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On the business card of Won Soon Park, Seoul's dynamic and charismatic Mayor, there is a drawing of a spoon-billed sandpiper, with the legend small but can fly further. Mr. Park is very interested in how far he and his city can fly, and if you ever wanted proof of the value of city leadership to social innovation, he is the man; the Seoul man.

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An animated figure, Mr. Park ran his Mayoral campaign on the slogan "Citizens are the Mayor." He champions the value of co-production and underlines the importance of connecting directly with the public. Outside Seoul's cavernous City Hall building is a two metre high symbol of an ear, to emphasize that Mr. Park is listening – actively listening.

Inside City Hall he has installed Simincheong, a Speakers Corner where citizens can record and broadcast their suggestions to government. His office has a wall full of post-it notes – change ideas from his constituents as well as a webcam so that everyone can see who he is meeting with. In a country with a legacy of authoritarian government and corruption, he speaks about transparency being the most important innovation in city government.

But although he spearheads the city's change agenda, Park realises the importance of travelling together. His mission – both before and since becoming Mayor – has been to build Seoul's capacity for social innovation and cross-sectoral collaboration. As a result, the city has a growing infrastructure focused on securing sustainable change and better results underpinned by strong evidence.

Key nodes in this framework include The Hope Institute (largely modeled on the Young Foundation where Park spent part of his in London), the Residents Participatory Budgeting System and the Social Innovation Planning Division. The Division is charged with identifying the best global examples of social innovation and exploring their potential application in Seoul. And then there is the Seoul Social Innovation Park, one of only three in the world (Singapore and Bilbao host the other two). The park plays home to a cluster of organisations and shared spaces for social enterprise development and collaboration.

What are the lessons emerging from Seoul's experience under Mr. Park? First, we see the value of creative and visionary leadership, characterised by highly effective use of social media to engage citizens directly (this is a man with 750,000 followers on Twitter). Second, the key role of the public sector in mobilising wider partnerships – what Mr. Park calls Super-sectoral collaboration – is evident. Third, the experience shows what can be achieved in a relatively short time even in a large and complex city like Seoul, with ambitious direction.

Closer to home, last week I spent the day with elected officials from across the URBACT projects, considering the question of social innovation and city leadership, as part of the programme's capacity building efforts. The ensuing discussion about collaborative models was frank and wide-ranging. Hot topics included the relationship between elected officials and civil servants; social media's impact on the interface between politicians and citizens; and the struggle to justify investing creatively in the long term during a time of Crisis.

This event and the recent URBACT Summer University (#URBACT2013) in Dublin brought home the value of this capacity building work. For me, URBACT has no function more important than building the competencies of the urban practitioners who will shape the future of our cities – in collaboration with their citizens. The programme plays a key support role in this by shining lights on effective practice and supporting its transfer. The upcoming round of National Training Schemes (NTS) events in the autumn – where we bring practitioners together from our 150 participating cities – will form the final strand of this capacity building work for 2013.

Beyond that, we enter a new European Union (EU) funding era where there will be significant funding available to promote social innovation, not only through the Cohesion Funds, but also via programmes like Horizon 2020. There is also an increased focus on cities, where the majority of EU residents live, where our problems are concentrated and where shared solutions must be found. This presents a great opportunity, and URBACT cities should be well-placed to benefit, through their experience of social innovation and collaborative practices.

At the root of this is the URBACT model's focus on co-production and integrated urban solutions, which echoes one of Mr. Park's favourite aphorisms: "If you want to go fast go alone, but if you want to go far go together."

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