Engaged Sisters
Studying the entrepreneurship and innovation support system from ‘within’

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Abstract
Entrepreneurship and innovation support has grown into large institutions in a society that cherishes an enterprising culture. Individuals are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and innovative in general, and to start up their own companies in particular. To support individuals in their business creation processes, policy stresses the need of providing with measures. Together these measures comprise a support system, directed towards supporting new and established entrepreneurs. It has however been recognized that the entrepreneurship and innovation public support system is highly gendered, favoring men and male businesses, whilst programs targeting women put the onus on individual women to start and grow businesses. As well it has been recognized that the policy support system tends to exclude ‘othered’ groups rather than including them in enterprising activities. The subtext of entrepreneurship support points to how some people “are” entrepreneurs, whilst others need support in order to become more entrepreneurial. Hence, there is a need to change the support system of entrepreneurship and innovation since it tends to disempower rather than to empower ‘othered’ groups in society.

“Sisters in Business” make up an organization of wo/men entrepreneurs who have joined forces to address this need. Their vision is that entrepreneurship should reflect the society at large. During the last year they have therefore taken several initiatives to make this happen and is today one of the support organizations in a medium sized Swedish town. In this paper three Sisters are working together with a researcher within this area. Together we have formed a group of “engaged sisters”’. In our dialogue the dichotomy between ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ have temporarily dissolved in favor of creating narratives, from episodes, experiences and the everyday life of sister’s, to illustrate how the support system works from ‘within’. This led us to questioning whether the ‘support system’ really is a support system, or something else? Furthermore, this insight made it apparent that there exists ‘other’ support system, tough concealed and silenced. Finally, suggestions are proposed for how ‘practitioners’ can work together with ‘academics’ to change the rules of the game.

Keywords
Entrepreneurship, innovation, support policy, engaged scholarship, multi-sited ethnography
Imagine that you have an idea – something you that have popped up in your head at one point of time and that leaves you no rest. It demands your attention. Finally you decide that you need to do something: to try out and find out if this idea could be turned into some kind of reality. You have already got positive feedback from family and friends. They all urge you to go for it.

The vision of how your idea could be influential to more people, many more, is growing stronger and clearer and pushes you. Finally you just know you it feels important to try, for better or worse. Looking for this road that you have never walked down to before, unfamiliar and exciting, but also a bit scary, you contact one of the organisations working with support to entrepreneurs and innovators.

During the meeting you need to explain that you don’t have a name for the product - as many entrepreneurs before you. Still you are asked a lot of detailed questions you cannot (yet) answer. As a result, you get homework to do; developing a business plan, marketing strategies, naming target groups, potential suppliers, conducting a SWOT-analysis, and figuring out a price for your (yet) unknown product.

You need to walk down an unfamiliar road. Still exiting. Still a bit scary. As the process continues however you start to realize that this road is not new for the advisors, who seem to have already finished explanations and suggestions for all the blocks that you stumble across.

The moral here is that it seems more to be about learning the name of the road than discovering a new road that you can name yourself. This imaginary case is composed by experiences from what can happen when you have an idea, invent something that doesn’t always ‘fit’. Whether it is to start up a company, a project or just break a path in ones life whilst following out something new.

This story echoes well the experiences of all authors of this article when it comes to starting up something new. It takes time and people who both support you in terms of “you can!” and “did you think of this?” and “are you really sure this will work?” as well as “this might be an opportunity for you!” At a first glance these questions could be referred to as common sense questions, but in policy and in the support system they are easily turned into expert questions. When they turn into expert questions something happens. They are no longer open questions but turns into questions that demand precise and detailed answers.

With expert questions the road is no longer yours to discover but is obfuscated and mystified by expert language you need to learn, thus leaving a fog to get through. This may put anyone in a situation of insecurity and you may thus easily become trapped in a learning process where you start searching for outside answers and knowledge to dissolve the fog and looking for the ‘right’ way, instead of ‘moulding’ the idea in social situations where there is not right answer but only different perspectives. Whilst the first learning process echoes the idea of one person knowing (e.g. the teacher) and one person not knowing (e.g. the student), the second learning process is of another kind.

In the second learning process you discover yourself in different situations, imbued by taken for granted assumptions, various opinions and ideologies, and power mechanisms that both inhibit and push the idea. You realize that there is no ‘right’ road to walk. The motorway may sometimes be the best choice, but at times it may be more beneficial to take the trail along the lake and stop for a coffee in a sunlit glade in the midst of all the wild flowers...
Introduction

Entrepreneurship and innovation support has grown into large institutions in a society that cherishes an enterprising culture. Individuals are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and innovative in general, and to start up their own companies in particular. To support individuals in their enterprising activities, policy stresses the need of providing with different measures to increase this activity (e.g. Audretsch, 2007, Audretsch and Thurik, 2001, Lundström and Stevenson, 2005, Lindholm Dahlstrand and Stevenson, 2007). Together these measures comprise a support system; often directed towards helping new entrepreneurs to walk down the road mentioned in the epilogue. It has however been recognized that discourses of entrepreneurship and innovation are excluding rather than including (Andersson et al. 2012, Ahl, 2004, Berglund, 2007, Pettersson, 2007). Further, this seems to be maintained and reinforced, rather than challenged and transformed in overall policy (Berglund and Granat Thorslund, 2012). The effect is that policy excludes rather than includes new ideas and individuals that don’t fit the norm (e.g. Lindberg, 2010, Pettersson, 2007).

Hence, entrepreneurship and innovation is highly gendered, favoring men and male businesses, whilst programs targeting women put the onus on individual women to start and grow businesses (Ahl et al., 2012). As well it has been recognized that the policy support system tends to exclude ‘othered’ groups, such as young people, immigrants, women and cultural workers, rather than including them in enterprising activities (Berglund and Johansson, 2007b). Further, the subtexts of entrepreneurship support points to how some people “are” entrepreneurs, whilst others need support in order to become more entrepreneurial (Perren and Jennings, 2005), which seems to reinforce the division between individuals with certain in-born entrepreneurial attributes in contrast to those who lack these attributes; and who therefore need to capture them by participating in particular training exercises. Hence, the need to change the support system of entrepreneurship and innovation has been acknowledged, since it tends to disempower rather than to empower ‘othered’ groups in society.

