Conference Report

Social Innovation Europe Launches in Brussels: the Innovation Union moves forward

On March 16th and 17th the Social Innovation Europe Initiative launched in Brussels. The launch drew social innovators/practitioners, academics, entrepreneurs, strategists, policy makers and innovators from across the 27 member states. The event was fully subscribed almost as soon as it was announced.

The first day of events took place in a Vaudeville music hall. Henriette van Eijl from the Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry and Louise Pulford, who manages the Social Innovation eXchange acted as compères. Musical guests Briezz began the proceedings with light-hearted fanfare.

This was immediately followed by statements from Commissioner László Andor, the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Commissioner Andor remarked that after a crisis, “we cannot rely on conventional tools” to help us rebuild our societies and economies. Instead, he suggested that “we need to make risk-taking worthwhile,” and put our trust in socially innovative solutions. He also encouraged social innovation to embrace the potential of the social economy and facilitate its development, and he would like to see "social innovation become an integral part of social policies and schemes, helping us to be more responsive to emerging social needs."

"We need to make risk-taking worthwhile."
- Commissioner László Andor

Commissioner Andor was followed by statements from Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive of the Young Foundation, Diogo Vasconcelos, Distinguished Fellow at CISCO and the chair of the Social Innovation eXchange, and Louise Pulford, of the Social Innovation eXchange, who will lead the consortium which will deliver on the Social Innovation Europe Initiative. Each of them stressed the need for social innovation, to create new markets, to create new jobs, and to change our idea of what constitutes growth and improvement. Louise Pulford stressed that the Initiative will consolidate networks—it will strengthen the ties between social innovation workers across Europe and streamline the field, allowing innovators to find better solutions faster.
These remarks were followed by a panel discussion entitled “Putting a face to the policy: perspectives from different Directorates-General in the European Commission” featuring Henriette van Eijl from DG Enterprise and Industry; Olivier Rouland from DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion; Peter Wintlev-Jensen from DG Information Society and Media, Research and Innovation, Philippe Keraudren from the DG for Research and Innovation, and Liesbet de Letter from DG for Regional Policy; and finally Agnes Hubert from the EC’s Bureau of European Policy Advisors (BEPA). This panel was chaired by Peter Dröll from DG Enterprise and Industry. During this energetic panel, speakers explained their department's interaction with social innovation through a series of objects, including a 3 meter rowing blade, a laser pointer, a Hoberman's Sphere, a picture of a French 19th century wedding celebration, an owl and a broom. These objects symbolized the speed at which social innovation can effect change, its ability to pinpoint goals, the interconnectedness it brings between departments—and the red tape it can create—as well as its potential to engender wisdom, and its potential to bring sweeping change.

Another panel followed this discussion. It showcased the work of 6 prominent social innovation pioneers. Ana Vale of EQUAL in Portugal discussed her model for mainstreaming social innovations. Vickie Cammack of Tyze Personal Networks in Canada talked about creating a secure, personal, online network for people facing life-challenges, as well as the savings this kind of initiative could generate for governments funding healthcare. Gorka Espiau of DenokInn spoke about DenokInn’s Social Innovation Park in Bilbao, Spain, and the benefits of making social innovations tangible and marketable. Martin Hirsch of the Agency for Civil Service in France argued for the use of experimental techniques in social circumstances, and joked that sometimes you need to join the government to bring your innovations to life. Simon Roberts of Ideas Bazaar in the United Kingdom talked about using information technology to connect older people virtually, and actually. Mirosław Miller of the Warsawskie Centrum EIT+ in Poland considered the need for academics to break out of the ivory tower and collaborate with the private and public sectors.

Dinner followed this panel, with each course punctuated by presentations which exemplified the great social innovation projects happening all over Europe. Bruno Lafelice from VitaEver, Meinrad Armbruster from Eltern-AG, Julie Caulier-Grice from the Dialogue Café and Ercan Tutar from the Dreams Academy all presented their award-winning innovations—each had won recognition in the This Is European Social Innovation contest, which was run by SIX and Euclid Network to highlight a selection of inspiring social innovation stories in different sectors, throughout Europe. Francis Beland of the X Prize Foundation also presented on prize-giving and its ability to focus creativity and deliver results.

The second day of events began with remarks by Geoff Mulgan, and the official launch of the Social Innovation Europe Initiative by José Manuel Durão Barroso, President of the European Commission. President Barroso affirmed that social innovation exists at the point where social and economic categories blur; it is through blending these categories that social innovations can have a major impact. He asserted that innovations can empower

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citizens to become co-creators of new enterprises and services. He stated that “it is not smart to cut investment in innovation,” and that now is the time to draw on the “strong European tradition of social innovation,” to rebuild markets, and make Europe a world leader.

