

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN GERMANY – REVIVAL OF A PROMINENT CONCEPT

From Bismarck's 'National Security System' to today's energy transition, throughout history innovation made in Germany has been far from being purely technological in nature. Yet, public policy has only recently shown interest in the concept of social innovation culminating in the broadened understanding of innovation laid out in the country's national 'High-Tech Strategy'.

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SOCIAL INNOVATION: MADE IN GERMANY

Germany is the largest economy in Europe and a leading export-oriented industrial nation. For many years, Germany's national High-Tech Strategy (HTS) mainly targeted technological innovation. More recently, however, substantive advancements towards a comprehensive, interdepartmental innovation strategy have been made. In this sense, the strategy emphasises "an expanded concept of innovation that includes not only technological innovation but also social innovation – and that includes society as a central player." [1, p. 4]

Germany is well known for its art of engineering and industrial production communicated through its quality label 'made in Germany'. Germany also has a long tradition in the field of social innovation as is evident in historic examples such as the 'kindergarten' or Bismarck's 'National Security System' shaping the German welfare system. Krupp's welfare program, for example, provided extensive social benefits for employees (e.g. flats and medical provision) and built a long-term, generation-spanning attachment of the employees – similar to the contemporary social responsibility programs of corporations.

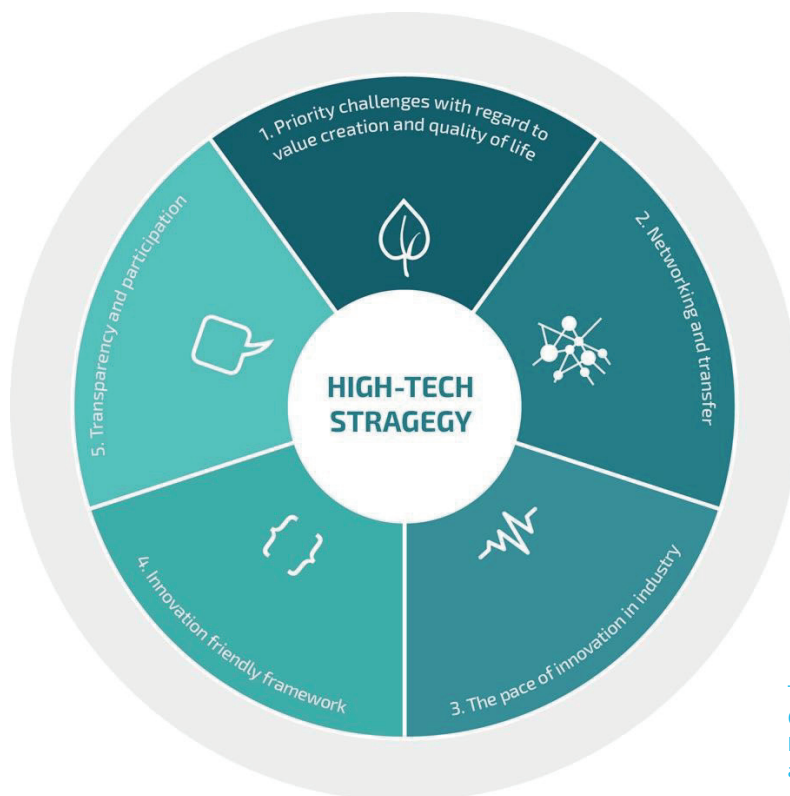
Inventions such as the 'dual system of vocational education' or the 'Energiewende' (energy transition) are well known examples of recent social innovations made in Germany.

THE REDISCOVERY OF A LONG-FORGOTTEN CONCEPT

While Germany has established an astonishing support infrastructure for technological innovation with science parks, university-industry cooperation and start-up development accompanied by extensive research programs, social innovation hardly played a role. Likewise, the academic innovation discourse has long been dominated by a strong focus on technological innovation. Approaches that criticised such narrow understanding of innovation and called for shift in innovation research towards the interplay of social innovations, social conflict and social change appeared only occasionally. In this context, social innovation was understood as the implementation of new social and socio-political ideas and institutions.

Largely forgotten, the term 'social innovation' was revisited by Wolfgang Zapf in 1989. According to Zapf [2], social innovations constitute "new ways to attain goals", especially in regard to new forms of organisation, new regulations, and new lifestyles that would alter the direction of social change and solve problems better than previous solutions, thus worth to become imitated and institutionalized.

