



Empowering rural social innovation in the SEMPRES project

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Innovating with social aims

Innovation is generally associated to technological, industrial and commercial development, despite originally referring to societal transformations (Godin, 2014; Lindberg, 2014; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). However, as policy agendas throughout the world have increasingly focused grand societal challenges and the global 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the need for socially innovative solutions are underscored (Grimm et al., 2013; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Howaldt et al., 2018; Lindberg, 2018). This entails a call for more inclusive innovation processes and agendas, involving and addressing the needs among those who are seldom recognized in traditional, industrial innovation (Lindberg, 2014; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016). These may be users, citizens, consumers, employees or other concerned groups. The term 'social innovation' especially refers to innovation processes with social aims and means, improving welfare, wellbeing, relations and empowerment in various social contexts (Berglund et al., 2016; Howaldt et al., 2018; Moulaert et al., 2013; Nicholls et al., 2015). Social innovation often addresses needs among socially or economically exposed groups of people, due to poverty, unemployment, disabilities, ill-health, migration, rurality, urbanization, etc. (Copus et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2017).

As the societal challenges addressed in social innovation processes are complex and boundary-spanning, pooling of multiple perspectives and resources are required in order to properly understand and handle the mechanisms at hand (Grimm et al., 2013; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2018). Interaction across organizational, sectorial and geographical borders are thus imperative to social innovation (Howaldt et al., 2018; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016; Moulaert et al., 2013; Nicholls et al., 2015). New constellations of actors are thus often formed, as part of projects, networks or other platforms. Organizations and individuals from the civil, public and private sectors are joined in these constellations, striving to communicate and coordinate their efforts based on their specific interests and perspectives. As part of the civil sector, non-profit organizations play a key role in identifying and addressing needs among socially or economically vulnerable groups of people, whose voices are seldom heard in societal transformation processes (Copus et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2014; Lindberg and Nahnfelddt, forthcoming). The social services – in terms of diaconal work – provided by Christian communities and parishes is a prominent example of this key role of civil society (Angell, 2016; Berglund et al., 2016; Eurich and Langer, 2016; Schröder, 2016).



Social empowerment in rural areas

The project “Social Empowerment in Rural Areas” (SEMPRES) gathers 16 partners from eight European countries – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden – in order to enhance innovative forms of social service delivery in rural areas. The project is financed by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Program during 2016-2019 and managed by the Diaconie of Schleswig-Holstein, the social welfare organization of Germany’s Protestant churches. The project partners are The Evangelical Lutheran Church in North Germany, the Academy of Economics Schleswig-Holstein in Germany, Novia University of Applied Sciences in Finland, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius in Finland, The Diaconal Centre Liepaja in Latvia, the University of Latvia, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences in Latvia, the Lutheran Diaconia in Lithuania, The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Foundation for Social Action in Estonia, The Foundation for Lifelong Learning in Poland, the University College South Denmark, Nordregio in Sweden, Coompanion Norrbotten in Sweden, and Sunderby Folk High School in Sweden. SEMPRES is an eminent example of how complex societal challenges of rurality, unemployment and migration may be addressed through interaction across organizational, sectorial and geographical borders (Lindberg, 2017). By forming a new constellation of actors from the civil, public and private sectors, SEMPRES strive to communicate and coordinate various interests and perspectives while addressing joint challenges. By engaging several churches and diaconal centers, SEMPRES especially provides insights in the role of the Christian civil society and Christian diaconal work in social innovation processes (cf. Angell, 2016; Berglund et al., 2016; Eurich and Langer, 2016; Schröer, 2016). A previous study of SEMPRES exposes that its social innovation processes serve to: 1) identify societal challenges of rural decline, in terms of outward migration, economic downturn and deteriorating service infrastructures, 2) increase the rural attractiveness by innovative forms of social service delivery, 3) organize multi-stakeholder constellations of local and regional community actors, 4) mobilize and empower vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, unemployed and young people, in service design and delivery, 5) arrange participatory workshops to delineate needs, develop solutions to these needs, and implement the solutions in micro-projects (Lindberg, 2017).

