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Social Innovation for Public Service Excellence

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Governments around the world are grappling with societal challenges that are acting as a brake on sustainable economic growth, leading to inequality and instability in society, and impinging upon the general well-being of their populations.

Social innovation is a response to these challenges that offers considerable promise for public managers. It offers new solutions, new methodologies and new conceptual frameworks. Success can be seen through case studies from around the world, including middle- and low-income countries in South-East Asia. While it remains an emergent field, still building a robust theoretical underpinning and establishing an evidence-base, the promise of social innovation is too compelling to ignore.

Social innovation refers to new ideas that work in meeting social goals. A social innovation approach puts capacity to harness innovation at the core of public service. As a field, social innovation is new, practice-led and under-theorized. It should be considered more of a movement than a particular methodology, as might be the case for design thinking. Indeed, a feature of social innovation is that it combines multiple disciplines, types of actors and sectors. Social innovation is also more than just invention; it describes a process from initial prompt through to scale and systemic change.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

For the public manager, there are three important features of social innovation.

▶ First, social innovation brings an experimental approach to public service. Experimentation entails an evidence-based approach, acknowledgement of the limits of current knowledge, multiple small bets about what might work, and acceptance that some attempts will fail but provide learning that builds towards future success.

▶ Second, social innovation requires distributed systems where innovation and initiative are dispersed to the periphery and connected by networks. Public managers must support and partner with social innovators: people who initiate and lead social innovation initiatives, and who can be found anywhere within the system, but tend to be semi-outsiders and boundary spanners.

▶ Third, citizens and service users can bring insights and assets to help public managers achieve their policy objectives. Social innovations are developed 'with' and 'by' users and not delivered 'to' and 'for' them. Co-design and co-production are common elements of social innovation. As a result, social innovation can build community capacity in addition to delivering direct project impacts.

Figure 1: The Young Foundation's innovation spiral

1. Prompts
2. Proposals
3. Prototypes
4. Sustaining
5. Scaling
6. Systemic Change
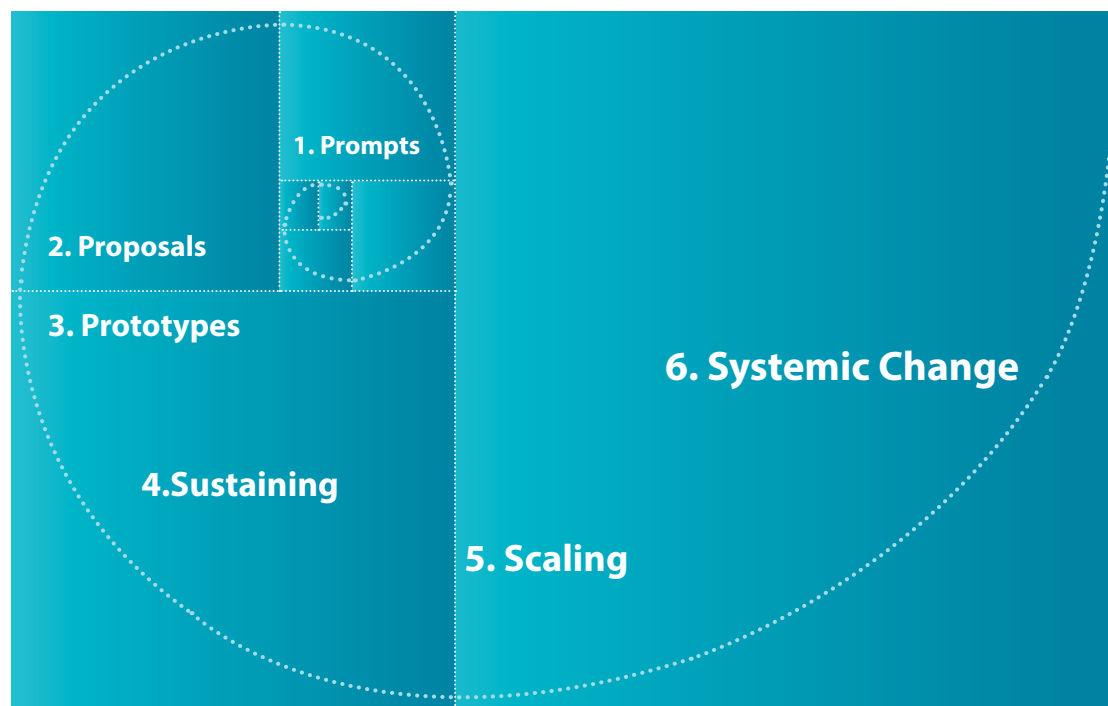
Source: The Young Foundation

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Anyone can be a social innovator, and people acting as social innovators are found everywhere: in every sector, at every level of the hierarchy as well as outside it, of every age and background. The twin challenges for public managers are firstly, to take on the role of a social innovators themselves and secondly, to support social innovators by nurturing them, channelling their energies towards the more pressing problems, and connecting them within a bigger system.

Public agencies can nurture their capacity to absorb social innovations and innovate themselves by building a diversity of relationships with other actors of all kinds and by finding ways for staff to understand others' perspectives. One powerful perspective is that of service users. Ethnography and design thinking are two tools for tapping into that perspective to gain better insight into social issues and develop solutions. Another approach is finding ways to encourage and bring together people interested in social innovation through events and networks.

Proposals and ideas for social innovation can be developed with the community through participatory decision-making and co-design. Experience with a range of innovation funds, prizes and camps has found that more directed approaches which support innovators with more than money tend to pay off. A shift to outcome-based procurement rather than pay for activity is also 'innovation friendly', but relatively hard to implement.

Social innovations generally require substantial development in the field. When contracting and monitoring projects, emphasis should be on ensuring rapid learning and adaptation rather than on compliance with the initial plan. Social innovation initiatives can benefit from co-location in hubs or parks and from the kind of intensive support provided by incubators.

Social innovation offers two additional ways to sustain new projects beyond mainstream public management practices. The first way is through the creation of marketplaces and introduction of competition, fostering social enterprise and the concomitant social investment market. The second is through task-shifting public service functions to volunteers or micro-entrepreneurs in the community, which often achieve better and cheaper results.

Scaling is a major challenge for social innovation. Promising approaches include facilitating horizontal learning networks, open source methodology, and replication and social franchising support. To fully tap the potential of social innovation, public managers must move beyond support of individual social innovation projects. They must integrate social innovation into the creation of a national system, building the infrastructure to support social innovation from prompt through to scale.

While social innovation shows great potential for public managers, it is not without its challenges. It will find the most fertile ground where there is trust between sectors, public managers have space and authority to use their own initiative, and government seeks to promote the general well-being of its population. Public managers need to be in a position to take a smart informed approach to risk, as the outcomes are often uncertain and the methods not yet rigorously tested. Public managers need to shift - and be genuinely empowered by their political masters to shift - to a more facilitative role and trusting relationship that requires some 'giving up' of power to the community. They must also be patient for results and work hard to reconfigure public institutions to financially benefit from social innovation.

For a more detailed coverage of Social Innovation – including a list of recommendations for practitioners – please refer to the full paper, authored by Simon Tucker (Associate Sr. Consultant, Scope Group).

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