



# Innovation in Social Work and its Impact on Social Management

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## Abstract

This article shows the diversity of drivers for social services, including demographic change, changing social roles, consequences of lifestyles, changed attitudes and expectations, progress in the field of science and technology, new forms of management and new organizational forms as well as changes in social politics. At the same time, innovations in social services have significant effects on different levels: users, quality, organizations, cooperation, financing, sustainability, social politics and values. On the basis of the results of a two-year study seven innovation trends observed in social services all over Europe will be presented and their impact on social management will be explained in this article. It becomes clear that innovation in social services is a complex process, in which business concepts are transferred and adapted to social-economic conditions, which results in the constant re-negotiation of the underlying conditions and the involvement of external actors.



## INTRODUCTION

Which are the consequences for management processes resulting from the challenge to launch, organize and monitor innovations? The answer for this question gets to the heart of an innovation research which claims to be relevant for the future design of social services. The answer is about recognizing challenges and pressure for change, identifying future trends and focusing on the mechanisms that allow the implementation of trends in new or improved services. The way to find the answer will be outlined in this article: First, innovation will be defined as an answer to societal challenges, and then essential trends of innovation will be outlined on the basis of empirically reliable findings. Finally, important conditions for the implementation of innovation in social management will be shown.

## INNOVATION AS RESPONSE TO SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Social work is in a profound transformation process. It is connected with further change processes, such as demographic, technological or social change. These lead to new needs as well as to rising costs that result in new forms of services, which are understood as response to new needs or as solutions for current problems. Important drivers for innovation in the field of social services are (Hawker et al 2012):

- Demographic change: there is an increased number of people living longer into old age, with a particular increase in the numbers of people aged over 80. This development will lead to an increase in care and medical interventions. This is alongside a reduction in the numbers of people at working age, due to a declining birth rate, which leads to concerns about levels of informal care for older people and arises questions about the ability to meet these increasing care demands from declining tax income bases.
- Changing social roles: The changes are within family structures. Families are getting smaller or the family members live far apart from each other. The number of single households, especially of older people, is increasing, as well as the number of single parent families, which are facing the challenge of proper 'socialization' of their children. There are also changes in generational relations due to longer life expectancy. Changing gender roles lead to rising female employment rates.
- Consequences of changing lifestyles: There is a growth in lifestyle related conditions arising from unhealthy behaviors, such as poor diet or smoking, alcohol consumption



and drugs, but also resulting from stress (burn-out). At the same time, progress in medical research and preventive health care lead to a rising life expectancy which results in a growing need for care services.

- Changed attitudes and expectations: Citizens are expecting a better quality of life, personal autonomy and self-determination have become more and more important over the past years. Consequently, patients wish to be more involved in decisions about their health and their health care options. Persons with disabilities no longer want to be defined by their disability, but wish to be accepted as full members of society, who are allowed to shape their lives on their own.
- Progress in the field of science and technology: The growth in internet and web-based technology is leading to an exponential growth in access to information and new forms of communication. This development does not only change workflows or co-operations between providers of social services and the involvement of users, but it does also change the range of services itself (e.g. tele-health/care solutions to ongoing care needs are becoming more widely available). At the same time, the introduction of technical support systems at home leads to the preservation of independence even in old age.
- Changing management styles and organizational changes: The shifting of provision of services from the public sector into the private sector creates new organizational forms, which react differently to ongoing needs. The involvement of a growing number of actors increased the necessity to introduce new management forms that take account both of individualism and shared expertise and respect at the same time greater involvement of the users.
- Changes in social politics: Welfare organizations are in charge of social policy objectives, while services and costs are being regulated through the introduction of competition in the social sector. At the same time, the available resources are not growing to the same extent as the needs, which results in increased cost pressure in social politics.

Since innovation can be „a product, production process, or technology (much like innovation in general), but it can also be a principle, an idea, a piece of legislation, a social movement, an intervention, or some combination of them” (Phills et al, 2008: 39) the response to social challenges can have the shape of new services (new products or new services), new forms of delivery (new means and processes of service delivery), new forms of governance (new forms of implementing the service delivery and new responsibilities), new forms of resourcing (new forms



of financing, co-financing and redistribution of resources), and new ways of evaluation (new sets of criteria to evaluate the service, e.g. on the basis of effectiveness instead of professional criteria. The criteria of *novelty* is crucial for innovation. This can mean an evolutionary improvement or a total restart. The dimension ‚new for whom‘ also has to be respected. A novelty can be new and better for one organization, but does not necessarily mean an improvement for other actors. This leads to a second criteria for innovation: *quality*. Innovation has to be connected to an improved service: “In public services ... innovation is justifiable only where it increases public value in the quality, efficiency or fitness for purpose of governance or service“ (Hartley, 2005: 30). The improvement of the quality needs to be completed with the aspect of contextual fit, which ensures the fitness in the respective frame of the service provision. The aspect of sustainability, which entails a wide-reaching implementation and societal acceptance, also is an important feature of improved quality.

