

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RUSSIA: EASIER SAID THAN DONE

Currently, social innovation in Russia is a relatively new phenomenon. Despite a growing demand for innovation in the social sphere on the part of the state and society, innovation is not disseminated on a large-scale basis. So, how is social innovation implemented in Russia?

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WHAT IS DONE

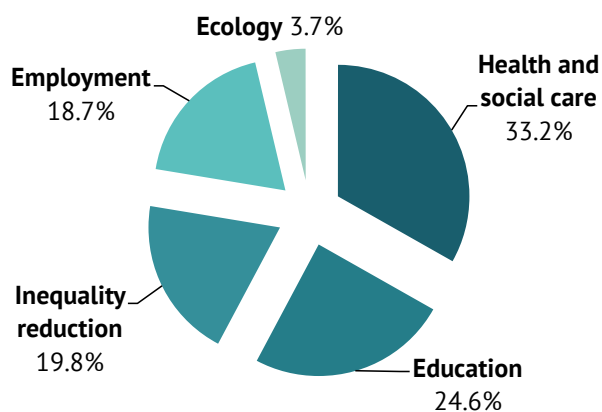
In the modern world, social innovation is used more and more often as an efficient tool to address the most acute social issues and mitigate their negative effects. Social innovation becomes useful when new social challenges emerge and traditional methods and tools cannot always provide a solution thereto.

Social innovation is a relatively new phenomenon for Russia. In contrast to the situation in developed European countries, where civil society plays a major role, in Russia special importance in the dissemination of social innovation initiatives is attached to the authorities who understand the significance of their development and, consequently, promote social activity in areas that the government considers most important. The importance of the

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authorities is due to several reasons. First, administrative, legislative, financial, and other barriers impede the implementation of social innovation [1]. An example of such barriers can be found in the fact that the innovation policy in Russia is focused on science and technology and there is no legislation that would govern the development of social innovation. Second, Russians have low community commitment, which is the main issue that public organizations have to address [2]. Third, Russian people have mental barriers due to which they tend to treat any innovation or change in their social reality with apprehension.

Nevertheless, the first major initiative to support social innovation and, in particular, social entrepreneurship belongs to private business. In 2007, LUKOIL President Vagit Alekperov founded the Regional Social Programs Fund (RSPF) "Our Future". In 2011, the Government of the Russian Federation established an autonomous non-profit organization, the "Agency for Strategic Initiatives", to provide support to non-profit organizations (NPOs). One of the Agency's goals is to find promising initiatives in social entrepreneurship in Russian regions. Besides, since 2013, centers for innovation in the social sphere (CISS) are being established with the aim to promote social entrepreneurship. In practice, however, these organizations only support small and medium-sized



Social innovation projects implemented in Russia, broken down by policy fields

Source: compiled by authors with the use of the data of the Fund "Our Future" [4]

businesses rather than socially oriented NPOs. Also, if looking at the activities of the “Our Future” fund, a similar tendency to neglect the support for NPOs can be observed. According to experts, these tendencies relate to governmental interests to focus on social business rather than socially oriented NPOs, as well as the overall perception that social entrepreneurship is similar to small and medium business [3].

