

Chapter 18

The Study of Social Needs as a Strategic Tool for the Innovation of the Social Care Sector: The Contribution of New Technologies

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ABSTRACT

One of the biggest challenges for social intervention is to acquire more efficacy and innovation. The strategic detection of innovation opportunities is directly linked with the research and comprehension of unmet social and economic needs, but also with a profound evaluation of the usual ways to identify and answer to current and emergent needs. The contribution of ICTs, traditionally absent from social work and social care universes, can be very relevant at this level. Therefore, in this chapter, the authors discuss the boundaries and conceptions of (social) needs as a strategic dimension for innovation and evaluation on social intervention and reflect upon the key issues (difficulties and opportunities) associated with the use of ICTs in social work and social care systems.

INTRODUCTION

The Social Work profession intends to promote “social change, problem solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” (IFSW, 2001). In this sense, the commitment towards change, regarding development and social justice, as

well as the openness to innovation are, today more than ever, the cornerstones of a social work capable of asserting itself as a strategic element in the construction of alternative, equitable and balanced societies.

Nowadays, a proactive response is necessary for the social and economical challenges that society faces; challenges that have profound

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implications for social work methods, goals and populations. We have also to consider that many of the social work theories and classical methods were conceived in very different contexts. Now a new paradigm seems to arise associated with the complexity of global, unpredictable, and technological societies. This new paradigm puts the requirements of effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, costs, measurability and speed of results in the front page. Many authors (Langan, 2009; Parton, 2008; Peckover, White & Hall, 2008; Mitchel & Sloper, 2008) and professionals emphasize the potential dangers of this emergent model of thinking and acting for the social work core values and specific approaches that are associated mainly with quality, proximity, interaction, long term processes and holistic perspectives. Notwithstanding the fact that these critics may be very pertinent and deserve more discussion and research, it's a fact that social work, like any other profession nowadays, is inevitably plunged in the "information age". The ways to adapt and to benefit, or to resist, to the new conditions will induce the role that social work is enable to play, now and in the future. As West and Heath (2011) underline "a reactive answer to new technologies limits opportunities to influence the core issues" (p. 209). It's crucial for social work to reshape and update models, without losing the core values but learning how to strategically use, in the best way, for a "best practice" (Hill & Shaw, 2011), the tools and potentialities of ICTs.

In fact, although some ethical and methodological problems that need further debate and reflection, the use of ICT can increase the possibilities: a) to formulate (and evaluate) new and better social and political answers to material and immaterial (cultural, social), objective and subjective user needs; b) to define innovative strategies to intervene in the causes of social-economical problems, conceiving new citizenship spaces and policies that can effectively promote quality of life, and finally, c) to create a culture of social entrepreneurship, data sharing and "hybridisation"

of responses (new forms of evaluated articulation between public, private and third sector). This is not only important but essential in societies, like ours, characterised by uncertainty and complexity, then claiming for new understanding and intervention processes and to increase efficacy and equity of social professional practices.

The identification of social needs, and above all the underlying criteria determination, evaluation and prioritization, requires, especially given the current context, renewed reflection and new sharing and assessment strategies. The diagnosis of unmet needs, considered by many authors (Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan 2010) as a basis for social innovation, as well as the distinction, often with diffuse borders, between need and want (Reviere, Berkowitz, Carter & Ferguson, 1996) actually requires a broad and deep discussion and new participatory strategies that may be enhanced, for instance, by the use of ICTs.

Thus, in this chapter we will begin by discussing the thresholds and conceptions of social needs, as well as the specific issues, potentialities and limits associated with the use of ICT in the social sector. In the end we intend to place some of its possible applications to foster innovation and effectiveness on social intervention. More specifically, we aim to discuss the mechanisms and possibilities of ICTs to promote:

- Innovative forms of social diagnosis, capable of identifying and articulating capabilities and opportunities.
- Interventions evaluation (specially user needs satisfaction and impacts of policies and measures).
- Follow-ups and production of shared indicators and processes between social organizations.
- Inter-sector or inter-institutional articulation, or shared experiences evaluation, and scaling-up of innovative interventions, on a local or a global dimension.

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