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# Towards brighter futures for European small and medium-sized towns

*What can social innovation contribute?*

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# 14. Towards brighter futures for European small and medium-sized towns: what can social innovation contribute?[1]

*Marco Bontje, Nicola Bacon, David Bole and Claire Gordon*

## INTRODUCTION

Social innovation has gained prominence in academic and societal debates in recent years. It has become such a popular topic among researchers, policy-makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social enterprises that entire conferences as well as journals are dedicated to it. Although it has become fashionable in the early twenty-first century, the roots of social innovation can be traced much further back in time, to at least the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019). Social innovation can mean different things in different contexts, ranging from small grassroots initiatives to systemic changes. Thus far, most social innovation projects, strategies and research have taken place either in large cities or in rural areas. There has been far less attention paid to small and medium-sized towns, a settlement category often overlooked in urban and regional research in general. Also, in shrinking cities research, larger cities tend to attract most attention, at the expense of smaller settlements. In Europe, there are far more small or medium-sized towns than large cities, and many of them are facing an uncertain future. This may apply even more to small and medium-sized (post-)industrial towns, which may be facing a double disadvantage: being small and missing critical mass, while also not having the right specialisation(s) to be competitive in the twenty-first century economy. Social innovation may offer chances to improve the social sustainability and future perspectives of such places (Gordon 2019a).

This chapter will first introduce the concepts of social sustainability and social innovation and discuss its potentials and limitations when it is applied in urban and regional development. This is followed by a review of development challenges and future perspectives of small and medium-sized towns in general, and small and medium-sized industrial towns in particular. The two topics came together in the recently completed Bright Future for Black Towns project, in which the authors of this chapter were involved. In this project, the development paths and narratives, current strengths and weaknesses, and future perspectives of small and medium-sized (post-)industrial towns in Europe were analysed. After briefly introducing the project and its case study towns, the main focus of this chapter is on one of the project's most important elements: a comparative analysis of social sustainability and social innovation.

## SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social sustainability is one of the three pillars of sustainable development identified by the World Commission on Environment and Development of the United Nations (WCED 1987).



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Unfortunately, the social dimension of sustainable development has often been neglected in policy and practice, though recently interest in social sustainability is growing (Boström 2012). Social sustainability research relates to substantive concepts, such as social well-being, social equity, social capital and social cohesion (Cuthill 2009; Dempsey at al. 2011), as well as procedural aspects, such as social infrastructure, citizen participation and democratic governance. Social sustainability research often focuses on (access to, affordability and quality of) housing and the impact of urban regeneration on communities and people's lives. The neighbourhood or local community is often seen as the most appropriate scale for analysis and assessment (Dempsey et al. 2011). However, it is acknowledged that not enough attention has been paid to how social sustainability can be achieved in urban policy and practice, and how policy success could be assessed in this regard.

In the Bright Future for Black Towns project, the following definition of social sustainability was used, proposed by consortium partner Social Life:

> A process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work in. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world-infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve. (Woodcraft et al. 2012, p. 16)

This definition underpins Social Life's social sustainability framework, which captures the elements needed to create socially sustainable places. This framework is derived from a review of research and consultation across disciplines, drawing out what is already known about what makes places thrive. The framework draws on a wide range of interdisciplinary research evidence from social sciences, (environmental) psychology, behavioural economics, well-being, urban studies, housing, planning and environmental science (Woodcraft 2012). Over the last five years, the framework has been developed into a tool for framing discussions and plans for places, both new housing developments and existing areas. Social sustainability assessment brings together different methodologies traditionally considered to be discipline or interest specific. For example, it draws on formal administrative data, data held by services and on grey research published by NGOs or others, as well as on the ethnographic studies in the earlier work programmes of this project. Interviews with public sector, private sector and community organisations in the case study areas also informed this process. The framework consists of four dimensions: amenities and social infrastructure; social and cultural life; voice and influence; and adaptability and resilience (see Figure 14.1). The framework offers a tool to assess the social sustainability of places and a lens for practical actions to improve social sustainability (Gordon 2019a).

Social innovation is increasingly seen as a powerful strategy to increase social sustainability and can potentially be a key driver of social change (Howaldt et al. 2015). Social innovation has gained significant attention over the past two decades as an evolution of the idea of innovation for purely economic reasons. Social innovation researchers, practitioners and activists recognise that people can innovate for societal benefit. Social innovations are seen as new approaches, which manage better than existing societal practices to meet social demand and resolve societal challenges. Moreover, they are not only good for society, but also aim at enhancing society's capacity to act (BEPA 2011).

