



More Buzz on When Bees Meet Trees*

I first heard about the paper *When Bees Meet Trees* from Tim Draimin, who heads up the Social Innovation Generation National team. He thought the report, which explores how large social sector organizations can help scale social innovation, would be of interest and asked me to share a few thoughts. Little did Tim know that I would write several paragraphs critiquing the paper.

I had the feeling that the term ‘social innovation’ was used in this paper very broadly and loosely to apply to almost any change in the social context, in social service delivery or within a social organization. To give just one small example, the paper cites as a major innovation the inclusion of hearing aids on the list of items covered by the National Health Service in the UK. Granted, this is an excellent and very welcome policy shift. But is it a social innovation? (See the [SiG knowledge hub](#) for a [definition of social innovation](#).)

Any term can become almost meaningless if it is employed too loosely and is applied to characterize virtually any type of change. I believe that there is a need for more conceptual clarity around the notion of social innovation. For example, there is not a clear distinction made in this paper – or in conversations more generally – between the concept of social innovation, (characterized by durability, impact and scale) and social sector innovation. The latter is less broad and represents one subset of the former concept. I had some difficulty with the paper advising the social service sector to embrace social innovation because it was written in such general terms. The paper’s call to “engage with social innovation, and commit at a leadership and business planning level to trying to support social innovation reach scale” needs to be better explained.

The paper does set out a very helpful list of how-to’s for enabling social sector innovation but it should make a conceptual distinction between internal organizational innovations and substantial qualitative innovations in service delivery. For example, there are innovations within organizations in terms of how they communicate; how they raise funds and finance their operations; how they learn and communicate with their members; and how they train their staff. However, these internal actions may not change the methods or interventions they employ to deliver their services.

* This blog was published on the *Social Innovation Generation* (SiG) website on January 27, 2014.

Presumably, social sector innovation implies at least a disruptive shift in service delivery and, ideally, a modification of organizational processes as well. Sarah Schulman’s work in Australia focuses on profound changes in service delivery, which then lead to internal organizational shifts.

Moreover, the distinction between organizational incremental change and radical change to approaching a problem is not well made. Organizational reforms are often made by modifying the current procedures in place. They start with the status quo and build up from there. These shifts are primarily process-based. Disruptive reforms, by contrast, start with an identified problem and ask what needs to be done to tackle the challenge more effectively. These reforms are mainly outcomes-based.

It also seems to me that the impetus for disruptive change may have to come from some place outside existing organizations (e.g., a lab or the “bees,” like small innovative organizations). The large social sector organizations or “trees” typically will not select new methods that end up cutting themselves down. The bees have an important role to play in stirring up the pot.

Finally, I believe that another conceptual disaggregation is required. The social sector itself is not a monolith. It actually comprises a wide range of generic interventions that apply to many groups within the population (e.g., affordable housing; training) and group-specific interventions (e.g., persons with disabilities; children in care). I am not sure whether the to-do list set out in this paper is equally applicable to all these components.

Although there is a need to break down the silos within the social sector, I think this has to be done from a different starting point than what the paper advocates. The shift should start from the community rather than the organizations currently involved in service delivery. The latter tend to be in survival rather than experimental mode. Current funding structures don’t encourage the required experimentation. Consequently, profound shifts likely will not come from within the organizations themselves. They will feel comfortable engaging in a few upgrades and modifications to their internal processes. While important, that is not what disruptive change is all about. Small nimble organizations and the broader community offer the most promising spaces for radical innovation.

Sherri Torjman

Copyright © 2014 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy
1354 Wellington Street West, 3rd Floor, Ottawa, ON K1Y 3C3 CANADA
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org Twitter: @CaledonINST
Tel/Fax: (613) 729-3340