Governing social innovation: Exploring the role of 'discretionary practice' in the negotiation of shared spaces of community food growing

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Abstract

Despite the extensive areas of under-used green and brownfield land that remain in public ownership, little academic attention has thus far been given to the role of the public sector in utilising this resource for shared forms of community food growing. Building upon recent calls for more research targeted towards the governance of social innovation, but also the spaces and places in which it occurs, this paper presents an in-depth qualitative account of one such public sector-led attempt at instigating the co-production of community food growing. Guided by social innovation theory and Lipsky's (1980) street level bureaucracy, the discussion pays particular attention to the discretional practice of front line public sector workers. Whilst at one level public sector-led initiatives lack sufficient intention or scope for bringing about the transformation of existing social orders, their contribution to propagating individual and smaller scale occurrences of social innovation in the context of community food security should nevertheless not be overlooked. It is by adopting a more micro-level, situated and process orientated approach to the analysis of alternative forms of collaborative public sector-led community food growing, that it becomes possible to evidence the presence of innovative practice as it unfolds on the ground.

Introduction

An extensive literature exists surrounding the governance and regulation of registered spaces of common land. In contrast, much less academic attention has thus far been given to the management of publicly-owned areas of green or brownfield land which may possess equal potential to become valuable spaces of community food growing. This includes a lack of understanding as to the ways in which the public sector, through both policy and practice, comes to shape the availability of land for shared use at a very local level, including by whom and for how long. Seemingly linked to this is a general absence of formal policy reference to the potential wider societal opportunities presented by more co-productively aligned approaches to community land use. By way of response to these gaps, this paper builds upon recent calls for more research targeted towards exploring the governance of social innovation, but also the spaces and places in which it occurs (Maclean et al 2013; Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010). Of particular interest is whether and under what conditions alternative approaches to the use and management of publicly-owned green or brownfield land can support the emergence of socially innovative outcomes.

Despite the extensive areas of green and brownfield land which remain in public ownership, only very limited evidence exists of public sector authorities taking lead roles in stimulating community food growing (Anderson et al 2014). Often their involvement conforms to (and is limited to) a traditional regulatory and planning policy role. Moreover, with public authorities increasingly being tasked with maintaining core public services and functions in the face of on-going financial cutbacks, land assets in their ownership appear all too often to be regarded in a very narrow and short-term frame of dispersal. In contrast to asset dispersal, an alternative co-productive style of arrangement involves the state remaining accountable for an asset, but, through a process of devolved and collaborative decision-making, the responsibility of the local community being equally fore-grounded (Joshi and Moore 2004). However, factors including what this alternative approach involves in practice, what the relative costs and rewards might be for those involved, how such collaborative processes are shaped by characteristics of space and place, and indeed why they remain a seldom selected option by public sector bodies in the context of asset management, are all under-researched. Also of relevance here is the absence of any practical policy guidance from which already over-stretched public sector workers might draw reference. What is seemingly required instead is a capacity (and willingness) amongst individual public sector workers to risk cross-sector collaboration and in so doing rely much more centrally on their own situated 'discretional practice' (Catney and Henneberry 2012; Lipsky 1980; Proudfoot and McCann 2008). Retaining a focus on this micro-level dimension of cross-sector collaboration with respect to promoting community food growing on publicly owned land, we are guided for the remainder of this discussion by two core research questions. They are: to what extent can a collaborative public sector-led approach to community food growing foster socially innovative outcomes; and, what is the relationship between social innovation and the situated discretional practice of public sector workers?

In responding to the above two questions we begin by applying the lens of social innovation theory to a summative review of collaborative forms of small-scale food growing. Reflecting on the often observed disconnection between community-led and public sector-led food initiatives, we outline the broader institutional challenges of stimulating socially innovative practice within the public sector more widely. Drawing on the work of Lipsky (1980), we supplement social innovation theory with the concept of 'street level bureaucracy'. We do so in order to better access the micro-level process of front line decision-making. We are also further informed by recent work that proposes a more entrepreneurial framing of front line public sector workers (Lowndes 2005; Hjorne et al 2010; Durose 2011; Catney and Henneberry 2012). Accordingly, we question the potential role of situated discretionary practice in creating greater institutional space for engaging in more socially innovative forms of cross-sector collaboration (Levesque 2013). Having explained the research methodology we then turn our attention to in-depth analysis of a single case study; a seemingly innovative community food growing project in Hajdúnánás, Hungary. Guided by the dual analytical framework of social innovation theory and street level bureaucracy, we review the experience and perceptions of public sector workers and community participants in the contribution of this project towards the local alleviation of food poverty. Having first considered the extent to which the case constitutes a socially

innovative scheme, we end by offering a more generalisable set of conclusions on the place of public sector officials within the governance of social innovation.

