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Learning for Change: On leaving the ivory towers

September 25, 2017

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The TRANSIT Learning 4 Change conference has brought together a great diversity of individuals concerned with Transformative Social Innovation. Particularly inspiring were the 'critical talks' of three members of the International Advisory Board, (Ariel Gordon, Edina Vadovics, and Gilda Farrell) introduced by IAB chairman Tim O'Riordan. Through different themes they confronted the audience with thought-provoking questions. Just as they have been challenging the TRANSIT consortium over the course of their near-finished research project, their questions typically reminded of the societal stakes involved with TSI research – thereby also raising the recurring issue of how that research could make a difference in addressing urgent societal problems.

The questions raised easily succeeded in firing up the discussion tables. At my table, the third round was particularly inspiring as we discussed the question raised by Gilda Farrell. Critical, passionate and experienced as she is, she took us along in her 25 year retrospective on the TSI efforts of herself and colleagues. "When we imagine ourselves in the future (25 years from now) looking back at our work today, what may turn out to have been our blind spots regarding transformative change?"

One answer brought forward at the table was that it would be sad to have to realize that one had somehow forgotten to tell the stories of successful Transformative Social Innovation: the stories of individuals and collectives who turned convictions into new practices, who managed to organize themselves, who went about acquiring the resources needed, and who actually succeeded in getting the new social relations disseminated or institutionalized in one way or another. Likewise, it was discussed how fear of failure, complacency and wrong assessment of current priorities would be painful to look back upon. Quite unavoidably in this meeting of researchers, activists, entrepreneurs, policy makers and other 'practitioners' of social innovation, also the societal role of science and researchers came up: what if we'd realize only years later how we had persisted in classical modes of hyper-specialized, objectivist, introverted, academia-confined, disengaged knowledge production...failing to descend from the 'ivory tower' and being left with filled bookshelves as mere witnesses of a disintegrating society?

The possible drama of science and scientists failing to make a difference speaks to many of us, of course. The earlier passionate efforts of Marxism, urban sanitation movement, the Vienna Circle, Karl Popper's pleas for an Open Society, the critical-theoretical warnings for the many guises of fascism et cetera are unfortunately not outdated, as authoritarian rule and structural societal problems persist. Researchers keep being hindered or even imprisoned for arbitrary reasons; evidence and argument are still, or once again, easily ignored or swept from the table. So it may turn out

eventually that researchers have failed to descend from their ivory towers, underestimating or depreciating what they could have achieved through action research, transdisciplinary efforts, consultancy and responsiveness to 'grand societal challenges'. On the other hand, it would be no less tragic – and this is my personal concern as a researcher- to find out that we had forgotten to man (M/F) our ivory towers, to resurrect the ones that have been destroyed, and to invest in the equipment and highly skilled people to make them effective. Or to realize how we'd been following our practically engaged passions, whilst lacking the overview and the systematic search for these 'blind spots' raised in Gilda Farrell's question.

The picture shows the European Southern Observatory telescopes in the Chilean Atacama desert. For practical reasons it's not made of ivory, money being dedicated to getting the equipment and observation right, but the range of sight for those we've trusted to watch on our behalf is enormous.

Learning for Change: Science Shops – A Phoenix or a Ghost

September 25, 2017

Jens Dorland

Thoughts on science shops as a social innovation

Another interesting aspect is the idea of Science Shops as a social innovation. The concept stems from the 70'ties, our oldest case is from 1985. Still many attendants have never heard of the concept. Some Dutch conference attendants (not from the session) even thought it was dead. They linked the movement to the democratization of knowledge, which for them was no longer a problem, and thus science shops were no longer necessary. Their hypothesis was that in other places, like eastern Europe, this is still an issue. So, there science shops are still a necessary social innovation.

One of my immediate thoughts was that the science shops in the Netherlands, a country where science shops were so deeply entrenched that they were mandatory by law, were more inflexible due to this institutional entanglement. Science shops in the UK, Germany, and slowly Scandinavia are spreading again, showing that there is a relevance and need. This goes to show that what and when something is a social innovation is very context dependent, and how entrenchment in institutions might well be a weakness. However, this is a bit of conjecture based on few remarks here and there, but worthwhile to think upon deeper. Science Shops still exist in the Netherlands, another explanation might simply be lack of awareness and visibility. This raises the question why do science shops not have the same type of diffusion as FabLabs or Desis Lab that are so much younger?

In the end, I have several new questions, which makes me happy, as good and critical questions are hard to come up with on my own ☺. It also showed me that this conference instead of being a presentation of the outcome of my case research, is yet another step on the way to fully understand it.

