

ImPRovE stakeholder workshop Vienna

Focus Group Discussion

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Campus WU, 1020 Wien, Welthandelsplatz 1

Presentation & moderation

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Participants:

- **Elisabeth Hammer** (economist & expert on social work)
neunerhaus (Association for Homeless People) & University of Applied Sciences Campus Wien
- **Bernhard Leubolt** (management and political scientist & social innovation expert)
Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Wien), ImPRovE team member
- **Michaela Moser** (philosopher, theologian & poverty expert)
armutskonferenz (Austrian Anti-Poverty Network) & EAPN & Univ. of Applied Sciences St. Pölten
- **Andreas Novy** (economist & social innovation expert)
Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Wien), ImPRovE team leader
- **Judith Pühringer** (management and social economy expert)
bdv austria (Association of Social Enterprises in Austria)
- **Alexandra Strickner** (economist & expert on grassroots initiatives)
attac Austria & Wege aus der Krise (Civil Society Alliance for Solidarity, Ecology and Democracy)

The workshop started with a short presentation of the project. Besides introducing the organizational background, general aim and research questions, the focus was laid on the conceptualizations of social innovation and poverty that were established in the first working papers. All participants were familiar with the definition of poverty by Sen and Nussbaum and with the conceptualization of justice by Nancy Fraser and considered them relevant. In contrast, the argumentation for our concept of social innovation did not completely convince the participating stakeholders. They detected some gravitation towards a normative conceptualization and missed an adequate consideration of the contradictions that are inherent to the concept. In this regard, there was a feeling that a clearer definition of the social context in which social innovations develop would also be important. The orientation towards needs could – in line with Sen and Nussbaum – be replaced by the idea of supporting capabilities. What is clearly missing from the perspective of invited stakeholders is the idea that relevant social innovations in terms of poverty reduction should not be residual and placed at the margin of society or the welfare state respectively, but should rather be universal and relevant for all.

The connection between social innovation potentials and the restructuring of the welfare state is seen ambivalent. On the one hand, the more politics is concerned with practical impacts of programs and the less failing of projects is allowed for or even encouraged, the less innovation is possible. On the other hand, though, it seems that the restructuring of the welfare state can also open windows for social innovation when existing practices do not meet their aims anymore and need to be substituted by more

effective ones. Ultimately, social innovations in our field need to be understood as contributions to the transformation of the state in ways that are relevant for all citizens. Social innovations, therefore, need to address social relations and structural issues. In this sense, e.g., it would not be sufficient to introduce a social market for food. One would also have to problematize the production conditions in the food industry as a whole. The transformation of the state is regarded as being dependent on a complex interplay between grassroots or civil society actors and underdogs in the administration that facilitate change processes. That is to say, the public administration itself may hardly be in a position to ever initiate social innovations. Nonetheless, when there is strong structural pressure, underdogs may facilitate change by commissioning studies and financing the search for alternatives.

To allow for social innovations, politics would have to accept a different role of service providers in the field. Innovations require much flexibility for which there is little room in daily business (and which also leaves employees with a feeling of insecurity). Service providers therefore need to be seen not only as entities that deliver a certain type of services, but as organizations that are able to provide reflected knowledge on the social issues they work on. To this end, sufficient funding to finance research activities would have to be made available, e.g. by funding special units that are responsible for fundamental work. Due to the dependence of social services on external (public) funding, innovation always remains precarious. Under today's welfare regimes, service providers usually have to rely on internal funding when making a start on own research. The more the organization is oriented exclusively towards service delivery, however, the smaller the room for social innovation.

In terms of language and terminology, the expression 'new needs' in our concept of social innovation was criticized for two reasons. On the one hand, doubts were raised that there are 'new needs' at all (they are rather understood as varieties of well-known needs). On the other hand, the implicit assumption that people living in poverty have needs that differ significantly from the better off parts of society was seriously challenged.

With regard to coordination requirements by the state, there was the feeling that (at least in the case of Austria) there were times in the past when the state fulfilled this task already more satisfactorily. Today, politics and the administration would call for participative structures but finally not be able to create the framework for implementing them. There is the impression that although civil society organizations are invited to participate in discussion fora, eventually not much room is provided for fundamental discussions and discursive depth. Potential conflicts (e.g. for resources) would rather be 'solved' by inviting all organizations separately instead of openly discussing needs and an appropriate allocation of funds. At the same time, a certain degree of individualization and a reduction of solidarity between social organizations are being observed. To this end, an umbrella organization that moderates between members could facilitate social innovation processes.

A problem deriving from the internal structure of the sector is seen in the fact that due to well-established networks from the time of Fordism some powerful organizations would still have privileged contacts to politics and the administration and therefore not benefit from increasing transparency. At the same, however, also in cases of more transparent procedures (e.g. by open calls for tender) those big players would often have advantages due to more experience and resources. For this reason, the big

players often seem to only participate for symbolic reasons in networking events and discussion rounds. Intermediary organizations could guarantee accessibility, ongoing exchange and continuity.

Another aspect of participation, i.e. the involvement of poor and excluded people, bears the danger of further contributing to stigmatization and labeling. Perhaps one should rather speak about people living in precariousness, which is much more flexible as a concept and today also affects increasing shares of the middle classes. However, it may also contribute to the belittlement of the hardships of severe poverty that many people also in developed countries experience.

The opening up of participation opportunities is nonetheless an important aspect of innovation, but it should primarily be understood as the opening of spaces of the majority for poor and excluded groups of the population. Participation in small and specialized projects is hardly an alternative to participation in the major institutions of society. When it comes to political representation, possibilities for individual participation are just as important as collective participation strategies. As most poor people have to invest much energy in the organization of their daily lives and need to find innovative strategies to secure their necessities of life, one should not expect or even request too much from them in terms of political mobilization and engagement for an organization.

Participation should be concentrated on fields in which all social groups have equal interests in being represented, such as community work. To make sure that participation is sufficiently representative – including not only the poor but also the rich – involvement could be determined by means of lotteries. After all, what is relevant to combat poverty is solidarity between social groups and understanding for the diversity life's realities, also of other people.

In a last round, the question of which eastern European countries could be of interest for our research project was discussed. There was quick agreement that Hungary should be a promising candidate for case studies as not only the national Anti-Poverty network is very active but there are also many projects that deal with workfare in a critical way. Apart from these promising agents and initiatives, however, we should be aware of the political-economic context. As a more general remark, we were also reminded to question the increasingly important practice of impact measurement in a critical way.

When it comes to topics that should not be missed, household budget could enter via the backdoor by working on housing or energy. Another topic that seems to be most relevant nowadays is food and nutrition. For the case of Vienna, housing first should – in contrast to the US context – not only be seen as an example for the reorganization of assistance for the homeless, but as a case where a relatively small initiative problematizes the issue of increasing rents and lacking access to affordable housing; they thereby also lobby for a change of structures in the housing market.