Relating social innovation to community food growing

During the last two decades, there has been a prolific rise in the establishment of community food growing initiatives (Derkzen and Morgan 2012). Although regularly displaying wide diversity in function, form and longevity, such initiatives commonly retain an ability to prosper on even the smallest and most marginal expanses of land. Indeed, it is often the relative absence of the types of open (green) space traditionally associated with food growing, which serves to stimulate local interest in establishing small scale communal food growing initiatives, including on previously uncharted food growing territory (McClintock 2011). Through their role in re-appropriating private, un- or under-used space for wider social benefit, many small-scale food growing initiatives might be characterised as examples of socially innovative practice. At the same time, however, the actual extent of this wider social benefit – i.e. by whom the benefits are commonly accrued - itself remains a contested issue, warranting on-going critical review (Hinrichs 2003). Also questionable in this context is the basis upon which internal stakeholder reporting of socially innovative practice can be externally verified. Recent conceptual work on social innovation by Frank Moulaert and colleagues provides a useful starting point for exploring this further (Moulaert et al 2005; 2013a).

Moulaert et al (2005: 1976) identify three core dimensions of social innovation:

firstly, "satisfaction of human needs that are not currently satisfied" – the 'product' (or content) dimension; secondly, "changes in social relations especially with regard to governance, that will enable the above satisfaction, but will also increase the level of participation of all, but especially deprived groups in society" – the 'process' (or implementation) dimension; and thirdly, "increasing the social political capability and access to resources needed to enhance rights to satisfaction of human needs and participation" – the 'empowerment' (or outcome) dimension. Despite the prominence given within this definition and subsequent works (Moulaert et al 2013a) to the role of governance, commonly studies of social innovation continue to be approached in a manner which separates the public sector out as an external (often negative) force (Hillier 2013; Pradel-Miquel et al 2013). Instead, the attention of such studies is directed towards the ability of civil society and third sector organisations to realise changes in conditions of governance from the bottom-up. Whilst the rationale for and contribution of this civil society/ third sector focus is clear, it simultaneously seemingly risks segregating out and silencing the potential capability of government actors - or more precisely, individual public sector workers - in finding ways to facilitate, rather than merely restrict the establishment of social innovation practice. Of particular relevance here, are those front line public sector actors who interact with some of the most vulnerable members of society on a daily basis (Martinelli 2013). Also relevant is the wider potential space for creativity that has opened up in association with the growing proliferation of project-based and more co-productively aligned forms of policy and programme delivery (Kovach and Kuerova 2009). Whilst the political hijacking of social innovation discourse for

neo-liberal purpose is well documented (Jessop et al 2013; Klein et al. 2013), its use across multiple scales of government is nevertheless noteworthy (Moulaert et al 2013a, 2013b). As is argued, for example, by Levesque (2013), that "public administration has become a fertile ground for social innovation" (p25), creates the potential for new relationships to emerge between the differing groups of stakeholders. Accordingly, it is these stakeholders and this wider opening for more collaborative forms of public sector practice, which we take as our focus here.

Given the current climate of austerity, playing closer attention to the ability of the public sector to propagate socially innovative practice is especially timely (Bock 2016). An immediate challenge that this commonly presents is the need for some degree of receptivity towards taking risks; an approach regularly linked to socially innovative practice, but not commonly synonymous with the behaviour of civil servants (Wilson 2013). A particular challenge of nurturing a culture of trialling innovative approaches amongst civil servants is what Wilson (2013: 308) refers to as the automatic tendency, when operating in the context of pre-set policy objectives, to "channel decisions into 'known' and 'already established' pathways, rather than encouraging innovative thinking out of the box". Such an approach does little to support the need for establishing "an environment conducive to the emergence of innovation" (Biggs et al 2010:11).

In order to better understand the conditions under which individual public sector workers are active in trialling innovative alternatives, it is helpful to give greater attention to their ability to incorporate discretional practice into their everyday work. Informing such an approach is the seminal work of Lipsky on street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). Primarily concerned with explaining the logic of mainstream front line practice, Lipsky argues that "the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively *become* the public policies they carry out (pxii, orig. emphasis)". Central then to the work of Lipsky and others on street-level bureaucracy is the premise that the meaning and impact of public policy emerges during the very process of administration (Durose 2011). Notably though, because of the 'non-voluntary' status of their clients, street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky claims, "have nothing to lose by failing to satisfy clients" (Lipsky 1980:55). As he also therefore concludes: "managing complaints successfully is a far cry from changing policy in response to consumer dissatisfaction" (p55). Seemingly, however, it is only through the enrolment of these very same individuals who all too often act as barriers to risk taking, that it becomes possible for public sector-led attempts at stimulating socially innovative practice to take root within the communities that they serve. Accordingly, and in contrast to Lipsky's own orientation, here the discretionary spaces of administration become the point of interest, not for explaining the mundane well-trodden pathways of policy implementation, but rather, the occasions when public sector workers actively choose to become the instigators of more innovative forms of practice (Martinelli 2013). That is, when, why, and with what consequence, they decide not to shy away from the unknown, but rather to trial approaches which attempt to instigate an alternative 'interpretation' of government policy by operating outwith the safety of routine (Hjorne et al 2010: 303).

