Being SEiSMiC, or how to understand this eruptive urban project?

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It's kind of a tectonic movement. The Future Earth does it. The UN-HABITAT and World Bank support it. The European Commission interweaves it. Community-based management got a Nobel-prize just a few years ago. Living labs are nearly everywhere. Co-creation in general have come some way as normalised desired approaches in many urban policy areas. Transdisciplinarity and deliberation has even become a bit worn – in Denmark they even talk of 'engagement fatigue'.[1]

Urban issues has a similar thing going right now. According Christian Svanfeldt, DG REGIO, it's everywhere and 'everybody wants to ride the urban wave'.[2] Even CSR Europe has recently launched the *Sustainable Living in Cities Campaign*.[3] Since we are now in the urban age this is not suprising – and don't get me wrong, this is a good thing.

In this situation, the *Societal Engagement in Science – Mutual learning in Cities*-project (SEiSMiC) launch event gave some signals on what the JPI Urban Europe may expect in the future concerning co-creative approaches to urban development and management.

Grounding urban issues

The SEiSMiC objective is to:

> ... bridge the gap between the scientific community and society. This will be done in ten countries[4] with a structured dialogue, mutual learning and various approaches of citizen participation, co-creation and co-production about urban social innovations with scientist, policy makers, citizens and a large variety of urban actors.[5]

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[1] See Horst (2014)

[2] SKL 'Hållbar stadsutveckling genom Urbact och andra EU-initiativ', seminar 18 November 2014, Stockholm.

[3] See CSR Europe <http://www.csreurope.org/sustainable-living-cities-campaign#.VIhANNZvA8Z>.

[4] The ten countries where you find SEiSMiC national-nets are Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

[5] SEiSMiC (2014), p. 4

This is to be done, by large, with social innovation to empower affected groups to take part in urban development. So, what could the SEiSMiC project possibly add to the this new geology of morals that the SEiSMiC project strives to articulate?[6]

From my point of view,[7] it is an explorative project that will help us understand social innovation to empower citizens. This is pertinent since the notion of social innovation is not – and perhaps should not be – too precisely defined. As a point of departure, two definitions of social innovation were drawn together by the SEiSMiC project coordinator Margit Noll: social innovation as defined by what is '*good for society*' – i.e. place-based generated solutions to 'individual and commmunity problems'[8] – and that which '*enhance society's capacity to act*' – i.e. where societal problems or challenges exceed the capacity of existing institutions and new or modified approaches and institutions are required.[9] Hence, in SEiSMiC the use of a social innovation approach is seen as generating '*faster and more effective urban transition*' as well as '*increased efficiency in resource utilization*'. Both senses taken together makes for a project to improve conditions and support new ways of tackling European urban societal challenges. Hence, the explorative work is found in the effort to design more and better tools.

But added to this, SEiSMiC will perhaps rather help us explore responsible innovation in an urban context? As Dionysia Lagiou, DG RTD, cautiously pointed out to the assembled innovators and policy-makers,[10] SEiSMiC may exceed expectations and build capacity to this end. As we are all well aware of, urban development is in dire need of participatory and open/responsible innovation to balance technology push tendencies![11] Empowerment again, but with a more implementation and impact built into it.[12]

To keep with the geological metaphor of SEiSMiC – these differences in operative conceptual balances notwithstanding – it could be seen as a project to *ground* urban issues. That is, to translate the ideal conceptual-abstract spaces into practical matters in a bit more

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[6] Deleuze & Guattari (1987)

[7] And I should have incorporated this partial perspective (Haraway 2004) into the main text, but my point of view is based on middle-age, middle-class, CIS male, Northern European by birth and a couple of generations (although many other areas of the word are involved in my family), partner (female) and two kids of about five years old. Hence my perspective is quite susceptible to many -centrisms.

[8] OECD (2011), p. 21.

[9] Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, & Hamdouch (2013), p. 2

[10] See 'SEiSMiC launch kickstarts social innovation projects' <http://www.seismicproject.eu/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=24&cntnt01returnid=60>

[11] See the August and October blarticle installments for a background on why we need to balance technology push and pull in innovation.

[12] Cf. Owen, Macnaughten, & Stilgoe (2012)

messy reality of muddling through by various actors. (This is also why linear models of innovation do not impress JPI Urban Europe at all.)

Rather, it is about tendrils and capillaries in different meshworks that hopefully may intertwine to some degree. In other words, SEiSMiC works to dismiss a caricature made up of a previous geography of society which had the research community almost segregated in monasteries (or ivory towers), policy-making located in their own quarters and circuits (the bureaucrats' endless hallways or the 'Brussels bubble'[13]), and an elusive general public everywhere but still very excluded from those rooms of knowledge production and decision-making. What we see in SEiSMiC is distributed learning and innovation in knowledge practices by having all these actors gather around the issues to be solved.