Social innovation can be a complex process, often involving several actors and cooperative relationships, and it is context-specific: particular solutions work well in particular contexts

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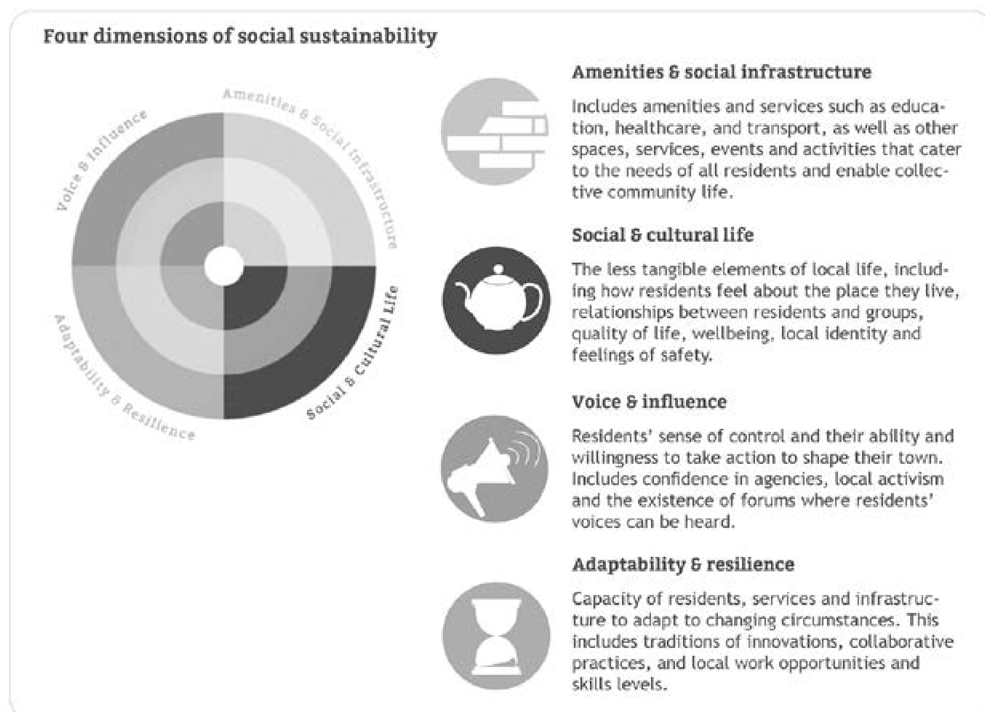


*Source:* Gordon (2019a).

*Figure 14.1 Social life's social sustainability framework*

and can therefore not always be scaled up or transferred (Bartels 2020; Reynolds et al. 2017; Van Dyck and Van den Broeck 2013). Moulaert and MacCallum (2019) stress the territoriality of social innovations: 'Socially innovative actions do not simply happen within places; they happen in response to place-specific issues and through the mobilisation of place-specific resources' (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019, p. 80). These innovations are often the outcomes of initiatives taken by ordinary people at the local scale. There are definite links between the notions of social innovation and social capital. In local communities with tight networks and shared norms, values and understanding, cooperation within and between groups to make social innovations happen will be facilitated (Baker and Mehmood 2015).

In an attempt to create a shared understanding of social innovation, Howaldt and Hochgerner (2018, p. 19) define social innovation as 'a new combination of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts … with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices'. Moulaert and MacCallum (2019, p. 4) state that social innovation is based on three core principles: 'it meets genuine needs neglected and/or exacerbated by the state/market apparatus; it creates new forms of eco-social/institutional relations and polities; and it collectively empowers people (especially marginalised people) to act'.

Moulaert and Van den Broeck (2018) acknowledge the academic roots of current social innovation debates referring to earlier debates about affiliated concepts such as social move-

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ments, social economy and corporate responsibility. While earlier forms of social innovation were about social change and transformation, more recent debates are more diverse and often relate to either caring neoliberalism (or socialising market mechanisms), or socio-political transformative social innovation. The latter of these two ideologies, going beyond attempts to improve market mechanisms, is more common in urban studies research. It understands social innovation as a strategy to strengthen solidarity and contribute to socio-political empowerment. Researchers of social innovation can play an active role in this type of strategy as co-producers of transformative change (Bartels 2020).

## SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS: DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Urban studies research as well as urban policies, globally but also within Europe, are overly focused on large cities and city-regions. Especially in Europe, a continent full of small and medium-sized towns and cities, this is remarkable. Estimates of how many Europeans are living in these towns vary, but it is definitely a settlement category that should not be underestimated. Steinführer et al. (2016), for example, state that more than half of Europe's urban population lives in small and medium-sized towns, and about one-fifth in small towns. Servillo et al. (2017) report that 27 per cent of the European Union (EU) population is living in small and medium-sized towns of up to 50 000 inhabitants. Since the late 1990s, the EU increasingly acknowledges the importance of small and medium-sized towns in strategic documents such as the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and the Territorial Agenda for the European Union 2020. However, this has not yet led to increasing research interest within urban studies. Despite frequent attempts by some researchers to give small and medium-sized towns and cities a more prominent place on the international research agenda (Bell and Jayne 2009; Steinführer et al. 2016; Atkinson 2019; Ocejo et al. 2020), research in these settlement categories has remained an exception to the larger cities rule.

Definitions of small and medium-sized towns and cities differ and may be based on several criteria, including population size and density, built-up area and socio-economic criteria. However, relative size and importance within the town's specific national and regional context is also relevant. What is considered to be a small or medium-sized town in one country can be considered as a quite large city in another. In the Bright Future project, case study towns were selected that represent the third (or lower) tier of national settlement hierarchies and are not situated in large city-regions, with population sizes ranging between about 10 000 and about 100 000 inhabitants.

There are both pessimistic and optimistic discourses and conceptualisations about the recent development and future perspectives of small towns. On the pessimistic, problematising side, small towns are perceived as places that often face economic and population decline, are less developed and less capable of recovering from structural problems. These small towns are often in need of policy action from outside and from within to cope with current economic dynamics. Conversely, the optimistic discourse idealises small towns as the best linkage between urban and rural, a potentially sustainable form of urban structure (ESPON 2006). According to this discourse, small towns have several advantages in respect of quality of life, for example, an attractive living environment, lower costs of living, higher public security and stronger social networks than larger cities (Erickcek and McKinney 2006; Pink and Servon

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2013; Wirth et al. 2016). These two conceptualisations also imply two contrasting development scenarios, leaving small towns as winners and losers in a polarisation process (Fulton and Shigley 2001).

**Specific Challenges of Small and Medium-sized Industrial Towns**

Small and medium-sized industrial towns are often perceived as having a double disadvantage (Bole et al. 2020). According to the pessimistic discourse discussed previously, small towns in general are seen as losers because they cannot compete with the agglomeration economies of larger metropolitan regions, which have larger and more productive firms (Combes et al. 2012) and/or attract more knowledge workers and knowledge-intensive companies (Van Winden 2010). When smaller towns depend on traditional economic bases, such as mining, steel or textile industries, they are more vulnerable to decline since they are unable to find a niche in the twenty-first century world economy (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012). This applies even more starkly to towns with an economic base that is mostly or entirely dependent on a single industry or even a single company. The 'places that don't matter' discourse, about (perceived) lagging and declining areas with little economic potential (Rodriguez-Pose 2018), seems to be tailor-made for these industrial towns. Traditional small and medium-sized industrial towns are seen as having old productive economies, in contrast to the new productive economies typical of larger cities which are based on creative and knowledge-based activities (Hamdouch et al. 2017). In this dominant discourse, industrial towns are inherently vulnerable and in need of restructuring, though not all towns would be able to successfully restructure. This pessimistic view of the future of industrial towns is part of a broader discourse of the supposed shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy and society, which started in the 1970s and has become the dominant economic growth paradigm since the 1980s. Several recent research projects have provided evidence that many small and medium-sized industrial towns either already are disadvantaged, or face a problematic socio-economic future (Servillo et al. 2014; Hamdouch et al. 2017).

However, as Bole et al. (2020) and Gros-Balthazard and Talandier (2020) argue, there are also many small and medium-sized industrial towns that are still performing well, also within a supposedly post-industrial continent such as Europe. These towns are often still important parts of national urban systems and national or regional economies, and their industries are not stagnating or declining, but innovative and growth orientated. In contrast to the dominant post-industrial discourse, remaining industrial or even re-industrialising may be a realistic development perspective for some small and medium-sized industrial towns (Wink et al. 2016). A rediscovery and renewed appreciation of a town's traditional industrial culture may help to make (present or former) industrial towns more resilient and future-proof (Görmar and Harfst 2019). These industrial cultures as well as other place-specific qualities can become part of convincing urban imaginaries that can become a fruitful basis for urban and economic development strategies (VanHoose et al. 2021). In these strategies and imaginaries, it is crucial to involve the local population, since they are (or should be) the main target population and will also have relevant ideas and understanding about what works for their community (Lazzeroni 2020). Social innovations rooted in these place-specific qualities, made for, but more importantly also by, local communities, may help to realise a brighter future for industrial towns (Gros-Balthazard and Talandier 2020).

