

Societal Innovation as a Collective Learning Opportunity

"It's not new, but maybe doing it is."

An interview with Hank Kune

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"I like the concept of societal innovation, which can have ramifications across the entire society. It is much more difficult to achieve than one-off interventions and often emerges as a result of a number of social innovations linked with technological innovations linked to changes in relationships people have with each other and with society."

Hank Kune makes himself comfortable in the corner couch overseeing Amsterdam's vibrant Westerstraat. With a sparkle in his eye and a heartfelt conviction for possibility, Hank shares his perspective on the distinction between social and societal innovation. "Social innovations are changes in quality of life that affect groups of people - they could be small or large groups, an age cohort or socio-economic cluster, a neighborhood or a geographical region. It is essentially focused improvement on the quality of life of a group. However, Hank believes we need more attention today on societal innovation... creating conditions where diverse groups of people can look at the broader systemic concepts, think further about how they can anticipate consequences beyond the smaller ecosystems in which independent activities take place, and reflect on core leverage points that trigger widespread change. "Unless you deal with the broader and longer term consequences you could end up simply pushing problems elsewhere in the system."

One challenge Hank sees is in getting people to think not just in terms of desired outputs but desired outcomes after two years, desired impacts after five years, and critically looking at implications for generations down the road.

What does it take to do this? Hank comments, "Agility of mind, courage, imagination, a combination of creativity and analytical skills... but it comes down to taking the next step, even if you are not sure where it may eventually lead, being open to learning, being ready to choose a direction and start to move. It's about moving with an entrepreneurial spirit. It is not new, but maybe doing it is. Even in the simple things we do day-to-day - having an openness to read signals, listening to people, listening to your own intuition. We just need to welcome people to practise this more widely."

"Wouldn't it be a societal innovation if politicians were praised and encouraged for changing their minds as they learn more about how the world works?" asks Hank, and delves into an example of societal innovation: "In most Western countries politicians are not encouraged to learn from emerging experience and share their new insights. They are supposed to take a stand and are pilloried if they publicly change their stance; they are criticized, even ridiculed for not holding to their original convictions. Even when new knowledge is there to discount what they once believed. There is little advantage to learn from emerging insights in this system." Hank continues with a proposal for 'policy prototyping' in the Netherlands. Instead of dismissing policies which are not

100% thought-out in terms of their implications and consequences, and instead of accepting the way public media dismisses politicians who learn and grow as unreliable, we can instill a way of working with policy as a work-in-progress, that draws on collective learning and insight at a given moment. What if policy incorporated learning loops and could be tested in real life with real people and the feedback on what people want/need/could accept were used to design policies that are relevant, useful and actually taken up by citizens? “This would be a valuable societal innovation if we could incorporate this type of prototyping in policy-making, it would show us where our blindspots are and obstacles to enabling a healthy society.”

Asked to comment on the role of entrepreneurship in societal innovation, Hank asserts, “It is about more than being the next Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos or iconic captain of industry. And it’s more than lots of entrepreneurial people doing lots of things on their own. We need widespread acceptance that working together works! And that taking steps - even if we are not 100% sure of the outcomes - is important. Being an entrepreneur for societal innovation means taking the step forward. Of course, sometimes not taking the step forward is the entrepreneurial thing to do! Being aware of the choices and choosing is what is needed.” Entrepreneurs are needed for the innovation impulse and to try to make new things manifest. Nurturing entrepreneurship can help us live into more of an innovation culture.

“In our Societal Innovation Camp last summer in Finland we looked at what an inclusive innovative city is. We worked with challenges that cities brought in from different perspectives and different countries, and asked ourselves: How do you create an innovation culture that is all pervasive? One that is not only a hobby of an educated elite or enlightened academics, but one that includes everyone... seniors, immigrants, children, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, politicians, teachers. What does it mean to live in an innovative society? We learned it is not only about creating innovations but also actively accepting them into our lives – also the prototypes, which still need more testing. Can we accept that not everything our governments or businesses or universities do is necessarily going to be a success, especially the first time? Perhaps the process of trying out and improving prototypes adds more value to our lives than simply consuming ready-mades some ‘experts’ have decided we need, be they products or policies.”

One project Hank is trying to get off the ground is a virtual reality project where they are trying to create worlds where young children can make their voices heard in urban planning processes by co-creating the type of city they want to grow up in. He explains how the process of designing this project is in itself an innovation. “The initial idea was energizing, and by continuing to take next steps all kinds of issues and questions emerged. When we asked ourselves how to bring the children together, all kinds of possibilities could be explored: through teachers at a school, or the same age groups at different schools in one city, or many schools in different cities, or also different countries? How would they communicate with each other? Could they co-create happy neighborhoods valid in different cultures? What would we learn from their worlds? It would not be about a bunch of adults sitting around a table asking kids to comment on their urban designs, but about kids playing together by creating neighborhoods they like. We would need appealing gaming tools, intuitively accessible, for the kids, adult observers with the capacity to learn but not intervene, and of course the virtual environments would have to be absolutely safe for the kids to play in. It’s about new ways of hosting collective intelligence. And you can only discover how to do it by taking the next step.”

