



The impact of the national Competence Centre in Germany

Achievements and changes in Germany within the project of establishing a national competence centre for social innovation

Over the course of the last two years, we were able to exert a massive influence on the political discourse on the topic area of "social innovation." The launch phase of KOSI coincided with the campaign phase of the German political parties for the 2021 federal elections. These were excellent conditions to start discussions with members of parliament, with parties and ministries. We asked the parties to take a stand on the topic of "social innovations" and to explain what measures they would take if they were given political responsibility. We held parliamentary evenings, held talks with all the candidates for chancellor and launched demand papers.

As a result, all the major parties have positioned themselves on the issue of social innovation. In the coalition agreement of the governing parties, the topic of social innovation is addressed several times and measures have been described that the governing parties intend to take. Some of these are in line with our demands. A department for social innovation has been established in the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and there are also clear responsibilities for this area in the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action that were not existent before.

We managed to initiate a cross-sectoral consortia from different sectors and spheres, all addressing social innovation in their own ways. This exchange and collaboration were very valuable. The fact that part of the consortia was asked to collaborate further on a national platform for social innovation by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research shows that our work was also noticed and much appreciated by national politics and administration.

Following up on these results, we have been particularly concerned with the processes at the federal state level. This has led to the establishment of a working group with the responsible ESF authorities of the various federal states. Here, a regular exchange now takes place on various content-related challenges for the development and strengthening of funding initiatives in the thematic field of social innovations.

Very important partners for the development and dissemination of social innovations in Germany are the providers of the social economy. Through various measures – workshops, talks with decision-makers, symposia on the topic of social innovations, lectures, etc. – the willingness to cooperate with social startups and social enterprises was significantly strengthened.

In addition, we have contributed to a stronger networking of the meta-actor level through various communication measures, lectures, workshops.





Is the country more aware of social innovation now? If so, how? If not, why not?

Germany is definitely more aware of SI. Social Innovation has been recognized and talked about much more in the last years alongside technological innovation. A Social Innovation Strategy is being finalized on the federal level with two Ministries in the lead and various strategies for social innovation or social entrepreneurship are being formulated in the different federal states in Germany. The various players involved in our consortia have been doing quite some lobbying, education, and capacity-building as well as scientific research which helped educate politics and administration as well as a wider audience around the value, ways and needs for social innovation to take place and grow in Germany.

Ecosystem mapping

What do you know now about your ecosystem that you didn't know before – specific actors, new programs etc.? Or did you know everything already?

No, we didn't know everything yet. One pleasing finding, for example, was that universities and other scientific institutions are intensifying their activities in the field of social innovation and that the topic is gaining momentum there. One focus is on linking research and transfer by providing infrastructures such as social innovation labs. In these labs, universities cooperate, for example, on the development of social innovation and at the same time the action-oriented research on the innovation process. Another important finding was the importance of regional public funding programs that increasingly put social innovation on the agenda. This certainly also has to do with the structures of ESF funding, which rely on regional funding by the federal states. However, it was also noticeable that such programs are very individually tailored and often only address very specific topics or are only open to very individual target groups. This is a great challenge for those seeking funding, and help is needed to gain orientation. The importance of social entrepreneurship was also striking. This did not surprise us, but it also shows how social innovation is often still understood in Germany. Not all actors have discovered the topic for themselves by a long shot, but some are catching up quickly - the large German welfare sector with its large organisations is currently one of them. A lot is currently happening here in the support and initiation of social innovation.

Have you worked with any new stakeholders in the development of the competence centres – from communities, universities, foundations, business? And how? Were there any unusual suspects you didn't think were part of the ecosystem?

The Competence Centre has reinforced our experience that the support and realization of social innovation requires the contributions of all sectors of society. In this respect, we were less surprised that





we found a good composition of diverse ecosystem actors in the competence centre. Many of the partners have also been known to us for many years and there have already been very good partnerships in the past. However, the value of the new network lies in the serious approach of working together across sectors and supporting social innovation in a joint approach on a national level and thus with a very different relevance for the national policy level. As a competence centre, we can now speak with one voice and not just from one silo.

How has your map changed/developed during the program?