Research Methodology

Given the predominance of existing empirical studies of social innovation concentrated around Western European initiatives, the decision was taken for this study to purposively look outwith this space for cases of potentially novel approaches to the co-production of community food security. Capitalising on an opportunity for undertaking collaborative data collection in Hungary around such a theme, initial background desk-based research was first undertaken by the local researchers to identify relevant case studies. From the short list that this produced, further informing the decision to finally select the Hajdúnánás community food growing scheme was the fact that a wider longitudinal programme of research has been undertaken on the town by one of the authors (Kovách), dating back to 1982. This deep knowledge of the town together with the associated existing network of research connections proved significant in the identification of the individual scheme. It subsequently also enhanced understanding, across our international research team, of the multi-level policy context shaping the current round of public sector-led initiatives aimed at tackling unemployment, food poverty and social deprivation (Moulaert et al 2013b). Building on this foundation (as well as accompanying access to associated empirical research data archives for the town), the main source of data drawn upon in the analysis is from fieldwork undertaken in Hajdúnánás during 2014.

The fieldwork was conducted in two stages. The first stage (May 2014) involved semi-structured interviews with the key stakeholders responsible for creating and delivering the community food growing scheme which forms our case study; namely, the mayor of Hajdúnánás, and two principal social workers (the latter based in the Hajdúnánás Family Care centre). As part of this research, guided field visits were also undertaken to the case in question, as well as to a number of other shared land use sites and initiatives located in and around the town. For these, we were accompanied on one occasion by the Mayor and on another by the two social workers. The second stage of data collection (July-August 2014) involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six social care land use programme participants. Whilst three of the scheme participants were identified from suggestions made by the lead social workers, the remainder were independently approached during the course of return visits to both the family care centre and to the food growing site. They included a mixture of both working-age respondents and retirees. All respondents had been involved in the scheme for in excess of one growing season, with the majority having participated since its launch. Research interviews were limited to direct scheme participants only. In all instances a conversational approach was taken to the interviewing with respondents encouraged to provide both descriptive detail of the nature of their involvement and the tasks for which they had responsibility, as well as reflective accounts of their respective experiences of designing, leading and implementing, or participating in the scheme. For clarity of analysis the resulting research data is structured in conformity with Moulaert et al's (2005) 'satisfaction of human needs', 'changes in social relations', and 'empowerment dimensions of social innovation'. Our primary focus throughout is on the situated discretionary practice of the lead social workers. However, by way of wider introduction to

the operating context of the Hajdúnánás scheme, it is with the national policy that we briefly begin.

Operating context: Hungarian social land use policy

Since the mid-1990s the Hungarian state government has been involved in running a series of public works and social land use programmes. They are presented as an attempt at 'helping tens-of-thousands of poor families to escape poverty and hardship' (Mayor of Hajdúnánás). An increasingly common feature amongst them is the use of shared forms of agricultural practice on public land as the centre point of orientation. At a local geographical scale, however, considerable variation exists in the approach taken, the management and also the actual outputs and outcomes of such programmes (Bakó et al 2014). One recent example is the national 'START public works' programme. Through the START programme, municipalities (mostly in deprived regions) can apply for funds to launch their own job creation projects. Despite their relative high profile, to date START programmes have been largely unsuccessful in the ambition to reduce poverty by increasing overall levels of labour market employment (Koltai, 2012; Koltai-Kulinyi, 2013; Bakó et al, 2014). Often it is the most disadvantaged low-educated job seekers who are required to enrol on START projects with the prescribed work activities proving ineffective in preparing them for the open labour market. Critics have further argued that the public work programmes serve only to trap these job seekers in a local paternalistic system dominated by the mayor and the local government. In so doing they are seen to recreate feudalism at the local level (Bakó et al, 2014), whilst at the same time reinforcing a dominant neo-conservative ideology of welfare provisioning in which blame is attributed primarily at the level of the individual recipient (Raphael 2003).

In conformity with the above critique, during 2000-2010 the public works programme in the case study town of Hajdúnánás perceivably had little impact on the local economy. Locally implemented projects produced little by way of social benefit and failed to address the on-going rise in poverty and related social problems among the resident population. In response, and following the election of a new mayor, since 2010 the local council prioritised the introduction of a new portfolio of land based public works projects and other local economic initiatives. The foundation for many of these more recent projects is the production and consumption of local food as the basis for creating employment and stimulating economic growth. It is from within this policy and political context that the support was secured for the Hajdúnánás social land use scheme. In contrast to the economic focus of the other public sector land-based projects operating with the town, the Hajdúnánás social land use scheme has an explicit aim of mitigating food poverty amongst local families. It is this scheme (referred to here simply as the 'Hajdúnánás scheme'), which provides the focal point for exploring the potential for socially innovative practice to be propagated from within the discretionary spaces of public sector engagement in community food growing.

