

# Connecting the Dots: Creating an Environment for Innovation to Flourish

Louise Pulford 25 June 2013

From climate change and aging, to poverty and unemployment, the world is facing increasingly acute social and environmental challenges. The case for social innovation has never been clearer - doing things the old way cannot solve these challenges.

Local and national governments, businesses, NGOs, charities and cities are beginning to use social innovation – whether it's through new top-down approaches to social services; businesses and universities running competitions to find fresh young innovators with radical new ways to use technology; or communities working out better ways to share resources and support each other. All of these players are facing many challenges. Some concerns relate to the practical issues of actually "doing" social innovation - *What is the best way to incubate new ideas? How can I set up the right kind of institutions to do this? How can we successfully use prizes and competitions to promote innovative practice? How can we effectively scale or replicate great ideas?* Other questions arise on supporting social innovation – focusing on the favorable environment needed for social innovation to

flourish. *How can we build up new finance flows for social innovation? What does an effective policy for social innovation look like?* And perhaps most importantly, how can I feel more confident as an innovator? Who can I draw on with experience, and how can I convince the people with power in my area to promote and support social innovation?

Within SIX's global network, we are seeing responses to some of these challenges for social innovation.

## **More effective learning and sharing**

We all know that we live in a global world, and the potential solutions to our local challenges may be found on the other side of the world. So, whilst the learning how to innovate and encouraging the right support structures are important, there is increasing recognition that social innovation will not develop as a field if we do not create better systems for learning and sharing with each other and better networks.

When the Social Innovation Exchange, or SIX, was created in 2008, there were no networks for social innovation practitioners and thinkers that cut across sectors and disciplines. So SIX was designed not to supplant what already existed; rather it aimed to connect the isolated networks and people working in silos. Today, the SIX is the world's primary global network for people involved in social innovation. SIX is comprised of more than 5000 individuals and organizations that are at the cutting edge

of practice, from private, public and third-party sectors.

SIX connects people tackling complex social challenges to one another, enabling social innovators to exchange ideas, resources, and inspiration, and to feel connected and supported by each other. These connections are facilitated at regular gatherings and events based on either themes or how to build the field of social innovation, both physically and virtually. At SIX events, participants can hold conversations they can't have anywhere else. We create a safe space for an honest discussion and we work together to come up with strategies and solutions.

SIX's global reach allows us to promote learning across sectors, fields and countries, speeding up the process of learning and sharing around the world. Many social innovations which are part of SIX (from models of innovation labs and incubators, to individual projects on issues as wide ranging as palliative care to new approaches to schooling) are being replicated in different parts of the world – demonstrating that solutions are being moved globally, from Helsinki to Bangkok, from Denmark to Australia.

The combined expertise of our networked members is formidable, and by communicating and disseminating their ideas across the network, SIX helps all of its members to benefit. Convincing people in power to support an idea is easier when you can demonstrate its success somewhere else. Collectively, our membership

represents a vast resource to the field of social innovation. In essence, SIX connects innovators to increase their capacity—and the capacity of the field of social innovation in general— to generate better, smarter solutions, worldwide.

## **Doing innovation**

There needs to be more investment and focus on skills, learning and training for all actors involved. Like other forms of innovation, social innovation is a process. Good ideas that work are not just a matter of luck - there are skills that can be learned to help people come up with new ideas, but that also help individuals whether they are in government, other parts of the public sector, business or NGOs, to develop innovations beyond the ideas stage and into practical projects. From identifying the cause of an issue and brainstorming ideas, to prototyping and piloting new services, to identifying the right kind of business model and developmental path, with the right methods, processes and skills, we all have the capacity to innovate.

Many are now seeing innovation this way too, and the demand for learning programs is growing. Universities all over the world are now offering social innovation courses, and many organizations around the world are running workshops and providing educational materials and tools for social innovators – including The Australian Centre for Social Innovation's 'radical redesign' methodology that

enables public services to learn a methodology for redesigning services, and Nesta's online innovation toolkit. Innovation thinker John Kao is also looking at how we can transfer the skills and methodologies used in business innovation to facilitate large scale collaborations to tackle social issues.

## **Supporting innovation – The Europe case**

Social innovators have commitment, experience and energy, but they also need support. Whilst many players can contribute to making the conditions that enable social innovation to flourish – from intermediary institutions and national innovation agencies, to think tanks and government at all levels, there is a clear role for overarching institutions. The European Commission is one of the institutions beginning to play a role. President Barosso has taken a keen interest in social innovation in recent years, and in 2009 his Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA) commissioned SIX to contribute to a report on a potential social innovation strategy for Europe (Empowering people, Driving Change: Social Innovation in the European Union, 2011) that heavily influenced the Commission's 2010 Innovation Union Plan—a set of goals and policies aimed at creating smart, sustainable, inclusive economies explicitly through innovation. Meanwhile, 'This is European Social Innovation,' a competition run by SIX and the Euclid Network—

supported by the European Commission (DG Enterprise)—identified and publicized some of the most interesting social innovation projects in Europe, making the best practices in European social innovation visible for the first time.

One of the first actions of the Innovation Union was the creation of the Social Innovation Europe initiative (SIE), which was designed to help grow the field of social innovation in Europe so that it is mature enough to tackle the multitude of challenges currently facing society. This program will explicitly link social innovation to priority challenges. Run by SIX, Euclid Network and the Danish Technological Institute, SIE has brought the Innovation Union to life. Through a series of events, reports and a dynamic web portal with up-to-date information, access to crucial resources and the latest thinking and actions in the social innovation field, the SIE initiative has connected people across silos, and provided translation services between sectors and regions in order to maximize synergies of business, public sector and civil society, and also create new partnerships.

## **The need for supportive networks**

Doing social innovation is not easy. By definition, social innovators are likely to be working with various people from different sectors, and working in different ways or attempting things that haven't been done before. In many cases it is not even known exactly what the end result will

be. Even if you have the skills and financial or policy support, it's still not easy. Innovators need other innovators – they need to know about how other projects really work, so they can adapt them to their own contexts. Furthermore, they also need support from trustworthy people who 'get it.'

In order for social innovation to provide effective solutions to the world's intractable social problems, we need teams of people who understand the process of innovation and know how to implement it. We need governments who understand the field of social innovation and support it rather than create barriers that make innovation difficult. We also need networks that allow people to quickly and effectively learn from one another about who is doing what, when it works and when it doesn't, and why. With capacity, support, and access to networks of people around the world who are fighting the same battle with the same determination, we are all capable of innovating solutions to the social challenges we face.

The SIX network is made up of people who want to learn, want to share what they know and want to collaborate with other like-minded colleagues from around the world. If you are one of these people we would love to have you with us. On the SIX website you can find information about how to join the network, how to connect with other members through our events or browse what other people are doing. We look forward to meeting you!

**Louise Pulford became Director of Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) - a global community of 5000 individuals and organizations involved in social innovation – when it became an independent organization in January 2013. Louise has been responsible for the SIX network for the last 4 years whilst it was being incubated at the Young Foundation, where she ran the network and its two associated websites (SIX and Social Innovator), delivered large international events, and supported SIX's global community. Louise also manages the European consortium, which runs the flagship European Commission project, Social Innovation Europe, a European network for social innovation.**