



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



WILCO

Welfare innovations
at the local level
in favour of cohesion

WELFARE INNOVATIONS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN FAVOUR OF COHESION (WILCO)

Lessons learnt about the sustainability and diffusion of Social Innovation, based on the evidence of the WILCO project.

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INTRODUCTION

The project witnessed the emergence of several types of innovations, including innovations in services and their ways to address users, innovations in regulations and governance, and more generally innovations in the nature of the local welfare system. The aim was to identify innovative practices in European cities and the factors that make them emerge and spread by setting them against the context of current social problems and urban policies in 20 cities across Europe.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The comparative analysis gave us an interesting insight into how social innovations develop, which is in some ways different from some prevailing perceptions.

Success and long-term sustainability are the exception, not the norm

There is a tendency in publicity on social innovation to discuss successful cases and those that are scaled up to a system-wide level. Based on our evidence, it must be concluded that the reality of local social innovations is a different one. The majority remain local and last only a limited number of years. The emphasis on success stories and scaling-up is an important one, with implications for the direction of future funding; but it is equally important to realise that the majority of local innovations (especially those not originating in professional organisations) do not fit such a pattern of growth and that one should not disregard the cumulative effect of the many small, temporary initiatives that are of high value within their local context.

Of the innovations we studied, the majority were either discontinued after a few years or faced an uncertain future in the short term. Cutbacks in public sector funding no doubt play a part in this, but the underlying structural dynamics, such as project-based funding, dependence on charismatic initiators and shifting political fashions, suggest that the underlying conditions are of a structural nature.

The underlying assumption of several studies and public statements is that economic growth and social innovation in cities are complementary and part of a single strategy to make cities more attractive, competitive and liveable. Yet our evidence bears out that this is only partially the case. There are various innovations that indeed do fit the strategies of cities to become globally competitive places, attractive for urban elites. Urban gardening is one such example.

However, there are various innovations that are irrelevant to such strategies, for instance, because they focus on people at the fringes of urban society. Such types of innovations have proven especially vulnerable to cutbacks and shifts in the political mood. The most sustainable innovations were those that were either fully integrated into the local welfare administration or even initiated by the local authorities. Generally, local authorities tended to favour innovations that were complementary to their growth strategy.

Having said that, there were major differences in the governance style of local authorities, which affected the local potential for generating and sustaining social innovation. Innovations can more easily gain recognition and sustainability where authorities proved open to contributions to local welfare by different parties. To some extent such openness appeared related to institutional factors, such as the level of decentralisation within the state structure, it also depended on the nature of local politics.

Just as social innovation is not necessarily complementary to economic growth, it is not to be seen as a substitute for local welfare policy. Social innovations provide crucial impulses for such systems to change for the better and fill in the cracks; yet they are, based on our evidence, usually not conceived as alternatives to existing welfare programmes. Local welfare systems are themselves not works of a grand design, but patchworks of different approaches and instruments, with large variations depending both on the city and the policy field. On the one hand, it is a step forward that social innovation is now increasingly recognised as part of this 'welfare mix'; on the other hand, this should not be overstretched by making it part of a top-down strategy that seeks to integrate it into a coherent system. That is simply not how social innovation works.

Diffusing innovations is not essentially different from innovating

Spreading best practices is crucial to making social innovation more effective. However, it is not a quick fix. Many publications on the diffusion of innovations are based on business contexts and on products, rather than services, which means that it is important to identify clearly how local social innovations are different. The nature of products made for the commercial market is that they are not made primarily for the local market, but deliberately designed to spread widely to other places.

Social innovations, by contrast, are usually initiated to solve a local problem. Wider diffusion is only of secondary importance to the innovators, if not irrelevant. The image of the highly visible entrepreneur giving TedX talks is, in this case, unrepresentative. Therefore it is especially important for this type of innovation to have intermediaries, who know the situation on the ground and assess what it takes for innovations to take root elsewhere. There was no evidence that at this point in time established EU channels play a significant role in this process.