Another concern that has been raised in relation to entrepreneurship and innovation policy it the effects it create (Storey, 2002). Despite new policy models substantial resources put into policy programs there is scarce evidence for its impact in practice. Both in relation to particular communities (Andersson and Johansson, 2012), in relation to their expected output (European Commission, 2005), and in relation to challenging gendered norms and traditions (Berglund and Granat Thorslund, 2012). Even if some research have been undertaken to investigate how overall policy goals have travelled into local programs and into practice (Selegård, 2011), and the tensions created between policy and practice with regards to in-built conflicting logics (Stenmark, 2011), little is written about what it means to work ‘within’ the growing institution of entrepreneurship and innovation policy. In this paper we will pay attention to how overall – sometimes conflicting ideas on economic growth, social cohesion and inequality – is dealt with in a regional context where different policy supported organizations aim at creating a better soil for future entrepreneurs and innovators. More specifically, we will discuss the Swedish support system of entrepreneurship and innovation from the experiences in the “Sister’s in Business” network.
“Sisters in Business” make up an organization of wo/men entrepreneurs who have joined forces to address the need of inviting disempowered groups to entrepreneurship and innovation and to innovate models that create effects in practice. Their vision is that entrepreneurship should reflect the society at large, with all its members and social groups. Hence, entrepreneurship should reflect a society’s diversity of people and not give privilege to the western world white middle-aged man that has been designated by the discourse (e.g. Ogbor, 2000). Sister’s can shortly be described as a loosely connected network of engaged entrepreneurs, aiming to support a becoming entrepreneurs and innovators. From the start however they had more of an anti-public support attitude. In the early times of Sisters, as the network was about to establish, the founder stated very firmly in a presentation that the idea of Sisters was not to be in need of any kind of support measures, but they wanted to stay independent and do ‘their own thing’. When Sisters started it was, legally, nothing more or less than a business hotel, hosting offices for small entrepreneurs who could share their office costs. Informally, however, Sisters became a place where people interested in entrepreneurship and innovation - who had ideas and dreams – came to hang out. Subsequently, lots of time and efforts were put into meeting the individuals who took contact with Sisters by listening, answering queries, posing questions, sharing experiences, solving problems and formulating opportunities.

In 2010 the founder, together with a colleague entrepreneur, started to work with the visions of what Sisters could become, that took Sisters from a loosely connected and informal network to a limited company. In 2011 they saw the opportunity to apply for public funding within the area of entrepreneurship support and was granted resources for two projects, directed towards disempowered groups. Thus during this time Sisters changed from taking an ‘anti-public support’ attitude to be part of transforming the support system to acknowledge all the entrepreneurs they had met. The vision is still to create conditions for business to reflect society at large; with all its people and ideas.

In this paper three Sisters are working together with a researcher within this area. Together we have formed a group of “engaged sisters”. In our dialogue the dichotomy between ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ have temporarily dissolved in favor of creating narrations, from episodes, experiences and the everyday life of sister’s, to illustrate how the support system works from ‘within’. Accordingly, four stories are presented that together tell about how system ’works from within’. These stories are all formulated against the backdrop of the epilogue of “walking down an unfamiliar road” and is entitled as follows: 1. From anti-public support to developing a “Sisters support system”, 2. Encouraging slumbering entrepreneurs, 3. Who are Sister’s?, and 4. Inviting disempowered groups. Together these stories give shape to a larger narrative; one that is often told between the lines. Present, clamoring for attention, yet silenced. This narrative, entitled “Sister’s – a silenced support system”, problematizes the support system from within.

**Entrepreneurship (policy): from the perspective of disempowered groups**

In the first ten-year overall strategy for the European Union member countries the key word was ‘entrepreneurship’, followed by ‘innovation’ in the runner up strategy set
for 2010-2020. Entrepreneurship and innovation are no longer only words describing societal phenomena of “newness”, “change” and “diffusion”; they have also grown into important overall guidelines for what we should ‘do things’ entrepreneurially and innovatively in contemporary society. Let us therefore first scrutinize the ideas of entrepreneurship in modern society.

In entrepreneurship research the Schumpeterian view of the entrepreneur as an innovator and a person breaking the norm has gained acceptance. According to this theoretical landscape, the entrepreneur is seen as a person with certain talents, a pioneer who introduces the innovation that distinguishes one business from others. Entrepreneurship research has, however, not paid much attention to the crowd of people working together in organizational contexts to produce and diffuse “newness” (Whittle and Mueller, 2008), but has instead contributed to constructing the entrepreneur as an almost superhuman masculine being (e.g. Berglund and Johansson 2007a; Jones and Spicer, 2007; Meier Sørensen, 2008), who nevertheless seems as hard as the Heffalump to get a grip on (Jones and Spicer, 2005: 234). Hence, much of the legitimacy of entrepreneurship in modern society rest upon the general notion of entrepreneurs as creative and energetic frontrunners that undertake innovative actions leads to prosperity and development for all of us.

Accordingly, in contemporary discourse, the entrepreneur stands out as an ideal human being, a God-similar creature that constitutes the missing piece in every puzzle to solve no matter what the context is. On the other hand we are all called upon to become ‘enterprising selves’, working on ourselves in order to grow our full potential as human beings on the labour market. Turning every man and woman into an enterprising being can therefore be seen as an ultimate goal in contemporary society. This has indeed legitimated the emphasis on entrepreneurship and innovation policy measures that on the one hand aims at strengthening the growth potential among business and reducing barriers to turn new research findings into products at the market, and on the other hand intend to stimulate “othered” groups such as women, the youth, disabled people, immigrants, and so forth. Consequently, entrepreneurship and innovation is related to economic growth but also to social issues, as the need of tackling inequality and exclusion (Berglund and Johansson, 2007b).

