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# Big-Time Small-Scale Innovations

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# BIG-TIME SMALL-SCALE Innovations

Is there value in supporting small-scale, yet innovative projects? Based on their experience in Digital Pioneers – a programme supporting innovative Dutch civil society initiatives – Corline Van Es and Chris Sigaloff of Kennisland, Netherlands, make a case for this latest sector trend and the support it deserves.

In times of financial, social and environmental crisis, most policymakers tend to focus on top-down solutions, which require large budgets. It is easy to overlook the promise of small-scale, albeit sustainable investments. This article is a call to organisations or individuals to support innovative, small-scale, local and grassroots projects, which promise tailor-made solutions and increased problem-solving capacities with lower risk profiles.

### The Digital Pioneers Fund Approach

Since 2002, the Digital Pioneers Fund (DP) – a programme developed and implemented by the Knowledgeland Foundation, an independent think tank based in Amsterdam, and supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of Netherlands – has provided financial and organisational support to Dutch civil society initiatives developing innovative Internet projects.

DP aims to elevate the social importance and role of online civil society projects through a number of ways. These range from motivating these project initiators to actively contributing to a plurality of online debate; strengthening social cohesion; sharing knowledge on tackling social problems using new technologies and stimulating the inclusion of vulnerable groups such as immigrants, elderly or disabled people. Interestingly, the key distinction setting DP apart from other conventional supporting organisations lies in its practice of investing in its beneficiaries,

rather than subsidising them. The result is high-quality, sustainable projects which are independent of government support, with positive social outcomes and more flexible support mechanisms.

### The Value of Small-scale Investments

After more than six years of collaborating with numerous civil society projects, the results have indeed proven to be encouraging. Thus far, DP has supported a total of 156 projects from thousands of applicants and many of these social initiatives have impacted the community directly. Presently, with only one-time initial funding from DP, about 85% of these projects are still running, reaching out to an estimated two million users per month. In most of the projects, the community is actively involved in helping various causes, which include emancipating and empowering[1]; activating[2]; including[2]; informing[3]; offering space for co-designing and tapping on the community to solve social problems[4].

*Soundnet*[5] is an example of an online project that contributes to community empowerment. Its founder, Rene Post had set up the Geluids.net foundation in 2003 after reading reports in the media about the debate on noise pollution caused by Schiphol Airport and the lack of access to data to verify the claims. Rene wanted to start a project to offer people who live around the airport a means through which they could show the actual level of noise pollution. With the help of Digital Pioneers, Geluids.net developed special

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metering stations (antennas) that can visualise the noise pollution via a website. Between implementing a complex installation and devising a network of small, affordable metering stations, Rene chose the latter so that measurements could be made simultaneously at a number of locations. The costs per metering station were kept low by use of the Internet, open-source materials and standard components such as a microphone and personal computer equipped with a sound card. By collecting sensor network-based data on a large scale, Geluids.net provides an actual base for a rational discussion about combining living, working and transport functions in densely populated areas. In this case, the access to information led to empowerment of the community.

An online project that promotes inclusion is '*I remember*', an interactive application which helps to stimulate the brain functions of people with dementia within a tailor-made online environment. For people with dementia, loss of memory is often very frightening. Research shows that active stimulation can slow down the process. The application '*I remember*' is based on proven methods translated into a web tool. They show pictures and associations the patient remembers from their youth in a Lifebook. Currently, the application is being tested in several elderly homes.

The *talking book[6]* is another project that promotes inclusion. It makes children's books available to handicapped children. Often, handicapped children do not have access to books. Because of their physical challenges, they are not able to grab, open and read a book. Often, these children are dependent on adults to read books aloud to them. Talking books give these children a chance to read them independently. Book texts are scanned and read out online, and the children can turn a page using a specially designed 'one button' mouse. At the website, around 100 children's books are published, some of which are complimentary while others are accessible at a nominal fee. The project also takes place in partnership with several publishers.

*Creative Crowd* meanwhile aims to increase the community's problem-solving capacity. Its founder, Carl Lens, was inspired by an online portal[7] that managed to engage local communities to improve their neighbourhood. Under this initiative, the community marks suggestions for improvements in their district on a map. This can be in the form of a report of garbage lying around or of broken streetlights, or simply suggestions to improve the neighbourhood. These suggestions are polled by the community and, if supported by a majority of them, are directly sent to responsible local governmental officials. In this way, the community and the local government can collaborate and work together for a safer and cleaner living environment.

