

Breaking silos, Building Communities and Nudging Social Scientists: On the SITE4Society experiment

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Governments worldwide are committed to try to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Moreover they recognize that they alone cannot mobilize the necessary resources and capabilities for this purpose. Hence, they have called for cooperation from all societal stakeholders to assume responsibility and strive to contribute to the achievement of SDGs. This is leading to a new phenomenon whereby different kinds of non-governmental economic actors ranging from civil society, social enterprises, start-ups, firms and multinationals are aligning their strategies and reporting against the same objectives. For scholars of economic development, this represents a wonderful opportunity and terrain to study how self-interest maximizing economic players with disparate objectives, resources, capabilities and hidden intentions, can be cajoled to contribute to a set of common and collective goals.

For social scientists, there are two ways to go about doing this. The well trodden path calls for being a ‘outside thinker-observer-researcher’ creating knowledge and tools through study, while leaving the ‘object of study’ pretty much in the same state as it was before. The road less travelled, is to become an actor participant of the natural experiment, i.e. become a mouse in the laboratory experiment, joining the other mice in the cage, instead of being on the outside taking notes. This might not only lead to a new kind of learning by doing, but also offer more scope to make a difference in the conditions of the context, as it is likely to give deep insight on how the players in the game can be motivated and nudged to contribute to the collective cause.

The SITE4Society initiative is exactly such an action-research adventure to create a home-grown social innovation. It starts from the premise that the mobilization of Science (or knowledge), Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship are instrumental variables to address societal challenges and the purpose is to explore how we as academics in UNU-MERIT, can create a shared value in the local and global communities towards the SDGs. This is not entirely a new idea. Scholars have identified the ‘Triple Helix Model’ and proposed that continuous and spontaneous interaction between actors from the university, industry and state can serve to build industrial capabilities in knowledge intensive sectors. But here actors from the university usually refer to those working in the hard sciences, innovations are strictly of the technological kind and entrepreneurship refers to business, and the state is interested because the Triple Helix Model can contribute to industrial and economic growth (Goal 8, and Goal 9).

In contrast to the standard Triple Helix Model, the focus of SITE4Society is to explore if and how social scientists can generate a social innovation, wherein the value created accrues primarily to society or is dispersed across a variety of actors, rather than being largely appropriated by a single entity. It is part of the trend that seeks greater humanization of the economy through social innovations based on conviviality and cooperation (Kemp et al. 2016). An innovation is usually successful if it caters to an underserved need, want or demand, which in this case we perceive, as the lack of bridges or active networks between academics from different disciplines and between social scientists and the rest of world – interested in transitioning to sustainability. Thus, the overarching objective of SITE4Society is to break the

silos and start conversations on the assumption that it would generate value for many. This is done through ‘interactive workshops’ that are designed to be ‘live learning experiences’.

How have we fared? Already, we have generated some value that goes beyond a warm glow to the organizers, but it is too early for a detailed analysis. Currently, we have passed the first litmus test of an intrapreneurial initiative – our colleagues and students who participated have found it useful. Furthermore, we have been able to attract talented scientists, entrepreneurs and managers, who have been generous and willing to make it a live ‘learning experience’ by responding to questions that interest us. Both they, and students and faculty from other disciplines, often first time visitors, have expressed satisfaction. Thus, without further ado, to illustrate the above, I summarize what we have learnt from our guests of the last workshop. Let’s first recall the SDGs.



We had representations from a variety of economic players in the local innovation system, Brightlands (institution supported by Limburg government to nurture start-ups), Sustainability (getting to be a start-up), DSM corporate sustainability division (a Dutch multinational in 50 countries), GoodGood (a social enterprise), LOCOtuinen (a cooperative), Bandito Espresso (a social enterprise) and Maastricht University (an academic institution!). How they are working to contribute to the SDGs is shown below in order of their priority.

Speaker and Company	SDGs covered	How?
Dr. Irina Burlacu, Program Coordinator at Brightlands Innovation Factory	3, 9,12,13,11,16 4,6,8, 10, 14,15	Building an Eco-system in the Limburg region and supporting startups working on SDGs
Dr. Burak Can, Co-Founder of Sustainbly	3, 10, 11, 13,17	Creating an open source platform offering an air quality solution on IoT (internet of things) – that minimizes end of life waste and generates livelihoods for the differently abled.

