

# 4 CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

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## 4.1 Summary<sup>5</sup>

The Systems of Innovation view (Chapter 2) underlines that innovation is also a social process between different actors. This is linked to the concept of social innovation. The concept of social innovation originates in critiques of traditional innovation theory. By calling for social innovation, new theories point at the need to take the social mechanisms of innovation into account (the social mechanisms of innovation).

A second dimension of the concept of social innovation is that innovations must take a social responsibility into account. Innovations should not only focus on the profit aspect but also on the planet and profit aspects of sustainability (the social responsibility of innovation). As innovation is also disruptive, this can be a challenging demand.

There is also a third dimension of social innovation: the fact that not only commercial activities need innovation, but also social and public activities. In the context of rural development, social innovation refers to the (social) objectives of innovation – that is those changes in the social fabric of rural societies, that are perceived as necessary and desirable in order to strengthening rural societies and addressing the sustainability challenge (social inclusion / equity: the innovation of society as well as the social responsibility of innovations).

## 4.2 Introduction

Social innovation is often appointed as an essential part of agricultural and rural innovation. One might call it one of the buzzwords which become popular and pop up in policy arenas and feature as a container carrying a plethora of meanings. Everybody seem to agree that social innovation is important but what exactly is meant by the term remains often unclear.

In the following section we discuss the origin of the concept of social innovation and its use in the context of innovation today. We present a threefold categorisation which provides insight and creates order in the multitude of applications and interpretations. Section 4 focuses on the significance of social innovation in the field of agriculture and especially rural development, where it figures most prominently. Section 5 reports on factors of success and risks of failure in supporting social innovation in the rural context. Section 6 finally, indicates where we lack knowledge and where more research is needed. We end with some conclusions.

## 4.3 Defining social innovation

The concept of social innovation is born from the on-going debate and critique on traditional innovation theory with its focus on material and technological inventions, scientific knowledge and the economic rationale of innovation. It points at the need to take notice of society as a context that influences the development, diffusion and use of innovations (Edquist 2001), but also points at the possibility that innovations bear risks as well as opportunities for society.

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5. This Chapter is an adapted version of the briefing paper on Social Innovation (Bock, 2011)

In the following we distinguish between three main interpretations of the social innovation concept, referring to:

- The social mechanisms of innovations;
- The social responsibility of innovations, and
- The innovation of society.

#### *The social mechanisms of innovation*

It is common knowledge by now that new technologies and products affect social relations, behaviour and attitudes. It is also commonly recognized that the successful development and introduction of new products and new technologies depend on its fit into a specific social context with a specific organisation of social relations and specific norms and values and accepted behaviour patterns. We know, for instance, that inventions may only become adopted once society is 'ready' to put them into use. Stirrups are often referred to as the classical example for how innovation diffusion depends on favourable social conditions, such as the birth of knights as a powerful social class. It is also an example of how powerfully innovations may affect society.

“The Anglo-Saxons, a dominating enemy of Charles Martel’s Franks, had the stirrup but did not truly understand its implications for warfare. The stirrup made possible the emergence of a warrior, called the knight, who understood that the stirrup enabled the rider not only to keep his seat, but also to deliver a blow with a lance (...) This simple concept permitted the Franks to conquer the Anglo-Saxons and change the face of Western Civilization. Martel had a vision to seize the idea and to use it. He did not invent the stirrup, but he knew how to use it purposefully.” (Simonson 1995: 12)

That the social context matters, is also recognised by businesses that take variation in taste into account when introducing products that are new and strange in a particular place. Think for instance of the introduction of foreign food, that generally enters in an adapted form – in taste as well as presentation. This can be done by making dishes fit into the usual menu-structure of a ‘proper meal’ (i.e. a ‘burger menu’) or by adapting the original recipe and offering ‘grilled sushi’ (Lang et al. 2009, Chapter 7).