Learning for Change: Piqued interest of an outsider

September 25, 2017

Jens Dorland

The sheer amount of exhilarating insight gained in TRANSIT is extraordinary, or so we tend to think when diving into the data and discussing with each other. One of my biggest interests in coming to the conference was to see how interesting outsiders find our project, what specifically they find interesting, and further deepening my insights. This blog will focus specifically on Science Shops and Living Knowledge, as I conducted that case study and presented it at a session.

The questions in the session on Science Shops circled around impact, experiences and practical advice. Impact on societal transformation is a notoriously hard question that we can only allude at. I am very satisfied with the types of local empowerment that a Science Shop can have that we analysed though.

Many however mostly sought experience and inspiration for their own work, both policy makers and academics, and a single NGO. What are the different operational models, which resources do they need etc., which was a nice confirmation of the focus we have had. The amount of questions, discussion, and general agreement with our diagrams also showed both relevance and confirmed the "truth" of our findings. The frame of a session though, did not really allow to coach specifically on how to translate science between groups, only general illustrations, explanation of practices, and the most crucial challenges.

And then afterwards, it is hard to know if our sessions will help, will result in new activities and innovations. Did we in the end focus on the most relevant parts? While having confirmed the relevance of the output on science shops we presented, we could have talked for one hour just on best practice in translating scientific knowledge for communities, and how to give such knowledge an impact. Instead we focused on operational models and how to embed in the university. My hope is then that someone in the future will return and tell, was it relevant.

Learning for Change: The hybrid nature of social innovation: its opportunities and risks of clashing values

September 25, 2017

Halima Vanhee

The aim of TRANSIT is to figure out "how social innovation leads to transformative change". Before Transit and my minor "Advancing new perspectives on economic thinking" I never heard about the term social innovation to be honest. However I have been in contact with the concept at my internship at Youth interactive "A creative entrepreneurship academy" in Santa Barbara. Youth Interactive is an afterschool Entrepreneurial Arts Academy and mentors youth led businesses. The goal is to guide students, who did not get an equal chance to education, to start up an own business. Not only do they get additional extracurricular credits, but it also boosts their confidence for a future career.

Furthermore at the TRANSIT conference I had a talk with a young researcher from the British council that set ups FabLabs and Makerspaces in London and China. She is one of the founders of the project "Living Research" which brings UK and Chinese makers and academics together. The aim is to understand the recent boom in maker culture in China, and to explore the potential crossover between Chinese and UK maker practice. One of the things they do is providing training in the technology sector for women since inequality remains an issue in China.

At the session "The hybrid nature of social innovation: its opportunities and risks of clashing values" I learned that the use of hybridity is essential and in order for it to work there should be a balance between state, market and the civil society. Unfortunately this is still an obstacle for all the aforementioned projects. I learned that people in general and business could have a major impact on society, than sometimes a government. The reason in my opinion could be because the way of working is more focused on certain area and therefore more effective. An additional reason in my opinion could be because it is easier for an individual than a government to observe what needs to change.
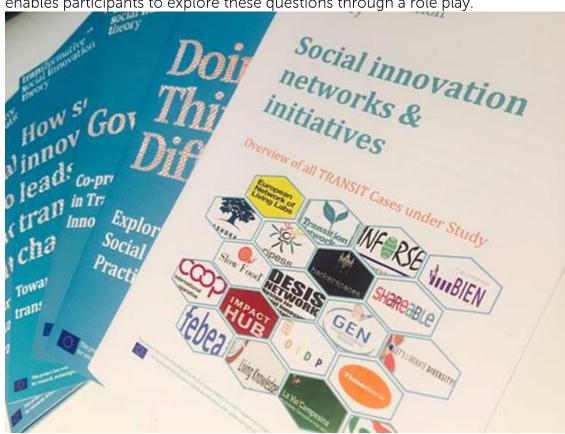
Learning for Change: Are we all Ali Baba's? If opportunity knocks, build a door.

September 25, 2017

Xu Yiqun, minor student at Erasmus school of Economics

How to balance different actor's initiatives and interests in a social innovation? How to support a social innovation through transboundary collaboration? This session enables participants to explore these questions through a role play.

The session was conducted in a role play model. The audience were asked to participate in a real social innovation project which is currently going on in Utrecht. The project named De nieuwe is a local centre run by citizens to organize activities for the elderly in the neighborhood. Each of the participant was assigned to a role from researcher, city administration, business owner of the centre and professional healthcare and welfare organization. There were two rounds of discussion held and all the participants work together toward a solution to get this social innovation sustainable funding. Here are several take-aways:

1. Utilize the function of different role: The hybrid nature of this and many other social innovation models implies that it is possible to get ideas and supports from different perspectives. So, utilize the resources from the different actors in the project will help it to access more alternative solutions and increase the chance of its success.
2. Balance the interests: At the reverse side of the coin, multi actor means that the project need to balance the different initiatives of all the relevant party and ensure that all their interests are put into context. This requires the participants to aware the position and condition of other actors. The business model they come up with should suit the demand for all parties.
3. Set short-term and long-term goals: Each actor in the project may have different speed to react. Therefore, it is more optimal to set a short-term goal which is easy to achieve and explore the long-term sustainable ecosystem along the way.