Social services constantly deal with contradicting interests such as the needs and expectations of users, their relation to public authorities, quality expectations, access to financing and the general legal framework of social politics, which is changing quickly. Innovations therefore face the challenge to provide solutions to key problems in totally different contexts (vgl. Eurich/Langer 2014).

The user’s perspective: The users can be involved in developing, designing and evaluating the service delivery and thus contribute to the improved quality and effectiveness of the service which is now better adapted to the user’s needs. Innovation has to correspond to key problems of individualization and personalization of services and it has to improve the user’s possibilities to participate.

The quality perspective: On the one hand, the involvement of users and the closer co-operation of organizations, professionals and relatives lead to new quality standards, including possible new criteria such as easier access to services, availability and affordability. On the other hand, quality and innovation are always connected with the definitional power and the acceptance of quality standards.

The professional’s perspective: The professional’s perspective on innovation opens a wide-reaching discussion which deals with a shortage of skilled professionals, the need for



qualifications and even the use of modern assistance and information technologies. The implementation of information technologies could result in new approaches for social work, in new innovative tools and in new competencies, but also in new means for evaluating professional expertise.

The organizational perspective: The organizational perspective focuses on the “what” and on the “how” of innovation: Social services can satisfy new needs or new solutions are developed for already existing needs. Access to social services can be facilitated. The division between sectors can be softened by the offer of cross-sectoral services (such as art classes for children, which imply jobs for artist and at the same time support mothers who are looking for a job). Changes in the form of collaboration with the user are possible, e.g. in highlighting the aspect of self-help, but new roles and new relations between the providers also can be consequences. There can also be changes regarding the management style within the organisation. The cooperative and the organizational perspective belong together. In this context, pillarization, overspecialization and interface problems become drivers of innovations. Innovative solutions consist in the establishment of networks or social movements, which contribute to changing the concept, the service delivery and the resourcing of social services. Co-operations of actors coming from different sectors can result in changes within the organizational system. The initiatives can be the result of voluntary groups and the collaboration of users, professionals and researchers is likely to become more important.

In the context of scarcity, the resourcing und sustainability perspective indicates the need of a welfare-mix and the release of new resources: We can find new ways to avoid budget restrictions and to acquire new funds, e.g. through the involvement of private investors or foundations. Co-operations between organizations, public authorities and private providers could also be a solution.

In the context of social politics governance and cultural change within service structures represent an enormous challenge. Top-down approaches are barely viable, due to the high autonomy of service companies and the diversity of local authorities. The challenge lies in the establishment of new and often participative forms of governance. The development of new methods and changes in social politics are also possible. The value perspective is closely connected with these considerations. Without participative and cultural development programs,



the development of a common vision and a lot of persuasion, a change of direction is not likely to be successful. The innovative solution can consist in new models of participation in society, public relation activities, cooperative concepts and local development processes. New concepts for social services emerge, such as the new-inclusion-paradigm or the paradigm of active ageing. Diversity, access to services, anti-discrimination and equality can become important topics. Social services reflect the social, economic and political developments and play an important role in the development of new social models in Europe. It is therefore vital to identify key features of social services and innovations that will characterize the nature of future social services.

#### AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY

The European research project Innoserv was carried out between August 2012 and January 2014. Representatives from research, social services and politics were involved in the project, which aimed at identifying current trends in innovation in the field of social services and at finding decisive factors for the emergence of innovation. The project was neither about finding a sample of best practice examples nor about a detailed analysis of the structure of certain organizations with innovative services or about modeling the current provider landscape. The project aimed first of all at identifying user-oriented current trends for innovative (new and improved) products and services. The selection was justified on the basis of a comparative analysis.

The study followed a two-step approach: At the theoretical level current trends and directions in researching social services in the fields of health, education and welfare were examined and the political guidelines for social services were analyzed. At the same time current cross-sector approaches of social services were identified.