Ms. Willemijn Brouwer, Sustainability Engagement Officer - RoyalDSM	2,3,7,12,13	Leveraging unique competences in life sciences and material sciences towards solution designs that nourish performance and contribute to sustainability
Dr. Kaiser Chaudhary, Founder of GreenIndusTree, GoodGoodVentures, and Power One for One	7,8,9,13,17,3	Channeling investment from for-profit companies into renewable energy in Emerging countries including the base of income pyramid markets via an Impact Investment platform
Ms. Anne, Core team member of LOCOtuinen and responsible for communications	11,12,8,3,13,16	Running a cooperative urban garden where members can harvest their vegetables 9 months a year and thereby decreasing carbon, promoting healthy food and raising awareness about sustainability
Ms. Diënné Hoofs, Co-owner of Bandito Espresso	12,8,11,13,16	Providing good food and even better coffee using organic ingredients that have fair trade certification, with used equipment whenever possible for production and hosting clientele.
Mr. Jérôme Scheren, MPP Student, who mapped contributions of Maastricht University to the SDGs	3,4,9,8,5,10,12,16 6,1	Through scientific publications, collaboration with private actors and projects for public sector agencies and government bodies, Maastricht University contributes to SDGs.

The trigger for all the entrepreneurs was a deep desire to make the world better; it really had nothing to do with the presence of a business opportunity.

Entrepreneur	Personal Triggers
Burak Can	Visible Impact of poor air quality on health of personal entourage
Kaiser Chaudhary	Desire to contribute to universal access to Clean Air, Clean Water and Clean Food
Anne	Desire to be engaged in more responsible, local production and consumption patterns.
Diënné Hoofs	Desire to provide an alternative food choice that is more organic and responsible

The business models of the entrepreneurs were diverse and they came with their own challenges.

Entrepreneur	Business Model	Personal or Systemic challenges
Burak Can	Entrepreneurs hold one steady job and devote spare time to firm	Time management – additional allocation of effort required for

		business take-off
Kaiser Chaudhary	A for-profit division funds a non-profit philanthropy (which may or may not be financially autonomous in the short or medium run)	Lack of interest of business intermediaries in Emerging markets in quality and long-time project sustainability
Anne	Business objective is to cover costs through cost-sharing by members and sales of organic produce	Lack of time of members to expand the community
Diënne Hoofs	Business objective is to generate livelihoods for workers while adhering to the credo of fair-trade and organic inputs.	Challenges of organic farmers in terms of access to information, logistics, activist buyers and a more open market.

All speakers confirmed the possibility of furthering collaboration with the academic community and offered us great food for thought.

Speaker	Questions/Message for students and academics
Irina Burlacu	Do you have a good business idea to promote sustainability? Contact us.
Burak Can	How can production systems be transformed to become circular or with zero waste?
Willemijn Brouwer	Help us in embedding the SDG agenda by examining our objectives, measuring impact and avoiding silos.
Kaiser Chaudhary	What does impact mean? What are socially adequate returns? Do countries care about SDGs or are they using it opportunistically? How much do developing countries care about the environment (e.g. in terms of willingness to invest effort and funds)? Do rules to which companies are bound to in Europe also apply to them in developing countries (PET, Fertiliser etc.)? How do multinationals respond to more lenient or ineffective regulatory systems?
Anne	How can we expand civil society communities that are engaged in urban farming? Let us take Maastricht as the case study.
Diënne Hoofs	Organic: is it really better for the environment? Fairtrade: is it really fair? How fair is fair trade? How can the downside of organic farming be addressed? Organic farming or Innovative farming? What should a small business do and not do to have the most positive impact possible?

To conclude, I cite two interesting observations of doctoral students. Chandrashekar notes that the presentations broke the standard economics notion of all firms as entities uniquely

focused on profit maximization at all costs, for the speakers, “highlighted not only economic, but also legal, philanthropic and ethical responsibilities being observed”. Finally, Otioma Chuks, summarized us well: “SITE4Society provides a platform to interact with entrepreneurs with varied business backgrounds and at different stages but working towards one thing: doing business while promoting public wellbeing. It serves to reduce the knowledge distance between academics and practitioners, offering a two-way opportunity for learning and collaboration.”

Reference

Kemp, René, et al. "The humanization of the economy through social innovation." *SPRU 50th anniversary conference*. 2016.