Recent theories about innovation use the concept of socio-technical innovation to explicate the inseparability of the social and technical in processes of innovation (Smith et al. 2010). The construction and introduction of new technologies always involves changes in the interaction of ‘things’ (artefacts), actors and ‘ways of doing’ (institutions) and affects and is affected by how society is organised and functions. This is the most evident in the case of ‘system innovations’ that go beyond the introduction of a new product or process but change the context, manner and meaning of how something is done, and lead to fundamental changes in many areas of society. Automobility is such a system innovation, which includes much more than the invention of the automobile.

“The regime of automobility, for example, includes not only paradigmatic technological design for cars, but also the specialised road planning authorities, the institutions of the ‘driving licence’ and ‘motor insurance’, the lobbying capacities of car manufacturers and oil companies, and the cultural significance of automobility. In combination, these elements form a socio-technical regime that stabilises the way societal functions are realised, and gives shape to particular patterns of producing and consuming mobility” (Smith et al. 2010: 440).

Based on these insights a new (systemic) analytical framework is developed – the multi-level perspective on socio-technical transition (MLP) – that explains why, how and where innovations may occur and lead to wider transitions, what preconditions favour innovation and how such a process may be fostered by innovation policy (Smith et al. 2010; Moors et al. 2004).

### *The social responsibility of innovation*

In classic economic thinking innovation is considered important because of its ability to increase profit and encourage economic development (Voeten et al. 2009). Still today innovation is often associated with industries developing new products and new technologies driven by their wish to maximise profit. At the same time, technological innovation is increasingly met by scepticism and concern about potential risks for i.e. human safety and the environment. The debate about genetic modification may serve as a well-known example for these concerns that more in general point at the need to evaluate the social impact of innovations and to find out who are the winners and losers in innovation processes. There is also a call for innovation that helps solving important social problems, such as environmental degradation. All this may be summarised under a call for social or socially responsible innovation: innovations that are ethically approved, socially acceptable and relevant for society.

Socially responsible innovation calls upon businesses to invest in society and to come up with socially relevant innovations, as part of their corporate responsibility for ‘people and planet’ and not only ‘profit’.

Some theorists argue that the process of innovation has to change as well (Geels & Schot 2007). Social innovation requires new – social – methods of innovation, characterized by processes of co-design or co-construction and collaboration with society. As a result the range of innovation-actors changes and research and development are no longer the exclusive domain of science and business; with the inclusion of users the roles of, and relationships between science, market and (civil) society change. Their exchange and combination of knowledge becomes an important element of the innovation process as it goes beyond the creation of more knowledge. It changes perspectives and ways of looking at things, values and behaviour; and in doing so guides the development of socially acceptable and relevant products and processes.

Related to this process of collaboration in innovation, various authors underscore the importance of social and creative learning as the mechanism of social innovation. We discuss the idea of social or collective learning more in detail in the context of agriculture and rural development in section 4.5.

### *The innovation of society*

Social innovation is finally referred to when indicating the need for society to change as a prerequisite for solving pertinent problems such as discrimination, poverty or pollution. Here the focus is on changes in social relations, people’s behaviour, and norms and values. It is often interchanged and combined with concepts such as social empowerment and inclusion, social capital and cohesion. The Stanford Centre for Social Innovation departs from such an interpretation and defines social innovation as follows:

*“Any novel and useful solution to a social need or problem, that is better than existing approaches (i.e., more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just) and for which the value created (benefits) accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.”*

Similar calls for social innovations can be found in various government programmes. Also the Europe2020 strategy document defines social innovation in the sense of social inclusion as one of her priorities. To design and implement programmes to promote social innovation for the most vulnerable, in particular by providing innovative education, training, and employment opportunities for deprived communities, to fight discrimination (e.g. disabled), and to develop a new agenda for migrants' integration to enable them to take full advantage of their potential (Europe 2020 strategy document, 2010, p.18).

