

Social innovations between claims of autonomy, coexistence and adoption

In Berlin, experts of projects and actors from the local political scene and the realms of administration discussed social innovations

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„Commitment“ and „innovation“ are buzzwords when it comes to consider the preconditions of social cohesion in the future. While the term commitment refers to voluntary work and civic action for a more “civil” society, the term “innovation“ points at social practices that break up routines of welfare production and lead to new offers and services. Innovative projects for mutual support and good community relations are pilots and pioneers at the local level – in districts, quarters and neighbourhoods – that may be scaled-up in the long-term.

Looking at experiences made so far with the relationships between innovative projects and initiatives and the political and administrative scene – that was the aim of a recent grassroots event, organized in Berlin by the Heinrich-Boell-Foundation in cooperation with the EU-project „Welfare innovation at the local level in favour of cohesion“ (www.wilcoproject.eu). Titled “Strengthening civil society, supporting social innovations. How do politics, authorities and innovative projects cooperate?”, this get-together scrutinized the example of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. For this purpose, short presentations of six social innovations in the fields of child and family care, work integration and urban development were presented and commented. Thereby, mutual learning concerning the rationales, modes of working and constraints on all sides was facilitated. All participants, sharing despite much differences the basic perspective of upgrading the role of the local civil society, claimed the need of promoting more cooperation and social networks as a key element for stabilizing innovative projects. For the field of child, youth and family care, the *intercultural family centre Kreuzberg* was introduced at the beginning. The family centre is a juncture for a diverse array of offers, ranging from a family café to mother-tongue consultancy, for children and families in the neighbourhood. The *neighbourhood mothers*, a project of the Diakonischen Werk Berlin Stadtmitte e.V., accompany migrant families within their daily life. As bridge builders and mentors, neighbourhood mothers offer informal help, for instance when it comes to deal with authorities or to make the right choices over schools and child care. The project *job explorer* combines questions concerning the economy, employment and life perspectives of youngsters. Being supported by the district unit for business promotion, job explorer facilitates networks between pupils, their schools and local companies. Therewith, it paves new ways for youngsters into jobs. The second part of the workshop was dedicated to projects and approaches in the field of the new creative economy and of urban regeneration. In this respect, *princesses gardens* stood for organic farming in the city. As a classic hands-on project, princesses gardens cultivate new forms of social interaction and mutual learning. In contrast, the *LOK.a.Motion GmbH* has a different organizational design and pursues different goals: the job incubators accompany and coach people from the district on their way into entrepreneurship and self-employment and they help local business people in the neighbourhood to get together around shared problems and challenges. The *neighbourhood management* approach, introduced at the grassroots meeting by the example of the so called Wrangel quarter in Kreuzberg, is different from the projects mentioned before insofar as it aims to link a variety of social, economic and community concerns and initiatives on the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhood management, initiated by the Berlin Senate, pursues integrative, cross-departmental cooperation among authorities and the strengthening of local support and participation structures.

Remarkably, in all six presentations social innovation was perceived from different angles. For example, the project neighbourhood mothers, giving participating women also a perspective of professionalization, attempts to widen the portfolio of local welfare state services by developing outreaching services and advocacy. It is in this perspective that the project wishes to obtain

recognition from politics and authorities. Conversely, the princesses gardens promote the idea of cultivating spaces for experiments with alternative forms of urban living. Thereby, the urban gardeners won't become part of the (welfare) state infrastructure but adopt public space for creative collective action; what they claim for stabilizing their innovative activities for a longer term is merely a kind of basic security and guarantee from the local authorities that they can use the grounds and land given to them so far just for a kind of "*in-between use*".

The discussion of the grassroots event centred on the question how innovative approaches could be secured, diffused and scaled-up. To put it bluntly: Is a „mainstreaming“ of successful projects possible? And to what degree and in which ways does it need state-action? Because even if authorities and politics do not support social innovations, their projects may gain importance and become replicated due to their cultural attractiveness. Targeted support by programs for innovative approaches is welcomed, presupposed those programs are based on the intrinsic interest of politics and authorities to learn from experiences and practices of innovators. However one can find as well the opposite: Authorities funding innovative projects but pay no attention to their underlying missions and related contents, using them simply as an additional part of the clientele, local policy and administration have to subsidize. At worst, support programs adapt innovations to the everyday management of authorities, meaning a loss of autonomy, persuasiveness and perspective for the innovators. This kind of support may belittle rather than mainstream the innovative concerns of the initiators. As the discussion demonstrated, reality lies between these different poles: Very often, both sides, authorities and innovators, arrange themselves in a kind of coexistence where innovative projects and their types of service provision may get some funding while at the same time authorities and administrations basically stay to their routines and “business as usual”. Innovation is then reduced to a special task of small scale organisations at the fringes of the political administration, helping the centre to cope with challenges rather than being seen as a message and pilot practice to be understood and taken up by the centre. In such a kind of coexistence the innovative ideas and practices stay bound to their local spheres of influence. Large-scale reform is unlikely, if working relations and exchange between authorities and innovators stagnate. Here, family centres, that presented themselves in the first part of the meeting, are a counter example because they are supported by the local child and youth welfare office as kind of pilot schemes, a chance for the wider administration and professional realm to learn from new practices at the spot.

The grassroots event ended with questions raised about the limits of revitalization and social change in the urban space by innovative nudges from bottom up. The participants identified several obstacles: questions of power in the local (social) politics that cannot be taken up by projects and organisations with very limited power and resources, the huge difference between new approaches with little traditions and roots and the enormous persistence of administrative routines as they have built up over decades. In search for potential factors of success, one has to take a wider look, spotting not only small scale innovative organisations but the general climate in a city, its local authorities' staff and politicians. In these various “publics”, it is decisive whether there is curiosity and willingness to learn. So far in Berlins' political administration this seems to be the exception while the rule is characterized by a mixture of indifference and loose coexistence with innovations “outside”. Given this backdrop, the princesses gardens put much emphasis on entrepreneurial initiative. Resources from sales and markets and from interested administrations outside are seemingly easier to be reached than from the administration next door. As a speaker stated, for them it is much more promising to access the expertise of an urban gardener“ from New York than to establish a working contact to Berlin's parks department. However, for projects like the neighbourhood mothers there is no alternative to approaching local authorities and institutions in their own district.