Social Innovation as satisfaction of human need: trialling the co-production of community food

The Hajdúnánás scheme is run out of the local Family Care centre by two senior social workers. During the research interviews these two individuals recalled the multiple stimuli (local and otherwise) informing their interest in trialling an alternative approach to tackling food poverty in Hajdúnánás. In this case they included rising food costs, a high level of food poverty and generally poor quality of diet consumed by low-income families. Equally influential was the perceived ineffectiveness of existing aid programmes in radically improving this situation. Moreover, a combination of dwindling public funding and yearly increases in the number of local families in need of assistance, created a concern for the social workers that there would be a growing shortfall in the level of support available from the centre in future years. Whilst collectively these factors reflect the social worker's purposive orientation towards addressing an unmet social need (Moulaert et al 2005), they also share a strong accord with Lipsky's (1980) original thesis that discretionary practice is fuelled by an operating context of financial constraint. Equally significant, though, and seemingly crucial to the social workers actually instigating a change of approach, was the political space of opportunity that opened up in 2010 (Wekerle 2004). This came in the form of the election of the new Mayor of Hajdúnánás; an individual with a background in organic farming, a passion for small scale food production and a declared interest in creating a national identity for Hajdúnánás as a place of alternative and innovative local practice.[1] In contrast to an earlier attempt made by the social workers of presenting their project ideas to the previous mayor, the newly elected mayor welcomed their proposal:

> *"In 2010 the mayor approached me about developing an anti-poverty programme... the local unemployment rate was 10.2% and poverty was a challenging social problem... ... From the 3400-3500 local children, 1700 received regular children care [benefits]... The mayor is an agronomist and the land use programme was close to his own ideas..."* (Hajdúnánás scheme leader)

Informing the decision by the two lead social workers to trial a novel approach to tackling food poverty was their specific ambition of integrating the production and consumption of healthy food as a means to helping local families achieve greater self-reliance in meeting their own dietary needs. In pursuing this aim the social workers capitalised on the backing received from the mayor to procure a quarter-value of the latest round of European emergency aid funding and ring fence it for their project (one million Forints (approximately 3,000 Euros)). The next step was to then research other models of social land use already operating elsewhere in Hungary.

In conformity with the devolved approach taken to the governance of rural development in Hungary and the associated proliferation of project based policy delivery within this arena (Csurgó et al 2008; Kovach and Kucerova 2006), a range of different models of shared rural land use operate across the country. Whereas, for example, a simple design may mean that support is provided only in the form of self-provisioning of food growing for participants, in the case of a more complex project several different types of land based activity may be operating in parallel. Variation also occurs in the types and levels of

involvement by participants and in the extent of end-product marketisation (Bartal, 2001; Jász et al. 2003). As part of their research the two Hajdúnánás social workers reviewed some twenty projects. These ranged from social co-operatives to agri-holding based communal farming; site visits were also undertaken at two settlements. Remaining sensitive to the needs and characteristics of Hajdúnánás and their own principles of family care, the design eventually decided upon was for a mixed-produce model of community food growing. The overall design was constituted around generating additionality through the input of voluntary labour from the participating clients (permitting funds spent on seeds to be converted into relatively high volumes of food produce). Notably though, and in contrast to the other schemes, the *social* returns generated from this additionality remained protected due to a ruling imposed by the social workers from the outset that all food produced be for direct family consumption only. Also relevant was that the scheme in no way constituted an act of rationing by these front line workers of the services provided by the family care centre (Lipsky 1980; Jessop et al 2013).

With the approval of the mayor, the social workers then began the task of implementation:

> *"We had talks with the mayor about possible financial limits and available council land property... ...The mayor convinced the council to cover the cost of the first work on the 2 hectares"* (Hajdúnánás scheme leader)

Notably, the two-hectare site allocated by the council for the Hajdúnánás scheme is located close (walking distance) to both the town centre and target residential areas; it is also adjacent to a wealthier neighbourhood (a point we return to later). Previously an under-managed area of public green space, the allocated site was first rotovated in preparation for food growing and then notionally divided into land parcels of 500 square meters, ready for allocation to individual families. In parallel to overseeing the preparation of the site, the two social workers also had to determine the qualification criteria for participants. A maximum income was set at 42,750 Forints (130 Euros), per capita, per month (and in the case of pensioners, 57,000 Forints (180 Euros)), with larger families prioritised.[2] It was decided that candidates should have an existing relationship with the Centre, thereby already being known to the two social workers.

For the first year of operation (2011), out of a total of 157 potential families the social workers selected and secured the involvement of 57 families. Of these, 30 families were allocated a plot on the main public land site (initially for a single growing season), whilst the remaining 27 families were to be supported in cultivating food in their own back gardens. A formal growing contract was drawn up with each participating family and they were then given a seed bundle (mixed vegetables) at a cost to the scheme of approximately 8,000 Forints (25 Euros) per bundle.

By the time of the first harvest the Hajdúnánás scheme was described as being a renowned success, exceeding the original expectations of all involved. Of those participating in year one, for example, only five families were categorised by the social workers as having 'failed', with the remainder regularly having worked the land in accordance with scheme requirements. The market value of the food produce was estimated to be in the region of

100,000 - 150,000 Forints (320–480 Euros) per annum, per plot - a notable sum compared to the cost of the original seed bundle. By year two, the number of participating families had increased to 78, with reportedly no failed plots returned at the end of the growing season. At the time of writing the scheme continues to be regarded as a sustained success, meeting but also going beyond the original aim of contributing to the alleviation of local food poverty. Rather than limiting the scheme to its original design, spurred on by its early success, in subsequent years the social workers went on to expand its reach and increase its complexity. [3] In the words of the mayor, the scheme presents a prime example of what can be achieved by "bringing together tradition and innovation". In order to determine whether it can also be understood as constituting *social* innovation, however, we turn our attention now to a more relationally focused account of the process of implementation.

