

Book Review

Victor Bekkers, Jurian Edelenbos and Bram Steijn (editors).
Innovation in the Public Sector: Linking Capacity and Leadership.
Governance and Public Management Series.
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Reviewed by Karl Löfgren

While the notion of innovation has been on the international political agenda for 20 years now, accompanied by a massive interest among students of economics and business studies, the concept has been remarkably disregarded in the academic field of public administration. Innovation as a concept has almost become synonymous with entrepreneurship in the private sector, whereas the public sector has been perceived as a natural opponent to innovation.

In that context, the collection of chapters edited by Bekkers, Edelenbos and Steijn fills a gap in our body of knowledge, and makes a valuable contribution to a new research agenda in which the public sector is an important constituent in our endeavour to become a truly innovative society. As the editors argue in their introductory chapter, innovation represents a challenge to public administration in two different ways. First, the public sector, and subsequently public administration, constitutes the foundation for a more innovation-driven economy. Without a public sector adapted and geared up to a different form of knowledge based economy, the aim of making society and the economy more innovative will inevitably fail. Second, a future society requires that the public sector itself becomes innovative in order to face a number of challenges. Societal threats such as climate changes, crime and international economic competition force the public sector to rethink the choice of priorities, solutions and instruments. In particular, this is because, as the three editors point out, a number of social and political developments (e.g. individualisation, globalisation etc) in (Western/European) societies have undercut some of the 'linkages' between various social actors thereby depriving governments the capacity of solving (cross-sectoral) 'wicked problems'. Undoubtedly, this requires a new way of considering our current forms of governance and choice of policy instruments.

The collection is composed of an introductory chapter, nine contributions which include both empirical, theoretical and conceptual pieces, and a final discussion. The contributions cover a range of subjects from case studies on the management of innovation studies to comparative studies on innovation in different states. If I, as reviewer, should pick a few good chapters I would in particular stress the conceptual contribution by Christopher Pollitt on innovation in the public sector, and the chapter by Lember, Kalvet and Kattel on public sector innovation at the urban level and the role of procurement. The former, by Pollitt, puts the whole concept of innovation into a broader conceptual and historical framework, and warns against 'off-the-shelf' models and theories of innovation in which frameworks developed for production innovation in the private sector are uncritically exported to the public sector. Pollitt argues that innovation in the public sector needs to be studied from a long-term perspective in which we over time see if we can identify any common denominators. That context matters is also something emphasised in the overall conclusion of the book - local relations, values and interactions matter for innovation. The latter chapter by Lember, Kalvet and Kattel is interesting insofar it provides a good comparative study of a number of innovations, mainly transport- and IT-systems, in a

number of Baltic Sea cities with a special emphasis on procurement, and the relationship between the public procurer and the private contractor/supplier. The chapter demonstrates how the public sector through procurement affects the innovation of new processes and products (which later can be commercially exploited).

While there is every reason to applaud the initiative by the editors to compile a selection of papers in the novel field of innovation of the public sector, there is also reason to draw the attention to some less fortunate aspects of the volume. Probably the most important shortcoming of the book is that the focus of the book, both the introductory chapter as well as the individual contributions, is on the *conditions* of (successful) innovations in the public sector, rather than what actually constitutes *processes* of innovation. We are told about the sources of innovation, the importance of inclusion of societal actors (as well as the formation of networks), and not at least the role of the public managers for innovation, but the innovation process *per se* is treated as a black box. In fact, very few of the chapters discuss, let alone present empirically, the actual processes of innovation from initiation to adaptation. It is not so much that the quality of the studies is poor; quite the opposite. It is just that this book by too much echoes the by now well-known normative narrative of the advent of a post-NPM governance paradigm in which all existing problems are wiped out by co-production, the inclusion of users, stakeholders and other civil society actors, and enlightened leadership. In this context, innovation just becomes an argument for governance and management reforms rather than the actual object of study.

In addition to that, after having read the volume I am still not really sure what constitutes an innovation. Compared to some of the previous economist writing on, for example, national innovation systems (such as the works by Bengt-Åke Lundvall (1992) and Charles Edquist (2005)) where the authors clearly limit themselves to product innovations, this volume presents a (mildly speaking) broad definition of the term. In the introductory chapter we learn that the concept of innovation can comprise products, processes, technology, concepts, institutions, governance, and finally also be organisational or managerial (pp.15-16). Also, we are taught that innovation can be incremental, radical or transformative (*ibid.*). The closest we get to an attempt to distinguish innovation from other concepts (on change) is a reference to Osborne and Brown (2005) in which it is said that “it is essential that innovation makes a difference in such a way that the actors involved perceive the innovations as discontinuity with the past” (p. 14). While this very broad understanding of the concept holds the capacity of encompassing the complexity of public sector activities, it has less analytical value as the concept becomes almost tautological; innovation can be almost anything as long as the involved actors *feel* that it produces change. What is really puzzling in this context is that the aforementioned contribution by Pollitt addresses the very same problems in much of the existing academic debate on innovation in the public sector. He compares the concept to other academically fashionable concepts (such as networks, leadership and governance) and makes a remark that the concept of innovation (at least at present) is yet another concept that may join the ‘*Vital but Vague*’ club.

Despite these points of criticism the fact remains that this book is a pioneering work, and rather than being read as a unified collection, I think that most of the individual chapters contribute to an academic field which still only exists at an embryonic stage.

About the Reviewer

Karl Löfgren is Associate Professor in Public Administration at the Department of Society and Globalisation, Roskilde University, and Head of Studies (Public Administration). He has recently published books and articles in the fields of local democracy, social surveillance, democratic audit and electronic government. He can be contacted at klof@ruc.dk.

References

Edquist, C. 2005. "Systems of Innovation: Perspectives and Challenges." Pp. 181-208 in *Oxford Handbook of Innovation*, edited by J. Fagerberg, D. Mowery and R. R. Nelson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lundvall, B.-Å. 1992. *National Innovation Systems: Towards a Theory of Innovation an Interactive Learning*. London: Pinter

Osborne, S. and K. Brown. 2005. *Managing Change and Innovation in Public Service Organizations*. London: Routledge