

SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR REFUGEE INCLUSION SEMINAR

LESSONS LEARNT

For societies to become really inclusive we need innovation at all levels (political, administrative and grass-roots). Innovation is not only an idea leading to a “project”, but most and foremost a vision of how people and institutions should collaborate in order to put in place processes that can lead to real, systemic change.

Some of the social innovation initiatives that were presented during the seminar, if scaled up with the support of institutions, could become **a tool for systemic change**. For example, the concept of ‘blended education’, as developed by Kiron Open Higher Education, could represent a breakthrough in higher education for everyone by addressing social justice issues, including income inequality or geographical isolation. Again, the experience of cities like Erlangen, Gdansk and Sahab showed how the arrival of refugees opened up participation spaces for all citizens by challenging the overall manner in which a city works and engages citizens.

To provoke this sort of transformational social change innovators should aim at a **meaningful scale** of innovation and at a **paradigm shift**. But such a shift will occur only if supported by **leaders’ willingness to break out of institutional and ideological inertia and routine, meeting creativity, enthusiasm and organisational skills on the ground**. The transformation of Medellin from the “Murder capital” to the “Most innovative city” in the world, for example, happened through a massive reprioritisation of public funds to develop infrastructures, transport, schools, libraries and homes and through a commitment to reach standards of excellence, dignity and beauty. The “Miracle of Medellin” was made possible by **collaborating outside the usual silos**, by bringing together politicians, entrepreneurs and activists from the social edge.

Furthermore, a key success factor for refugee inclusion is the **takeover of activities by refugees themselves**. They know best what their needs are and they can effectively spread information within their respective communities. When traumatised and destitute people arrive, it is normal to care for them and help them, but in this situation it is easy to forget that they also have skills, resources and desire to shape their own destiny. Therefore systems of support more often than not deprive them of agency. On the other hand, innovation, especially through technology, can significantly reduce the threshold for refugees taking part in society in terms of previous contacts, social history, intermediaries, power and language skills. Innovative initiatives which rely on refugees as key actors and promoters have demonstrated the diversity advantage and shown the win-win within power sharing, reciprocity and cultural/social symmetry within the community.

The model of refugee inclusion should, then, be based as much as possible on **co-design**: design with the users, and not for them. The experience of Techfugees can offer helpful insights on this regard. After six first months of gathering tech solutions which were focused on creating “The App” which would solve all the problems, Techfugees understood the importance of going on the ground and gathering information from NGOs to better understand the actual context-specific problems. They also recognised the imperative of gathering more people with refugee background during hackathons in order for them not only to tell their story, but also to co-create technology in a way that was meaningful and relevant.

Another crucial lesson which emerged during the Seminar is that in order to achieve real change **innovators need to be bold** and focus on what the various players can do together in the medium-long run. When dealing with refugee inclusion we should also focus on how the world can become a better place if we use technology and connectivity to make the global knowledge accessible to all in a more equal and fair way.



As a matter of fact, the bold thinking when it comes to integration is not just about inclusion, is the recognition that the quality of the places we live in defines how long and how well we live. Therefore, the places that figure out how to draw on the power of their diverse social capital will be the places that thrive. These are the places that not only welcome newcomers and protect them, but also make them agents of success.

For these reasons, we have to **pool together** our efforts, resources and movements to address the system and not only the different challenges: inclusion of newcomers also requires a rethinking of the current system. Rather than pushing newcomers into the dysfunctional labour market, we need to lobby for the recognition of “soft occupations” that today do not have the necessary recognition within society (teachers, nurses, etc.), as well as favour the quick insertion of refugees in skills trainings combined with on the job-language training.

Finally, consideration should be given to the **role of institutions**. As a matter of fact one of the main consequences of the “refugee crisis” was the mobilisation of civil society and a change in the social contract, with private citizens realising they are part of the system too, and therefore, that they should not only delegate to institutions, but act within their own capacities. The story of the current refugee arrivals is not only a story of tension, fear, desperation and pain, it is also a story of fabulous solidarity, hope and creativity.

It is somehow clear that institutions might not be the actor which spontaneously innovate, but it is also clear that they **can and should be the first one to join in and support the innovators**. Let’s take the example of Bureaucrazy: this app is aiming at simplifying and making accessible bureaucratic forms to all newcomers (and potentially Germans as well) by using simple questions and answers in their own languages. It follows naturally that initiatives like this should be acquired and used by governments.

Another important role of institutions is to **promote a narrative shift**, inspiring people by sharing examples of success, like the Intercultural Cities Network has been doing for the last 10 years, harnessing the Diversity Advantage and Integration as a win-win across Europe and the globe.

Sometimes citizens just need to know that institutions are there and that they are **in control** of the situation. In Grande-Synthe (North of France), for example, once the border with the UK in Calais was blocked, the refugee population increased from 60 to more than 1,000 people in a month. Damien Carême, the Mayor of this town inhabited by 22,000 people, understood from the beginning the need to address the local community as an actor of inclusion. Over 10,000 citizens-volunteers came to the camp in just one month and no complaints nor protests were registered, nor any criminal act in the first six months of activity.

Finally, big institutions should learn from the business world and **walk the talk**: the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Department of the Canadian Government, for example, managed to go over legal hurdles to create internships for newcomers, and has now helped 400 refugees in finding employment.

Another example comes from the State of Victoria (Australia), which developed the project “Recruit smarter”, based on the acceptance that unconscious bias exist in government recruiting. The project is being tested by three government departments, including treasury and finance. It works through a “blind recruitment process” whereby personal data about the candidate is removed at the time of application.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Need to raise awareness in the innovation community about effective targeting of the whole population**

Currently, the majority of initiatives exclusively targets refugees' needs, disregarding those of the host societies. Effective initiatives should also include awareness raising among host communities by directly bringing them in touch with newcomers, to identify common needs, priorities and desires. This avoids tensions between both categories and creates the ground to fully develop the diversity advantage.

- **Need to create a transformation hub**

Being at the front-line often means that daily emergencies obfuscate long-term perspective and make it impossible to step back and take radical decisions. Therefore, there is a need for a deliberate and participatory space/body within institutions and cities to focus on pattern shifting possibilities, as well as prototyping and testing the possible solutions. There is also a need for more curated forms of organising, in order to evaluate what is relevant and share it with the network and the critical decision-makers.

- **Need to avoid fragmentation**

Social innovation which has the potential to provoke transformational change is the one that addresses the system and concentrates on how to draw on the power of diverse social capital.