Unlike many products, which can shift places easily, social innovations have to be 'translated' to be effective elsewhere. It is rare to have a straight transfer from an idea from one place to another, although we did find some examples of this (for initiatives that were typically low-resource, low-skill).

The process of reconstruction and translation requires new ways of collaboration, for example, between governments and citizens, and new ways of thinking. This process does not start when an innovation is introduced, but usually well before that. Rather, it is the other way round: an innovation is adopted when minds are ripe. A good idea is not convincing in itself – it comes when people are open to it. What this means is that adopting an innovation from elsewhere is, from the perspective of the adopting parties, not fundamentally different from inventing one.

All of this means that the diffusion of social innovation is, first of all, hard work, and second, by necessity the combined effort of many different players. Encouraging social innovation is therefore best done by allocating resources, not only to spreading information and building networks, but also to boundary spanning and translation activities. We therefore welcome the initiative for Social Innovation Communities (although we feel it is a pity that collaboration must be organised through a competitive tender). Such Communities fit well with the evidence and lessons learnt from the WILCO project and similar European projects.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a tendency in publicity on social innovation to discuss successful cases and those that are scaled up to a system-wide level. Based on our evidence, it must be concluded that the reality of local social innovations is a different one. Many social innovations are short-lived and remain small in scope.
2. Public policy should not focus singularly on the selective group of innovations that can be mainstreamed. Instead, it should pay more attention to the capacity of cities to continue generating many new initiatives of a highly local nature.
3. Social innovation does not necessarily complement strategies for economic growth, nor is it necessarily an adequate substitute for existing welfare policies. It can in specific cases; but general statements to this effect should be distrusted.
4. Approaches or projects will in some way need to be adapted to the context into which they are adopted. Encouraging social innovation is best done by allocating resources, not only to spreading information and building networks, but also to boundary spanning and translation activities. It is essential to include local people who know the situation on the ground and assess what it takes for innovations to take root elsewhere.
5. The concept behind a social innovation is less important than the collaborative relationships needed to implement it in a local context.
6. Innovations can more easily gain recognition and sustainability where there was an open governance style, that is, where authorities proved open to contributions to local welfare by different parties. To some extent such openness derives from structural features of administrative systems, but policymakers and officials in all types of systems have proven capable of achieving it.

WILCO had the following goals:

- **To identify innovative practices in European cities and the factors that make them emerge and spread**
- **To set them against the context of current social problems and urban policies**
- **To make recommendations how to encourage local social innovation.**

For this purpose, the project brought together universities from ten countries (Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK), as well as the research networks EMES and NISPACEE. The project was coordinated by Radboud University Nijmegen.

We selected twenty European cities (two per country) on which we focused our research. The chosen cities were: Münster and Berlin Friedrichshain – Kreuzberg (DE); Zagreb and Varaždin (HR); Amsterdam and Nijmegen (NL); Barcelona and Pamplona (ES); Milan and Brescia (IT); Stockholm and Malmö (SE); Birmingham and Medway area (UK); Warsaw and Płock (PL); Lille and Nantes (FR); Bern and Genève (CH).

Below we provide an overview of the methodology used throughout the different stages of the WILCO project.

First stage

The first part of the project consisted of mapping the context of social innovations at the local level. We described the historical-institutional background on the basis of two dimensions, the structure of the overall welfare state and the degree of centralisation and the position of ‘the local’ in shaping welfare. For this purpose, we made an inventory of variables that must be regarded as formal pre-conditions for local welfare policies and initiatives, including key regulations, financial provisions, contractual arrangements and entitlements. Because at this concrete level there were many changes in key variables (e.g. in financial and regulatory conditions), we set a time frame covering the last 10 years. The variables were specified for three policy fields central to the project: child care, employment and housing.

We started with a literature review. To be sure our information was up-to-date, we also conducted six interviews per country (two in each of the three policy fields, with public officials and professionals), sixty overall.