Social innovation as change in social relations: delivering the co-production of community food

The decision by the two social workers to originally only select family care centre clients of whom they had direct knowledge and an existing relationship, was recalled during research interview as an essential initial safeguard. Nevertheless, during the early stages of operation, they regularly had to deal with the challenge of clients wanting to give up their plot. With it being entirely their responsibility to convince the clients to remain involved, this came to require a diverse set of relational skills (Ingold 2000). It also required acceptance of the fact that, during the early years in particular, the relationship of dependency was no longer unidirectional. Rather than the clients merely being dependent on the family care centre for the supply of ready meals, in the early stages at least, under this scheme the social workers were equally dependent on the compliance and participation of the clients. In contrast to the normal reported situation of "having nothing to lose by failing to satisfy clients" (Lipsky 1980:55), the voluntary nature, visibility and profile of this publicly funded project, signified quite the reverse.

Perceived by the social workers to be of particular importance in sustaining the extended engagement of care centre clients in food growing was their own regular hands-on involvement throughout. Just as their local knowledge of Hajdúnánás and the target audience proved crucial during the initial design of the scheme, so too was it to remain equally as influential in shaping the on-going process of delivery. This, despite the fact that the launch of the scheme called for a considerable amount of practical up-skilling on their part also: *"We had to learn how to plant, for example, potatoes, how to take care of vegetables..."* (Hajdúnánás scheme leader). As it turned out though, 'learning how to plant' such that they could then guide others was merely a first step. Far more crucial as time went on was the social workers' willingness to experiment with and incorporate multiple approaches towards 'enabling' the participating clients (Durose 2011, 986). This included the emphasis they placed on creating opportunities for both formal and informal learning by others (see below), as well more broadly, as their day-to-day way of interacting with scheme participants. By way of illustration, all six scheme participants interviewed spoke positively about having been 'invited' (rather than required) to join. The scheme had been personally presented to

them by the social workers as an opportunity to do something of tangible benefit for their families. The same respondents also stated their belief in the genuine ambition of the social workers to use the scheme as a means of increasing the level of care afforded to the client families. Of particular relevance here was the requirement that the produce be consumed directly by participating families, rather than sold on the open market (Jessop et al 2013):

> "*Of course I said yes when* [the social worker] *had invited me. It is a very good possibility for us to produce food for the family. I have 11 children and 10 live with us, so we need a lot of food. And this is a very good initiative, it is a big help for us."* (Hajdúnánás scheme participant)

Both social workers emphasised the importance of not being perceived by clients to be approaching the day-to-day management of the scheme 'from above', or being seen to be inspecting the work of the families rather than the plots. However, given the fact that the condition of the crops on every individual plot was inspected monthly during the growing season (with the inspection including monitoring that regular work was being undertaken to support the cultivation, that the land was well maintained, free from weeds, and so on), avoiding this perception of being controlled from on-high called for a very vigilant and relational performance of the regulatory role. Based on the accounts of the participant respondents, the social workers appear to have managed this well. The scheme was generally framed as a popular and welcome additional service provided by the family care centre:

> "*No, she* [lead social worker] *or they* [Family Care Centre] *never control us. Of course they visit us very often and we show them our garden, how the vegetables are growing and they help us with their good advice. But no, they have never controlled us."* (Hajdúnánás scheme participant)

Also present in the above response, is the participant's sense of ownership of 'their' individual food plot (Maclean et al 2013). Relevant here was the social workers' account of how they had regularly sought ways to retain sufficient autonomy on the part of clients in their own personal management of their plots; an operating environment in which "the families take decisions for themselves on how to do things better" (Hajdúnánás scheme leader). An absence of sufficient autonomy, they had realised, heightened the risk that contracting families would lose interest and leave the scheme. The illustration was given of plot allocation. During the first year the distribution of individual plots to participating families was based on pulling tickets from a hat. Although the original plan had been to continue this practice on an annual basis it became clear that the preference of most participants was to keep the same plots each year. Accordingly, this is how the scheme is now run.

In parallel to receiving informal one-to-one advice from the social workers during their visits around the individual plots, as an integral part of the scheme participants were required to take part in formal training and public talks on horticulture and simple food nutrition.[4] They were also expected to attend food festivals, season-opening and closing ceremonies (etc). In addition, through a 'Way of Life' sub-initiative, they received low-budget food recipes. This combination of educational and community building activities was informed by the ambition of the social workers to foster an integrated approach to tackling

food poverty capable of empowering families to cut back on the consumption of low quality processed food. As they explained, the festivals especially were used to formally and publicly thank the clients for their time and dedication to the project. In addition to running light-hearted produce competitions (e.g. largest potato, best tomato, etc.), from the second year of harvesting the social workers also began awarding diplomas in food growing to all clients successfully completing the harvesting. Given the prevailing neo-conservative welfare ideology of poverty being the fault of the individual (Raphael 2003), the formal acknowledgment of the contribution and achievements of the scheme participants in this manner seemingly contributed towards the potential for the Hajdúnánás scheme to promote a socially innovative outcome (Pradel Miquel et al 2013). The award of a diploma created the opportunity for the scheme to advance not only food security, but also the social status and identity of the individuals. In this respect the emphasis placed on skills and education marked the scheme apart from other social land use initiatives operating in the town.