With the enlightened discussion and reflections during and after role play, the session showed that transboundary collaboration can well support sociall innovation and thus further build capacities for urban sustainable transitions.

Learning for Change: Challenging roles in the new economy

September 25, 2017

Arnout Franx

In the morning of the first day of the Learning for Change Conference I attended the session: 'Challenging roles in the new economy'. The session was on current challenges that are faced by Impact Hub Rotterdam (http://impacthub010.nl), which is a member community that connects talent, knowledge and resources of social entrepreneurs. In this blog I will review on the session.

First, one of the researchers that contributed to the TRANSIT research project provided a useful framework to put the challenges in. She explained how state, market and society relate to each other in the world of social innovation.

Then, the founder of Impact Hub Rotterdam told us more about her concept. I really recommend to check their website if you would like to know more about all the interesting initiatives that are taking place at the Impact Hub. The audience was asked to discuss two of the main challenges that are currently faced by the Impact Hub. Since there were peoples with all kinds of different backgrounds attending this session, the discussions that came about were very fruitful.

For me the most important outcome of these discussions was that the willingness to learn from one another can be seen as a key ingredient for successful social innovation. On this conditions new social structures can come about that direct us to the new economy.

Learning for Change: Interactive Play to Engage New Ways of Thinking

September 21, 2017

Abbie Caldas

Through a series of games and role-play, we explored participatory community engagement: how educational and societal structures can oppress the marginalised - and some techniques to overcome this. Ensuring communities can trust and feel empowered to share their perspective is critical in creating change.

As almost strangers, we entered the room knowing only about each other that we shared a curiosity in empowerment and education. An hour later, we had drummed together, stood on chairs, been lead blind, created languages, sculpted personas, and changed the rules. Through a series of interactive games, we explored the art of participatory community engagement and developed an intimacy, unachievable by a standard lecture. There were only seconds to jot down notes, but it didn't matter because the understanding was in our bodies and the experience, maybe more so than in words in our notebooks.

Group sharing and reflection. - Photo by Mellouki Cadat-Lampe

The lead facilitator, Luc Opdebeeck, shared inspiration from Brazilian Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," which explores how to liberate people through a process of critical awareness. A somewhat radical perspective, it requires an openness to embrace change. As participants of this workshop experienced, there is a partnership between facilitator and learners which empowers dialogue and self awareness. One person does not have all the answers s/he must impart onto passive students; we can learn, work, and live together, in a continuously evolving relationship. Stemming from this theory, the "Theatre of the Oppressed" developed by Augusto Boal, also Brazilian, uses images and actions to communicate rather than words. Eager to try it out, workshop participants trusted the process and released their own creativity and playfulness, which opened up opportunities for deeper dialogue.

By applying these games, we quickly developed group cohesion and a safe space to experiment and express ourselves. We played a rhythm on a drum as we introduced our names and performed an action which represented something we are not. Highly encouraged to get involved, it brought us into the moment, not able to be distracted and think about something else. We were then lead around the room, eyes closed, by a partner who created a language as we went along. People looked for new ideas and pushed their own boundaries.

Facilitated reflection is a key component to these games and after some laughs, we were asked where and how are we blind in life? When do we have to just trust others and go with the flow?

Further games invited more questions: What does "oppression" look like? What is your position of power? What happens when rules change? What is your limit? When are we victims of the system?
How can we change those systems that are not working?

We concluded with the recognition that we are all actors. In such a group setting, people can project their reality onto the actors which can facilitate discussion of difficult topics. Through this method, participants become more aware and more active in their own lives and it is important to work with the heart as well as the mind. With a grassroots approach of participatory engagement using theatre, communities are trained to use these tools themselves, so there is never an end to this process. This powerful approach highlights how we must understand the system in order to change it.

Expressing Emotions - Photo by Abbie Caldas

Sculpting participants into "the oppressor" and "the oppressed." - Photo by Abbie Caldas.

Luc is the Director of Formaat, a workplace for Participatory Drama: www.formaat.org

He works with marginalised people facing issues of community conflict, minority rights, homelessness, mental illness and other ethical dilemmas.

Co-Facilitator Mellouki Cadat-Lampe is a senior advisor for Movisie, a centre for social development, promoting citizen participation and independence: www.movisie.com

Jamila Talla is the Chair of the Foundation "Voice Of Afghan Women"

Learning for Change: Three ways to tackle the problem on shortage of monetary resources in time banks

September 20, 2017

Annick van der Wal

Social innovations such as time banks are often facing the problem that the monetary value of return is too low to cover costs or to guarantee a sustainable income. In the session 'The challenges of Resourcing and Diversification for Sustainability' at the TRANSIT conference, three pathways were given to tackle this problem.