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## THE BRIGHT FUTURE FOR BLACK TOWNS PROJECT

The Bright Future for Black Towns project (2017–20) was part of the Smart Urban Futures research programme of the Joint Programming Initiative Urban Europe. The project searched for opportunities to reinvent European small and medium-sized industrial towns beyond the dominant post-industrial discourses. The ambition was to develop place-specific strategies for small and medium-sized industrial towns in Europe. To be able to do this, sociocultural specificities and place-based qualities of these towns were analysed with a mixed-method approach in which several quantitative and qualitative methods were combined.

Common post-industrial approaches would be, for example, to aim for economic diversification, to replace manufacturing by other sectors, or to redevelop into a mainly residential town. These strategies may not always work well for the towns, and it should also be kept in mind that some of the towns should not be considered post-industrial, but are still very industrial. Therefore, the option of staying an industrial town was also included. Existing industries may have a promising future, and new industries could be established based on local or regional industrial skills, knowledge and traditions.

The project started with a statistical analysis of small and medium-sized industrial towns in Europe, aiming for a systematisation of how these towns were performing as regards population dynamics and socio-economic development. The next project steps focused on five case study towns in five European countries:

1. Corby (the UK) is a medium-sized town in the East Midlands, about 100 kilometres north of London. Corby grew fast because of its steel industry and as one of England's New Towns after World War II. Since the 1980s, most of the steel industry has shut down. However, there is now a more diversified manufacturing sector, new distribution and logistics industry, and some growth as a result of its proximity to London and potential to be a home for long-distance commuters (Gordon 2019a).
2. Fieni (Romania) is a small industrial town in the north-east of the country. Its cement factory and its light-bulb factory until recently were major employers not only for the town, but also for the region. Recently, though, the light bulb-factory has been closed, and the cement factory has become a smaller employer owing to automatisation (Cercleux et al. 2020).
3. Heerlen (Netherlands) is a medium-sized town in the south-east of the Netherlands. Heerlen grew fast as the centre of a mining region, until the mines were closed in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite several compensation measures by the Dutch national government, the town and its region are still struggling to find a new economic future, and the population has declined since the 1990s (VanHoose et al. 2021).
4. Kajaani (Finland) is a medium-sized town in central Finland, about 500 kilometres north of Helsinki. The paper industry was the main employer until the largest paper factory closed in 2008. Soon afterwards (2012), a teacher training unit of the University of Oulu also closed, leaving the town without higher education. Meanwhile, some successful economic redevelopment projects have revitalised the town, but the population is still declining (Häyrinen and Semi 2019).
5. Velenje (Slovenia) is a small town in north-east-Slovenia, which became the socialist model city under Tito's reign in the former Yugoslavia. Three decades after the end of socialist rule, the socialist heritage is still prominent. Velenje's economy is based on two

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pillars: coal mining and consumer electronics. It is currently still the most industrial of the five case study towns, but the future perspective of both mining and consumer electronics industry are uncertain (Tiran et al. 2019).

In each of these towns, the development trajectory and the narratives about the town's past, present and future was analysed. This was based on interviews, observations, and analysis of local media and policy documents, among others (Semi 2019). This material was used to create a first draft assessment of the social sustainability of each of the towns. This fed into the first of three participatory workshops with residents and other local stakeholders.

The participatory workshops used a common agenda and approach. The project partner, Social Life, created method guidelines to carry out the social sustainability and practical innovation processes, and to guide the facilitation process. The intention was to encourage full participation of attendees so that their individual and collective experiences and insights could inform the process. These guidelines drew on knowledge of participatory processes in the social innovation field, many of which are drawn from service design experiences (Kimbell 2015).

In the first workshop, the draft social sustainability assessment was presented and the participants were invited to give feedback and enhance this. The second workshop explored the town's history of social innovation as well as recent social innovation initiatives to understand what local factors have fuelled innovation. In the third and final workshop, participants proposed, developed and discussed their own ideas for new social innovations. The project's final step was to develop policy recommendations for each of the five towns. This may have relevance for other small or medium-sized industrial towns in Europe as well. In the following sections of this chapter the social sustainability and social innovation parts of the research project are discussed.

## SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED INDUSTRIAL TOWNS[2]

For the assessment of social sustainability in the five case-study towns, the Social Sustainability Framework of project partner Social Life was used. The framework has four dimensions: amenities and social infrastructure; social and cultural life; voice and influence; and adaptability and resilience (Woodcraft et al. 2012). The assessment took place in two steps. First, the researchers based their assessment on data and information gathered earlier in the project through in-depth interviews about each town's development trajectory and the narratives about each town's past, present and future. When necessary, additional data and information were gathered. The second step was to present this preliminary assessment in the first workshop and discuss it with the workshop participants. The participants' feedback was incorporated in the final assessment version.

For each of the four dimensions, three scores were possible, expressing relative strengths and weaknesses: strong, weak or expected (in between strong and weak). A fourth possible score, polarised, was added during the analysis as sometimes there could also be combinations of particular strengths and weaknesses within the same dimension (Gordon 2019b).

As can be seen in Figure 14.2, none of the five towns scored strong on each of the four dimensions. Kajaani was the only town where none of the four dimensions scored weak; the

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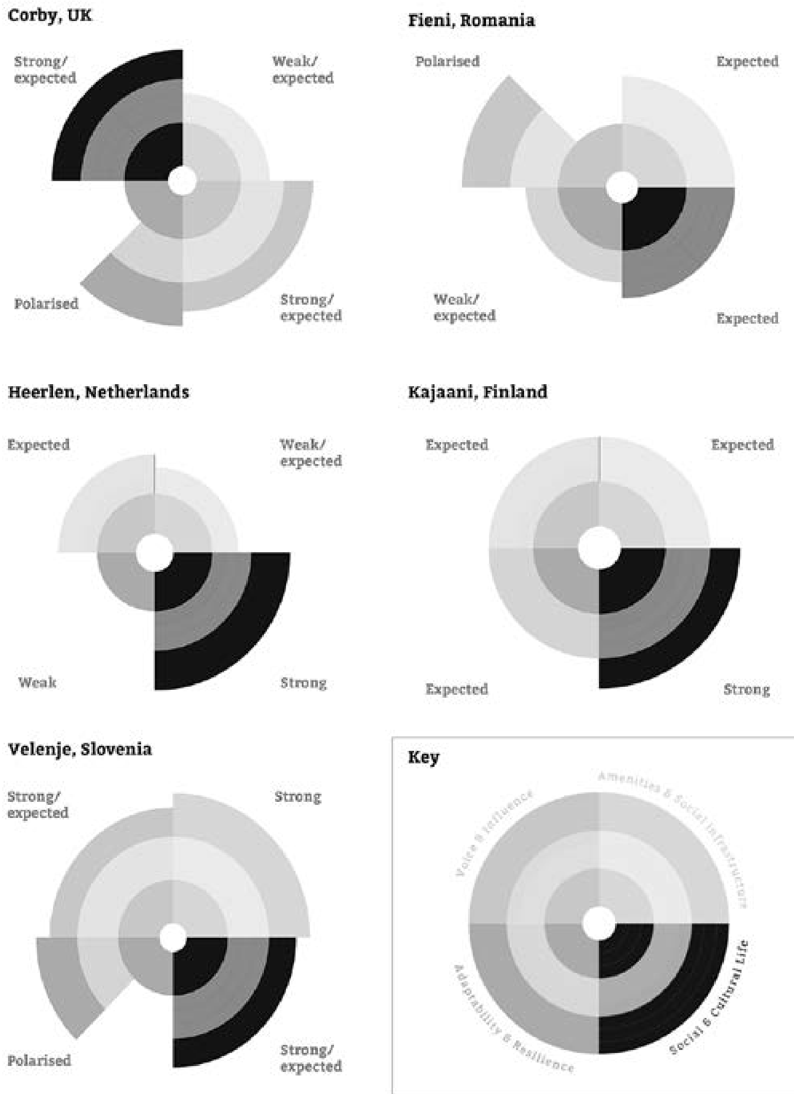


*Source:* Gordon (2019a).