Social innovation as outcome: from co-production to community empowerment?

As news began to spread of the success of the Hajdúnánás scheme, so too did it come to be supported by the wider community of Hajdúnánás. Prior to this point however, by their own account, the two lead social workers had had to endure considerable local prejudice, opposition and criticism for adopting such an alternative approach to food provisioning. With it already being widely known that there had been many failures with social land use initiatives in other parts of the country (e.g. with donated seeds not used or cultivated), during the early days the family care centre was publicly accused of having "thrown the money into the wind" (Hajdúnánás scheme leader). In seeming alignment once again with the prevailing neo-conservative ideology, the general sentiment and expectation among the wider community was that the allocation of money was 'a waste of resources', that 'the poor people would be no good', and that they 'would not stick to the contract':

> "*We underwent horrible offense in the city…. citizens said 'this program is all in vain', 'it will not work', 'the poor will eat the seeds and planting potatoes, they will not plant any', 'it will be unprofitable, the land will remains weedy…' and 'it is all throwing money down the drain'*"(Hajdúnánás scheme leader)

In explaining their ability to withstand this onslaught, the social workers repeatedly referenced the importance of having the personal backing of the mayor. This political support and the clear alignment of the scheme with the council's own strategy of using local food production as the basis for renewing the identity of Hajdúnánás was seemingly essential. At the same time, though, also influential in securing wider community acceptance was the very public nature of the scheme. This was due in part to a critical mass of cultivation taking place on public land located close to the centre of the town. It was the inherent public visibility of the food growing - "both the produce and the working of the clients are on public display" (Hajdúnánás scheme leader) - which appeared to be crucial in securing wider social return at both an individual and community level. In visibly proving the initial opinion and expectations of the town wrong, and tangibly demonstrating that the habit and ethos of being hard-working was very much present amongst the clients of the Family Care centre, the

scheme contributed towards assisting participating clients in establishing a new local identity (Holloway et al 2007):

> "*We do something for us, for our family, and everybody sees we want to do something. Of course some of us has a job too, but the most important is we do something extra and not just wait for the help"* (Hajdúnánás scheme participant)

Another notable feature of the Hajdúnánás scheme was the active encouragement of wider family involvement. Viewed pragmatically, the involvement of whole client families was a means of ensuring that the cultivation of crops would be sustained throughout the growing season. However, it also appeared to create a number of additional unintended, yet potentially much more fundamental, social benefits. In parallel to supporting food security, the communal and inter-generational nature of the food growing practice permitted active and inclusive aging at a family and community scale. In the case of two of the participant respondents, for example, both were formally only 'family helpers' of the principal contracted clients (their daughters). They became involved with the cultivation work because of their own time availability (due to their status as retirees), the limited time of their daughters, and the opportunity that the scheme reportedly presented for them to make further tangible contributions to their families:

> "*My daughter has got the plot, she has signed the contract but she has a job and children, so she has no time to do it. We are retired so me and my husband do the gardening. We like it. We go to the plot every second day and work there 3-4 hours."* (Hajdúnánás scheme participant)

More broadly, the shared-practice design of the scheme (including both the cultivation activities and food festival events) contributed to increasing the social bond between the participants. It resulted in a community of food growing practice becoming established which was both respected and valued by its 'members':

> "*We work here in our gardens individually, but if somebody does not do well, does not care about the garden everybody will feel it. For example in the beginning there was a man who had not defended against pests and pests invaded all the gardens. So in the beginning there were some participants who did not care enough about the garden, but now they are not here, now all participants do well the gardening. So this is a good community."* (Hajdúnánás scheme participant)

For the participants then, the impact of their involvement in the scheme appears to extend beyond the original ambition of the social workers' for finding more sustainable and integrated ways of tackling local food poverty. The communal cultivation of food simultaneously came to be regarded as a positive, enjoyable and important social activity in its own right. At the same time, however, a closer look at the above response also raises possible concern as to 'who belongs' (Trauger 2007); that is the actual on-going inclusivity of this scheme over time (Hinrichs 2003). With so much at stake, not least given the very public nature of the food growing, the on-going ability to accommodate individuals who are less skilful or experienced, or who simply have less 'free time' to dedicate to orderly communal food cultivation might be questioned. Whilst the scheme has gained wider community

acceptance based on its productive performance to date, such is the nature of the harvesting cycle that this performance has to begin afresh on an annual basis. It is in the interests of those benefiting from the experience of being part of the "good community" to coercively guard against any changes in practice, or membership of participating clients, which may result in its unravelling. Arguably, this applies as much to the social workers as to the participating clients of the family care centre. It in part also explains why, from the outset, the social workers elected to retain full responsibility for the management and delivery of the project, as well as on-going iteration of its design. Given the production levels and other reported returns achieved through the project to date, it seems unlikely that they will come under any pressure to step back from this management role in the near future, other than by their own choosing.