During the study more than 750 providers of social services in Europe were contacted and asked about their innovative practices, the nature of the innovation, the form of the innovation, its origins and its effects. By a bottom-up-approach 20 innovative ideas were selected and short visual examples of the chosen projects were produced (cf. Langer 2013) which were uploaded to a web based 'social platform' for continuing and managing a multi-level discussion between users, practitioners, policy-makers and experts on a European level. This procedure ensured that a wide range of stakeholders (who are involved in the provision of social services or who are



dependent from them) took part in the feedback-process and evaluation of the selected projects (cf. Eurich/Strifler 2012).

The research project was working towards four objectives (cf. Langer/Eurich 2014a):

- to present innovative ideas via highly communicative, low-threshold examples (short films) for innovative services, in order to outline a detailed picture of current innovative practices that deal in a new way with challenges in the fields of health, education and welfare.
- to initiate a dialogue about trends in the field of political guidelines in involving different actors (service provider, decision-makers, associations, users, researchers) in a multi-level dialogue. The results were made available for policy-makers, practitioners and users.
- to identify research gaps that need to be further explored within the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy (through the identification of future trends in social services in the fields of health, education and welfare).
- to develop sustainable structures for information in form of a web-based platform on which the results are permanently available.

The results of the Innoserv project allow the identification of innovation trends in the field of social services and, in naming the key characteristics of innovation as ‘novelty’, ‘quality’ and ‘sustainability’, articulate the nature of these trends (Dahl et al. 2014). The term ‘trend’ does not apply to a normative statement, but means an empirically based tendency on a supra-individual level, which is currently accepted as novelty or qualitative improvement.

#### a. Product-oriented trends

*User-centered services and approaches:* User-oriented services focus on the paradigmatic shift towards the user, which aims at an improved balance between supply and user’s needs. The involvement of users in the re-shaping of processes changes the interaction between professionals, users and volunteers and leads to shifting roles and functions of actors, increased cooperation between organizations, policy-makers, users and volunteers. This leads to cross-sector co-operations and new partnerships between organizations and thus integrates the provision of social services in societal structures. This comes with a shift in the definitional power, the overcoming of pillarization and a radical flexibility in the context of service delivery. However, the new forms of



interaction may stimulate conflict between the ethos of professionals, with their potential interest to preserve autonomy and their expert role, and the wishes and needs of users. For the users, on the other hand, increasing autonomy is connected with more self-responsibility.

*New technologies in the social services sector:* Compared to the medical sector, the use of technology is relatively new in the field of education and welfare. However, the challenges of an ageing society require rethinking and alternative solutions. Technology is one possibility to strengthen the effects of social services. A major advantage of information and communication technologies is the facilitated access to relevant health information. These technologies have also positive effects on the organization and administration of services and improve the communication between professional providers. The potential for conflict is especially connected with the question of implementing technologies. Professionals and users are thought to have a risk-avoiding mentality and sometimes appear unwilling to change, which results in reticence when it comes to assistive technologies. Additionally, there are local contexts where information technology is not yet well developed.

#### b. Process-oriented trends

*Innovation in the development of organizations and institutions:* Organizations play an important role when it comes to the creation of innovations. Regardless of the size of the organization, they are constantly adapting to their environment. Since staff and financial resources are especially important for the service delivery, organizations tend to mix resources by combining private funding with volunteers. Different forms of alliances rather than individuals can be identified as agents of change. They can both promote and inhibit innovation. The management level plays an important role when it comes to innovation since it is responsible for creating an innovation-friendly atmosphere. A competitive environment can also result in innovative solutions. However, it has to be stressed that processes of organizational change and their results are difficult to predict and the mix of resources has primarily been tested in short term projects and is therefore not necessarily sustainable.

*Measuring outcomes, quality and challenges of service innovations:* Outcomes of innovation would usually be measured on three different levels: the user level, the provider level and the societal level. Since quality development is one of the key elements of innovation, the question of quality is closely linked with normative aspects. Economic measurement methods are not sufficient, if the improved quality has to be related to different stakeholder groups: Clients, professionals,



politicians, managers do not usually agree on the question what improved quality means. Measuring quality therefore has to be based on different criteria: Quality of life, social environment, access to economic and social activities, free choice, job satisfaction and quality of relationships. The consideration of social services under the aspect of quality is in itself an innovation.