*Figure 14.2 Social sustainability scores for the case study towns*

other four towns appeared to have at least one weak or polarised dimension. The social and cultural life dimension appeared to be relatively strong in all five towns. Highlighted strengths in this dimension in all five towns were community spirit, social support and strong sense of local identity. Shared problems in the social and cultural life dimension in most of the towns were poverty, inequality and the negative image and reputation (sometimes even stigmatisa-

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tion) of the towns from the perspective of outsiders. In the three towns with substantial migrant populations, Corby, Heerlen and Velenje, a lack of tolerance towards recently arrived migrants and ethnic minorities was added as a problematic issue. In some of the towns, the quality of life in a small town was stressed, alongside safety; however, in other towns a lack of safety was emphasised instead.

Most weaknesses were in the adaptability and resilience dimension. In most of the towns, demographic and/or economic shrinkage was seen as either a current problem or a threat for the near future. Related to this, selective out-migration, especially of young people, was mentioned, but also, in some towns, a lack of entrepreneurship, a conservative mentality (cognitive and/or political lock-in) and/or passivity among those that stayed in the towns. In some towns opportunities from shrinkage were identified, including low land and real estate prices and the availability of vacant spaces. In some of the towns, economic diversification and the presence of many small and medium-sized businesses were seen as strengths and/or opportunities for resilience.

The other two dimensions had more mixed, and sometimes contradictory, results. For example, in the voice and influence dimension, the relationship between municipal authorities and residents was seen as a strength in all five towns; but, in several towns, distrust in local politicians was highlighted. Grassroots activity and citizen action were often seen as a strength; however, lack of participation was seen as a weakness. Often only a small section of residents actively participates in citizen action, with other parts of local society remaining un-affiliated and un-involved. Mixed results also appeared in the amenities and social infrastructure dimension: in each of the towns, some amenities and/or infrastructures were considered strengths and others weaknesses. Each town appeared to have different strengths and weaknesses in this dimension.

## History of Social Innovation

In the second workshop, a participatory review of the history of social innovation in each case study town was undertaken. This review explored earlier examples of social innovation in the towns, to identify and understand which factors made these earlier innovations possible. This should also give the workshop participants inspiration for possible new social innovations for the future. Moreover, the researchers wanted to look for similarities and differences and possible explanations for them across the case study towns. In the workshops, the researchers first gave an introduction about social innovation, and some examples of what they considered to be past social innovations in the town. This inspired the participants to reflect on those examples, what made them possible and which impact they had on their town, and to suggest additional examples themselves. These examples were often projects that participants and/or people from their social networks were involved in. Added to this (inevitably) biased and selective review, the researchers also searched for additional examples in each of the case study towns beyond that which was discussed in the workshop.

From the workshops and reviews, it became clear that there were strong and rich traditions of social innovation in Corby, Heerlen, Kajaani and Velenje. In these towns, there were many examples of citizen-led action responding to local needs in the recent past, in some towns going back to earlier decades or even more than a century ago. In Fieni, social innovation seemed to be a more recent phenomenon. Fieni's experience during socialist rule was different from Velenje's, which is related to the differences in town size (Fieni being far smaller than

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Velenje) and differences between the Romanian and Yugoslavian versions of socialism. In Fieni, citizen action, but also municipal action, was hardly possible in socialist times; on the contrary, Velenje was a place of innovation and experiments, thanks to its status as a socialist model city. This socialist past still leaves its mark on both towns' recent experiences with social innovation, for example, in the strong tradition of volunteering.

In the comparative analysis, next to many town- and/or country-specific aspects, several striking parallels in the histories of social innovation of the case study towns were noticed. An evident parallel in all towns was the prominent role of the manufacturing and/or mining companies in the past (and in Fieni and Velenje still in the present), not only as employers, but also as providers of social and cultural services and infrastructure, and as key players in social networks. The companies either joined forces with local government to establish or develop services and infrastructures, or they provided services and infrastructures for their employees and their families that local government could not provide. They had a strong influence on how the town was governed and organised. For Heerlen, during the heydays of coal mining, there was a peculiar joining of forces of local government, mining companies and the Catholic Church. In recent decades, deindustrialisation and fragmented business ownership (Corby, Heerlen and Kajaani) or privatisation and foreign ownership (Fieni and Velenje) has diminished the role of (large) businesses in the social life of towns. This meant the reduction, or even loss, of social networks and infrastructures, on the one hand, but opportunities for new forms of social innovation, especially grassroots and citizen-led initiatives, on the other. In Heerlen and Kajaani, a do it yourself culture was emphasised by the workshop participants. However, this was not a general feature of their populations, but rather applied to only a select group of people with large social networks and a can do attitude, like the people who participated in the workshop. While the large employers of the past were no longer present or actively involved, new actors entered the social innovation field and new collaborations were created. Many projects discussed in the workshops were realised by partnerships between civic sector groups and the local authority. However, local government often was involved in other roles; not as active participant, but rather as facilitator, supporter, or stimulator.

