Promoting Innovation in Social Services
An Agenda For Future Research And Development

Summary Findings and Key Recommendations
**Background**

European welfare systems are under increasing pressure to transform and adapt to the present and future challenges of our globalized world. This is especially true of the comprehensive field of health, welfare and informal education services – that we will all use at one point or another during our lifetimes.

Social services, generally speaking, are changing. Research conducted by the INNOSERV social platform identified a diverse set of themes. This research agenda outlines how the various stages of investigation worked together to develop possible solutions to the issues surrounding social service innovation, and revealed how they might stimulate future lines of investigation.

Due to the close relation between innovation in social service provision and the broader ‘development agenda’ for social services, this report identifies important mechanisms for positive development in social services across Europe. The research itself focuses on key themes for social services, with the intent of helping these services improve the lives of people and promote a fair and sustainable model for society in times of rapid social change. It needs to respond to new concepts and technologies and to accommodate new social norms and expectations. All service developments have to be effective both in terms of outputs and outcomes and in the use of social and financial resources.

The themes and sub-themes for future investigation of social service innovation promoted by this research agenda neither cover the entire field of innovation in social services, nor speak to the broader field of social innovation. As it includes rather diffuse shifts and developments that affect social attitudes and behaviours, social innovation has a strong correlation to social change and the often intangible factors accompanying it (including the influence of social movements, for instance). Social service innovation is characterized by parallels to this, but differs in that it emphasizes the ‘organizational’ or ‘directed’ aspects of innovation. It stresses, in other words, innovation in service provision as a rather formalized embodiment of ideational or thematic innovation.

INNOSERV’s research agenda also parallels much broader socio-economic and socio-political trends concerned with austerity, due to limited resources and the need for their optimal allocation, along with broader welfare
The difficulties in developing a cohesive direction in this debate stem from a basic confusion over the meaning of “optimum” in relation to social service provision. Do we apply the pareto principle, where no one can be made better off without making someone else worse off? Or, should we consider the well-being of minority groups before that of the majority? Does “optimum” indicate the most cost-efficient way of resource allocation, or one that is rightful and just? If the latter, how do we determine what is rightful and just?

In this debate, innovation has shown the promise of better outcomes by mobilizing resources in a new and often more effective way, sometimes being promoted, in response to the prevailing austerity, as “doing more with less.” Others criticize it for being a disguised argument in favour of further budget cuts. Obviously we cannot resolve these questions. What we can do is provide an impression of what innovation in social service might look like through ‘visual sociology’ (in this case, using short film documentaries to explore innovation developments) and theoretical case work (www.inno-serv.eu), and by highlighting the questions it asks, the challenges it triggers, and the promise it holds by this research agenda. In relation to services, the INNOSERV project has neither studied the structure of individual organizations or the provider landscape, nor the present position in which these organizations and providers find themselves. At base, the project develops a deeper understanding of the emerging products and services, and specifically the processes behind their development. Against this background, we cannot judge whether innovation within social services is more limited than in the commercial arena - although this is a research question worth examining. We can, however, illustrate how innovation relates to and differs from technological innovation, and observe the particularities it brings, from the micro to the macro level, for the actors involved. Please note that all examples of innovations being shown in INNOSERV-videos are not promoted as being “best practice” examples. They rather serve to spur the debate about what innovation in social services might look like.

The INNOSERV approach to investigating social service innovation

Our platform has taken a bottom up approach, collecting the views of stakeholders about innovations in social services in various European countries. This was accomplished through visualizations of twenty innovative examples presented to users, practitioners, policy makers and experts in the field in the INNOSERV partner countries and beyond. Prior research on the state-of-the-art knowledge on social service innovation, along with a systematic assessment of major drivers and challenges in the framework surrounding the phenomenon, helped reinforce these examples of innovative practice. This enabled the development of a model for innovation in service development which linked together the factors driving innovation, including key social and technological changes and challenges with key qualities which make innovation effective and sustainable. These two factors are linked together in practice by individuals and organizations mediating these two sets of factors. One of our key theses is that the
way these are mediated is crucial to eventual adoption and take up of innovations in practice (this model presents only one of the approaches explored through the INNOSERV project):

Factors influencing Social Services Innovation

1 Note: this model has been developed on the basis of the empirical work within the project. It represents one of the mechanisms for identifying innovation in social services. Other approaches included, for example, the systematic detection of current research in scientific publications. For further information about the model of innovation in service development, please read chapter 3.2. of the full research agenda document.
Roskilde at the end of June 2013. This draft was then subject to a sustained consultation process with users and practitioners, policy makers and researchers. The entire process has been performed over nearly two years. The research agenda is thus the culmination of a sophisticated process that combined academic research methods with the strong involvement of various stakeholder groups.