For social innovations, in order to have impact potent, it is essential that they are able to sustain and grow. When a social enterprise is established, often they receive grants in the first few years that make it able for the enterprise to persist and thrive. Unfortunately, after a few years, when these grants are no longer given, a lot of start-ups stop because they have no funds to sustain.

Despite this there are some success cases of innovations which have found ways to sustain by working together with institutions to receive funds. Next are three examples of pathways which have proven to be a solution:

1 Start a second social entrepreneurship with an own income to cover the costs of the social innovation. When Partners in Crime, a time bank in Maryland, faced this problem, they started to look at what their members possessed and what they could mean for the time bank. A thrift shop was founded in which stuff donated by members is being sold to cover costs for the time bank. In exchange for the stuff members donate to the thrift shop, members receive time credits. [http://www.partnersincare.org/]

2 Embed the social innovation in a bigger organisation. Time Banking UK is a perfect example of this: Time Banking UK is an umbrella organisation of around 300 time banks in the UK. Because of the size of the organisation, it is easier to find partners, supporters and funders for the innovation and thereby sustain. [http://www.timebanking.org/]

3 Provide commissioned services. An example of this is the American Institutes for Research, a behavioral and social science research and evaluation organization that addresses complex social issues, with the main goal being improving people's lives, with a special emphasis on the disadvantaged. They receive their funds by providing assessments to governments and other organisations.
[http://www.communityscience.com]

These success stories show us that with the right organisational construction it is possible for social innovations such as time banks to sustain and thrive for many years!

Learning for Change: Social Innovations and Youth Empowerment – Insights on how to engage new generations in community action

September 20, 2017

Sofia Badini

This panel session brought together the expertise of practitioners and researchers to investigate what social innovations can do to empower young people, especially those who are at risk of marginalization because of unemployability or difficulties in obtaining bank credit. The importance of building trust and engaging in meaningful activities within youth-oriented initiatives has been emphasized through case-studies of the European Credit Unions movement (creditunionnetwork.eu), Fiare Banca Etica (ethic bank in Spain, fiarebancaetica.coop), Timebank Hull and East Riding (time bank in UK, timebankhullandeastriding.co.uk) and YouSEE (social platform in Western Balkan, youseefor.me).

The concept of empowerment goes hand in hand with independence. The common goal of these initiatives is to enable young people to build autonomous projects in life. The challenges of building an alternative local economy from the bottom up are many and not only limited to ensure commitment of young people: overlaps with the welfare system and relations with regulatory authorities are often troublesome. While time-credits benefits to volunteers run in parallel with traditional source of income, Fiare Banca Etica has had endless regulatory barriers before being able to settle as a branch of the Italian, well-established Banca Popolare Etica (bancaetica.it).

Besides those issues, it is hardly debatable that these kind of innovations, at least in their early life, rely on subsidies. A strong dependence on government funding is a weakness when the financial and political system shows resistance to not-for-profit projects. Initiatives promoting inclusiveness, solidarity and collaboration are unquestionably valuable because of their ability to network and their social impact on communities, but the integration of traditional and developing ways to support local communities is still an ongoing process.

Learning for Change: different actors in the new economy and possible levels of analysis

September 20, 2017

Yeonsoo Woo

On 14th of September 2017, the session Challenging roles in the economy took place at BlueCity 010. The session discussed the difficulty social entrepreneurs and local initiatives face during collaboration, and the ways they can deal with it. Different actors and their different interests have also been looked into.

In the new economy, the matter of collaboration requires different actors interacting with each other. Amelie, the speaker, discussed the different actors with different characteristics (see figure 1). Three main actors - State, Community and Market - show different characteristics. Regarding public/private distinction, state stays in the realm of the public while community and market stays private sectors. In terms of formality, community is classified as informal while state and market are as formal. Lastly, the actors are distinguished according to non-profit/profit orientation. In this distinction, market stays as profit-oriented while state and community are not. The 4th sector of civil society is created in the joint of all three actors.

During the session, Amelie emphasised the fact that there is a misalignment of interests of different sectors. For example, the Impact Hub Rotterdam deals with a company money and needs to take the financial problem into their account. The community with which it works with mainly consists of volunteers and does not have to take care of the budget problem. As a result, the notion of 'we' and 'they' has been created within the same working block.

In order to discuss this problem, we had time to come up with the ideas on the question: "which conditions allow actors to value each other?" (see figure 2). My idea on this concerns the importance of different focus and different levels of analysis. If we were to look at problems from an individual level, that is community, market, and state, there will inevitably be conflicts over interests. However, if they develop a collective group identity, then we can look at the problem on a broader level which offers collective identity and interests. In this way, we further create the firm root of development in the new economy.