By stressing the need to include and give voice to socially deprived groups, the political element of innovation is underlined. In any innovation processes it is important to keep a close eye on who are considered to be included in the innovation processes and who not, and who are eventually to gain or lose from the changes brought about. Social innovation is also strongly related to the innovation of politics and governance. Following Moulaert et al (2005) innovative governance allows for the inclusion of non-traditional actors, integrates various policy issues and centres on area-based development. It should, moreover, stimulate experimentation and stimulate risk taking as innovation is based on creative, out-of-the-box thinking and the possibility to learn through trial and error.

### *Conclusion*

From the above we may conclude that social innovation is a complex and multidimensional concept that is used to indicate the social mechanisms, social objectives and/or societal scope of innovation. The social mechanisms of innovation refer to the fact that the development, diffusion and use of innovations always occur within a social context, and in interaction with social relations, practises and norms and values. As a result, there are generally winners and losers and it is important to evaluate the social impact of innovations. Innovations should be 'social' in the sense of socially acceptable, relevant and ethically appropriate. This may be achieved by socializing innovation methods and re-organising innovation as a social and collective learning process with the purpose of the common definition of problems and common design and implementation of solutions. Finally, social innovation refers to the inducement of re-organising society with the purpose of more equality and social justice. In the latter case, the concept of social innovation is not only an analytical and academic concept, but also used in a normative way, stressing the need for social and political change. It is, hence, important to be aware of the political element of (social) innovation and to analyse which kind of (social) changes are considered desirable and deserving governmental support and which not.

## **4.4 Social innovation in agriculture and rural development**

Processes of innovation have been studied and analysed in different contexts and places and at various spatial scales – such as nations and sectors (Tödting & Tripl 2005), but also regions, cities and (deprived) neighbourhoods (Moulaert et al. 2005). This section starts with a brief look into regional innovation and regional factors of success and failure that might be relevant for innovation in rural areas. From there it proceeds to social innovation in the context of agriculture and rural development.

### *Regional innovation*

Scientists and politicians increasingly acknowledge the importance of knowledge and innovation for the competitive advantage of regions. Within that field 'the learning region' is a

frequently used concept to indicate those regions, which are successfully promoting innovation (Morgan 1997).

*“Learning regions are locations with a strong social and institutional endowment that exhibit continuous creation and diffusion of new knowledge and high rates of innovation”* (Hauser et al. 2007: 76).

Taking the region as a platform for knowledge exchange underlines the importance of learning as a collective process. Regions are expected to promote collective learning because they allow for the spatial proximity of innovation organisations and actors (Tödtling & Trippl 2005). The relative proximity of actors is seen as especially important for the exchange of tacit knowledge – that is informal, non-codified, experiential knowledge, that may even be unconscious and habitual. Tacit knowledge needs personal interaction and face-to-face contacts for its transmittance (MacKinnon et al. 2002: 301). Its transference depends on what is also called “untraded interdependencies” (Storper 1997 in Tödtling & Trippl 2005) – the tacit conventions and informal agreements that people make to trust each other and to collaborate.

Critics of the learning region approach point at the fact that many networks are not place-based and stretch across different places and regions. They are especially important because they provide linkages to external networks and structures and thereby actors and knowledge that may not be available within the region (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008).

Peripheral regions are regarded as less innovative in comparison to agglomerations because of their lack of human capital and innovation attitudes. Important drivers of innovation are absent because of their “organisational thinness” and lack of dynamic clusters and support organisations and because of their distance to other regions and external knowledge (Tödtling & Trippl 2005: 1208).

Although the ‘learning region’ concept has been widely employed in regional studies, it has rarely been applied to rural regions, possibly because the institutional structures it prioritizes are more clearly visible in urban centres. Rural areas may be peripheral in the sense of organisationally ‘thin’ as well as geographically remote, but they may score high in terms of social density and, hence, social capital and a shared sense of identity, all of which are important factors promoting ‘learning regions’ (Wolfe, forthcoming). Rural regions, moreover, differ in peripherality and in innovativeness. There is, hence, a need to look more in depth into what defines the innovativeness of rural areas.

### *Agriculture, rural development and innovation*

The term social innovation is popular in the context of agriculture and rural development but the use and importance attached to it differ according to the domain and scope of innovation referred to. In addition it has a considerable political or normative weight.

