

Policy Research Alert

FROM FLASH-IT, A DISSEMINATION PROJECT RELATING EUROPEAN POLICY PRIORITIES TO EU-FUNDED RESEARCH IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

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Social Innovation: Optimizing the Win-Win Approach

Harnessing the potential of social innovation has become a priority for European public policy. But before that potential can be systematically exploited, the drivers and dynamics of social innovation must be better understood. The EU-funded TEPSIE¹ research project is helping to fill that knowledge gap.

Exploring the theoretical, empirical and policy foundations of social innovation, the TEPSIE consortium has reached out to researchers and policymakers around the world. Among the insights gained through the project's collaborative efforts to date are those emerging from the recent Social Frontiers² conference in London. Organized jointly by NESTA (the UK's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), TEPSIE, Glasgow Caledonian University and the Rockefeller Foundation, the conference transcended national and disciplinary boundaries to facilitate an invigorating exchange of social innovation ideas. While a full summary report on the conference is still in preparation, blog dispatches from the event highlight some of the policy-relevant observations at the centre of discussion.

In one session focusing on collaboration and competition in the public sector, for example, it was mooted that efforts to optimize innovation in the public sector have led to a misguided search for individual public innovation heroes. Instead, it was suggested, innovation in the public sector should be regarded as a team sport involving multi-actor collaboration among convenors, facilitators and catalysts. During the ensuing discussion participants shared illuminating anecdotes about social innovation from different cultural contexts, with delegates noting that having the latitude to make (and learn from) mistakes could be a vital part of the innovation heuristic. In that same vein it was observed that efforts to eliminate risk in the public sector may diminish potential for innovation.

Examining research methodologies associated with social innovation, another session at the Social Frontiers conference debated the merits of case studies and databases. While one case study from Egypt illustrated the value of recognizing anthropological factors in social innovation, researchers from Canada stressed the importance of transcending case study methodology to consider unexplored relationships between key sections in databases.

As TEPSIE enters its third and final year, the consortium has begun a critical phase in consolidating its findings and providing intellectual impetus for social innovation.

¹ The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe (www.tepsie.eu/); EC Grant Agreement No. 290771

² <http://siresearch.eu/event/social-frontiers-next-edge-social-innovation-research>