The Pancake Method: Social Innovation and Young People in Europe's Cities

Eddy Adams 25 June 2013

It's early evening, and Alicia, a young woman of Columbian descent, walks into a communal yard space in one of Rotterdam's toughest neighbourhoods. She's an outsider; so all eyes are upon her. From her bag she starts unpacking items – a small stove, an omelet pan and a wooden spoon. Then she crouches and starts setting things up. The young people hanging around the space wonder what she's up to. Other kids appear, as word gets round that something's happening – or about to happen. Slowly, kids gather round her – one, two, and then a little group – to find out what's going on.

Alicia speaks while she fiddles with the stove, explaining that she's going to make some pancakes. She doesn't say why pancakes – or why there – she just chats while getting on with her business. But she seems to have forgotten some key ingredients. Eggs, for example. How is she going to make pancakes without any eggs? A young boy offers to go and get a few eggs. And no flour either? Another kid offers to get flour. While passing the time Alicia tells them her story. She's from another neighbourhood, tough like this one, but on the other side

of town. One thing leads to another and after an hour they've flipped pancakes together and established a bit of rapport.

Alicia is an outrider for a successful Rotterdam Foundation, Thuis Op Straat (Home on the Streets). Her job is to spot talent and to offer support to young people whose potential has been overlooked by the education system. Often these are young people who – with different life circumstances – would be on other pathways. Her job is to build relationships, nurture talent and alter their likely trajectories by rechanneling the entrepreneurialism of the local drug dealer and the leadership skills of the neighbourhood bully. As a former gang member and school dropout, Alicia is good at recognising them, and has credibility when she speaks.

Strange as it seems, *the pancake method* has enjoyed some success as part of a repertoire to engage talented but disaffected youngsters. Alicia's Foundation supports them to operate as community mentors and peers, helping them identify their talents, building their confidence and advising them on how they can develop their skills further. In return for 100 hours of volunteering, the organisation will meet their education costs for one year, making sure that they are steered into the best learning environment for them. Thuis Op Straat is being funded from a variety of sources and has built a reputation for transforming the lives of young people beyond the reach of mainstream services.

There are core components of this story that we see in cities across Europe which are utilising social innovation to support young people into jobs and businesses. These include:

- Taking risks and being proactive
- Focusing on young people's talents – what they can, rather than what they can't do
- Building trusted relationships
- Offering something in return for something else – the deal
- Involving young people in service design and delivery

This evidence was gathered by URBACT, the European Union's urban exchange and learning programme. Funded by the 27 national Member States, the programme provides a platform for cities to collaborate on finding solutions to shared problems. Its primary aim is to promote integrated sustainable urban development, a key aspect of which is employment for all citizens – especially young people in the current economic crisis.

In response to the challenges Europe's cities face, URBACT created a workstream to examine how cities can use social innovation to tackle urban youth disconnection. This process involved gathering evidence from thinkers and doers across Europe who are leading work in this important area. Many of the participating cities – like Rotterdam – are actively involved in the URBACT programme.

We heard innovative examples of cities tackling this problem at every stage.

From Swindon, England, we were impressed by the new services that emerged to support problem families. This involved tackling the youth issue upstream, working with very young children who are statistically more likely to be truant, engage in antisocial behaviour and struggle to make the transition to working life. The re-engineered service allowed families to choose the support services they needed and, radically, to choose who would provide them.

In Copenhagen, we were intrigued to hear how anthropologists had been mobilised in the redesign of the public employment service offered to young people. From Nantes we found out about coproduction with parents to prevent early school leaving. In the former Eastern Bloc state of Latvia we heard how street basketball is used to build connections with disaffected young people and municipal services.

Along the way we learned that “social innovation” is a highly subjective term, and what is leading-edge in some cities is yesterday’s news in others. Across Europe, city managers are constantly told that they must “do more with less,” and at the same time apply high levels of innovation in response to often chronic social challenges like youth unemployment and caring for older people. However, the environment in which they work often

discourages risk-taking (especially when resources are tight) and often we find that people struggle to understand what is meant by social innovation.

Of course, social innovation is all around us. It is not a new concept, but rather a tag for ways of working that are already widely in use. Our workstream set out to identify tangible examples of social innovation in relation to disconnected young people. We were also looking for conditions in European cities that were likely to promote a culture – or ecosystem – of social innovation. Ad hoc innovation is well and good, but we are most interested in promoting sustainable systemic change.

Our process identified a set of conditions that can support this shift. We have explored them through the prism of disconnected urban youth, but we believe they are equally relevant across the board. In no particular order these include:

• *New ideas generation:* An important starting point is the acceptance that we need fresh thinking. As Linus Pawling noted, "The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas and throw the bad ones away." This means creating a culture of ideas generation – what Danish Mindlab refer to as ideation – giving permission to all stakeholders to generate new suggestions. Barcelona, Nantes and Copenhagen all provide good examples from our work

• *Harnessing unusual suspects:* Different perspectives

add value. Creative problem solvers refer to the value of 'wild geese' - outsiders who are not constrained by their knowledge of established ways of working. Their forte is the naïve but powerful question. Coming in from other spheres, they bring fresh valued insights – and Berlin, Riga and Swindon shared their experiences of such work

• *The new evidence base:* Swindon had been spending up to UK£300,000 per annum on some families – for more than a decade – with few tangible results. It took a brave leadership to uncover the facts, to face the evident challenges and to respond. Too often we fail to ask the right questions, and overlook vital evidence – which must come from a variety of sources

• *Coproduction:* Michael Young, founder of the Open University and the Young Foundation, argued that "people are competent interpreters of their own reality." Cities which are at the leading edge of social innovation understand the value of fully involving all stakeholders – particularly customers – in service design and delivery. Cities like Rotterdam and Antwerp have evolved new, exciting ways to work alongside young people in this way

• *New service delivery models:* In Europe, the Global Economic Crisis has exposed the weakness of public service delivery models in many cities. Recent evidence from cities has underlined the value of organisation – often NGOs – which can respond flexibly and which can mirror the profile and values of their customers.

Copenhagen, Barcelona and Riga have all shared their examples of working this way

• *Smart finance:* We were struck by how few of those giving evidence saw lack of money as the problem. Much more frequently, they referred to a European city model where there are significant funds dedicated to supporting young people, though they are inflexible and not fully optimised. Public sector resources in Europe, although diminishing, still account for between 40% and 50% of GDP in many cities. Breaking down the departmental silos that restrict how these funds are used is routinely identified as being the key problem. Our Swindon case provides an excellent example of this in practice.

URBACT is primarily interested in building capacity in Europe's cities. A major challenge is how city authorities can provide the conditions to promote and support social innovation. This requires a mindset shift amongst municipal leaders, away from a controlling role toward one that majors on brokering, enabling and sharing risk. These cities show the way forward, and their experience underlines the potential gains from working differently and from involving young people and 'unusual suspects' at the heart of new service design and delivery.

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