First of all, social innovation is most frequently used in the context of rural development as it is here where the need for social changes is most evident. When rural development is concerned, the social is presented as a core element of innovation, also in the sense of engaging society in developing new solutions.

When it comes to strictly agricultural development in the sense of production efficiency, social innovation is generally considered of less significance. Here a technology-oriented definition of

innovation predominates (Moors et al. 2004). This has also to do with the different scope of innovations referred to above; agricultural development, as such, often deals with innovations in the sense of new products or new processes whereas rural development regards the innovation of socio-economic systems.

But what kind of innovations are needed, in which domain and what the need is for social innovation, is also highly contested in the political arena of agriculture and rural development and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (High & Nemesis 2007), where 'agricultural modernization' and 'multifunctional rural development' meet as conflicting paradigms and solutions to the sustainability challenge. For who supports multifunctional rural development, foresees the need for fundamental social changes – in organisation, behaviour as well as values – and attaches great importance at social innovation as essential part of the solution and part of a collective learning process (Knickel et al. 2009). For who supports agricultural modernization has high expectations of scientists and their capacity to develop and design new technologies.

The ambivalent use of social innovation, as an analytical as well as normative concept, complicates the definition and description of its significance and meaning in the field of agriculture and rural development. In order to reduce and disentangle this complexity, we make again use of the three-folded categorisation of the concept introduced in section 4.2. In practice, however, the three categories of interpretation are strongly interrelated.

#### *Social mechanisms – co-production of rural innovation*

In the past social mechanisms were considered as important when reaching the phase of diffusing innovations, when experts transferred new knowledge, products and/or technologies to users and convinced them to accept and use them. Traditional Agricultural Knowledge Systems (AKS) are based on this approach.

The new systemic approaches stress the importance of social mechanisms as basic element also during the development phase. Innovations are seen as born from collective and creative learning processes and the mutual exchange of knowledge. Learning is no longer structured as a linear transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, but becomes a shared, social, and circular process, in which the combination of different sources and types of knowledge creates something new (Oreszczyn et al. 2010; Stuver et al. 2004). This type of learning is in itself innovative as it allows for a new (cross-border) constellation of actors to collaborate, who come from different backgrounds and have different interests (Tovey 2008). Social innovation is then put on a par with collective and creative learning. At the same time it is also more than an innovation-method, as it also produces (social) innovation in the sense of new skills, products and practices, as well as new attitudes and values (Rist et al. 2007; Bruckmeyer & Tovey 2008).

The EU LEADER programme is a good example of an innovation policy that is based on this approach. Starting as an experiment in some European regions, it has been mainstreamed as crosscutting-axis for the local delivery of rural development plans in the present CAP (2007-2013). LEADER represents a territorial, participatory and endogenous approach to rural development. Following its philosophy it is important to enable the inhabitants of rural regions to realise their own development plans, making use of local resources and local knowledge. LEADER facilitates local capacity building by supporting the creation of local and extra-local networks (Convery et al. 2010; High & Nemesis 2007; Dragan & Shucksmith 2008; Lowe et al. 2010). In doing so LEADER intends to create favourable conditions for the social mechanisms of innovation to function.

There are more examples where novel practices are born from the interaction and exchange of knowledge and experience between social groups that did not use to interact, such as farmers and citizens. Well-known examples regard environmental cooperatives in which farmers collaborate with citizens (Wiskerke et al. 2003), or consumer-buying groups where urban consumers enter in stable relations with farmers (Lamine 2005).

Based on the above we may define social innovation as collective and creative learning processes, in which actors from different social groups and contexts participate, resulting in new skills, products and/or practices, as well as new attitudes and values and new behaviour.

