New Forms of Learning in Knowledge Economies: Societal Innovation

What happens when 100 people from all over the world share their experiences and knowledge to solve real life problems in real time?

This summer, Aalto University in Helsinki organised an experiment on “Prototyping Societal Innovation”. In collaboration with the Committee for the Future of the Finnish Parliament, the New Club of Paris and other partners a new, global and self-renewing collaboration network was created.

The idea behind this experiment is to explore new ways in which universities can provide value-added to the society by co-creating activities through collaboration with other societal parties. Therefore, the focus in all cases, which ranged from participatory city planning to new forms of lifelong learning, was on creating synergy between education, research, and innovation (= knowledge triangle) and strengthening networks and exchanges between academia, industry, and society (=triple/quadruple helix approach). The question was how to co-create new actionable knowledge where there are no ready solutions in the existing frameworks.

The Aalto Camp for Societal Innovation (ACSI http://acsi.aalto.fi) aims to be an “international new-generation innovation agenda bringing forth a concept, operating mode and network for the development of a global innovation platform. It gives rise to an international, self-fortifying innovation community integrating research, learning and innovation”.

This co-creation of innovative solutions for real life cases of society and enterprises shall not only be applied in Finland, but also encourage learning and exchange in other regions and countries, and some ideas on organising a future ACSI in Asia were discussed.

What is Societal Innovation?

Societal innovation can be described as a trans-disciplinary approach to create and apply knowledge to complex, non-linear issues. It is different from “social innovation” which refers to innovations meeting social needs of all kinds, but typically is about small modifications within a given community or organisation. Societal innovation always investigates the existing system and reframes an issue. Neither the definition of a problem nor the direction of the solution is unequivocally known a priori (Rotman 2005). Common searching and learning processes where scientists and non-scientists jointly try to find a shared problem perception is another element of societal innovation. For ACSI inviting different actors from academia, business and civil society was therefore an essential part of the prototyping processes.

Another crucial element is the discipline-transcending concept of ACSI. Aalto University is a recent merger of different schools: the School of Economics, the School of Art and Design and the School of Science and Technology. Trans-disciplinary collaboration and knowledge creation is very different from traditional interdisciplinary communication where each actor sticks to the “schools of thinking” and other frameworks of his/her discipline.
Societal innovation draws on the ideas of social complex systems theory, which explains social renewal processes as a dynamic co-evolution between structure, actors and practices (see N. Luhmann, A. Giddens, U. Beck and others).

**Why is Societal Innovation important for future growth in Knowledge Economies?**

Many countries develop national innovation systems and policies, fostering investments in R&D and supporting corporate innovation activities. While a technological focus on innovation is still the dominant paradigm, some countries realize that innovation is first of all social. Learning, education, open knowledge flows, and creativity are the basis for capacity building in knowledge economies and constitute a “societal comparative advantage” (Lam 2002). A societal comparative advantage goes beyond the notion of Porter’s “Competitive Advantage of Nations” (published in 1990) which explains differences in national economic prosperity and productivity with purely economic patterns of company strategies and government policies. Knowledge economists would argue that intangible, societal assets and flows are a prerequisite for building a national competitive advantage, and that technological innovation builds on societal innovation.

**Is Societal Innovation difficult to learn and practice?**

The ACSI process is based on the idea of a knowledge triangle methodology, which integrates research, learning and experience. For example, each of the real life cases in Helsinki had a so-called case owner, who provided the material before the camp and for working out solutions during the camp. The better he/she frames the case, the better the solutions can be prototyped by the ACSI team members working on that case. On the other hand, reframing a problem through the team can also generate new angles to a problem. Termeer (2007) states that societal innovation is “not just about isolated instances of innovation brought about by a few people but about changes in the way of looking, thinking and acting, with sweeping consequences for the arrangement of organisations, markets, technology, social relations and concepts.”

Comprehension of such significant processes of change while being part of such processes is indeed a challenge. This is one of the reasons that a lot of time should be given to team building, self-assessment of own thinking processes and reflection. There is also an element of play in rapid prototyping of societal issues. Michael Schrage, the MIT Media Lab innovation researcher, calls prototyping in organisations a “serious play”; it’s not enough to have great ideas unless you are able to demonstrate and play with them. Renewal and innovation in knowledge societies starts within shared, civic spaces of interaction and play between different societal actors.

**Why is Societal Innovation also a public leadership issue?**

The ACSI cases were all drawn from public sector organisations; this was not by coincidence but by design: using the public sector as platform for innovation provides the necessary openness to explore the intersections between different groups of actors in the society. People in public organisations who are facing complex problems and see opportunities, arrange connections and reinterpret their own routines can trigger and influence societal innovation. They direct their attention to a particular issue, start to act, create experience through that acting and make sense of it (Termeer 2007). The ACSI
cases all started with such an active sense making of a societal issue. Taking this issue through the prototyping exercise can lead to societal innovation.

Participation, social interaction, reflexivity and action are not common terms used to describe public sector problem solving, since the traditional view of the public administration tends to be that of a rule-defining and controlling central actor in change processes.

Creating a process of involving actors from academia, business, civil society and public administration in co-creation and prototyping societal innovation also reflects the readiness of an open knowledge society such as Finland to invest in continuous adaptation and learning in an ambiguous world.

Which organisation could initiate prototyping social innovations in emerging knowledge economies in Asia?

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2 Alice Lam (2002). “Alternative Societal Models of Learning and Innovation in the Knowledge Economy”, Conference paper presented at DRUID Summer Conference on “Industrial Dynamics of the New and Old Economy- who is embracing whom?” Copenhagen/Elsinore 6-8 June 2002

3 Termeer, Katrien C.J.A.M. (2007). „Vital differences on public leadership and societal innovation” Translation of Inaugural speech at Wageningen University and Research Centre, December 2006

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