He professed faith that the participants in Social Innovation Europe would produce invaluable solutions to Europe’s challenges, and that he would be attentive the outcomes of the initiative. His speech demonstrated both his commitment to the Commission’s Innovation Union, and his confidence in the Social Innovation Europe Initiative’s ability to enable a better, smarter Europe.

A third panel discussion followed President Barroso’s speech. This panel asked “What does Europe need to do now?” This panel featured Ingrid Lieten, the Deputy Prime Minister of Flanders; Isobel Mota, Trustee of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; Mercedes Bresso, President of the Committee of the Regions; Barbara Eros, Strategic Program Director of DemNet; and finally Filippo Addarii, Executive Director of the Euclid Network. Diogo Vasconcelos moderated a lively discussion on the future opportunities for social innovation from the varied perspectives of the panel. The focus was on concrete actions that embrace the social innovation agenda as well as the measurement of social innovation, the role of intermediaries and the values that motivate entrepreneurs.

Following this panel, participants broke into groups for two sets of workshops. The first three workshops addressed the ‘how’ of social innovation, and some of the tools we need to develop to advance innovation, namely the ecology of finance, the evaluation of social innovations and the routes to scaling up of successful social innovations. These workshops were led by Luc Soete of UNU-MERIT, Peter Ramsden of Freiss Ltd. and Ruth Owen of FEANTSA, respectively. The second set of workshops addressed priority areas, in line with Europe’s grand societal challenges, namely active ageing in Europe, workplace innovation, as well as cities and eco-innovation. These workshops were moderated by Jeremy Millard of the Danish Technological Institute; Peter Totterdill of Workplace Innovation Ltd; and finally Maria Da Graça Carvalho, MEP, respectively.

Social innovation ideas generated in these workshops were gathered by rapporteurs and brought to an ideas auction led by Marcel Brouwer, a professional auctioneer of Gavelers BV. Popular innovations included a loan scheme for applied research in social innovation, a design model to balance portfolios for those who support many social ventures, a strategy for disseminating innovations through community-supported pop-up shops, infrastructure to bridge the gap between evidence-based practice and common practice, and certifying good practice, among others. Details of all of these ideas will be listed on the Social Innovation Europe website (socialinnovationeurope.eu)
Final remarks were given by Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science and Diogo Vasconcelos. Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn focused on the practical ways that the Commission could support innovation. She detailed the work of the 7th Framework Programme, and pledged that its successor would also engage with social innovation projects. She also mentioned plans to fund a large-scale mapping of social innovations across Europe, thereby generating an invaluable strategic resource for funding bodies and policy makers. Finally, Diogo Vasconcelos drew events to a close, reminding participants to remember and use the insights and connections made over the past two days. He urged the conference participants to embrace the social innovation agenda, to challenge current ways of working, to use their imagination and creativity to ensure that Europe, with its 500 million people—one third of the world’s GDP—will also be a leader on social innovation.

This event, with its mix of speeches from Commissioners, panel discussions of social innovation practitioners, workshops on building a social innovation ecosystem, lots of space for informal learning and sharing, not to mention an old Belgian music hall, music from Briezz, and great food, left participants excited and energised. The cross sector nature of the participants highlighted that social innovation is not just innovation in social policy, but innovating for societal needs, which means connecting the business, the public and the "third" sectors. The event confirmed that Europe’s institutions can contribute a lot to social innovation, but social innovation can also contribute a lot to Europe's institutions. The hard work for the social innovation Europe Initiative starts now and we are looking forward to it!

Moving forward, the Social Innovation Europe initiative will incorporate the ideas and examples generated at this launch event into a series of reports. The first report on Financing Social Innovations will be published in June 2011. Subsequent reports, which will deal with evaluating social innovations and recommending next steps, will be published in November 2011 and May 2012, respectively.

The Social Innovation Europe initiative will also generate an online hub which will draw on the networks and expertise established at the event. This website will feature case studies of the most successful social innovations, profiles of leading social innovators, analysis by thought leaders, and information on the latest policies affecting the field. This website offers an opportunity for further participation in the initiative. If you would like to have your organization profiled, or to publicize your latest research, or to debate a policy, or to find funding, this website will be open to your questions and contributions. If you want to get involved in the Social Innovation Europe Initiative through the website, or by other means, please contact connor.friesen(AT)youngfoudnation.org.

The Social Innovation Europe Initiative is funded by the European Commission, DG Enterprise and Industry. The initiative will be run by a group of partners including the Euclid Network and the Danish Technological Institute, and will be led by the Social Innovation eXchange (SIX) at the Young Foundation.

“Looking forward to all the opportunities for co-creation that the SIE initiative is presenting.”
-participant, Canada

“There were plenty of useful ideas for all to concrete the social innovation strategy for the next EU agenda.”
-participant, Brussels

“An inspiring event.”
-participant, Italy