#### *Social objectives – responsiveness to new social needs*

The call for more responsiveness to social needs and expectations is a strong driver for innovation of the agro-food system (Lowe et al. 2010). Recent food scares are a good example, but also loudly uttered concerns about GMO, animal welfare and environmental degradation and declining biodiversity exemplify this public call. Continuously returning are also critiques that point at the damaging effect of the globalization of agricultural production and trade on developing countries. Finally, the social and economic decline of rural areas has been pointed at as one of the externalities of agricultural modernisation and the traditional production oriented agricultural support systems.

*“Likewise, as consumers have prospered, they have become much more discerning and judgemental about the quality and wholesomeness of their food and the treatment of animals and nature in its production. As a consequence, the ethics of intensive farming have been called into question, and the discourses of commodity productivism challenged by those of ‘slow food’, organic, welfare-friendly and food chain localization” (Lowe et al. 2010: 288)*

The call for what might be framed as responsible agri-rural innovation is received in various ways, reflecting different approaches to innovation. At the one hand we see attempts to meet social concerns by way of new technological designs, that reduce the negative effects. This is often achieved through more efficiency and reduction in either energy demand or polluting emissions (i.e. precision agriculture). In addition, representatives of society are increasingly consulted about their concerns at some stage during the development of new products or technologies. The purpose is to find ways to reconcile social concerns with the requirements of modern production. Such consultation processes have for instance accompanied the design of new stables for pigs and poultry (Grin et al. 2004).

The promotion of a new (rural) paradigm of multifunctional, integrated development is another, more radical response to social concerns, that attempts to change the agro-food system as a whole. It seeks to replace what is indicated as the productivist modernisation paradigm by a system in which farmers no longer aim to maximise production against minimal costs but instead develop new products and services, such as local, high quality food, nature conservation as well as rural tourism and green care (Roep & Wiskerke 2004). Combined with the ideas of endogenous, territorial development (see 3.2.1) the multifunctional paradigm positions farmers as one of many rural actors who exchange knowledge and ideas, combine their products and practises and in collaboration re-vitalise the rural economy by creatively responding to the call for agricultural change.

In the above, we find two definition of social innovation. First of all, social innovation refers to a social process of innovation – a process where the creation of ‘novelties’ (new products,



technology and knowledge) is based on the collaboration of different social groups, that crosscut traditional borders. Secondly, innovations are referred to as social innovation when the novel products and practices respond to public needs and demands.

### *Social transformations - Changing (rural) society*

When rural development and agriculture are concerned, social change is always implied. Changes in urban and rural lifestyles drive and demand innovations. It is, for instance, often argued that concerns about animal welfare typically arise in rich, urbanising societies, where citizens became estranged from farming (Boogaard et al. 2010). But also in the social mechanism of innovation and co-production of innovation, social change is implied through the crossing of rural-urban boundaries and re-establishment of their relations, as well as the development of new attitudes and values.

But social change may also be the explicit purpose of innovation processes. This is most prominently the case when rural development, in the sense of local development, is concerned and when the objective is to re-integrate rural societies that are perceived as marginal. Attention is then focused on the social sustainability of rural areas that may be endangered due to the loss of labour in agriculture, outmigration and the weakening of the social structure as a result of an ageing and masculinising population (Manos et al. 2010). Social innovation is then appointed as a collective strategy to rescue and revitalise rural societies.

Again, LEADER is a good example for a policy (and development philosophy) that aims at realising social change. Some even present LEADER as synonymous with social and cultural innovation (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008:274). LEADER is based on the idea that a well-functioning society is a socially cohesive society, that has large stocks of social and cultural capital, which function as a substrate for continuous innovation, needed for assuring long term sustainable rural development. LEADER seeks to strengthen communities in that sense. It seeks to promote social interaction, the creation of internal and external networks, to support capacity building, the development of knowledge and skills but also to build up confidence and self-esteem as well as a positive collective identity (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008).

Social innovation, then, refers to those changes in the social fabric of rural societies, that are perceived as necessary and desirable in order to assure their survival. It relates to social structure but also to attitudes and values and the willingness of people to engage for the collective good.

### *Conclusion*

From the above we may conclude that the concept of social innovation is most frequently used in the context of rural development. It is rarely referred to when the development (or innovation) of agriculture as a singular economic activity is concerned.

