

# LINKING PRACTICE FIELDS OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IN THE DOMAIN OF EMPLOYMENT

Social innovations in Employment are scattered. If social innovations want to achieve sustainable, social changes, they require integration to create more coherent 'social innovation of employment'.

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## SCATTERED FIELD OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN EMPLOYMENT

Reducing unemployment is the major social change goal in Employment. Labour market institutions regulate unemployment. Rules and regulations guide employers to create jobs. Despite these institutions and regulations, unemployment remains high. Specific labour market target groups have great difficulty to acquire paid work or meaningful (unpaid) labour market experiences, e.g., elderly workers, migrants, handicapped people, women and young persons. Due to expenditure cuttings, labour market

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institutions have scaled back their support efforts, as for instance schooling and training, or wage subsidies for employers. Room has been created for social innovation initiatives and even though the ambitions of these initiatives are high, in practice they remain scattered and isolated. If these social innovations are to achieve social changes, i.e., sustainable employment, they require integration.

The global mapping of social innovation of Employment resulted in 136 identified cases [1]. Analysing all cases lead to three practice fields, namely *youth unemployment* (& other vulnerable groups), *social entrepreneurship* (& self-creating opportunities), and *workplace innovation* (& working conditions). The Policy Brief [2], which reports about the case study research (based on a selection of ten out of these 136 cases), revealed that *youth employment* is strongly related to

traditional policy making and employment organisations that already were in place before the term social innovation was getting into vogue. Social innovation initiatives face an uphill battle. They seem hardly able to contest the role and responsibility of public policy and the state. The initiatives are limited in nature. Initiators, such as foundations and individuals, for example, organize training and opportunities for target groups to acquire job experience. They are often funded by local or international programmes, however, their sustainability and upscaling is limited once this funding or program support ends.

*Social entrepreneurship* is represented by individuals or organisations which use a profit driven initiative to combat a social issue, i.e. by helping others in creating jobs or training persons to enhance their competencies. These initiatives are sustainable for as long as the business case of their social innovation is economically viable. In

practice, upscaling is not likely to occur. However, social entrepreneurship and self-creating opportunities seem to become a new normal for participants: platforms and the Internet offer a low threshold for start-ups. Apart from funding start-ups and providing expertise and training for entrepreneurs, public policy plays a limited role.

*Workplace innovation* and working conditions differ from the earlier two practice fields, and remain mostly an affair at the level of organisations, of employers and employees. Therefore, it is rarely an issue for employment policymakers and employment organisations. Workplace innovation is initiated by organisations in order to improve their performance and their job quality; engagement and involvement of employees is crucial for success. Improving working conditions is a related topic, often driven by legal obligations to at least guarantee minimum levels of proper working environments.

Sustainability of work, in the case of workplace innovation, is rather positive because employees, and often unions or work councils, participate in their implementation. Scaling is however not in the interest of individual organisations and competition between organisations can be a barrier for cooperation.

Social innovation in Employment has a paradoxical relation with public bodies. The analysis of the practice fields youth employment and social entrepreneurship suggests a shifting responsibility of social security tasks from public policy to private and civilian initiatives; contrary to these two practice fields, the initiative for workplace innovation came from work organisations and not public bodies. At the same time, social innovations cannot escape public intervention. Analysis at a higher

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level, the *comparative analysis* of the 136 cases [1], reveals a dominant role for public bodies. It appears that people (‘individuals, networks and groups’) are the main driver to lift off social innovation initiatives. But in order to sustain and scale up, these initiatives lack institutions and a solid eco-system, as youth employment remains entangled in

‘old institutions’, social entrepreneurship is mainly driven by charismatic go-getters, and workplace innovation solutions are kept hidden behind company walls for the sake of market competition.

### SOCIAL INNOVATION AND POLICY: HOW TO INTEGRATE THE PRACTICE FIELDS TO TRIGGER SOCIAL CHANGE?

If sustainable employment is the main social change goal, then support from policy is necessary to integrate the isolated initiatives. While unemployment figures dropped significantly since the economic recovery after 2015, the employment chances for vulnerable groups are still precarious, such as the persistent high youth unemployment

in Southern and Eastern Europe. Apart from ‘traditional’ employment issues, new challenges emerge on European labour markets as a consequence of new technologies, impacting economies and jobs. Whilst new technologies offer opportunities for jobs, e.g. in the IT branch, there is also a threat that digitisation, robotics and automation

may eliminate jobs of lower and middle skilled employees. The challenge for social innovation is not only to formulate answers against the loss of the quantity of jobs, but also to respond to the loss of the quality of jobs, as technological innovation result in ‘digital Taylorisation’ of jobs.

Workplace innovation measures/ activities at organisational level ...	... affecting social innovation at societal level will enable ...
- design autonomy and learning opportunities into the work of teams and jobs, and organise for more self-managing behaviour	- entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial behaviour good for business and employability; reduces employment risks
- open and transparent and non-ambiguous communication	- feeling heard, experiencing trust and stimulate non-defensive dialogue; results in better problem solving
- time, space and resources for learning and experimentation	- stimulates creating ideas and accepting to make mistakes; results in innovative behaviour
- supportive leadership and genuine care for others	- the reduction of power play and conflict, and result in trust and respect
- a certain level of job security, and honest rewarding/fair pay	- a sense of belonging and enhance social cohesion and better inter-relationships
- constructive labour relations, employment relations and industrial relations	- a business orientation based on common goals and cooperation

Integration is key to overcome the disparate nature of social innovations in Employment. The integration of the three practice fields into one coherent chain of 'social innovation of employment' requires the alignment of labour market and education activities of governmental bodies, training and experience-building goals of social entrepreneurs, and the human resources management activities of employers that are targeting employee engagement (i.e. workplace innovation). Furthermore, the separate social innovation initiatives must be connected through knowledge sharing and linking stakeholders. The needed commonality regards the three fields is in the first place to acknowledge more prominent roles for job seekers, trainees/interns and employees, which point to the importance of bottom up governance approaches. This means that target groups are provided a say in their deployment. In the second place, actors should recognize that there is a chain, between labour market entrance, improving the employability of labour market participants, and internal and external labour mobility in companies and organisations: the appropriate terminology is lifelong employability or lifelong careers. Thinking in chains would for example link social innovation with workplace innovation ('social innovation in the workplace'), as in the table [3].

## CONCLUSION

Overall, we observe that social innovation initiatives remain unconnected to create critical mass for sustainable change in employment. To enhance sustainable employment for target groups, policy makers need to conceptualize an integrative view on social innovation in employment including all stakeholders. To overcome isolation and stimulate upscaling such an integrative approach could align social innovation initiatives with existing activities and policies in the domain of employment, human resources, and training and education, at the level of work organisations, labour market institutions as well as individuals and their communities.

## REFERENCES

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