Second stage

After we had mapped these national backgrounds to social innovation, we moved to the local level. We chose twenty European cities (two per country) on which we focused our remaining research. The chosen cities were: Münster and Berlin Friedrichshain – Kreuzberg (DE); Zagreb and Varaždin (HR); Amsterdam and Nijmegen (NL); Barcelona and Pamplona (ES); Milan and Brescia (IT); Stockholm and Malmö (SE); Birmingham and Medway area (UK); Warsaw and Płock (PL); Lille and Nantes (FR); Bern and Genève (CH). For the twenty chosen cities, we gathered data about social inequality and exclusion in the local labour market, housing market and child care facilities, as well as more general data on patterns of social cohesion. Specifically, we identified the relative position of age, gender and migrant groups with respect to general patterns of social inequality and exclusion.

Data collection consisted of two parts. The first was an analysis of the Eurostat Database Urban Audit that includes data for more than 200 European cities, constituted the background for our comparative analysis. The following aspects were analysed: the structure of the labour market (employment by sector, activity rate by gender and age, unemployment rate by gender and age); the demographic structure (changes in the population over the last ten years, the structure of the population by age, proportion of immigrants on the overall population, old age dependency ratio), the inequality structure (gaps in the unemployment rates between centre and periphery, inequalities in the education level of the population, gender gaps in the activity rate and employment). The second part consisted of 360 intensive interviews, thirty-six in each country (six interviews for each group mentioned above in each city). The analysis was aimed at describing the living conditions of these people experiencing difficult situations and at identifying the strategies they adopt in order to deal with these situations. Special attention was paid to the factors preventing these people from getting social benefits and support from public, private or non-profit services.

On the basis of these data we wrote city reports, which included the following:

- An analysis of the main characteristics and trends of the local labour market (main sectors, employment and unemployment levels, groups of population mainly affected by long-term unemployment);
- An analysis of demographic structure of the population and of the trends taking place in the last 10 years (proportion of the elderly, fertility and natality rates, proportion of immigrants and their distribution in the urban territory, etc.);
- An analysis of the housing market, with special attention to critical situations such as overcrowding, difficult affordability, evictions, homelessness; a special attention will be paid also to the territorial distribution of the population most at risk and to identify critical urban areas with high concentration of problematic social groups;
- An analysis of the use of child care services, both public and private, with the aim of identifying specific situations characterised by a mismatch between supply and demand.

The interviews were translated into Excel sheets, as a basis for the analysis. The analysis was aimed at describing the living conditions of these people experiencing difficult situations and at identifying the strategies they adopt in order to deal with these situations. Special attention has been paid to understand what are the main factors preventing these people from getting social benefits and support from public, private or non-profit services.

The comparative analysis among similar situations in different cities allowed us to clarify the local factors influencing why and how people get into these situations (or are protected from them). The reconstruction of the specific everyday strategies of people affected by these problems allowed an understanding not only their needs, but also the resources (social networks, welfare benefits, reintegration programmes) that people at risk can mobilise in order to alleviate their own situation. This analysis helped to identify the specific local innovations that could be developed in order to meet these social needs.

Third stage

Having identified the context of innovations in local welfare in the first part of the project, the project turned to the innovations themselves. In order to do so, a distinction was made between the core ideas behind local welfare and the concrete approaches and instruments through which local welfare is implemented.

The first part of the analysis focused on discourses about social inequality and social cohesion in the three policy fields mentioned above, revealing the core ideas that drive innovations in local welfare. The key methods used were:

- Document analysis: content analysis of policy documents, minutes of local council meetings and a media analysis.
- Interviews: Researchers held 36 qualitative semi-structured interviews per country, with stakeholders both within the analysed fields and at the level of general policy. For each policy field, we selected policymakers (3), civil servants (3), and representatives of civil society organisations (3), representatives of our three chosen groups (3).
- Focus groups: To involve stakeholders in the progress of the research, one focus group meeting was organised in each city to which we invited policymakers, civil servants, representatives of civil society organisations and representatives of the three groups of interest.

The data were analysed and organised along guidelines spread by the WP leader, the University of Geneva.

After the discourses, we described instruments and approaches that are used to fight against social inequality and stimulate social cohesion. By virtue of the knowledge accumulated in previous phases of the research, we could assess how instruments and approaches were innovative in their context and whether they would be so in another context. In total, we gathered information about 77 social innovations.