The workshop participants had a broad and varied understanding of social innovation. In some towns, this also included commercial businesses that responded to specific local needs or institutions, or everyday social infrastructure, such as youth clubs and neighbourhood meeting centres. This may also imply that social innovation does not always have to be entirely new or innovative; it may also be something already existing made more effective, or an already existing infrastructure offering new projects or services. Social innovation often does not start from scratch, but builds on what is already there: a town's or a community's assets, traditions, social networks, local identity and history, or new uses for old buildings. Other social innovations discussed in the workshops were innovative in other ways: they were new to a town, but based on ideas adapted from elsewhere and implemented locally.

## Future Social Innovations?

The final workshop in each case study town was dedicated to developing a set of concrete ideas to tackle some of the problems highlighted in the social sustainability assessment. The participants developed their ideas in small groups, in three steps. The first step involved defining the problem, making an inventory of the underlying factors, the groups affected and any previous responses to the problem. Second, the groups made use of prompts in the

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form of cards on the table, prepared by the researchers in advance. The prompt cards helped the participants to generate ideas for social innovations and to brainstorm different types of approaches. The prompt questions included, for example: what would you do if you only had €1, and what would you do if you had €1 million; how to solve the problem with or without digital technology; what would you do if you were the prime minister, and what would you do if you had no political power at all? Finally, the groups used worksheets to develop the ideas they had selected in steps one and two.

This led to 18 ideas for the five towns combined, between two and five ideas from each town. While each idea was town-specific and the ideas covered a wide range of topics, some common themes could be identified. Several proposals focused on young people, addressing lack of voice and lack of opportunity and incentivising young people to stay in the town. Related to this, economic issues such as the need for new employment opportunities were also a key driver of social innovation ideas in four of the five towns. Some groups focused on other social issues, such as the need for better community integration or tackling growing loneliness and social isolation. Several ideas aimed to improve the attractiveness of the town more broadly for local residents and/or visitors. These ideas were also related to improving the town's image, especially to outsiders, and to strengthening feelings of local pride. As in the local histories of social innovation discussed previously, several ideas were inspired by examples taken from elsewhere. Examples included the proposal to introduce a Corby Pound, inspired by local currencies in other towns and regions, and the idea for a pop-up meeting place in Kajaani, inspired by examples of interim uses for vacant buildings. In several towns ideas of a low-risk, low-threshold nature were proposed, like grassroots ideas to tackle everyday problems that could be initiated by small groups or even individuals and required only modest funding. Other ideas were more ambitious and more radical, potentially serving multiple goals at once, for example, a programme in which older workers would mentor young people in Velenje. This programme could give young people skills to increase their chances in the local job market, increase social cohesion and solidarity between older and younger people, and offer incentives to young people to stay in the town. Some propositions challenged existing power relations and empowered groups with less voice and influence. A group in Corby, for example, proposed 'guest listener' sessions in which local authorities would be invited to listen to the concerns of young people. Some ideas were radical, such as the idea for introducing a basic income in Heerlen, replacing all current social welfare benefits. Another category of ideas tried to restore a lost asset or tradition in the town, for example, re-introducing the owners associations of apartment blocks in Fieni. These different types and scales of innovation indicate different imaginaries of social change. Such differences are related to the different regional and national contexts of the case study towns, but also to the kinds of participants represented in the workshops.

## The Main Challenge: How to Make It Happen?

At the end of the third workshop, the possibilities for taking next steps from social innovation ideas to real social innovations were discussed with the workshop participants. While the involvement of the researchers in possible social innovations ended after the third workshop, the researchers were willing to remain involved if the participants would decide to take next steps towards making their ideas happen. Apart from the British partners Social Life and the Young Foundation, none of the involved researchers were social innovation specialists; and

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they were not case study town residents either. It was made evident during the workshop that the responsibility for taking the ideas forward would rest with local agencies and local stakeholders.