**Research themes**

This research agenda provides a general description of each theme, identifies key sub-themes and their respective state-of-the-art research, along with research gaps to develop a systematic outline of the research questions directing future investigations of the subject. In the following we give a short account of seven themes identified as key areas for future research. Each presented theme includes some indication of the audiences it most potentially affects and the questions it evokes. A selection of most salient research issues which have emerged in the course of the INNOSERV project will follow. This investigation proceeds by outlining the tensions the issues stimulate and how they coincidently influence several of the major research themes. The identified issues, in other words, help establish the connections between various themes.

The seven key research themes identified by INNOSERV are:

(1) User-centred services and approaches,
(2) Innovations and organizational as well as institutional development,
(3) Framing social services in relation to innovation,
(4) The governance of social service innovation,
(5) The influence of national, regional and local contexts,
(6) New technologies,
(7) Measuring outcomes, quality and challenges.

The **first theme**, “User-centred services and approaches,” refers to personalization, cross-sector co-operation and the increasing interaction between professionals, users and volunteers. User-centred services and approaches focus on the paradigmatic shift towards the user: user-involvement in (re)shaping processes, the shifting roles and functions of actors, and rethinking and developing competences of actors, users and volunteers. This includes beneficial aspects often ascribed to phenomena like co-production, i.e., the active involvement of users in the innovation or service provision process.

However, the new forms of interaction resulting from such scenarios may stimulate conflict between, for instance, the ethos of professionals, with their potential interest to preserve autonomy and their expert role, and the wishes and needs of users. While a profound body of knowledge already exists on the interaction between professionals and users, little work has focused on the potential beneficial and harmful effects resulting from the stimulation and diffusion of social service innovation.
Missing knowledge particularly affects the conditions and frameworks needed for successful interaction between actors, and the related management and governance questions more directly assessed in separate themes below. While this theme is of primary importance for practitioners and users, it retains value for researchers investigating the relation of the two and seeking to provide valuable advice for practice.

The second theme, “Innovations and organizational as well as institutional development”, is about engineering change in relation to innovation: resources, patterns of change, agents of change, inter-organizational relations and the management of development. At the micro level, change within the social service organisation (managerial and organizational changes) might include resource mobilization for the realization of innovation. With respect to the surrounding institutional and other frameworks, change might include differing operational conditions for organizations thereby stimulating innovation.

This theme, in that it investigates who holds responsibility for initiating change and how socially beneficial change might be incubated, harnessed and directed, probably lies closest to the phenomenon of broader social shifts and trajectories. This makes it of central importance to researchers who analyse innovation in social services from a systemic perspective, along with policy makers who aim at triggering social change.

A third theme, “Framing social services in relation to innovation”, in close relation to the previous theme, concerns key values and the manner in which policy talk frames innovation: it defines social and political needs and identifies problems and key principles (such as broad quasi-legislative conventions) in shaping social services. It investigates, in other words, the operationalization of broader institutional relations and how these affect the identification of social needs as well as eventual service provision. A major emphasis falls on policy issues and how policy and social discourses affect the perception and legitimation of social service innovation.

This theme is not limited to the regulative influence policy-making can have on innovation, but investigates who decides how services should be designed and the potential effect these actors and processes have over the stimulation or prohibition of innovation. It is connected to values and the normative aspects of innovation in social services.

The fourth theme, “The governance of innovation”, is undergoing rapid change, becoming evermore complex due to the new forms of provider organizations and new forms of (governmental) governance. Governance encompasses sub-themes such as marketization, privatization, standardization, and service pillarization, along with cross-sector approaches that might come into conflict with the former or be used to overcome such conflict. This theme both sheds light on organizational aspects and contains a strong comparative dimension with respect to context. It pays tribute to the influence different welfare-state conceptions have on innovation in social services.

The theme does not only refer to inter-organizational aspects of network governance, but also to political steering through multi-level governance. Similar to the theme addressing organizational and institutional
development, this facilitates the development of guidelines for standard setting and monitoring, along with the promotion of innovation from a policy perspective (in practice and research).

The fifth theme, “The influence of national, regional and local contexts”, refers to the ‘embeddedness’ of innovation in cultural contexts, where local context refers to nation states and local authorities/municipalities. Sub-themes include cultural factors as barriers and facilitators, the capacity of systems in producing and sustaining innovation, and the transferability of social service innovation.