In the discussion about rural development as an integral process of socio-economic development of rural areas, social innovation has a prominent place. The concept of social innovation is used to refer to the social changes that are considered essential to realise sustainable rural development, and at the same time at the socially innovative process of learning that is necessary to realise these changes. More in detail social innovation refers to those changes in the social fabric of rural societies, that are perceived as necessary and desirable in order to assure their survival. It relates to social structure but also to attitudes and values and the willingness of



people to engage for the collective good. It includes collective and creative learning processes, in which actors from different social groups and rural and urban contexts participate. Together they develop new skills, products and/or practices, as well as new attitudes and values, that make a difference in addressing the sustainability challenge and in strengthening rural societies.

Agricultural innovation has an important place in discussions of rural development in the sense of a multifunctional agriculture, that is seen as important part of or even motor of rural development. Here we see also discussions about the need for agriculture to change in order to produce in an ethically appropriate way, to respond to social concerns and to help contribute to more social justice in society at large. Agricultural innovation is then approached in an integral way, part of a general process of change towards sustainability.

Apart from this discussion agricultural innovation is generally approached as a singular production activity. For what concerns its innovation attention usually focuses on technical and economic aspects with social acceptability as a concern when negative reactions follow their introduction.

#### 4.5 Success and failure of social innovation in rural development

This section summarizes the factors supporting or impeding successful social innovation in current practices of rural development. In doing so we distinguish between two levels of analysis. We start with discussing the factors that strengthen or weaken the potential for social innovation in rural development processes. We then look more in detail into the conditions that support or constrain those processes of social learning that are considered as an essential part of the social innovation process.

##### *Success and failure of social innovation in rural development*

Rural development is unthinkable without social innovation as a result as well as a mechanism: it includes the revitalisation of the social fabric of rural societies and at the same time thrives on the innovative engagement of local society members.

When it comes to the promotion of territorial rural development the existence of abundant human and social capital has been appointed as a prerequisite (Kinsella et al. 2010). Social networks need to be present in a given area that link people within the region but also connect them to other places. These networks need to be based in trust and reciprocity. People need to be willing to voluntarily engage for the collective, which is fostered by a common sense of identity (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008).

Collective engagement is easier to achieve in stable long lasting networks that are used to collaborate and have mutual interests (Oreszczyń et al. 2010). But new opportunities for learning and fresh insight occur especially when different networks meet. This may also easily evoke conflicts as credibility and trust need time to grow. This is where so-called boundary agents or brokers play an important role in encouraging the development of a shared language and shared ideas.

Some individuals play a key role. They are trusted and respected by many people, thereby connecting wider networks. Their charismatic personality and personal engagement convince others that it is trustworthy and worthwhile to join in (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008). These leaders have often moved into the region from elsewhere and are able to bring in new knowledge and new networks of contacts, that link the territory to extra-local, national or even international networks.

As Elinor Ostrom (2009, 2010) has pointed out time and again trust in one another and confidence that norms of reciprocity apply, are crucial for communities to engage in collective action and to care for their 'common good'. Only then are people ready to invest time and other costly resources in order to develop something which benefits all. Research in European rural societies confirms that it is difficult to promote local development in places with a weak entrepreneurial culture, with low levels of service, a weak civil society and no history of collective action, with little institutional capacity, pre-existing clientelistic power relations, and a top down approach through the local government (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008).

Clientelism and local interest lobbies are constraining local development as they limit the extent of local participation and exclude not only certain social groups but also certain development options (Convery et al. 2010). This, again, erodes the legitimacy of local development groups and plans and undermines people's willingness to actively engage in plans that are 'captured' by powerful others (Vidal 2009). The latter is also problematic when local development becomes too much controlled by public authorities, either by way of bureaucratic requirements or by pre-definition of themes and actions. Quite often government is counterproductive by framing the innovation-agenda in a certain direction.