Substantial research has thus been devoted to the importance of entrepreneurship and innovation policy and its role in creating economic growth, new jobs, social cohesion, sustainability and all sorts of things that is needed in contemporary society (e.g., Audretsch, 2007, Audretsch and Thurik, 2001, Lundström and Stevenson, 2005, Lindholm Dahlstrand and Stevenson, 2007). This research has paid attention to that entrepreneurship and innovation tend to be dealt with as parallel systems in policy. Whilst entrepreneurship policy has emerged primarily from small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) policy, innovation policy has largely evolved from science and technology (S&T) or research and development (R&D) policy (e.g. Lindholm Dahlstrand and Stevenson (2007). Innovation policy, in its attempts to stimulate a greater number of innovative, technology-based start-ups, thus crosses over into entrepreneurship policy (Lundström and Stevenson, 2005: 150 ff). On the other hand, traditional SME policy crosses over to entrepreneurship policy in their efforts to support new firm creation by way of information, advice, counselling and micro-loans (Lundström and Stevenson, 2005: 150 ff). Accordingly, these parallel systems are regarded as obstacles in practice where entrepreneurship and innovation cannot easily
be separated. Efforts have thus been made to construct a more coherent, integrated policy approach by creating new conceptual (e.g. Audretsch, 2007, Audretsch and Thurik, 2001, Lundström and Stevenson, 2005). The goals are to adjust policy to become more entrepreneurial and innovative in itself to have an impact in practice.

Despite efforts to become more entrepreneurial and innovative critique has been directed toward how entrepreneurship and innovation policy maintain traditional norms in with regards to gender, ethnicity, age and so forth (Andersson et al. 2012). Whilst entrepreneurship policy tends to maintain the ide of that the ideal entrepreneur is a western world businessman, innovation policy continues to produce the idea of innovation a technical product; made by western world men for western world men (Berglund and Granat Thorslund, 2012). Further, it is claimed that, whilst the entrepreneur is constructed as a heroic figure in dominating discourse, policy texts diminish these individuals into help seeking targets who need support and advice (Perren and Jennings, 2005). The groups designated to be included in entrepreneurship and innovation by particular policy efforts is rarely white middle-aged men, but rather women, young people, immigrants and so forth (Berglund and Johansson, 2007). This doesn’t mean that the white middle-aged man (here depicted as a discursively constructed stereotype) is deprived of resources. It is just that the resources earmarked for certain groups are articulated more clearly in the effort to recognise them as part of the entrepreneurial troop. In the Swedish context it was illustrated in 2007 how the majority of policy means was uneven distributed in relation to gender (NUTEK, 2007).

Acknowledging that gender, class, ethnicity and other kinds of social stratification is made in each and every corner of life, with its implications and often subtle yet thorough influences on how social life can be performed, this paper tries to recognize how this is ‘made’ from the stories of being ‘part of” the system.

Method: Engaged research

This paper is part of a larger project where the researcher (Karin Berglund) has been following Sisters in Business for about two years. During these years she has met people that relate to Sisters in various ways. Some run their own businesses, some are employed in public or private organizations, some work with entrepreneurship and innovation support, and yet some are curious about Sisters and nurture a dream of starting up something of their own. These encounters have often been made in meetings, at events, workshops, but also in everyday organizing. Besides of ‘hanging around’ Karin has conducted ethnographic interviews; that is talking to both ‘supporters’, ‘becoming entrepreneurs’ as well as to the ‘sisters’ themselves. As well she has followed blogs, read web sites and information material.

Three individuals that have been frequently recurring in the discussions during the fieldwork are: Annika Frida Birkelöf (entrepreneur, owner of Innovisual AB and participating in Sister’s activities), Johanna Lundin (entrepreneur, owner of Kapten Mjauzan AB and participating in Sisters’ activities) and Annika Löfgren (entrepreneur, owner of KREO and Sisters of Sweden AB). In this paper they have joined the ethnographer as partners in particular research project that aims at
understanding the support system from within. Furthermore, as part of this work, we seek to develop a research approach that takes a collaborational form, which we have named “Engaged Sisters”. During the winter and spring 2013 we met at five occasions to discuss this paper. These meetings were initiated with some questions from the researcher, but took soon the shape of a dialogue where topics usually not dealt with in everyday organizing were dealt with, as for instance; “What does it mean to be an entrepreneur?” “Who are Sister’s?” “What do entrepreneurs do?” “What does support mean?”

Methodologically, this research is inspired by critical cultural theory focusing upon the political dynamics of contemporary culture in general, and how research takes part of shaping (in)equality in particular (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986, Marcus, 1995, Marcus 1998, Marcus DeVault, 1990, 1996, 2006; Smith 2005, Willis and Trondman, 2000). In 2011 the researcher (Berglund) invited herself to the network “Sisters in Business” curious about how phenomena - such as entrepreneurship support, entrepreneurship among disempowered groups, women’s entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship as a feminist initiative - emerged through different contexts. In this research she has focused on following different activities, people, discussions and so forth. Approaching the empirical field in terms of ‘following and tracing’ is discussed by Marcus (1995) as “multi-sited ethnography”. This form of ethnography is described as “mobile”, and constitute a form that “takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilize the distinction, for example, between lifeworld and system” (Marcus, 1995: 96). Hence, by destabilizing certain phenomena knowledge can be created with regards to how practices are constituted; how they shape culture and are shaped by culture.

In this research the dichotomies of entrepreneurs versus the crowd of people not being labelled entrepreneurial is destabilized. As well is the dichotomy between the organizations supporting entrepreneurs and those who are not (explicitly) designated promoters made less stable. Thirdly, the dichotomy between particular groups of entrepreneurs pinpointed by policy (e.g. women, ethnic, young people) and the entrepreneurial norm (the middle aged white man) becomes undermined.