SEMPRES’s empowerment agenda

The project title “Social Empowerment in Rural Areas” reveals that empowerment is a central concept in SEMPRES. Previous research studies delineate empowerment among disadvantaged groups as a pivotal dimension in social innovation processes (Cajaiba-Santana, 2013; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Ionescu, 2015). In relation to social innovation, empowerment is defined as “increasing the socio-political capability and access to resources needed to enhance rights to satisfaction of human needs and participation” (Moulaert et al., 2005:1976). This may be understood as ensuring people’s influence over both their own lives and the society as a whole (Lindberg, 2017). SEMPRES aims to mobilize and empower vulnerable groups in rural areas, such as immigrants, unemployed and young people. It specifically aims to empower these groups in their role as end-users of social services, i.e. new services in health, education, care, working life and other welfare-related areas. This is since they are perceived



to be particularly affected by the declining social service infrastructures in rural areas, as they often lack the resources to influence or compensate for this loss. By actively involving these groups in innovative social service design and delivery, SEMPRES strives to improve their ability to influence both their own lived and the local society as a whole. Studies note that involvement of concerned groups is a crucial part of the empowerment dimension in social innovation processes (Davies and Simon, 2013; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016; Moulaert et al., 2013). This is since they may identify other needs and imagine other solutions than e.g. policy-makers or public servants. They may thus spur development paths that are more beneficial for those who usually lack a voice in societal development processes.

As noted earlier, such inclusive development may be further enhanced by non-profit organizations, including Christian communities, specialized in identifying and addressing needs among various vulnerable groups (Berglund et al., 2016; Copus et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2014; Lindberg and Nahnfeldt, forthcoming). Their combined roles as advocacy actors, service providers and innovation promoters, enable non-profit organizations to coordinate inclusive and boundary-spanning processes for social change (Lindberg, 2014; Lindberg and Nahnfeldt, forthcoming). Some influential idealistic traits have been pinpointed in such processes, including a basic view of human beings, where dignity, solidarity and agency is fundamental (Lindberg and Nahnfeldt, forthcoming). The diaconal work in Christian communities further amplifies these idealistic traits, by its radically solidaric approach to social needs and rights among vulnerable groups (Angell, 2016; Berglund et al., 2016; Eurich and Langer, 2016; Schröder, 2016). The ability to simultaneously acknowledge and address people's economic, materialistic, social and existential living conditions, is perceived as one of the most crucial contributions of Christian communities in social innovation processes (Berglund et al., 2016; Lindberg and Nahnfeldt, forthcoming). This includes promotion of people's spiritual and personal development in the quest to tackle challenging life-situations through improved empowerment.

Combining individual agency with institutional change

Studies reveal that empowerment through social innovation requires simultaneous changes on individual, organizational and societal levels (Cajaiba-Santana, 2013; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Ionescu, 2015). Sustainable improvements in the life-situation of individuals rely upon corresponding improvements in those organizational and societal structures ensuring welfare and wellbeing. This makes individual agency and institutional change a crucial combination in social innovation. In SEMPRES, the empowerment of users in rural social services entails, on the one hand, improved capabilities of individual's to articulate and address their needs in innovative service design and delivery, and on the other hand, improved organizational and societal structures to support their involvement and influence in such processes. That is enhanced by the simultaneous engagement of users, public authorities and non-profit organizations in SEMPRES. Experiences among the project partners show, however, that the public partners are not always willing to adapt their existing procedures and roles. Instead, they rely on the non-profit partners to arrange activities for engaging



the users, where innovative solutions are developed that do not challenge existing structures too extensively. As noted in previous studies, this risks turning SEMPRES's initiatives into "smokescreens", temporarily compensating for reductions of public services in rural areas and the inability of the declining service infrastructure to meet the needs among vulnerable groups (cf. Lindberg, 2017; Martinelli, 2013). On the other hand, non-profit organizations are regarded as the optimal social service providers in the ongoing transformation of rural social service infrastructures, as they are "supposedly more 'rooted' in the local civil society and more responsive to local needs than traditional top-down, bureaucratic public services" and "supposedly also ensure more democratic governance and user-friendly delivery processes" (Martinelli, 2013:349). Accordingly, social innovation processes in rural areas are – as in the case of SEMPRES – often initiated and coordinated by the local civil society (cf. Copus et al., 2017; Lindberg and Berg Jansson, 2016). The question is if SEMPRES possesses sufficient institutional legitimacy and management skills to balance bottom-up involvement of vulnerable end-users and top-down assurance of universal access to social services in rural areas (cf. Lindberg, 2017; Martinelli, 2013). This would require public, private and civil actors to share the responsibilities for infrastructure, provision, renewal, funding, etc. The balance act may determine if the innovative solutions developed in SEMPRES can be implemented, institutionalized and disseminated in ways that ensure sustainable improvements in welfare, wellbeing, relations and empowerment among vulnerable rural populations.



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