Pre-quakes and tremors

A first important result was delivered by the *Nieuwe Helden* ('New Heroes'), who were in charge of one (or main) protocoling activities for the first year of preparations to the launch 24–25 November. A protocole done by accompanying the national networks in their start-up activities and documenting meticulously in drawings what people expect and desire of their cities. More precisely, by asking citizens 'What thing or building would you like to add to your city?', the *Sketch*-project adds a very important layer of articulation capacity to SEiSMiC. The group presented three main findings: generalized in the message that people desire stronger communities, better transport, and more green in their urban areas. But the protocol was also operationalised as a big construction adjacent to the venue at the Madeleine square, re-presenting all sketches as well as sampling new ones on the spot.[14]

Then there was the sheer mass of local topics raised to find transnational partners in an open space exercise. An exercise which thus almost couldn't bear the weight of all to the point and concerns that were erupting from the national networks' representatives! The device programmed to do this was almost over-performing in having the earth start to rumble. All project proposals were later on condensed into six core themes for SEiSMiC to explore:

- New urban space and urban policy
- New local economy
- New urban governance and communication
- Measuring social innovation: social value and social impact
- Social innovation and collaborative mapping
- Social innovation processes

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[13] See 'SEiSMiC launch kickstarts social innovation projects' <http://www.seismicproject.eu/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=24&cntnt01returnid=60>

[14] See <http://companynewheroes.com/project/sketch/>

However, the eruption shows the bustling energy and 'let's get going', not only in national networks but in the transnational 'calls' that were made. This local enthusiasm is very important. Since one cannot do real implementation in a linear way, it usually requires local modification, translation, and redesign by the so-called 'end-users' and 'stakeholders' or they cannot make any good use of whatever is to be implemented – be it new technical artefacts, systems, or a welfare provisoning.

Finally, in this quick note on the launch event, there were also strong signals that there is no severe lack of funding for social entrepreneurs and innovation (although access is a different issue, most certainly concerning social innovation in its own right). Hence, social innovation is not necessarily 'public funding only': Dutch banks issuing social impact bonds and the UK Social Value Act are interesting resources in this respect.

What's in it for the JPI Urban Europe?

Given that SEiSMiC is finding its way, how does it fit to JPI Urban Europe? How can we absorb the matter – translate the seismic energy in the moving ground around us – generated by the SEiSMiC network? The are at least three interrelated ways in which the SEiSMiC project nourishes the JPI Urban Europe: in urban topical issues, in the general approach, and a possible bonus on EU-funding synergies.

By urban topical issues I mean the development of the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA). It is co-created with the help of many different actors with urban development concerns. The agenda will guide our call development over the next five–six years and in a longer term – although the SRIA must be overseen and reissued at shorter intervals. But it also bears upon our alignment activities. That is, our work to help member states coordinate their national funding programmes concerning urban issues so as to optimize the added value and access to competence in transnational collaboration. Following from this, it bears upon the JPI Urban Europe capacity to mediate between research-innovation and policy in Europe.

Secondly, our general approach is that the initiative supports interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, integrated efforts at solution oriented and challenge driven research and innovation for a transition towards sustainable and livable urban areas. Now, this is of course the compressed way of putting it in a kind of urban policy jargon – our technical working language, full of acronyms and notions, bits and pieces that is hard to understand as anything other than mumbo-jumbo if you are not near-fluent in both the landscape of polices and actions as in the way this landscape is talked about.

But since we are aiming for transdisciplinarity, some SEiSMiC participants also observed and commented that the project should be cautious against a kind of *urban elitism* at play in urban development. There is a clearly identified need to translate jargon into many other kinds of languages. However, this also means that the technical way of talking

also could be learnt in wider areas than the hot-pot of policy and interest-groups surrounding it! SEiSMiC could perhaps help us with this attunement?

Nevertheless, and with the risk of some more elitism, the JPI Urban Europe needs to get out in the 'capillaries' and to get some stuff back from these. It's like an inverted blood-system where a lot of nutrition derives from the fuzzy-boundary areas where 'transport' system meets other kinds of tissues. Of course, this is a two-way metabolism, since the 'blood' also delivers nutrients in the sense of coordination support and funding etc.

However, this brings us over to a another issue raised (among many others) concerning the initiative's general approach. How to accomodate a wider variety of people? How to accomodate the un-willing, those who don't want to 'change' and where to force them to change would be undignifying. An issue of 'othering' may erupt.[15] Since urban sustainable development requires drastic change in how we *urbanise*, transition will be a dramatic, seismic activity indeed and there are those 'who doesn't want to be shaken'! People who do not feel comfortable becoming aligned in the general frame of transformation.[16] It would be a great mistake to consider these groups to be merely irrational because they can't see the Truth in what needs to be done. In fact, it would amount to the same mistake we are trying to remedy by approaches such as responsible research and innovation.[17] They are not 'barriers'. If anything, this is where we have to be really innovative to allow their non-shakeness. Although this is not really doable as a black-boxed win-win behind the scenes practice (such as 'ecological modernization' was once set up to be).

The third and perhaps bonus in which the JPI Urban Europe profits is still more hypothetical. Synergies in question are between the research and innovation funding programme *Horizon 2020* and e.g. the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The story here is that they run almost in parallell, but with severly limited or no coordination in-between. However, the innovative actions for cities will provide EUR 330 million for urban sustainable development during 2014–2020 and 'a minimum of 5% of the ERDF resources allocated to each Member State shall be invested in the implementation of integrated strategies for sustainable urban development'.[18] Hence, it would make sense to coordinate, not least since cities and urban regional administrations are much accustomed to utilize structural funds whereas urban research and innovation is in general adapted to respond to European framework programme calls.

So, SEiSMiC does have much to offer in the coming project work phase and we are delighted to take part of it!

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[15] Law & Lin (2009)

[16] Cf. Stengers (2010)

[17] Owen et al., 2012

[18] See <http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/urban_en.pdf>, p. 4

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