Born experimenters

Kalle Nieminen, Director of Societal Foresight and Education, Sitra

When we learn to walk, we do not just get on our feet one day and start walking to our parents' amazement. Instead, we hit our heads on the table, grab the furniture for support and fall on our bums. We learn by experimenting.

I have heard this cliché example of experimenting countless times and chuckled that hopefully one day someone will come up with something better. But recently, I have had to change my mind. The metaphor is brilliant as long as we remember the actual point.

For almost 15 years, I have been intimately involved in the culture of societal experimentation. It has played an important role in the renewal of Finnish society. When Sipilä's Government Programme outlined the introduction of a culture of experimentation in Finland 10 years ago, the diverse approaches and methods of experimentation were not immediately adopted very extensively. But that is when the culture of experimentation began to gradually become part of societal development, however.

It is important that we talk about the *culture of experimentation* and not, for example, experimental development. While experimental methods have their own experts, the public sector needs a broad understanding of the logic of experimentation and the data it generates, and it also needs to recognise the places where experimentation takes place. Even though the experiments alone are not sufficient for societal change. Experiments are supposed to be the stage where you can hit your head on the table a bit, grab for support and stumble around.

Experiments are an essential part of the innovation process, for example, in companies.

When a company wants to renew and meet its goals of growth and competitiveness, it invests in RDI activities. The company wants to stand out by telling everyone how much of their turnover is directed to the development of new things, i.e. innovations. Experiments are a key part of this process. They might create a website for a product that is still in the pipeline, to see if there are any interested buyers. They may launch a new digital product to a limited audience and collect user feedback.

In addition to experimenting, however, the company uses other development methods aimed at innovations such as accumulation of user insight, service design, innovation prints or hackathons. All of these, and many others, are the tools the company uses to improve its innovation process. The experiment is often a versatile platform, and a good experimenter always formulates the experiment in relation to the goal and context. There is no one way to experiment.

Despite its brilliance, the term *societal innovation* has been underused in recent years. It refers to innovations that offer solutions to societal challenges.

The pressure to improve the productivity of the public sector is obvious in a difficult economic situation. We need renewal and the ability to solve issues related to well-being, education, safety and the environment. At best, societal innovations respond to this need as well. This is why, in a challenging societal situation such as we are living in now, we should invest in societal innovations and the required capabilities.

Societal innovation gives a new context to the culture of experimentation and links it to society's capacity to respond to change. Like companies, experimentation in the public sector must also be one of the tools.

Experimenting while strengthening foresight and the ability to use forward-looking information in decision-making. Experimenting while we support democracy by introducing versatile inclusion tools that enable citizens to participate in the design of new services. Experimenting while harnessing new technology and artificial intelligence and data analytics in the toolkit for societal innovations.

The culture of experimentation needs to be a central part of societal development, but it requires tools such as those mentioned above. Just like a child learning to walk, development needs stimulation and people around it who cheer you on even when you fall.

And so, we are back with the experimenting child at the beginning.

I learned to tolerate this metaphor when I realised that it says something essential about the worst pitfalls of experimentation.

Have you ever heard it said that because failure in experimentation is a doctrine, experimentation cannot fail?

The first part is true, the experiment is always a tool for learning. The second part is false, as the experiment may well fail. The experiment has always gone wrong if the lesson it produces is not utilised and it does not lead to change. At worst, this means that the experiment will become an opportunity to hide potential gems: *already tried it, doesn't work.*

In experimentation, the most important thing is to use the information collected, either on successes or failures.

Just like the toddler who will always get back up on their feet.