### c. Framework-oriented trends

Governance of innovative services: The conditions for innovation are determined by different organizations, including transnational institutions such as the EU but also national or local institutions. There are new forms of governance of social services, such as networks or partnerships, which can be initiated by public authorities or through bottom-up-approaches. Governance encompasses sub-themes such as marketization (with empowerment of the user), standardization (EU recommendations of best practice examples) und pluralization (wide range of providers and regulation by decentralized networks) as well as pillarization (single purpose organizations and 'islands' of authority) while at the same time there are cross-sector and interdisciplinary approaches. The resulting possible tensions are complex: continuity contrasts innovation, and the wish to preserve as well as reliability are contradictory to the realization of innovation, which contrasts, in turn, with rationalization by standardization and institutionalization. At the same time, the influence of national, regional and local frameworks is becoming more and more important. Innovations in social services are highly dependent on the social, educational and welfare systems in which they are emerging. The transferability of innovative practices is dependent on the personnel and financial resources of the countries concerned as well as from the economic and political stability as basic requirement for innovation in social services. Transferability is also dependent on the nature of the innovation.

*Programmatic and conceptual framing of social services in relation to innovation:* Innovation in social services is highly dependent on the political and societal context. Within these frameworks the values behind social services are expressed. Professionalization, for instance, places the definitional power of problems, needs and services in professional organizations and institutions. Conversely, interest groups have influenced policy, for instance in giving new definitions for disability and user's needs. Social services are accordingly always framed by another discourse. At the moment transnational values such as human rights and gender equality are dominant. Other key principles focus on active and healthy ageing, the fight against poverty and exclusion and

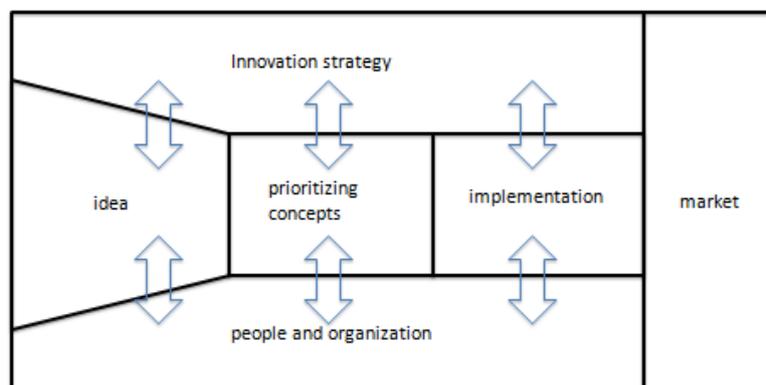
themes like good governance. Conflicts could consist in possible tensions between these transnational principles and current national legal provisions that are contradictory to each other.

## INNOVATION MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL SERVICES

The business concept of innovation management is the best way to transfer trends in innovation to enterprises in social services. Since innovation in social services always goes beyond the enterprise concerned, it becomes clear, that innovation management in social economy is about shaping new service structures (Langer 2014), in which innovation in social services is integrated. The question which organizational, political and institutional frameworks and factors stimulate innovation in social services or social enterprises changes to the question how social management can shape the organizational, political and institutional elements of an infrastructure in which innovation is possible.

Concerning for-profit organizations, Goffin, Herstatt and Mitchell have presented a new approach (Goffin et al, 2009):

*Figure 1: Categorization of key elements in innovation management (Goffin et al, 2009)*

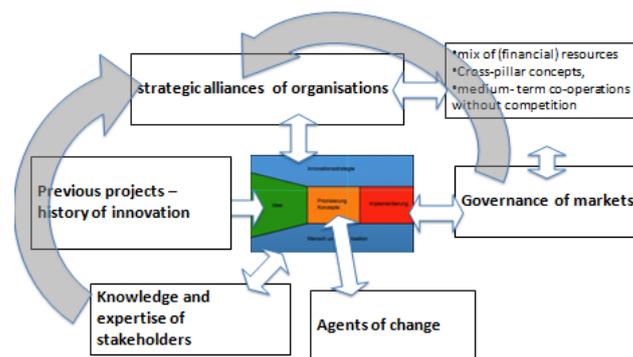


Key element of this approach is the location of innovation management within the strategic management of the organization: innovation is about long-term objectives and the development of the organization. There has to be an innovation strategy that helps developing ideas and organizational structures and involves the employees. The strategy aims at concretizing and implementing these ideas and concepts and at making them ready for the market. Goffin et al. distinguish between product and service innovation, but they stress the meaning of the process dimension of innovation, because it affects both the overall strategy of the organization and the involvement of the employees. Another important feature is the development of an

organizational culture that creates an innovation-friendly atmosphere, e.g. by integrating the competencies of the employees through teamwork. The placing of the innovation on the market presents a particular challenge. Being first on market involves high innovation costs, whereas copies can be brought onto the market with the same quality and at an affordable price. Marketing and product placement are therefore especially important.