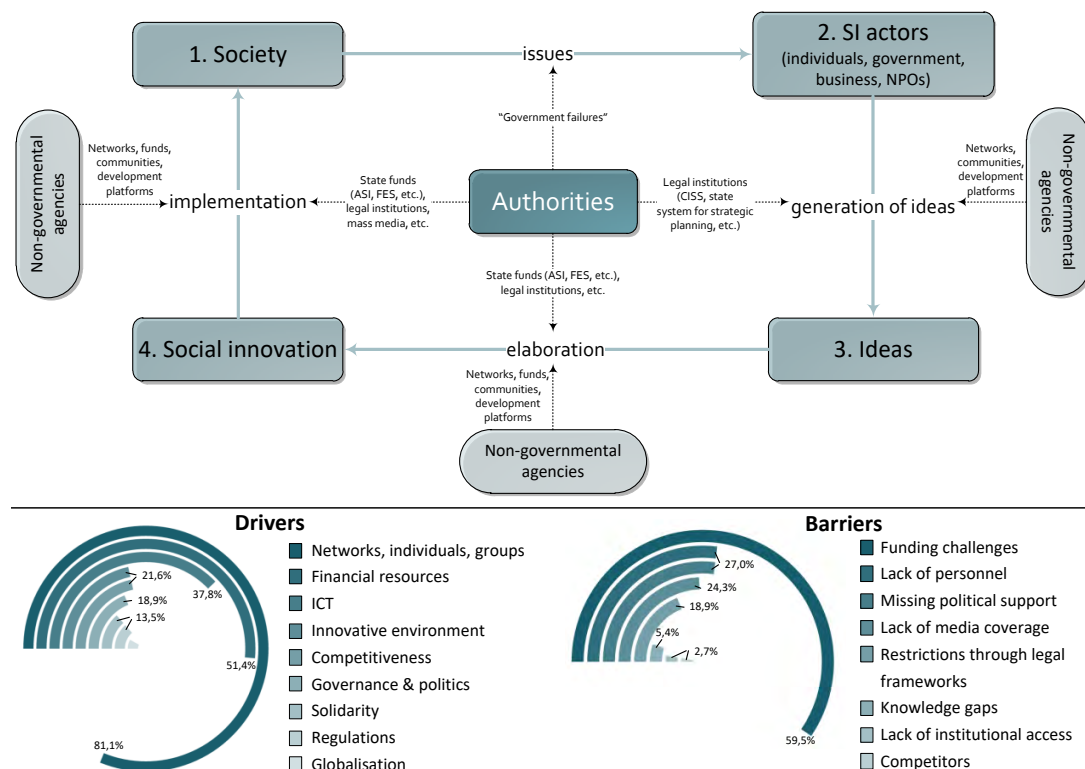
Despite certain difficulties, social innovation in Russia is implemented nationwide. According to RSPF “Our Future”, the fund has promoted 187 innovation projects in Russia from 2007 to 2016 [4]. Social innovation in Russia is implemented mostly in the following areas: health and social care (33 %), education (25 %), inequality reduction (20 %), employment (19 %), and ecology (4 %).

RUSSIAN LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Russia developed its social innovation landscape in conditions where lingering problems were aggravating and new problems emerged. Traditional methods of state influence used to address the issues have not produced the desired effect. In particular, employment of the disadvantaged, provision of health services to the elderly, and access to high-quality education remain quite serious problems.

Alongside the authorities, the main initiators of social innovation are individuals, the business community, and non-profit organizations. An important role in generating ideas and developing projects belongs to non-governmental organizations as these accumulate and implement advanced domestic and foreign experience with the help of information and communication technology. These are mainly legal institutions (centers for social innovation, state strategic planning system, etc.) which form a kind of vector defining priority areas. This aspect is important at the stage of project implementation since support provided by public funds to innovation initiatives depends largely upon the niche occupied, and rather is contextual than system-wide.

According to practitioners, it is not a coincidence that major barriers to the development of social innovation exist in Russia. These include for instance limited financial resources and lack of state support. As a result, social entrepreneurship, which combines both social and economic goals, becomes one of the main promoters of social innovation. At the same time, due to the absence of clear “rules of the game”, it is difficult to engage in social innovation activities since they require a firm legal basis. Besides, under such circumstances, the government often makes subjective choices in favor of those organizations receiving financial, educational, advisory, infrastructural, and informational support.



Nevertheless, the number of social innovation projects increases each year. The society is in great need of change and in a situation where government efforts in addressing critical social issues are not efficient enough, people themselves are encouraged to participate in community activities. A special role in this process belongs to the individual. Many projects were created and now operate on an altruistic basis; their development depends directly on the commitment of their leaders and the cooperation of their teams. However, financial sustainability of the project remains a crucial factor for the survival of social initiatives.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

At present, Russia makes efforts to develop a friendly environment for social innovation. There are certain achievements related to the establishment of various institutions supporting the implementation of social innovation and relevant infrastructure is being developed. People begin to understand the importance of civic engagement and their participation in addressing social issues – all this promotes the emergence of new social practices. At the same time, there still exist certain barriers to the development of social innovation.

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In the future, managing social projects at the national and regional levels will require efforts by public authorities who should clearly define the legal framework and should form a favorable environment for the development of social innovation. As for the scientific community, it should elaborate the theoretical and conceptual foundations for the long-term monitoring of social innovation implementation in Russia's constituent entities. It should further advance forecast indicators and a strategy for governmental policy in this sphere. The implementation of these measures can streamline and promote the diffusion of social innovation and help to solve or mitigate many social problems existent in Russia.

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