The multi-sited approach encourages ethnographers not only to focus on one ‘site’ – whether it is one place, one organization, or one particular group - but to pay attention to multiple sites and to follow how the phenomena of interest appear at these sites. There are different objects to follow, and techniques to be applied in in multi-sited ethnography. Some objects that can be followed are: the people, the thing, the metaphor, the plot, story or allegory, the life/biography, or the conflict. This means to follow out connections and relations and to trace ideas and themes/topologies that are not given beforehand, but found on the way. Whilst the larger research project of Sisters initially was focused on following the people, the object of study in this paper is directed towards following how the stories of entrepreneurship support emerge in the context of Sisters. During the time that we have worked with this article tensions emerged, in relation to an evaluation of one of Sisters projects “Equal Business” on the request of the municipality and carried through by two external evaluators, which may lead to follow these tensions/conflicts onwards. Thus following means to not write in stone what is to be done within a particular research projects, but to pay attention to what is emerging.
Challenging traditional forms of scholarship by co-producing research with the affected publics - being an engaged scholar - involves a critical perspective. The critical is built into multi-sited ethnography where the scholar is described as a “circumstantial activist” who during the fieldwork finds her- or himself at the crossroad of “all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments” (Marcus, 1995: 113). In such process the scholar cannot take the position of the ‘fly on the wall’ but takes part of processes, shifting personal positions in relation to people involved, contexts of interest and the discourses that are active in these time/space situations.

Two decades later, Marcus (2007) reflects about the development of ethnography that have passed since the books “Writing culture” in 1998 and the article “Multi-sited ethnography” in 1998 and calls for a more innovative ethnographic work by, for instance, turning ‘key informants’ into epistemic partners and producing texts that have effect in practice. That is; texts that have effect in “the complex situations defined by fieldwork itself, which produces them” (Marcus 2007: 1133). This kind of ethnography, he argues, mediates the world and among the people of concern. It provokes thoughts, cross-cuts dichotomies of action/ reflection, theory/ practice, researcher/ practitioner and provide us with new ways to do research.

In the call to this conference track engaged scholarship is referred to the “reciprocal, collaborative relations between the faculty member and the public that aim at the amelioration of communities, the co-production of knowledge, and the articulation of university practices embedded in the community” (c.f. Boyers, 1996). Arguably, this approach to research, offered by multi-sited ethnography, fits well the idea of engaging with the larger public. It focuses on joint collaborative work and to mediate texts where they have effects; in the practice concerned. However, this does not mean that this kind of research is atheoretical; rather the analysis is directed towards finding out how exclusion, inclusion, subjugation and inequality is produced in a web of sociality, reinforced by institutional orders.

What is stressed in the collaborative approach is that the ethnographer leaves behind the idea of being the observer of culture, to instead acknowledging its own position who, just as much as, takes part of making and producing culture (Berglund and Wigren, 2013). This view of ethnography also has implication for theory. Willis and Trondman (2000) mean that “the ‘nitty gritty’ of everyday life cannot be presented as raw, unmediated data, [...] nor can it be presented through abstracts theoretical categories” (p. 12). Again, this pronounces the need of mediation, to engage with different sites in order to bring ‘surprise’ to theoretical formulations, but also to construct alternative stories of the phenomena of interest. The theoretical process can thus be seen as a way of shifting back and forth; between fieldwork and theory, reflecting about their interrelationships.

With regards to the notion of disempowered groups, the theoretical understandings emphasized in institutional ethnography are helpful since they ensure that the analysis will avoid positioning the ‘studied’ subjects, as a problem to be solved. Institutional ethnography is an analytical approach that draws from everyday experiences as a way to examine social relations and social institutions (DeVault, 1990, 1996, 2006, Smith, 1995). Since fieldwork and analysis are rooted in everyday experiences this makes us aware of how the sites followed (stories, different places, people, conflicts etc) may
be connected asymmetrically. The institutional ethnographic approach illustrates how the problem of inequality arises, but it also points to solutions that involve changing the very institutions that are part of constructing unequal conditions disempowered groups in this study (DeVault, 2006).

Hence, on the one hand this research pays interested to how dichotomies are made unstable in different context and how stories of policy support emerges. On the other hand, this research aims at situating these stories, practices, tensions, conflicts and people in the larger theoretical framework in social science that is sensitive to the political dynamics of culture. This is how – in this paper; engaged sister’s - can join forces in exposing contradictions – social, political or economic, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1973). By making some dichotomies unstable, through engaging with those we study, new words (theories) can emerge and new worlds (political situation) can be discernible (Berglund and Wigren, 2012). However, with the idea of setting the ground for social transformation, these situations needs to be linked to social science theories that acknowledge power and how institutional orders are maintained, reinforced, and transformed.

**Sisters in Business: Stories from ‘within’**

“Sisters in business” is a network that arose with the idea of the founder, “Maria”, to gather entrepreneurs in the same physical place in the spring of 2008. At the time she was about to start up her own design business, but wanted to do this together with other people; and in particular together with female peers. Her dream was to provide with a gathering point. According to Maria “those who try to fulfill their dream by running a business, or starting up other kinds of projects, are most welcome to Sisters”. At that point of time Maria took part of a start up process at the local University incubator Idealab where “Monica” was director. The director and innovation coach, Monica, and the student Maria worked together, mixing business and pleasure and found ways to improve Marias idea and Idealab’s activities to promote entrepreneurship and innovation among students and university employees. Promoting entrepreneurship and innovation to be of concern for everyone is a challenge that Monica has been working with in her own company that was founded in 1999. In her company she developed “an innovation process tool” with the vision to wake up innovation in people, organisations and companies. What has struck Monica is that so many ideas and dreams are lost since individuals lack knowledge and experience on how ideas and people can grow together.

Both Maria and Monica emphasize that starting and running a company is often described as a risky endeavour that takes hard work and that may make anyone destitute, instead of seeing it as the fantastic opportunity it can be for an individual. Mainly, they argue, this risky view is communicated in public projects and incentives that are too bureaucratic, and also boring. When Maria decided to take the step to start her own company she talked Monica into joining her – being part of her “dream team” – focusing more on developing her own business than on Idealab’s functions. Thus, the question on how to get people and their companies to grow has thus been part of both Maria and Monica’s world before starting up Sisters in Business.
Since its start Sisters in Business has continuously expanded its network of ‘new’, ‘old’ and ‘becoming’ entrepreneurs that try out different ways of doing business. Taken together Sisters offers a bottom-up seedbed for many new businesses to grow, which has been made possible by the time and energy of several engaged Sisters, public funding and also some private funding. Over the time of five years, Sisters has grown into an own company and is now expanding to an NGO. Hence, from stating that they did not want to be part of the support system, Sisters have during the last years turned into a prominent private actor offering public support to people with ideas.