Compared to previous findings on innovation in social services, the concept of innovation management is clearly different. The aspect of the ‘embeddedness of innovation’, the fact that innovations have to be developed in specific infrastructures, is crucial (cf. Giddens). This service structure is marked by five characteristics (cf. Langer 2014), which can be applied on the innovation model:

Figure 2: *Embedded innovation management (Langer/Eurich 2014)*



- Organizations, organizational structure und cross-organizational co-operations in form of strategic alliances: In relation to social services innovations rarely result from one special entrepreneurial innovation idea, but can be traced back to the interaction of strategic alliances (health care services, educational services and welfare services), investors, different service companies and stakeholders. They are the result of the co-operation of different factors in an ‘organizational field’.
- Market design in markets for services: Unlike for-profit organizations, social service organizations don’t need to be first on the market. For them, especially the transferability of services and the mainstreaming of service innovation present major challenges. Innovations in the field of services are likely to be local or regional solutions that develop their own governance structures between market and politics. This includes a mix of



(financing) resources, combining different forms of financing and cross-pillar concepts that connect professional services with services of other actors and therefore sometimes collide with different legal provisions. Moreover, this relies on the partial exclusion of competition through alliances of organizations which aim at the bundling of resources, responsibilities and tasks in order to realize an innovative project.

- Governance, agents of change and the implementation of innovative ideas: There are certain actors who are responsible for the governance and the implementation of innovative ideas. These so called 'agents of change' can be individuals or groups; they support new ideas and use resources in order to promote the innovative idea. In doing so, the agents of change can be active on different levels: on the organizational level as well as on the management level, but also on the level of regulation and legislation, on the professional level and on the user level (Langer et al, 2013).
- External knowledge and expertise generated through previous projects and stakeholder involvement: pilot projects or previous projects that belong to the innovation's history emerge in different ways. They are often characterized by comparable structures, academic justifications, counselling or similar field references. Most of the projects are promoted by more than one agent of change. Social services are characterized by the interaction of the involved actors, so that production and consumption merge with each other. The necessity to take account of the effects of demographic change and the demand for more participation of the users have led to more flexible, individual and participative services. This also means, however, that external expertise becomes more and more important. The trends described, such as user-centrality, the growing importance of local approaches, cross-pillar solutions, strategic alliances and new forms of governance, intensify this development. Organizations are no longer able to generate and to secure necessary knowledge for their own innovation management only by their members. Since the consulting of external experts is not very likely to solve the dilemma, the concept of 'co-creation' (Jacobsen/Jostmeier, 2010: 225) becomes increasingly important.

The design of the organization, the surrounding framework and the atmosphere, which might encourage intrapreneurship, the infrastructure and the service structures are basic requirements for innovation, but the successful management of external factors is even more important, which reveals a substantial difference to the business approach of innovation management (cf.



Langer/Eurich 2014b). It is to be expected that the role of service companies as former dominant and most important actors will lose some importance. Innovation has rather to be understood as a process in which providers, investors, users and networks are involved. These actors are part of the organization's environment, the organizational field, which has to be integrated in innovation management. The wishes of the users, but also their knowledge, play an important role. Concepts of co-creation are necessary since they focus on the co-operation with service companies in innovation processes and not only on the integration of user's resources, as suggested by the business approach. It becomes clear that there is a shift from system innovation to structure innovation in the field of service companies. When it comes to co-operations with external actors who aren't (full) members of the organization, knowledge management proves to be a critical factor. The generated knowledge needs to be secured, extended and integrated in new co-operation contexts, which is challenging for innovation management: it has to pave the way for multidisciplinary, multi-professional, multi-advocacy, multi-engagement co-operations, in which multilevel governance can be implemented and which shapes the public opinion and culture. Innovation management has to take care of the mix of resources and the design of participative structures and new forms of service mixes that are adapted to the user's needs (in and outside of the hospital/nursery home) and wishes (personal consultation).

## CONCLUSION

The described tasks indicate that innovation in social services is a complex process in which the entrepreneurial innovation activity has to be extended beyond the organization's boundaries and has to take account of individual frameworks and infrastructures.

The scenario described is not a special phenomenon, but it illustrates in some ways the transfer of business concepts to social economic contexts while respecting the necessary adaptations to the new environment. This adaptation consists in extending entrepreneurial activities by integrating all actors involved. This includes, however, that entrepreneurial activities only represent one single factor on the way to accomplish sustainable innovation in social services. The nature of social services necessitates the involvement of external actors. For social entrepreneurs this means: They have to learn to see themselves as actors, who have to negotiate and establish the conditions in which new and sustainable services can be developed.



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