Discussion: public sector discretion and the governance of social innovation

Based on the evidence reviewed, there appear to be grounds for concluding that the Hajdúnánás scheme presents a genuine public sector-led attempt at improving food security and social inclusion through the active promotion and direct facilitation of community food growing (Szervák 2003). In the case of the scheme's ability to meet in full the conditions for social innovation, though, its contribution is more ambiguous. In accordance with Moulaert et al's (2005) criteria, it is formulated around an intentional and directed 'response to an unmet human need'. It is also directed towards 'increasing access to resources needed to enhance societal rights'. However, its progress in institutionalising such rights (Levesque 2013; Martinelli 2013), or 'bringing about wider 'changes in social relations', remains, to date at least, much more constrained. That the two lead social workers were prepared to make such an intensive, personal and prolonged investment in the delivery of the Hajdúnánás scheme appears ultimately to have been central to defining, but also simultaneously inhibiting, the scheme's capacity to stimulate anything more than an incremental step towards socially innovative change (Klein et al 2013; Pradel Miquel et al 2013).

The ability of the two social workers to address physical access barriers, their commitment to overcoming knowledge and skills-based barriers, their sensitivity in fostering sustained client participation, and their refusal to be dissuaded by external cultural stereotyping and prejudice towards the culpability of individual welfare recipients, undoubtedly provided the foundation for the public status of the project as constituting a renowned success. Nevertheless, despite all of this effort, the risk remains that, for as long as the scheme continues to be orchestrated from above through the leadership of the social workers, it holds greater potential to continue conserving existing social orders than to bring about transformative change (MacCallum 2013).

Asked, to reflect on their overall experience of participating in the Hajdúnánás scheme, the respondents were unanimously positive. Beyond the immediate produce base and social returns outlined, however, the extent to which the Hajdúnánás scheme actually works to disrupt the prevailing political logic towards food provisioning is otherwise negligible. Rather than being positioned as a basic human right, food security in Hajdúnánás continues to be framed by the logic of facilitating 'an individual's ability to produce or purchase food for

themselves and their family' (Jarosz 2011: 120). In conformity with this, the benevolence of the Family Care centre, and by proxy the local council, also remains firmly in the picture:

> "*I have nothing negative to say. It is a big chance, a big help to do something for the family. If somebody wants to do something it is a good possibility... For example, last year we produced so many potatoes that it was enough for the family for the whole winter. And we can use the money that we have saved for other things. They* [the lead social workers] *do not ask anything else, just to do the food growing well. This is not a big ask.*" (Hajdúnánás scheme participant)

Following Lipsky (1980: 94), an inherent difficulty in drawing conclusions on the actual extent to which the Hajdúnánás scheme has brought about wider changes in social relations, is that "the reported gratitude… may [simply] indicate how little people have come to expect from government". Moreover, when viewed in the context of the total number of clients currently dependent upon the services of the family centre, those for whom the scheme "is a very big help", who get seeds "for free every year" and who in return 'only have to provide their labour' (Hajdúnánás scheme participant), are very much the minority. Their acceptance onto the scheme was not determined merely by their income, but rather through a more complex and obscured process of discretion, at the determination of the two lead social workers. On the one hand therefore, the ability of the social workers to draw on their existing knowledge of care centre cliental helped to ensure that individuals were engaged with in a manner which took into account their individual circumstances, needs and background (Findlay 2015). On the other hand however, this discretional and non-standardised process of selection created equal potential to restrict the type of clients who would be afforded the chance of social empowerment (Hjorne et al 2010). It is this dimension that leads Lipsky (1980) to frame discretional practice, from a client perspective, as commonly constituting a threat rather than an opportunity.

It appears then that the social workers' and the mayor's declaration of the strong success of the Hajdúnánás scheme needs to be restricted to a relatively narrow food production and social cohesion framing, based around the existing social order. From a social innovation perspective, it is also notable that, thus far at least, the basic model of the Hajdúnánás scheme has not been institutionally scaled-out through replication by other Hungarian family care centres (Martinelli 2013). Towards the end of 2013, for example, the lead social workers were invited to present their model at the annual Association of Social Workers conference. Despite being well received, the general feedback and sentiment of this national audience was that the scheme was "too risky", and "requiring of too much work" (Hajdúnánás scheme leader), for them to be interested in implementing it in their own locality. This suggests that elsewhere, the discretional practice of these other front line workers remains far more defensive in nature (Catney and Henneberry 2012) limited, for now at least, only to the pursuance of the mundane coping mechanism more commonly associated with Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucrats. As had originally been the case in Hajdúnánás, the external perception of the risky nature of the scheme reflects the overriding prevalence of the neo-conservative ideology of social welfare claimants as holding personal

responsibility, not only for their own food insecurity, but more fundamentally, for their own poverty (Moses 2004).