Next we will share the story of Sisters, as a public support organization, from four stories that tell about different aspects of entrepreneurship and innovation support. The first story - from anti-public support to developing a “Sisters support system” – tells about why Sisters choose to change their mind about being in the support system. The second tells - encouraging slumbering entrepreneurs – tells about one example where Sisters have been a greenhouse for an idea and a person’s entrepreneurial endeavour. The third – “Who are Sister’s?” tells about how Sisters easily becomes incomprehensible in the local context in which they operate. The last and fourth story - inviting disempowered groups - tells about how Sisters invite those groups who are one the one hand made invisible in mainstream growth policy, but explicitly targeted as groups ‘in need of help’ in particular policy.

**From anti-public support to developing a “Sisters support system”**

In the early time of Sisters, the researcher remember listening to Maria at an event where she very firmly stated that their idea was not to be in need of any kind of support measures, but they wanted to stay independent and do ‘their own thing’. In 2010 Maria and Monica started a work that laid the ground for an expansion of Sisters by creating a vision of what Sisters could become. One thing led to another and the informal business hotel developed into a limited company with the two women as co-partners. Two years later they both made a friendly decision to go separate ways, wherefore Monica is today the sole owner of Sisters in Business Inc. Tough still working together with other Sisters’ companies in the public support projects running.

In the expansion from a network to a company it was important to Sisters not to take on projects only for the money, but that were in line with their long-term vision of making entrepreneurship and innovation more accessible; to all. Otherwise it would be easy to loose momentum. This implied selecting financiers closely, and saying no to some who offered models more of a straitjacket, than a space for creativity. In one of my discussions with Monica she explains; “These kind of actors want you to fit their template and that we should promote them continuously, by for instance putting their logo on our door so that they can brag about their results to the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications.” Monica then continues; “I think they need to change”. Accordingly, the models used in the support system may work well with traditional industries and science parks, and incubators supporting traditional business. But it has for instance been found that of the companies supported by the traditional incubators environments support, 14 % are women. This should be compared to the 28-30 % of women who run businesses in the Swedish society. So,
Monica explains, “they are worse than the average”. Change is thus needed and Sisters could, in their view, offer something more innovative and inclusive.

Today Sisters in Business runs three public financed projects, with resources from the two policy actors, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems; Sweet Business, Equal Business, and Spicy Business. Sweet Business is a “resource centre” for women in Eskilstuna, offering free advice, coaching, networking lunches and workshops to develop their entrepreneurship. Moreover, within Sweet Business, Sisters run a project called Equal Business aiming at supporting women’s conditions in the regional innovation system, and making women’s innovation capability visible on a more long-term sight. This is accomplished by working with an expert group of people from different positions (research, governmental authorities and so forth) to benefit the process of identifying obstacles to women’s development in the region. Whilst Sweet and Equal Business targets women, Spicy Business is a project aiming at strengthening young people’s innovativeness in the age of 18-26. The idea of Spicy business is to create a multi-cultural innovation space and at least 50% of participants have also a foreign background. In this project they are offered the ability to train idea creation and be creative in interactive workshops. Hence, all Sisters projects - some officially financed, some non-financed, some about to end and some new about to be launched – aim at empowering disempowered groups in society. That is; to invite the people who are not (yet) represented in business. To be part of a movement that transforms business as a path for the few and powerful to an arena for everyone and to see the potential of social change at this arena.

Encouraging slumbering entrepreneurs

The 1st of September 2008 the ‘Sisters hostel’ opened in an apartment, leased by the founder. The sister’s team started to work at their new office and together they created an environment that was friendly to all kinds of people, not a particular kind, e.g. some branches or, businesses that were growth oriented. Moreover, Sisters welcomed all sorts of people and in general those who did not find a place in any other community and in particular those who seemed to struggle with themselves and their ideas.

For instance, one of the Sister’s met a guy from Africa, “Philippe”, at a friend’s flat. Philippe had been a professional football player, but had to give this up due to an injury. Together with his girlfriend he moved to Sweden to start up a life together. Because of the move and the injury he found himself to be in a situation where he needed to think about what he wanted to do next. The Sister started to discuss a marketing project with him and while talking about the project she found out that he had a ‘true business mind’. Accordingly, she invited him to join the Sisters’ office where he got an office space.

At the time he was a “seeking soul” trying to find out what he was up to next, but in the discussions with the other Sisters’ he started to formulate an idea of recycling electronic waste in Cameroon. The idea is to educate people in Cameroon how to sort electronic waste, covering everything from mobiles, computers to kitchen appliances and bulbs. According to him, electronic waste is not taken care of in Cameroon, but people just throw everything in different piles. So he wanted to build a large recycling
centre near his hometown where he should buy a truck that drives around the villages to collect this waste to a specific collection point where the waste is sorted into different containers. When the containers are full they could then be transported to Sweden where the electronic waste turns into profitable products at the recycling market.

When the researcher met him the first time he presents himself proudly as a Sister and is very open about the emotional support he has got from all the Sisters, along with concrete advises to pursue the idea of recycling electronic waste. Many Sisters also tell about how they have been involved in the developing of the ideas, but also in helping out when it comes to network building, as well as in financing a first delivery to Sweden. This first delivery turned unfortunately into a failure, since the client supposed to pay in Sweden for the container opened the container and told him that there was nothing but ‘real waste’, not worth paying for at the recycling market.

After about two to three years of developing the idea another Sister presented him, and the now quite big business idea, to the manager at the Munktell Science Park. Philippe was soon invited to take part of their business incubator and offered resources to develop the idea. Whilst Sisters explicitly aims to create a more equal entrepreneurship world, with the vision of a society where business is a reflection of the society as a whole in terms of including different groups, gender, ethnicity, age and so forth, Munktell Science Park has more of a traditional perspective of entrepreneurship and business. On their website it says that they will “help innovators and entrepreneurs to go from an idea to a mature business quickly and successfully”\(^1\). Munktell thus offer inspiring rooms, idea development support, advice on finance and business coaching.