On activating citizenship, *Treemagotchi[8]* is an example. The *Treemagotchi* contest is a contest to take green actions on an honour basis, which are reflected on the individual's treemagotchi. The treemagotchi is a virtual tree on the social network, blog or personalised website, which allows you to place your picture in the middle of the tree and invite six friends to hang as 'leaves' on your tree. To nourish the tree and ensure its survival, the user has to carry out weekly actions for 12 consecutive weeks. The impact of *Treemagotchi* thus far has been surprising. For instance, in the two months of its existence, *Treemagotchi* has managed to motivate 5,450 contestants to cancel their membership of the *Yellow Pages*, saving 10.1 kilograms of paper, which equates to approximately 103 trees being saved. A total of 4,300 people have also demanded greener investments from green energy suppliers, while 160 people have made the switch to a green energy supplier.

Some have also found ways to survive on the incomes of their own services like selling print-on-demand versions of their online content[9] or selling data on consumer behaviour on their platforms[10]. These developments prove that social investing does indeed lead to thriving and viable social communities. Motivated by the success attained thus far, DP has gone on to establish the Digital Pioneers Academy in 2006. With the setup of the Academy, existing projects receive an extra helping hand to aid its continued growth into sustainable organisations with sound financial models.

### Supporting Bottom-up Innovation
Since its inception, the DP programme has facilitated the creation of innovative online projects. Based on DP's experience, we share four lessons on how to support these bottom-up innovations.

**1. A Thorough Selection Process**

DP recruits only the most promising initiatives and devotes time to a rigorous selection procedure which identifies talented social entrepreneurs who have the drive and the right skills to succeed in their projects. This is a three-step process that goes through the secretariat, selection committee and an interview stage. On average, only 10% of applicants become a 'Digital Pioneer'.

**2. Building a Cohesive Support System and an Active Learning Community**

Digital Pioneers itself is a learning community where project leaders often join forces to blend their skills into a powerful collaboration. The masterminds behind Digital Pioneer projects come with different backgrounds and expertise. Some are technically inclined while others are skilled in content development or project management. Bringing them together often leads to new insights and collaborations. DP designs learning environments such as open spaces, bar camps and kitchen table sessions to tackle issues and share project development. Attention is also given to developing personal skills, such as presentation, communication and leadership abilities. At the Digital Pioneers Academy, applicants are also matched with a personal coach to help them plan a more sustainable future for their projects.

**3. Empowering Lives**

Organisations in the civil society sector often begin informally, with the founders rarely viewing themselves as professional entrepreneurs. However, at the Academy, Digital Pioneers are challenged to see themselves as entrepreneurs leading professional set-ups. Volunteers or co-initiators are deemed as colleagues while interested parties are viewed as stakeholders, partners or potential financiers. By making the economic and social value of their projects explicit, the project initiators come to view their plans as a form of public service. This sense of empowerment gives project leaders the confidence to experiment with radically different but realistic financial or organisational models to achieve better results.

**4. Practising What You Preach**

As a programme designed to stimulate innovation from the grassroots level, it must, first of all, be close to the heart of the society. Innovativeness in the programme itself, along with flexibility and openness on the facilitators' part to reflect and learn, are critical to the programme's success. This is because DP believes in constantly evaluating whether it practices what it preaches. DP runs an open programme with a curriculum solely based on the needs of the projects, hence leaving a lot of room for the participants to interpret details on their own, experiment, as well as satisfy their curiosity. Every year, the selection criteria, staff and the results of the Academy are critically examined. The programme itself is subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, but run and developed as an enterprising social set-up with almost €2 million worth of funds. DP continuously strives to stimulate entrepreneurship, novel initiatives and beneficial cooperations amongst the parties involved.

**Time for Bottom-up Initiatives**

Regardless of whether it is education, the environment, media and communication or health and politics, now is the time for bottom-up initiatives to take root. However, success in advocating and stimulating social entrepreneurship is never easy. It is largely reliant on having a strong and supportive community, an active learning environment, skilled individuals as well as an organisation that practises what it preaches. In this global recession, it is likely that we will see a significant shift in economic and political systems. To ride on this impending wave of change and emerge as a leading force in social innovation, somebody needs to bite the bullet and make room for experimentation and support social entrepreneurs with the potential for success. DP hopes that its experiences will help innovative initiatives to improve the world we live in, one step at a time. ❖

[1] *Govworks BV*<www.govworks.nl>

[2] *Indymedia* <www.indymedia.nl>

[2] *Treemagotchi* <www.treemagotchi.nl>

[2] *Alane Newsreader* <http://www.edia.nl/en/alane/newsreaders>

[3] *Geluids.net* <www.geluids.net>

[4] *Flexwebhosting BV* <www.wikiproject.nl>

[5] *Geluids.net*, op. cit

[6] *Het Sprekend Boek* <www.hetsprekendboek.nl>

[7] *FixMyStreet* <www.fixmystreet.com>

[8] *Treemagotchi*, op. cit

[9] *FLOSS Manuals Stichting* <www.flossmanuals.net>

[10] *Ouders Online* <www.ouders.nl>

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