While cultural factors and their influence help determine service demand in particular areas, becoming thereby important for practitioners as designers of social services, policy determines the capacity of systems for realizing and maintaining innovations. Identifying conditions that support the transferability of innovations is basic to the academic investigation of innovation. While the second theme examines diffusion within organizational and institutional contexts, this theme concentrates on the different aspects of geographic diffusion.

The sixth theme, “New Technologies”, examines the impact of new technologies on organizations, professionals and users, and the interactions between them: accessibility of services, remote and assistive technologies, and especially the incorporation of new technologies in the social service process. These affect not only the communication of innovative practices and the connection between individuals as users to service providers, but also some of the delivered services themselves.

New technologies are, thus, of central importance to practitioners, not only as promotional devices, but for the development of new kinds of services and innovation as such.

The final and seventh theme, “Measuring Outcomes, Quality and Challenges”, encompasses a range of questions dealing with the improvement of social services for the user and the service provider and at the societal level, along with the question of how to measure this improvement and any possible unintended effects. As these questions touch on both technical and normative aspects, producing a unique combination of capturing created value to inform decision-making and political steering, they are of central interest to researchers.

Key issues and resulting tensions
The following issues, because they encapsulate the highest tensions triggered by the new imperative on social (service) innovation, are of central importance to the INNOSERV research agenda and cut across thematic areas. They assist our understanding of how best to enable social (service) innovation, how innovation relates to other key principles, and its potential capacity to re-vitalize societies.

Because the themes are so multi-faceted and broad in themselves, their final significance for the design of future research programmes, policy making and organizational practice is contingent upon pro-active engagement. The following issues help the reader better interpret the aforementioned themes. Without a higher degree of elaboration, including reference to academic knowledge from across disciplines and research traditions along
with the reflexive comments of field experts, practitioners, users and policy makers, it will be difficult to fully apprehend the tension fields spanned in the following. We strongly encourage every reader of this executive summary to consult the comprehensive version of the theme most relevant to him or her, along with the applicable (directly) interconnected themes.

The following issues are presented in an accentuated manner with the explicit intent of highlighting their obvious and latent tensions. They neither exhaust the range of concerns contained in this research agenda, nor prioritize any particular aspect. Such prioritization only emerges in conjunction with stakeholder involvement and a mutual recognition of the aims of social (service) innovation, whether and how it might be fostered, and how it might be embedded in the wider societal context. These key issues, however, are significant in directing this discussion process.

Though the following sections follow the same stages as the above themes, internally they correspond to a variety of other themes to which they bear strong connections.

**User-centrality, social needs and risk**

One central challenge in making user centrality a reality (Theme 1) rests in the identification of genuine vs. artificial social needs. A more sophisticated understanding of genuine social needs enables the development of ideas for social service innovation, ideas which can then be translated into responsive social services (Theme 2). Values and norms (Theme 3) guide the definition, discovery and addressing of social needs. However, such definition can also result from political bargaining and thus depend on the power constellations of involved constituents. To mitigate this, in the identification of needs there needs to be a strong reciprocal relationship between users, who explicitly participate in the process, and the political
actor. At the same time, the principle of greater user involvement includes the danger of trading the self-determination of users for the assumption of individual risk. Regulatory standards for social service innovation will have to take this into account (Theme 4).

**Direction and steering modes of change**
With regard to the identification and stimulation of innovation, and its organizational diffusion, there is often reference to a variety of 'agents of change' (Theme 2). This variety has both internal and external consequences for organizations and institutions. It is not yet clear whether the dominant pattern of innovation is bottom-up, top-down or ‘sideways’ or indeed whether there are mixed mechanisms at play. Any judgment may depend especially on context in its geographic sense (Theme 5), the organizational life cycle, and the particular stage of innovation in question. Themes of management, leadership (primarily internally) and governance (Theme 4; primarily externally) are related to structural vs. procedural approaches to social service innovation, the latter of which may include entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial acting.

**Key principles and their interpretation**
International regulatory frameworks, standard principles, and conventions (Theme 3) determine policy and organizational practice. There will, however, always be differences in the local vs. regional vs. national interpretation of these framing references (Theme 5). Conflict might even arise between these principle guidelines and current legal regulations. It remains unclear how these individual frameworks, and any consequent tensions, feed into social service innovation.