There is a challenge in participatory and action-orientated social innovation research: how to go through the entire process from ideas to realisation, while positioning yourself in this process as a researcher? Several workshop participants were already active in community projects and local networks before they participated in the project. For some of these, the workshops did not bring about new ideas or insights; for others it gave them an opportunity to think creatively about new approaches, or to evolve existing ideas. In many of the towns it was difficult to include all the different groups present in the town. Some groups were over-represented and others underrepresented or even absent. However, hopefully the workshops brought together people that did not meet before, leading to new collaborations, and inspired some of the participants to take new socially innovative initiatives. The workshops may also have given some participants who felt unheard a chance to present their thoughts and ideas to a (small) audience of fellow town residents. This may also have encouraged them to think of their town's future in new (hopefully more positive) ways.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the Bright Future for Black Towns project, a social sustainability assessment was combined with a participatory process to develop new ideas for social innovation. The assessment of the social sustainability of each case study town and the review of their histories of social innovation served as inspiration for possible new responses to local challenges. The social sustainability framework used in the assessment provides a comprehensive and locally specific means of understanding the extent to which places are promoting their residents' well-being and enable them to thrive (Woodcraft et al. 2012).

Though the five small and medium-sized (post-)industrial towns were situated in different European countries, in different political and socio-economic contexts, and in different stages of (de-)industrialisation, some commonalities were found in their social strengths and weaknesses. These commonalities may also apply to other small and medium-sized (post-)industrial towns in Europe and possibly beyond, and to other types of small- and medium-sized towns. The strength of local networks and social support emerged as a common strength, brought about by industrial culture and traditions of social solidarity, but also by the advantages of being geographically compact and having a relatively small population. Smallness does not necessarily make these towns socio-economically vulnerable, but could also be a strength, for example, because small towns often have a strong community cohesion. This reconfirms insights from earlier research about small and medium-sized towns (ESPON 2006). In spite of this, in all five towns concerns were voiced about the future perspective of young residents, how towns could retain their younger generations and reduce the potentially large impact of ageing, and how to change the town's negative reputation.

For Fieni and Velenje, towns that are still dependent on one or two large local employers, economic issues, such as fear of job loss or even factory closure, dominated local concerns. For Heerlen and Corby, towns that lost their dominant industry decades ago, the story is clearly different, though the social effects of that loss could clearly be felt. New economies that had

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developed had not been able to fully revitalise these towns and to solve their socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Most of the case study towns had rich histories of social innovation and had been the site of many creative responses to socio-economic challenges. Many of those social innovations were bottom-up, citizen driven. Many were inspired from elsewhere through regional, national and international systems of innovation and action. These innovations often started with engaged and concerned individuals or small citizen groups, but would not have been possible without support from local government, local NGOs or businesses, and external partners. Industrial employers were once key players in the social infrastructure of small and medium-sized industrial towns, but this role has declined significantly. Past industrial cultures, however, still impact on present social structures, relations and traditions. The smallness and relative peripherality of the case study towns may have contributed significantly to successful social innovations, building on existing networks and relationships, easy access to local government and the availability of relatively cheap space.

The workshop participants imagined several ideas for new social innovation to tackle key challenges facing their towns, ranging from small-scale interventions to larger-scale, more structural interventions. Evidently, the participants wanted to go beyond just grassroots actions. Some of the ideas proposed went beyond mainstream understandings of social innovation. A number of proposals were based on profit-making businesses, for example, challenging one discourse of social innovation as an alternative to market-based solutions.

It was difficult to reach out to the broader community beyond the usual suspects. Many workshop participants were already very active in their community; and some groups were underrepresented. Often this included more marginalised and newly arrived groups. Participation in local structures and decision-making in small towns often relies on the dedicated efforts of individuals or groups with confidence and social capital. Especially in the type of towns researched in this project, such active citizens are a small minority, while the majority may need additional incentives to become involved.

The results provide additional evidence for the importance of territorially embedded approaches to social innovation (Van Dyck and Van den Broeck 2013). These approaches need to draw on the many local qualities and assets of the place, in this instance small and medium-sized (post-)industrial towns. In the five case study towns of this project, enabling successful localised responses required a joint effort of a broad coalition of local actors, and often needed additional support from external actors. Without these coalitions, social innovation would not be able to move beyond small-scale initiatives that could not bring the structural changes needed to improve the social sustainability of small and medium-sized (post-)industrial towns.

## NOTES

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2. Owing to the limited space of this chapter, only the most important and/or striking results in comparative perspective can be highlighted here. See Gordon (2019b) for a more extensive and more detailed discussion of the social sustainability assessment and the social innovation workshops.

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