

Civic Society in Finland – a short reflection on policy impact

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Suomi 100 – the celebration of 100 years of independence for Finland and what a time to visit, a time when Finland is reflecting not only on 100 years of independence but also on 100 years of social innovation strongly rooted in the Nordic welfare model. Finland's approach emphasises that *'wellbeing is founded not just on technological developments but also on social innovations, ... the corner stone of the welfare state'*¹. A country acting as a strong proponent of social change, development and innovation is the perfect setting in which to reflect on policy making in health and social care, and particularly within mental health.

Civic society more generally in Finland should be considered a significant social innovation triumph. During 30 busy days in Helsinki, based at the Finnish Association of Mental Health (FAMH), we met with various actors in the mental health policy making field including employees of FAMH, representatives from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, employees from THL (the institute of health and wellbeing), representatives from social change projects, as well as representatives from SOSTE (the umbrella body for NGOs and civic society in Finland). Whilst these various organisations differ widely in the roles they play with respect to health and wellbeing policy more generally, the role and importance of civic society was emphasised and appreciated by all.

In terms of policy-making we realised the central role held by civic society in Finland in driving forward not only social innovation but in impacting social change through representing the needs of Finnish society. Often acting and advocating as an intermediary between citizens and governmental bodies, civic society in Finland appears to offer a direct route to sustainable social change in Finland. Not without its challenges, those we met with were honest & open about the barriers they face. This honest & open dialogue is something to be commended in policy making nowadays – it appears to be that these kinds of conversations are what drives policy forward as opposed to the debates we often observe which are highly politicised and stagnant.

A further reflection on this time was one of curiosity. Our time in Finland exposed us to organisations, roles and actions within civic society which we had not considered before. It made us question what the situation was like within our own context in Scotland. Did we have a body that operated in a certain capacity? Did we have an organisation that acted on behalf of a certain group of people? The answer to such questions was not always 'no', it was more often a direct probe to inquire further, opening our eyes to what the reality is in terms of the role of civic society in Scotland, both good and bad. The opportunity to compare cross-nationally was a valuable experience I'll take forward in any future policy-related work – to always inquire, to always acquire new information, and to always question what you take for granted within the context in which you are set. In terms of policy-making, the advantages to learning from different societal contexts should never be overlooked. We can only hope we offered as much back, as those we met gave us – in terms of their time, their honest and open debate, and the warm Finnish welcome we received by all.

¹ Finnish Literature Society, (2013). 100 Social Innovations from Finland. Falun: Scanbook