As is asserted by Van Dyck and Van der Broek (2013), it is only by applying a territorialised approach to studying social innovation that its path dependent and contextual nature may be brought to the fore (see also Moulaert et al 2013a). In understanding why the Hajdúnánás scheme has yet to be replicated elsewhere, it is important to give specific attention to the particular local conditions which served to cultivate a willingness amongst front line workers to risk innovative practice (Lowndes 2005). What the Hajdúnánás case illustrates is the difference that was made by the presence of a political space of opportunity sufficiently supportive of trialling collaborative food growing as an alternative approach to family care. In speaking about the scheme and how closely it fitted into his wider vision for Hajdúnánás, the mayor was clearly very proud of what has been achieved to date by the two social workers. Ultimately however, rather than leading to a radical change in the existing social order, the scheme instead served to reinforce the elite status of the social workers in enhancing the outcomes of social welfare provisioning within Hajdúnánás (Kovach and Kuerova 2009).

In 2015 one of the two lead social workers subsequently went on to run a successful candidature campaign, such that she now serves as a member of the local council.[5] It remains to be seen whether this, together with the re-election of the mayor for a second term, will lead to other collaborative community food growing projects being trialled in the future. For now, though, sufficient political reward already appears to have been gained for the social workers, the mayor and the council by risking more socially innovative forms of practice only at the level of a single project, and only via an operating model of limited transformational potential (Swyngedouw 2004).

Conclusions

Guided by a combined conceptual lens of social innovation and street-level bureaucracy, in this paper we have explored the situated discretionary practice informing a more co-productively aligned public sector approach to community food growing. In concentrating on the role of front line public sector workers we have intentionally diverged from a more common trend of leaving as ambiguous the role of public sector bodies within the governance of social innovation (Moulaert et al 2013a). Accordingly, we have also sought to investigate how socially innovative practice might come to emerge within the specific context of public sector practice (Levesque 2013). In drawing the discussion to a close and offering conclusions of relevance beyond the individual case, we return here to our original research questions. That is, to what extent can a collaborative public sector-led approach to community food growing foster socially innovative practice; and, within the same context, what is the relationship between social innovation and situated discretionary practice?

Through our approach to the analysis of the Hajdúnánás case, the situated and discretional practices of front line workers were intentionally placed centre stage. In doing so we sought to demonstrate the importance of giving due emphasis to the iterative and emergent nature of collaborative processes of public sector-led community food growing in

shaping the actual societal outcomes. Concentrating on the mediating role of individual front line public sector workers we discussed the potential for core components of socially innovative practice to be simultaneously propagated or constrained; to emerge either as an intentional goal, or as an unintentional outcome of a collaborative process. In so doing, our analysis diverged from a classic understanding of front line discretion as constituting mere defensive practice (Lipsky 1980). Instead we focused much more centrally on the potential for front line workers to engage in socially innovative practice.

In the case of Hajdúnánás evidence remains absent of any conceptual shift towards food security as a basic human right being achieved as an outcome of the scheme (FAO 2014; Dowler and O'Connor 2012). Yet, whilst at one level such public sector-led projects seemingly lack sufficient intention towards social innovativeness to become truly transformational of existing social orders, their ability to propagate more incremental, smaller scale occurrences of social innovation must not be overlooked (Klein et al 2013). It is by adopting a multi-scalar, situated and process orientated approach to the analysis of alternative forms of collaborative public sector-led community food provisioning, that it becomes possible to evidence the presence of innovative practice as it unfolds on the ground. At the micro-level it is only by focusing on the daily relational and situated discretional processes of implementing and administering policies and projects, that their wider potential to contribute to co-produced socially innovative practice can be evidenced.

At the same time as concentrating on the role of the individual, however, equally important in adopting a situated territorial approach to analysis, is the need to incorporate the wider social and political context and 'place' of operation (Moulaert et al 2013b). In the case of the Hajdúnánás scheme, it was the specific combination of an overarching operating context of neo-conservatism and on-going resource cuts, paralleled at the local level by political championing of more innovative approaches to local produce and community food growing, which were equally fundamental to the realisation and durability of the scheme. It is this combination, together with the relative discretional freedom afforded to the two social workers that led to their trialling of such an alternative approach. Just as notable though with respect to the 'space' of practice, was the fact that they did so in such a public setting. Ultimately, it is the public display of success, to be refreshed annually with each cycle of growing season, which stands most chance of the Hajdúnánás scheme stimulating institutional support for risking other more truly transformational forms of community food growing on public land in the longer term. In this sense also the spaces and places of social innovation, as well as processes of governance, clearly do warrant further scholarly attention across a whole range of scales (Maclean et al 2013; Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010).

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1. Including, for example, through the launch of a local product brand and the introduction of a local currency.

2. By way of context, in 2014 the average monthly per capita income for Hungary was 103,000 Forints (332 Euros).

3. This included procuring additional land from the local council in order to support an increase in the number of participating clients, and also expand into the rearing of chickens for eggs and meat (again, only for direct family consumption). The latter helps to ensure the availability of produce all-year-round.

4. The families are provided with educational support in all aspects of food growing, from planting to all subsequent cultivation and harvesting tasks. Following a subsequent expansion of the scheme in 2013 into poultry keeping, basic training is also given in poultry management, including basic information on the importance of regular cleaning of the chicken coups. Clients are instructed to immediately contact the scheme leaders upon any sign of ill health in the chickens.

5. The election of the social worker occurred subsequent to the completion of the field work.

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