which public bodies step back or engage in partnerships with citizens and their representing organisations. The role of the government is to eliminate regulatory obstacles, ensure facilities and room for experiment, and guarantee representativeness and equality.

Inspired by the Obama-administration some municipalities started to experiment with public-private partnerships which fund effective social services through a performance-based contract, so called social impact bonds. This stimulated social entrepreneurship initiatives to build business cases around social issues [4]. Social Impact Factory, for example, is a platform of the City of Utrecht that helps to 'match' entrepreneurs with 'social return' objectives [5]. It was inspired by other actions developed by the Cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. A more general policy is that municipalities are requesting from entrepreneurs to spend 5 % of their commission on 'social return' when the amount

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contracted out by the municipality exceeds € 100.000. Social return can be effectuated by creating jobs or by offering support or knowledge regarding local initiatives or social enterprises. This urged the central government to stimulate social entrepreneurship [4].

Compared to European and non-European frontrunners in social innovation, the Netherlands have just started their strategy of stimulation, namely building up an infrastructure and developing modes of financing [3].

MORE COHERENCE IN THE FUTURE?

There are many social initiatives, experiments, websites, innovators, communities, designers and practitioners active in society dealing with social innovative solutions to combat social issues. These activities can be found in health care, urban gardening, education, social design, sustainable energy production and energy saving, digital social innovation, new governance, active citizenship, innovative workplaces, corporate social responsibility, sustainable living and housing, and all kinds of 'labs'. These initiatives can address diverse social and economic problems and thus decrease the 'burden' for governments in times where responsibilities seem to shift to civic society, assuming – too easily perhaps – that their members become more 'resilient'. Yet, "A key challenge for social innovation in the Netherlands is how this relatively active but dispersed movement can join forces, gain more influence and broaden the concept of social innovation towards innovation for the social." [2].

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