



Territorial Social Innovation in the Nordic Countries and Scotland



Life Cycle Café

Life Cycle Café is an afternoon café open once a week that provides a meeting place for retired people and schoolchildren. The pensioners help the schoolchildren with homework while the children teach the retired some information and communication technology (ICT) skills. The approach responds to the challenges of aging as it provides meaningful activities for the elderly and brings the elderly and children together to learn from each other.

Preconditions, Inspiration, Nurture

The idea of the Life Cycle Café was developed by local associations in a 'mini-pilot' project that was implemented with support and funding from a larger development project in Hämeenlinna. The larger development project ran from August 1, 2010 to December 31, 2012, and sought new, concrete ways to develop services for children and young people. The project focused on new service models, multiple service producers and citizen-based approaches and was funded by the city of Hämeenlinna and the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra (Jokinen, 2012).

The larger project focused on one suburb of Hämeenlinna and a rural area (Iittala) that had recently become part of the city of Hämeenlinna through a municipal merger. The project stemmed from initiatives to develop a new kind of municipal leadership to respond to new challenges. The municipal leaders thought that as the municipal mergers added new kinds of areas to the city, it would be important to learn about the new areas not only from statistics but also by working with their inhabitants to ensure that their needs could be met.

The city recruited a resident to work with the program who functioned as a link between local people and the municipal authorities. As part of the development project, this resident organized workshops and other events with local inhabitants where new ideas for service provision for children and young people were discussed. The Life Cycle Café idea was raised at one of the workshops, where the local schoolchildren themselves said that they wanted to do more things with elderly people.

As a result, a local Red Cross association and a few parents of local schoolchildren applied for the mini-pilot funding (500 €) for the Life Cycle Café, and local associations for retired people joined the mini-pilot later on (Jokinen, 2012).

From the outset, the aim was to provide pensioners with meeting places and at the same time provide schoolchildren with a safe place to spend time after school. One aim is also to prevent risks related to children and young people spending time on their own without supervision, because many parents work far away from the rural areas and come home late.

It is also found important by those involved that the café provides the participants with a sense of community. Because of outmigration, many of the elderly do not have relatives living nearby, and the café gives them an opportunity to spend time with children and be a 'reserve grandparent' (Jokinen, 2012). The café has always aimed to be inclusive and welcoming, and one way of promoting this was to involve all the pensioners' associations in the area.

In practice, the café is open one afternoon a week. The pensioners sell food and beverages at low prices, help the children with homework, work on crafts and just spend time together. The children also help the pensioners—for example with problems related to ICT.

The point of departure of the idea of the Life Cycle Café was closely related to social impact, while economic impacts were not directly a strong driver. There was no detailed roadmap in place regarding how to develop the approach over time, but part of the idea of the larger development project that provided funding for the mini-pilots was precisely to encourage small pilots to test ideas while avoiding long planning processes.

Implementation

Resources

For the development phase, the initiators received funding from a project by the city of Hämeenlinna. Now that the project is completed, no external funding is involved. Instead, the time and enthusiasm of the pensioners who run the café is the most important resource. The opportunity to use the municipality's youth center for the café is also a central resource.

When it comes to support, the resident recruited by the municipality to provide a link between residents and the city of Hämeenlinna were important for the initiation and implementation of the Life Cycle Café approach, because she provided support during the project-phase. She also visited the café frequently to hear about what other kinds of needs the visitors had and what more could be done, and then conveyed the input to the municipal authorities. It is considered important that there are contact persons appointed in different organizations to keep the flow of information going between the café, the municipality and the school.

The Network / Cooperation

In order to receive the funding, it was required that the mini-pilots involved several different actors. In this case, the actors represented different kinds of associations and the mini-pilot strengthened their networks and cooperation.

The increased contact between the children and the elderly in the Life Cycle Café project also resulted in improved links between the local school and the elderly. Local pensioners, for example, started to visit the school so that the children could teach them about ICT. They could eat lunch there and help younger children with homework, and function as extra teachers.

Enablers and Barriers

In order to encourage and support innovative solutions, having municipal leadership that is interested in testing new ideas has been necessary in Hämeenlinna. Several of the municipal leaders were interested in developing their leadership and their structures in innovative and open ways, and to improve the way that the authorities worked with the inhabitants.

The role of the media was very important in making the Life Cycle Café and the other mini-pilots locally and internationally known. Local media interviewed the involved actors monthly and thus made known the work that the local inhabitants are doing on their own initiative.

There were some challenges related to insurances and responsibilities, but those were solved and discussed within the municipal authorities. It was made clear to the parents that the pensioners were not responsible for the children in the same way that, for example, a school is, but the parents did not find that to be a problem.

Interaction with Municipalities and Other Levels of Governance

As previously noted, the role of the municipality has been central, because the Life Cycle Café was an idea initiated in a workshop organized by the residents recruited to act as a conduit between residents and the municipality and the program was later funded and supported by the city.

Social Innovation Effects

Outcomes, Impact and 'Scaling'

The use of the Life Cycle Café is followed up, and it has approximately 800–1,300 yearly visitors. A Master's thesis has also been commissioned on the approach from a socio-pedagogical perspective, but other than that there have not been large-scale evaluations.

However, the approach was deemed so successful that it was continued even after the mini-pilot period and it is, as noted, still frequently visited. According to the Master's thesis that analyzed interviews with the volunteers and users, the café is highly appreciated as it provides a possibility to meet other people and to have a community.

The effects of the Life Cycle Café include the fact that local elderly people interact more with the school, and cooperation between the school and the pensioners is so well established that when a new retirement home was planned in the area, the local pensioners felt that it should be located close to the school.

The idea has also been spread to retirement homes in Hämeenlinna, where preschools, local entrepreneurs and associations jointly organize events for the elderly, children and the children's families.

The Life Cycle Café brand has been registered as a trademark, mainly for marketing reasons. There has also been interest from other municipalities and the example has been mentioned as a good example in national-level projects. There also seems to be increasing interest in the approach in Finland now that the current government promotes experimentation.

The interviewee involved in the project notes that there is now also a need to further develop the activities of the café based on the needs of the current children and young people in the area. Development needs and plans have been discussed at meetings, but the children and young people themselves have not been involved in them. It is considered that it would be important to consult them more to ensure that the café actually responds to their needs and wishes.

Lessons Learned

The Life Cycle Café is an example of an initiative that was developed by the local community but was part of a project by the municipal authorities. It is possible that it would not have taken concrete form without the development project by the city of Hämeenlinna, which brought different actors together and encouraged and supported new ideas.

The importance of municipal leadership is another central lesson learned from this example. Developing new ways of testing and piloting projects in an open-ended manner requires leaders who can convince decision-makers about their ideas and who encourage learning and open-minded thinking among the municipal employees.

Furthermore, it was found useful to have a person functioning as a link between the inhabitants and associations and the municipal authorities, because the municipal bureaucracy is often difficult for inhabitants to understand. The resident recruited by the municipal authorities to perform this function was able to help and support the inhabitants and convey their needs to the authorities.

The Life Cycle Café stems from the needs of the local community and local needs. The city of Hämeenlinna wished to support small-scale projects developed and implemented by local inhabitants because it had recognized that the needs and preconditions vary considerably between its urban and rural areas, and that there are no 'one-size-fits-all' solutions. The café has brought different actors together and has also resulted in increased cooperation outside the café activity. It organizes a variety of activities in which those who are not active as volunteers also participate, and it is found that the approach both builds on and strengthens the existing community spirit and traditions of doing things together in the area.