Triggered by a rise in the scientific discourse social innovation has begun to receive renewed attention by policy makers and the wider public only since 2010. Still, the elaboration of a common concept of social innovation's role in systemic change and societal transformation is pending. Against this backdrop, Howaldt and Schwarz [3] call for conceptual onward development beyond outdated concepts of socio-technical innovation-research and define social innovation as "an intentional recombination or reconfiguration of social practices (p. 54)". This growing awareness of social innovation



Core Elements of the German High-Tech Strategy (Source: adapted from [1, p.4])

is also reflected in publicly funded studies covering a diversity of topics, such as the variety of initiatives in different fields of action, the design of effective public support mechanisms or impact investment and social entrepreneurship [4].

CIVIL SOCIETY AS DRIVING FORCE

Initially, the renewed public discourse foremost was driven by grassroots movements: Committed individuals or small locally embedded networks functioned as key initiators who over time were supported by private endowments such as Ashoka or the Schwab Foundation.

Gradually, institutionalisation and the formation of support infrastructures as social impact hubs and centres for social entrepreneurship coincide the growing engagement of civil society actors in social innovation activities. Network structures started to evolve and events as the Vision Summit (www.visionsummit.org) – which has taken place since 2007 – attract public attention. In 2014, a network of partners from civil society, economy, policy and academia published the Declaration “Soziale Innovation für Deutschland” (“Social Innovation for Germany”). Although there remains considerable potential for optimisation by integrating social responsibility activities in core business, a recent survey of 600 large German companies (> 250 employees) illustrates that companies as well as civil society actors are overall committed to address emerging and longstanding challenges to society (e.g., demographic change, digitisation, social inequality).

SOCIAL INNOVATION AS PART OF THE HIGH-TECH STRATEGY

While holding leading position in technological innovation, Germany lags behind the European discourse and other European countries in regard to social innovation. Notwithstanding the stronger orientation of the German innovation strategy towards the grand societal challenges, traditionally social innovation has been perceived as being limited in scope and conceptually ‘fuzzy’. Especially the limited understanding of social entrepreneurship along with the normative orientation on solving social problems does not seem to be sufficient for unfolding social innovations’ full potential. Instead, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive concept of social innovation, which accounts for its various manifestations, actors and cultural contexts. Accordingly, the development of a common understanding of social innovation (including a clear differentiation from other concepts such as social entrepreneurship or technology innovation) is precondition for an uptake of the concept in a comprehensive innovation policy.

Strongly backed by political parties and research programmes in some Federal States (e.g. North-Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Wuerttemberg), the approval of Germany’s ‘New High-Tech Strategy’ (HTS) in September 2014 was an important milestone in this direction. The HTS establishes thematic priorities in research and innovation, with priority 1, 2 and 5 explicitly referring to social innovation. [1, p. 5]. Priority 2 centres on expanding universities’ collaboration with industry and society and priority 3 aims at strengthening

dialogue and participation. It is envisaged to strengthen interested citizens' opportunities to shape innovation policy, including formats for dialogues and public participation in research.

This expanded innovation concept has become most apparent at the Second International German Forum held in 2015, where Chancellor Angela Merkel and experts from around the globe discussed innovations and how they can improve wellbeing, prosperity and progress. One important question discussed was how the interplay of policy, business, academia and civil society could be organised to facilitate holistic innovations and devise effective solutions. This question was taken up by the conference 'Innovation for Society – New ways and methods to unfold the potential of social innovation' in September 2016 funded by Germany's Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). The congress in Berlin offered opportunities for national exchange between academia and practitioners from the field of social innovation. The two-day congress offered a platform for initiatives and communities of social innovation in Germany to meet and connect. It also offered the opportunity to discuss new topics and introduce new instruments for funding innovation.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the public debate on social innovation has gained momentum. As part of the HTS social innovation is expected to play an important role in shaping the future of the German economy and society. The digital transformation of economy and society will further increase the importance of social innovations. Triggered by the debate surrounding 'Industry 4.0', digitalisation affecting economies and social life as a whole calls for a closer look at the interplay of social and technological innovation. Technological innovations have the potential to positively impact the diffusion of social innovations and vice versa technological innovations frequently develop their full potential only in combination with a social innovation [5].

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