

The greatest innovation

Radical innovations have profound impacts on our lives. Take the internet, for example: it started what we call the digital revolution. The internet has changed everything, from the way we communicate, learn, and teach, to the way we work and do business. Almost 20 per cent of the world economy is reliant on wireless connectivity.

Innovations are often perceived as technical inventions: a new technology such as the use of fire by early humans for warmth, light, and cooking, or a useful new object like the wheel, discovered thousands of years ago. But, technology aside, social innovations are equally important. They are concepts, strategies, processes, or practical solutions that benefit society and promote wellbeing.

For me, the greatest innovation of all time is a social one – democracy. Invented in Athens around 500 BC, it granted equal rights to all free men. Some 2,400 years later, Finland became the first nation to grant inclusive democracy to all its citizens. The impact of democracy cannot be quantified, for it is the very cornerstone of social progress.

But there are social innovations that have had a measurable impact on the wellbeing of our nation. One example is the founding of maternity clinics one hundred years ago. Since that time, infant mortality has dropped in Finland from 15 per cent to below 0.6 per cent, and maternal deaths from 1 per 170 deliveries to less than 1 per

6,000 deliveries. Today public maternity clinics monitor the health of mothers and infants as well as provide fitness classes, psychological counselling, and nutritional advice to pregnant women. The clinics also are responsible for vaccinations, which is why over 95 per cent of Finland's pre-school children are protected against the most dangerous infectious diseases.

Another example is the North Karelia Project, which has lowered the mortality rate from heart disease among working-age men by 80 per cent simply by changing their dietary and smoking habits. The project

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was launched in the 1970s to reduce risk factors associated with unhealthy diet among the inhabitants of the Province of North Karelia. Through educational efforts, the people of North Karelia exchanged animal fats for olive oil, reduced their salt intake, and increased the amount of vegetables on their plates. The health boom caught on rapidly, increasing the life expectancy of Finns by no less than ten years.

Returning to the internet, is it fundamentally a technical or social innovation? I would say both, because it enables the spread of information, exactly like the printing press invented by Johan Gutenberg some 550 years ago. Eliminating the need for hand-written singular manuscripts, Gutenberg's innovation enabled books to be multiplied and spread everywhere. And just like the internet, the printing press was a catalyst for new businesses, printing workshops,

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