In our case, the result was not a map with red pins for SI initiatives but rather an overview of the current framework conditions, which for us include not only norms but also structures, actors, and the question of which function which framework conditions have. Against this backdrop, we worked with our partners over several months to collect data on a wide range of framework conditions. From regional innovation strategies and funding programs to financing partners or innovation labs to the understanding of social innovation and how such understanding shapes the framework. We also identified and analysed some examples of good practice to complement our meta-focus with some new, individual but relevant learnings. Of course, this landscape changes dynamically and we initially took a snapshot. For us, this means that we have to stay tuned and will continue to research. The next focus for us is to better understand the higher education landscape and the roles that academic institutions currently play in the social innovation ecosystem, what they do and why they do it.

What did you learn about the process? About mapping more generally?

By focusing primarily on framework conditions and mapping them in a targeted way, we have taken a new approach. In our earlier research, we often asked why individual initiatives succeed and others fail, and which framework conditions played a role. This time we looked directly at the meta-level. We have learned that we have come to very different conclusions than would have been possible in individual cases. For example, identifying the funding program behind an individual initiative would not have told us how widespread the support of social innovation has long been while, at the same time, there are remaining gaps and there is a lack of orientation. At the same time, we also learned that much information is difficult to access and therefore requires the contributions of a broad consortium with roots in all sectors of society and corresponding expert knowledge.





Looking into the future

Will your country's 'competence centre' still exist in the future/If so, how?

Yes! Currently, part of the consortium (Social Impact, SEND, TU Dortmund) is preparing the Platform for Social Innovation in Germany. This platform should contribute to a better dissemination of information in the thematic field of social innovations and strengthen the ecosystem via support and accompaniment of both scientific actors and meta-actors.

What will the relationship between your organisation and the competence centre be in the future?

The partners of the Competence Center for Social Innovation have been working together even before the establishment of KOSI and will continue to do so. The EU funding has made it possible to intensify the cooperation and to transfer it into joint project work in some areas. It is now necessary to examine how we can maintain the productive intensity of the cooperation by acquiring further funding.

Do you see your organisation continuing to be involved in European funding going forward? If so, how?

All consortium partners are involved in European projects. As soon as project funding opportunities can be unlocked at the European level that will allow for joint European work, we will apply for this as a consortium.

The ESIA factor

What did ESIA enable you to do in which you would not have been able to do without it?

Where was ESIA not useful for your country's engagements?

Which other countries/consortiums did you work with/connect most with? Why?

Because ESIA provided the framework for national work, we would not have been able to accomplish much of the above at the national level. ESIA as well as the Community of Practice on Social Innovation provided us with the opportunity to exchange and learn more about both the status quo of social innovation in various European countries and their social innovation ecosystem respectively.

Yet, despite various international exchange formats and activities, the clear focus of the project lay on the issue of national ecosystem development. The expectations concerning mutual learning within the consortium have not been met to the extent we hoped for. Further, due to the project setup – bringing countries with different levels and types of social innovation landscapes together – mutual learning seemed to be hampered to a certain extent. Thus, the potential for mutual learning was not exhausted.





This is also owed in part to the Covid-19 pandemic, which impaired options to exchange and visit each other in person and local social innovation actors respectively.

Thanks to early initiatives from all European competence centres, there has been exchanges with all consortiums, most notably Portugal, Ireland, and Greece. Overall, the project used to be very useful to strengthen the ties and relationship between all these social innovation actors across Europe.

Is there anything you missed or anything you wish you could have done within the project that didn't happen?

ESIA has provided the framework for an intensive transnational exchange. The work processes could certainly have been more effective and more cooperative if there had been the possibility to work out the respective specific challenges, strengths, and weaknesses through a joint in-person workshop at the beginning of the project and if we had also developed measures in this regard. However, face-to-face meetings were largely prevented by the pandemic in 2021 / 2022. The online sessions were a good substitute for the communicative exchange, but an organizational deep dive could not be realized in this form. An intensive partnership exchange is challenging and only possible to a limited extent if executed almost exclusively online.

Furthermore, it certainly took the team from Social Impact more time and resources than expected to set up all administrative processes, which have not been determined by the European Commission – for better or worse. This certainly bound significant resources on Social Impact's side, which otherwise would have been free to intensify our efforts to push mutual learning opportunities.