Another example Hank shares: Thirteen years ago there was a group of dedicated innovative civil servants in the Netherlands working with collective approaches for stakeholder participation. They organised a 3-day workshop with people from all over Europe and abroad to learn more about how this was being done in different countries, and share stories about how the role of government was changing with respect to citizens and stakeholders. Called Borders to Cross, one of the

characteristics of this event was that participants told stories, in lieu of giving presentations. “We created spaces where people could describe their initiative as a detective story, a love story or a fairy tale. That helped us to escape the death-by-PowerPoint mode. 13 years later the world has changed, and a number of the original organizers are trying to re-cross the borders again: we’re developing a new event, this time about civic-driven innovation. We are moving out into Europe again to involve people actively crossing borders with their work – citizens and public professionals – to tell the new stories that matter now, and learn how to support this new participatory culture. This time we’re also crossing generational borders, and each person who comes is encouraged to bring someone 30 years younger – or older – than themselves!”

Hank later comments again about the importance of intergenerational approaches to societal innovation, and the need to look at engagement horizontally (across sectors and disciplines) as well as vertically (cross-generationally). “We need to do it together. At any stage in life you have four active generations who contribute to society and they each have their role to play; each can do some things especially well but other things not as well as others. We need to combine the qualities different age groups bring to collaborative processes: from practical wisdom and roll-up-your-sleeves energy to innocence and unbridled idealism. We should re-energize the experience of ‘the village,’ which is essentially the collaboration of people across generations living and working together, knowing each other and learning to contribute what the community needs.”

Innovation is a collective activity. It seems it can’t be done alone; the basic building block is the committed and centered individual making a choice about the leverage point, “You may believe more in the 12,000 Tweeters of the Arab Spring or Margaret Mead’s small group of committed people – both can achieve sustainable societal change, both may lead nowhere, but either way it is about people moving together.”

“I am especially interested in intercultural collective intelligence,” shares Hank. “It really revolves around basic cultural and interaction issues, and it often comes down to language... because as we know, words can mean different things. We already see that ‘social innovation’ means different things in different places - but what do we actually mean? It’s a matter of perception and filtering, listening and hearing, reflecting and learning, and making the effort to understand ourselves and others. Do we really understand what we are saying – and what others are hearing? To benefit from collective intelligence, one has to be able to make the right synthesis. You have to hear what other people are really saying (that’s sometimes tough, especially if they come from different cultures or seem to totally disagree with you) - and ask yourself what it means for your own perspectives on the world? At some point you choose for the synthesis, not for the consensus or the compromise. That’s where the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.”

We chuckle at the complexity and joy of discovering the edges of that complexity, and I suggest “Perhaps social innovation is the conversation!”

I ask Hank, if this work is currently counter-culture - still foreign to much of the prevailing culture and its institutions - what keeps that sparkle in his eye and heartfelt conviction for possibility? “You have to continue to think about the world and do what you think is necessary. I believe I have a contribution to make, so I have to try to make it. We are at a point where cross-generational and geo-political dynamics offer more possibilities for breakthrough than 10-15 years ago. I have learned that perseverance is important: s/he who perseveres, prevails. Years ago I defined the spirit of enterprise for myself, and it comes down to four things: begin with a vision, follow a plan, learn from what happens and never give up. Practicing Aikido added another important lesson; the direction your body takes might be to the side, or even backwards, but the direction of your intention is always forward.”

So how can we be part of moving the Netherlands forward to achieve more of its potential? What can this country contribute to the world in these times? “Focus, entrepreneurial spirit, multicultural opportunities, not being afraid to go into new worlds and try things out. Active engagement in whatever we do, and the best of our creative culture.”

What can the Netherlands learn from other places in the world? “Moving from consensus-seeking to prototyping, moving faster, accepting uncertainty. Testing good ideas fast in practice. Being ready to take entrepreneurial risks was stronger here in the past, it faded for some time, and now this spirit is returning, renewed and stronger than ever.”

“I see a number of interesting initiatives and they get strangled in societal molasses, they meet cynicism or resistance or fear or lack of understanding; but what is that? What is holding us back? The continuing theme of our talk is about the importance of movement - of movement across apparent borders, of movement physically, intellectually, emotionally, in one’s perspectives. Hank offers how his moving across cultures and generations has opened up more possibilities for meeting diverse people already working collaboratively for societal innovation. “Usually it’s not about the answers, but making sure the questions keep getting sharper!”

I ask Hank to leave us with a question... he smiles, looks at the wall of photos of HUB members and asks matter-of-factly: “If there is something you think is really important to do, what is the next step?”

Hank Kune is founder and director of Educore, a Netherlands-based agency supporting innovation practice in government, business and society. Much of his work focuses on public sector innovation, the creation of dedicated innovation-enabling environments, participative planning and policy-making processes, and the strategic role of learning in society. He is an active member of the New Club of Paris, co-initiator of the Aalto Camp for Societal Innovation (ACSI) in Finland, and Founding Partner of the Future Center Alliance. His work on dedicated innovation spaces has been influential in establishing future centers in several countries. Website: www.educore.nl

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