Societal entrepreneurship in and beyond civil society – the example of innovative youth work in Sweden

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The aim of this paper is to present a project focusing on the development and expansion of particularistic and local entrepreneurial initiatives in the field of social youth work, emanating from within the civil society and spreading to other geographical places as well as to actors within the public and the private spheres. The papers research questions are the following: Are social innovations that emanate within the civil society transferable to other spheres in society? Are entrepreneurial initiatives developed to meet the needs and problems in one particular local context transferable to other contexts with a different set of resources, needs and youth issues?

One of the projects main objectives is the development of a theoretical understanding of the interrelated research fields we are examining; social/societal entrepreneurship and civil society. Research and theorization have grown in recent decades on the social dimensions of civil society. This goes hand in hand with increasing expectations that civil society organizations contribute to the production of services and the initiation of new models within the core welfare domain. Central and local governments are increasingly looking into this sphere for new solutions to meet welfare needs and to solve social problems. This is a rather recent development within the Swedish welfare system seen as a part of an ongoing restructuring process from a welfare state to a welfare society (Svedberg & Vamstad 2006, Svedberg & Trägårdh 2006). The theoretical discussions in the project are based on case studies of the youth organisation Fryshuset and especially an ongoing large scale project to spread Fryshusets models and know how throughout the country. Fryshuset has during the latest decades become a symbol for a successful youth work and this organisation is probably the most notable expression of the new position of civil society organizations in Sweden.

In this paper the main emphasis will be on the dissemination of social/societal entrepreneurial ideas, methods and models (Steyaert & Hjort 2006, Gawell et.al 2009) thus taking into account theories of diffusion (Rogers 1962/2003, Della Porta & Diani 1999) as well as translation (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996, Åberg 2008).

Two different perspectives will be taken as point of departure for the theoretical discussion. Firstly dissemination spatially as well as between different spheres of society, i.e. civil society, state and market. The geographical context matters; social interrelations and practices take on spatial expressions and space, in turn, is created and recreated by social practice. (see Massey 2005). Actors matters; in entrepreneurial processes actors are considered to disseminate innovations within as well as between different spheres thus enhancing organizational and societal change (Schumpeter 1934, Sundin & Tillman 2008, Westlund 2009)

Secondly a user perspective will be used. Civil society studies have often been focused upon members and volunteers but more seldom upon the users of the organisation (Jess 1998). Studies adopting a user perspective and discussing the conceptual understanding of a "user" have more often been focusing relations within the public sector (Dahlberg & Vedung 2001, Karlsson 2002). Fryshuset's activities target young people and stress the importance of a youth perspective. The inclusion of the views of the young users in our empirical work will form a solid basis for a theoretical understanding of the subjects to the entrepreneurial process.

The project is multidisciplinary and the case studies are based on a broad methodological approach. Qualitative methods (interviews and participant observation, see Denzin & Lincoln 2008) and quantitative methods will be combined with documentary studies (Czarniawska 2004). The case studies are performed both as local in-depth studies in a selection of municipalities and as a quantitative user study in a selection of Fryshusets' activities.
Expected outcomes of the project are both academic and practical, and aim at increased knowledge on issues on societal entrepreneurship within and beyond civil society; (1) Prerequisites and problems in the diffusion of entrepreneurial models and methods that have been elaborated in a particular context to other geographical environments with other actors and networks. (2) The creation of innovative activities to form positive social capital that might support empowerment among groups of young people, or why this does not occur as presumed.