**(Conflicting) policy principles**
What relationship currently exists between the diversity of current policy principles and social service innovation (Theme 4)? Innovation, far from being in harmony with existing policy principles, may stimulate conflict. Specifically, tensions arise with regard to innovation vs. continuity. This affects on the one hand the emergence of new (innovative) services vs. the preservation and the reliability of standard services, and, on the other, the ambitions of continuous innovation vs. scaling and how ‘standardization’ of new service approaches are achieved. It affects political regulation in both the field and organizational practice (Theme 2). The issues of cost vs. quality of outcomes are also often (though not always) key conflicting considerations (Theme 7). The extent to which the agendas of privatization and marketization either stimulate or prohibit innovation is a question to be asked in relation to this. It is also unclear how key principles regulating social service provision such as legal standards or broader directives (e. g., human rights declarations) might become more determinative than pragmatism (Theme 3) within this framework. Finally, with the promotion of innovation comes the need to balance administrative efficiency vs. cross-cutting service and funding streams, which seem to be needed for social service innovation.

**Systematic enabler of innovation**
What contextual factors help stimulate social service innovation: capacity vs. necessities (Theme 5)? Is innovation more likely to emerge where we
find the biggest need, or where existing socio-economic and socio-political systems have the highest capacity? Is innovation prompted by scarcity (which triggers potential demand) or abundance (in delivering potential supply)? Any answer depends on the local, regional or national context and the effects this has over the number, scope, size and type of the emerging innovation. This, in turn, shapes actor constellations and has implications for the design of funding streams (Theme 2).

Alterations by new technology
New technology (Theme 6) is becoming evermore important, both as a means of communication for social (service) innovation and as a fundamental element of service provision. How does this change actor roles (Theme 1) at the internal micro level: i.e., how is the relation between professionals vs. users altered? What effects does it have at the external field level: i.e., is there a complementary/integrative relation vs. a competitive relation between new (technology based) and old services? This includes the question of whether and to what extent technology is relevant to social (person-based) services at all. This connects to the framing of social service innovation (Theme 3).

The challenge of measurement
The measurement of the outcomes, quality and sustainability of services (Theme 7) will always be placed in a tension field between technical accuracy vs. normative directions. It is, as such, directly related to the principles framing social service innovation (Theme 3). Measurement is vital to how organizations and institutions steer, assess and regulate social service innovation (Theme 2), to how it affects users (Theme 1) and to how innovation is governed in relation to political prioritization, benchmarking and similar practices (Theme 4).

Alongside these overarching issues, three of the seven research themes received particular attention during INNOSERV stakeholder consultation phase, and subsequently received the most profound revisions in the iterative evolvement of the research agenda. Although we cannot be conclusive, we suspect that the pronounced interest in these three was due to their broad relevance as well as their inchoate state.

(1) User-centredness
In terms of relevance, as the first theme relates to the target groups of a service, so it touches on the essential traits of service provision. However, the very newness of a user-centred approach means that the realization of this ambition (serving the target group) is deficient and that much room for improvement remains.

(5) Context
The fifth theme touches upon the core challenges in European policy. These lie in bridging a pronounced gap between nation states and between regions or municipalities. One finds these gaps in socio-economic development status, political systems, or cultural values and traditions. Eastern European countries and new member candidates are subject to catalytic change and currently experiencing dynamic development. The state of crisis in some incumbent member states further increases the complexity of this issue and contributes to its lack of resolution.
(7) Outcomes and quality
The seventh theme is connected to social well-being and so to the ultimate rationale for social service provision. It affects constituents both at the European and at the global level and spans all sectors and field borders. The issue of outcomes and quality of services is directly linked to debates on social-welfare, including matters of inclusion, cohesion, productivity and viability – an issue subject to evermore intense debated.

As suggested above, the themes need to be treated in an integrated and not isolated fashion. Nonetheless, these observations can help identify the most powerful levers for bringing greater coherence to the field and study of social service innovation.

Outlook
The themes and specific issues discussed here together with the video portraits intend to stimulate exchange between researchers, practitioners and policy makers around the emergent field of social service innovation and other related debates. The research agenda, despite the focus on some selected issues, demonstrates the broad range of subjects being spanned by this new thematic focus.

This research agenda furthermore highlights how complex social service innovation is and how it occurs at multiple levels: at the micro level of individual organizations, at the meso level of organizational fields, at the macro level of political regulation, and ultimately at the level of broad social change. Due to this scope, we believe that social service innovation represents a fruitful field for scholarly investigation, spanning disciplinary, research, practice, and policy borders. In this regard, a multiplicity of potential setups and constellations of investigation characterizes its study. Basic and applied research can be combined in its investigation, and focused research projects can be complemented with social platforms or more experimental projects such as incubators, clusters or even network developments. This research agenda raises issues worth further investigation. It indicates the potential relation between the research approach and the primary audience highlighted in the executive summary and supported by the specific research questions accompanying each theme in the comprehensive agenda.
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