But reluctance of community members to join local development groups and to assume responsibility may also be related to a (perceived) lack of experience and confidence (Scott 2004). It specifically hampers the inclusion of social groups that are generally weakly represented in local politics, such as women, young as well as elderly people, and less educated citizens (Bock & Derkzen 2008). This is detrimental to the process of social innovation as it thrives on the input of something new and different, and the turning around of ordinary and traditional patterns of thought and behaviour. This is why the participation of new groups, such as women and young people, and the mixture of traditional segregated actor groups are so important. But as entrance of new actors into decision making arenas changes local power relations, these actors often meet resistance. Again, the political nature of (social) innovation becomes visible, in defining who is invited in to discuss and decide on which changes need to be realised and how. Allowing new actors to effectively bring in their knowledge and ideas and have the groups function in a way that allows for social innovation, needs political attention and support (Derkzen & Bock 2007).

#### *Success and failure in social learning and co-designing innovations*

Social learning and the collective development of creative solutions are considered to be an essential part of social innovation. They are, as it were, the mechanisms that set social innovation in motion. Supporting social learning then means supporting social innovation (Cundill 2010).

Social learning means that people start questioning their traditional way of doing things, and develop new ideas, new norms and attitudes, and new modes of behaviour. That is a demanding process, that requires the creation of favourable conditions or 'spaces' (Schneider et al. 2009):

- These places are 'safe' and removed from traditional political tensions and power relations;
- There is an atmosphere of trust and respect for difference;
- There is room to get to know each other;
- There is a shared purpose that needs the combination of different experiences and different types of knowledge.

This open space of collaboration has also been indicated as the ‘ agora’ - with the ancient Greek word for public space (Pohl et al. 2010). It indicates the need to meet and enter into dialogue as equals and to go beyond the traditional differences in roles, authorities and identities.

*“Multi-stakeholder learning processes, if adequately conducted, opens space for people – including scientists and policymakers – to speak about their assumptions, values, and norms so that decisions become based less on the defence of autonomous interests and hidden meaning and more on appreciation of the interdependency of collective interests.” (Steyaert & Jiggins 2007: 584).*

Moreover, the knowledge that is produced should be credible, salient and legitimate for all the involved actors, which requires discussion and agreement on possibly divergent goals and values (Pohl et al. 2010). Such knowledge is more readily produced when the participants are collectively engaged in action – when something has to be done and produced that is linked to concrete needs and therefore motivates and mobilises participation and engagement (Steyaert & Jiggins 2007; Wildemeersch 2007).

All this, however, takes time – as well as facilitation. Various studies point at the important role of facilitators who bring together different actors, form a bridge between different contexts and create favourable conditions (Schneider et al. 2009; Klerkx & Leeuwis 2009). Box 4.1 gives an overview of successful facilitation strategies.

#### Box 4.1 Successful strategies for facilitating social learning

- Allowing actors with different perspectives and interests to have access to the process;
- Allowing participants to be part of the process;
- Actively integrating new participants;
- Clarifying roles;
- Establishing personal relations;
- Organising informal, bilateral meetings and meetings at the participants locations to get to know each other’s’ life-world;
- Showing commitment, engagement and sensitivity as facilitator;
- Collaborating on a specific product, concrete goal;
- Seeking common interests and liaisons;
- Organising situations where distinct actors are addressed as ‘experts’;
- Placing personal experiences at the centre of collaboration and not scientific results;
- Reflecting on the participants’ distinct perspectives and knowledge;
- Enabling novel and positive experiences.
- Building on previous learning processes.

Source: Bock (2010)

Capable facilitators should also be able to facilitate conflict as conflict is part of learning and collaboration. The same is true for error, which should be acknowledged as an important source of learning (Cundill 2010). What it comes down to is creating a room for interaction where it is safe to question what one already knows, to admit that others might know something valuable, to share uncertainty and, then, to learn and create something new.

The above also points at the important role that the government can play in facilitating social innovation by offering spaces for interaction, supporting network formation and providing funds that enable continuing collaboration and facilitation (Klerkx & Leeuwis 2009).