Anyway, Philippe was recognized as one of the most promising entrepreneurs in a business program targeting growth. The Sisters’ that the researcher talked to at this point of time were both glad for him and proud that a Sister was “one of the most promising ones”. One thing led to another and soon he had a managing director, two experienced businessmen as coaches and both public and private funding. The managing director was also partner of the business.

In one of the meetings during this spring we start talking about Philippe´s ‘situation’ and the researcher learn that his company got bankrupted. When he came back from a visit in Africa, where he had been working to set up a recycling space, he found out that all money – borrowed and granted – was gone. He was not only back at square one, but he was worse off since he now had to repay a loan. Nevertheless, at that square he was offered some space to start all over again by the people that helped him in the first place; Sisters’.

Today he is trying to get a new approach to his idea, but he is also temporarily working at Sisters with finding international collaboration projects. He already came up with a good project in collaboration with an organisation in London to help foreign people from Africa to integrate better in Sweden through entrepreneurship. Monica considers that “he has learned a lot through the years” and that he has, through his experiences, become a “rascal in getting permission from presidents, ministers and the

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1 http://www.munktellsciencepark.se/om-oss/#, 2013-04-15
Environmental Protection Agency...”.

Who are Sisters?

The context of Sisters is a traditional Swedish small town that has its roots in the industrial development. This means that Eskilstuna is characterized by its industrial history, and known as one of Sweden’s important industrial cities. Some industries that historically have characterized Eskilstuna are Rademachersmedjorna, AB Separator, AB C. O. Öberg & co., Carl Gustafs stads gevärslakare, Eskilstuna Jernmanufaktur, Gense, and Bolinder-Munktell. Today Volvo Construction Equipment is the largest employer in the municipality2. With its 850 employees they manufacture powertrain components such as axles and transmissions for Volvo wheel loaders, articulated haulers, motor graders that are delivered around the world. The production facility in Eskilstuna is an advanced factory with a complex flow including both machining and assembly, specialized on gears and shafts. This workplace is met with great interest at the department of Innovation, Design and Technology at the local University that is part of many collaborative research projects aiming at the betterment of the production processes and the technologies used. Thus, entrepreneurship and business is in Eskilstuna historically and culturally shaped in an industrial context. There are ‘hard’ products produced by worker in factories, owned by entrepreneurs.

Today the context is changing and entrepreneurship is promoted in more areas than the traditional industrial one. The entrepreneurs who have visited Sisters throughout the years present almost exclusively ideas that are ‘soft’. They cooperate in local networks with different stakeholder, use social media for marketing and sometimes they act directly on a global market. As for instance one of the Sister’s who is buying antiques in flee markets and at auctions and sells them to Japanese people (who find Swedish antiques very attractable) through an online web shop.

Moreover, these ‘new’ entrepreneurs relate to the public sector in another way than the industrial industries have done. Traditionally the public sector has offered societal services (e.g. roads, water, electricity, transportation, schools) for the companies and its employees as part of the municipality’s infrastructure, but today’s entrepreneurs often work together with public organizations. As for instance one of the Sister’s who is working with one local school to develop their education by way of introducing entrepreneurship. Or, as Sisters’ are doing in a new project, working together with the municipality in a cultural project to support unemployed young people to find their way in life. The context of Sister’s is therefore not only slightly, but quite a lot different, from the traditional historical context.

Sisters in Business is owned by entrepreneurs making a living on their businesses, but they are also cooperating with the public sector (e.g. the municipality) to support becoming entrepreneurs in the area of disempowered groups; women, young people, immigrants and so forth. As Volvo they are part of research projects and cooperate with researcher, but in contrast to Volvo they are focused on ‘soft’ issues, such as

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2 See “Volvosteget”; http://volvosteget.se/om-volvosteget/utbildningsorter/volvo-ce-operations-eskilstuna/
integration, the mobilization of individuals and groups and the products are more often services, processes or intangible products, such as new mobile applications than ‘hard products’.

Besides, in contrast to Volvo they are in this context emphasized as a ‘private’ initiative. Whilst Volvo offers employment, Sisters seek to cultivate the cultural soil for entrepreneurs so that new businesses can be created. This work may have effect for the labour market situation in the region, both directly (new entrepreneurs starting up a business) and indirectly (these new businesses need to employ people). However, the issue of being ‘private’ is brought up every now and then since it renounces instability among some stakeholders, instead of the long-term work Sisters aim for. In the following dialogue one of Sister’s starts rendering a dialogue with an actor, working with innovation in the region:

Sister A: Yes, but we're "private" she [an actor in the public support system] she says and we [the Sister’s] "only think about making money and how long-term is that?". “Because you may well be gone tomorrow. So I cannot trust that you are an actor.” And then I replied," No, we've only been here for twelve years and we figured to stay for another twenty years, so I do not know how long-term that is for you, but for me it's pretty long-term. And we run a resource centre, and we are pursuing these issues and we are passionate and we have expertise that can add something".

Sister B: Why could this not work because you are private?

Sister A: Yes, but that's how they look at it, because she cannot ... She said it herself that she cannot put us in a category. They don’t know where to place us.

This dialogue tells us about the difficulty in not being part of the system on equal terms. Sisters is a private actor – but acting with public money. Moreover, they deal with issues that are not at the core of the support system; and have at other occasions (that the researchers been part of) been ridiculed and cause confusions among other actors. Because what they do and how they do it seems incomprehensible to those ‘outside’.