A number of criteria were used to select innovations:

- An innovation is innovative in its specific context. So, what mattered is whether an innovation was regarded as new in a particular city. It did not have to be path-breaking on a European or global scale.
- Since we looked as well at the dynamics of social innovations, we selected only those that have overcome the very inception stage. According to this criterion, every selected innovation had to have existed for at least one year (since March 2011) in order to be scrutinized. The innovations we looked at are about ideas or approaches that have been implemented in practice to some degree. This "project" can be an organisation or an organisational subunit with new services that clearly differs from what existed so far in the field, but it can also be a measure/intervention such as a new transfer, tax or resource arrangement.
- Social innovations could refer to a large project, but also to a cluster of small, similar projects. In such a case, it was the task to describe the whole cluster and zoom in on one or two of the small cases, to get a sense of the micro-dynamics.
- In case the innovation was part of a government program meant to promote, finance and regulate an innovative approach, only those innovations from wider national programs that could be seen as "local" – in the sense that there was a considerable degree of freedom to shape them in the local context – were picked up.
- Since social innovations generally included both bottom-up and top-down elements, we chose projects with variations in the mix (i.e. both innovations that were more citizen-driven as well as others with a stronger government involvement, etc.) in order to get a good sense of the different dynamics.

- As a mandatory requirement, in each city at least three and at most six innovations had to be featured and analysed by each team. The actual number of cases chosen in a city depended largely on the complexity of the respective cases.
- Each team had to cover all the three policy fields (child care, employment and housing) and target groups (single mothers, youngsters and migrants).

In addition to the material collected at previous stages, new data were gathered through interviews, with policymakers, professionals and users, at least 18 per country team (180 overall).

The data were analysed and organised along guidelines spread by the WP leader, Justus-Liebig University Giessen.

Fourth stage

At the final stage of the project, the data from the preceding stages of the project were analysed, integrated and discussed with stakeholders. It resulted in this final report and various other outputs.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Welfare Innovations at the Local Level in Favour of Cohesion (WILCO)
COORDINATOR	Taco Brandsen, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, t.brandsen@fm.ru.nl
CONSORTIUM	<p>Centre de recherche et d'information sur la démocratie et l'autonomie – CRIDA Paris, France</p> <p>EMES European Research Network – EMES Belgium</p> <p>Ersta Sköndal Högskola – ESUC Stockholm, Sweden</p> <p>European Research Services GmbH – ERS Germany</p> <p>Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen – JLU Giessen, Germany</p> <p>The Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe – NISPACEE Slovakia</p> <p>Politecnico di Milano – POLIMI Milano, Italy</p> <p>Radboud University Nijmegen – RUN Nijmegen, The Netherlands</p>

Universitat de Barcelona, Centre for Cultural, Policy and Society Studies –
CECUPS Barcelona, Spain

Université de Genève, Faculté des Sciences, Department of Sociology –
UNIGE
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University of Kent, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research
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Canterbury, United Kingdom

University of Zagreb, Institute for Social Policy – ISP
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Warsaw University – WU
Warsaw, Poland

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BUDGET

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WEBSITE

www.wilcoproject.eu

**FOR MORE
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FURTHER READING

Adalbert Evers, Benjamin Ewert and Taco Brandsen (eds.) (2014) *Social
Innovations for social cohesion 77 cases 20 European cities*, WILCO
Publication #82. ISBN: 978-2-930773-00-1. Available in PDF, eReader and
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Costanzo Ranci, Taco Brandsen and Stefania Sabatinelli (eds.) (2014), *Social Vulnerability in European Cities: The Role of Local Welfare in Times of Crisis*, Macmillan. Available for purchase at <http://us.macmillan.com/socialvulnerabilityineuropeancities/CostanzoRanci>

WILCO Final Documentary: A final documentary divided in the following three individual video pieces published at the end of the Project:

1. Social vulnerability in European cities
2. Social Innovations across Europe
3. Governance of innovation across European cities

Available at <http://www.wilcoproject.eu/videos>