Working with disempowered groups to support their entrepreneurial potential is indeed another story than developing technical products that are produced in a factory by employees. In short; different promoting activities are valued differently in different contexts. In the Sister context equality and individuals potential is valued. But, in mainstream support and business development the big companies and the hard products have an unthreatened position as the real and important. In this sense Sisters are not part of mainstream – that is; ‘in the midst of system’ - but they are rather at the edge of the system. Sometimes ‘in’, sometimes ‘out’. Sometimes they count; sometimes they are incomprehensible, invisible or silenced. The issue of being ‘in or out’ touches upon the vision of being innovative to change the system so that it support all people and takes part of changing how business is reflected in society. That is why the question of “Who are Sister’s?” cannot escape Sisters, until of course entrepreneurship (support) is reflecting society at large. Embracing all of its diversity.
Inviting disempowered groups

On Facebook one can read a post at “the Eritrean women’s association and Eritrean Woman Awareness” by “Mr Innovation”. The post tells about an event that took place in a municipality close to Stockholm during the autumn of 2012. This event attracted more than 100 individuals to gather. Mainly women from the Eritrean women’s association; a group that usually is related to problematic situations and that, in social media, often are accused to a burden to society due to high unemployment, criminality and drugs. The women visiting this event were however not there because of a ‘problematic situation’ but they were curious about how they could make use of their creativity in Sweden; in order to start a business or to get a job. Mr Innovation is presenting a slideshow from the evening showing where the text “a dream made possible in Nacka” is passing by the people who joined the event. In the end of the slideshow a thanks is directed from three Eritrean women to three Sisters. Three women saying thank you for a wonderful event to three women (Sister’s) for sharing their experiences of entrepreneurship and innovation. This is but one of story of how Sisters are seeking contact and engaging with other communities that usually is invisible – and silenced – in relation to entrepreneurship and innovation.

This meeting had its start in an encounter between Monica and a woman from Eritrea - Elise - during an education offered by Monica in her company. After this occasion they stayed in contact and met every now and then to talk. Elise were at the time starting to set up her own company and Monica got involved and also involved her in some of her projects. Both women seem to be passionate about helping people with ideas, Elise in her engagement with the Eritrean women’s association and Monica at Sisters. They thus started to talk about doing something together for the Eritrean women that seemed to have considerable difficulties both to get either employment or starting up an own company. They thus made the decision to try and invite these women around the topic of entrepreneurship. Obviously they were quite creative in their own Eritrean Women’s association, for instance coming up with a system of contributing with a small fee for each meeting that could be offered to a women in need, e.g. for a weeding, a baptism or any other event they collectively want to support.

In two weeks the Eritrean women marketed this event – in their meetings, in their own TV-channel, by Facebook and text messages to everyone. Meanwhile Monica got hold of a place where they could be. A couple of days before the event they realized that many more would come than the first 20 women they expected, which caused some problems with regards to the place. This was however taken care of and the event is talked about as “fantastic” containing an analysis if these women’s needs, stressing that they wanted to work with their knowledge of the pension system, they wanted to learn more about health issues and they wanted to get experience from entrepreneurship. With regards to the health issue they women contacted another association, but with regards to entrepreneurship they have continued the dialogue and are about to launch a project together financed by the provincial government in Stockholm.

A first meeting in this project, financed by “Entrepreneur Stockholm”, took place the 17 of June in 2013 in the old town in Stockholm. Around forty women had gathered
to work out what needs they had in relation to entrepreneurship. They decided to work together in three groups; 1: those who wanted guidance in working life, 2: those who wanted to start up a business, 3: those wanted to develop their business. They worked intensively for about one and half hour and gathered after that to tell about the knowledge they had reached about the experienced need in each group.

As an introduction to the group presentations one of the project initiators, from the Eritrean women’s association, exclaims "Come on, we cannot be shy here but need to learn how to stand up and say; yes this is what I want!". She points to her knowledge of being an Eritrean woman, not having practiced how to stand up for herself and to make her voice be heard and how this occasion could be seen an opportunity for them to speak up for themselves.

During the presentation one of the women tells that she has an engineer exam in environmental issues, but couldn’t find a job so she started to work as a day nurse at day care centres. So now she is thinking about how to combine her interest in environmental issues with nursing and educating children. Furthermore, one woman with experience of entrepreneurship tells about the importance of being in control of the finances in one’s own company so that one is not “in the hands of someone else”.
They thus start to ponder how they could support each other in this area and also in other areas. Moreover they discover that they have a lot of unrecognized skills, for instance the skill of being bilingual that is of great value to reach out to different ethnic groups in the area of entrepreneurship and innovation.

Summing up the evening, Monica and Elise reflect upon how much that has happened during only a couple of hours and that this is only the first step in a process where they now will try to meet the needs of the different groups by way of providing with e.g. education. Relating to the prologue this is however an education process that is built on outside ‘expertise’ answers, but is founded by ‘inside’ questioning and guidance.

Analysis of the Sister´s stories

Hitherto we have told about four stories of Sisters ambitions to create conditions for business to reflect society at large; with all its people and ideas. The stories were entitled: 1. *From anti-public support to developing a “Sisters support system”*, 2. *Encouraging slumbering entrepreneurs*, 3. *Who are Sister’s?*, and 4. *Inviting disempowered groups*.

A story is an account of connected events, presented in a sequence of written or spoken) words. The word narrative derives from the Latin verb narrare, "to tell", and is related to the adjective gnarus, "knowing" or "skilled". The word "story" may be used as a synonym of "narrative", but can also be used to refer to the sequence of events described in a larger narrative. Thus the stories told of Sister’s here make up particular sequences in a larger narrative of the Sister’s in Business. Next we will deepen the ‘knowing’ of each story in order to point to the larger narrative they are part of:
1. From anti-public support to developing: The first story tells about how Sisters’ are ‘forced’ into becoming a support system. People with ideas discover Sisters’ and find their way to this place – just to get someone to discuss their ideas with. And, they are all welcome. Soon Sisters’ are devoting more and more of their time to support becoming entrepreneurs than running their burgeoning businesses. Becoming part of the support system, they see the chance to get some compensation for all the time devoted to their likeminded without giving up their vision of making room for all kinds of entrepreneurs in society. Hence, the first story tells about how Sister’s attract people to entrepreneurship, but how they – because they are entrepreneurs and need to make their own living – had to find a solution to meet this interest and need. One solution was to apply for public funding.

2. Encouraging slumbering entrepreneurs: The second story tells about that all becoming entrepreneurs are not valued equally. This story also tells us that Sisters makes no difference between an honoured entrepreneur and one that is dismissed. Initially they offered a ground to grow, but when everything went wrong they turned into a place where the entrepreneur could take cover. Moreover, this story shows that an entrepreneur is not always an entrepreneur who is an entrepreneur. Instead, every entrepreneur has her/his idea, process, process, adversities, successes and also her/his story. Not all of them seek support. But those who do they may be valued differently in the support system, depending on their situation, idea, gender, ethnicity and so forth. This story thus tells about how Sister’s are encouraging slumbering entrepreneurs by, on the one hand being a place where one can grow and on the other, making up a shelter that offers protection.

3. Who are Sister’s?: Working with disempowered groups and support their entrepreneurial potential is indeed another story than the one about the industrial community that Sister’s are part of. The third story tells about how different promoting activities are valued differently in different contexts. In the Sister context equality and individuals potential is valued. But, in mainstream support and business development the big companies and the hard products have an unthreatened position as the real and important. In this sense Sisters are not part of mainstream – that is; ‘in the midst of system’ - but they are rather at the edge of the system. Sometimes ‘in’, sometimes ‘out’. Sometimes they count; sometimes they are incomprehensible, invisible or silenced. The issue of being ‘in or out’ touches upon the vision of being innovative to change the system so that it support all people and takes part of changing how business is reflected in society. That is why the question of “Who are Sister’s?” cannot escape them, until of course entrepreneurship (support) is reflecting society at large. Embracing all of its diversity.

4. Inviting disempowered groups: The focus in many of the Sister’s project is to work with disempowered groups who are not (yet) present in the business community. The fourth story tells about one of the projects and one of the groups (women in the Eritrean Swedish community) they are working together with. Emphasis here is on how they can work together, since the women’s wishes and needs are taken as a point of departure. Thus, this approach doesn’t take particular business ideas as a starting point, but individuals needs and wishes. This bottom-up approach invite to a more reflective learning process where the participators for instance discover that they are knowledgeable, that they have skills they can share with each other and that are also viable at the market place. This learning process resembles the one told about in the
prologue where an individual discover her or himself in a situation and get a chance to reflect about it, the taken for granted assumptions made, and various opinions, ideas, ideologies, and power mechanisms that both inhibit and push the idea. Of course ‘expert knowledge’ is also part of these projects, for instance in book keeping education, but the learning process that is sensitive for reflection and action and that doesn’t map out particular path is dominating the approach taken.

Summing up: These four stories together give shape to a larger narrative, albeit one that is often told between the lines. Present, clamoring for attention, yet silenced. This narrative stresses how Sister’s, from start, was a place where people hanged out who was interested and curious about the entrepreneurship path. Thus, a ‘natural’ entrepreneurship support place. However, since Sister’s are entrepreneurs and small business owners (trying to make ends meet) the situation was unsustainable since ‘hanging out’ took to much time (and thus money). Moreover it emphasize how Sisters are both a growing place and a shelter, and that the question “Who are Sister’s?” doesn’t escape them since their members, business ideas and way of doing things stand in stark contrast with how business have been, and still is, perceived in the local community. Finally Sisters tells a story about learning in a way that doesn’t involve a teacher/student relationship, but that invite to a space where one can search, reflect, criticize, develop, discover, experience and learn. This larger narrative we entitle “Sister’s – a silenced support system”.

Sisters: A silenced support system

The four stories of and from Sisters give shape to a larger narrative about a kind of promotion that is described and practiced in other terms than how the support system is usually depicted in research and policy. Thus Sisters stand out, since their appearance deviate from the norm. Not only because they are women, but also because of how they started (they were ‘forced’ into it), how they view the process (as a learning and innovation process), that most business idea (and not hard technical products) and that people still go there ‘just to hang out’ and not only to talk about concrete matters (their business ideas).

Interestingly this narrative of Sister’s is seldom expressed; rather it is silenced. Sisters often talk about the importance of the invisible (silenced) private support, such as family and friends; those who you can mould your idea with, as depicted in the prologue. Further they often mention other societal organizations (e.g. the Swedish Tax Agency, local small companies, insurance companies, banks) as important – yet often silenced – in the support of entrepreneurs. These actors, they tell, welcome entrepreneurs with questions, trying to answer them from their expertise. Tough, without a mapped out path for the particular business.

Whilst these instances are acknowledged as silenced Sisters rarely talk about themselves as a silenced support system. On the contrary, they tell about themselves as entrepreneurs; looking for opportunities (not hinders) and ready to turn a disappointment in a new direction (not being let down). This was also touched upon on one of the conversations we have had during the spring when the researcher mentioned the problems they faced the Sisters’ strongly insisted that they didn’t think
about them as problems, but as opportunities to be dealt with. Hence, the entrepreneurship discourse itself restrain the development of a more including support system that acknowledges the different conditions that actors work under and that recognize how the entrepreneurial male norm tends to manifest itself instead of being challenged. In other words the entrepreneurship discourse silence critique and makes it difficult to problematize the relation between disempowered groups and the entrepreneurial norm.

In contrast to normative studies within the area, offering new models for improved policy support, and to critical studies of policy that analyse policy texts and illustrate what they include/exclude (e.g. Bacchi, 1999) this study took a point of departure in the experiences of Sisters’ considering how entrepreneurship and innovation support is done in practice. From these stories the narrative “Sisters – a silenced support system” was created that illustrate the multifaceted work of Sisters in Business.

Taken together, this narrative illustrate that the support system is complex and ameobic, offering support to different ‘kinds’ of entrepreneurs and various ideas. However the four stories also reveal that the support system is growing into an own institution with its own norms and guidelines, which doesn’t always take diversity into question. Thus, from the narrative of Sisters it can be addressed whether the ‘support system’ really is a support system, or something else? Questioning the support system make us recognize that there might already be a strong support system in society; however concealed, silenced and working despite it is not given public resources.

This paper has been co-created by three Sister’s and one researcher. We argue that the “engaged Sisters approach” can be fruitful to pursue for those who are interested in changing the support system (or any other system) in order to find out silenced stories and how they have an impact on the activities exerted in a particular area. Moreover, this story, shall hopefully find its way into research conferences and journal, but more importantly; also into local communities where it can be shared, told and reflected upon in the context of concern.


