

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Social Innovation Ecosystems: A First Glimpse

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On 25th November 2021, 25 social innovation researchers and other experts came together in an online workshop conducted by TU Dortmund University (Social Research Centre) in the framework of the ESIA (European Social Innovation Alliance) project¹. The main aim of this workshop was to exchange knowledge and ideas on the most important factors to understand social innovation (SI) ecosystems. Participants came from projects in Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. The group also welcomed Max Bulakovskiy (OECD). Most researchers and experts are currently working on social innovation ecosystem mappings to provide national Competence Centres for Social Innovation from the project family with a solid knowledge base.

During the workshop, researchers expressed their research interests and discussed what is important to understand about social innovation ecosystems from a research perspective. Some striking recommendations for decision-makers emerge from the results of the discussion.

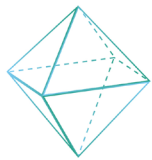
What is needed...

...when funding social innovation:

- Funders should better understand and take into account the impact of funding on the field of SI initiatives.
- While decision-makers identify concrete needs and possibly tie them to funding programmes, SI requires a certain amount of leeway and freedom for something new to emerge.
- However, SI in the non-profit sector often requires longer-term support, as self-sustainability is often only achieved after a long time or only with great difficulty. Many initiatives depend on external funding in the long term. Therefore, funders should provide long-term support to the initiatives and approaches they are convinced of.
- Finding funding opportunities can be a major challenge for SI initiatives. Designated SI funding sources can relieve the burden here and also enable targeted funding.
- Public funders are called upon to take into account the possible influence of public funding into private funding.

¹ The ESIA project and five other projects in the project family received financial support by the European Commission (ESF+ and EaSI programme) under call for proposals VP/2020/010.





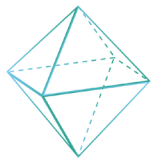
- The identification and definition of types of support at different levels (national, regional, local) provide measures tailored to specific needs. Financial support in particular requires a functional legal framework. Policymakers are called upon to reflect on existing frameworks and to optimise them with regard to the promotion of SI. Where no structures exist, they must be developed.
- Funders are called upon to reflect on the impact of their own funding structures and to specifically point out their impact in order to support initiatives in choosing the most suitable funding.

...at the policy level:

- There is a need to develop national strategies and policy agendas for SI.
- On the one hand, social innovation from civil society can be overwhelmed if the welfare state withdraws. On the other hand, a strong welfare system may offer too little scope for the emergence of SI. We need well-working welfare states, room for SI, and connections between both of them.
- Due to their key role in defining a normative framework, policymakers are able to shape the discourse around SI. Sometimes they may even determine what SI can and cannot be and define parameters of relevance. Policymakers are thus called upon to give SI as much formal leeway as possible, including at the discursive level. Pre-determination of SI can be a hindrance.
- Depending on the context, sometimes no targeted governance of SI is developed at the political level. In such cases, policymakers are called upon not only to understand SI as a sub-topic of innovation policy, but also to establish targeted governance of SI.
- Learning from the different governance models already applied can be crucial to define an actual governance model that supports structures, defines legal frameworks and creates synergies between actors and regions. Here, it may be important to align these support structures to enable synergies and identify gaps. This requires an overview, and this is where public administration can play a leading role.

...in capacity building:

- Develop learning networks, concepts and materials and get the frontrunners on board to support this process
- Despite the diversity of SI in practice, existing and new initiatives can learn from successful examples, adapt, reconfigure and update their approaches. Hence, it is important to create awareness of these examples and their success factors to enable learning and uptake.
- Existing SI initiatives provide a basis for new SI processes as (good or bad) role models. The idea behind an SI process can provide inspiration, be taken up and developed further. New initiatives can learn from the mistakes and successes of existing initiatives.



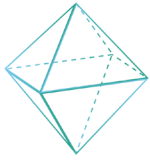
- The successful initiation and implementation of SI processes requires not only knowledge of successful examples but also specific competences. Educational institutions are called upon to provide these competences and at the same time to participate in SI - for example, within the framework of the third mission of higher education institutions.
- While a multitude of research activities on SI are realised at the EU research level, the research topic is considered to a varying extent in the member states in particular. Targeted funding of SI research at the national, regional or local level must complement funding at the EU level and focus on the specific needs of the context.

...to connect initiatives:

- Support for SI should not be limited to financial support. Incubators and networks play a major role in the successful implementation of SI and its diffusion. New initiatives may need support in networking with existing actors.
- It is possible to develop networks and support cooperation if appropriate infrastructures and governance models are provided. Policy makers are called upon to develop and provide platforms for exchange and mutual learning. Also, recognising the value of cooperation and making it an internal value of the SI practitioner community can be a key to the success and development of regional networks or cluster cooperation.

...to enable open minded collaboration at eye level:

- The cooperation and openness of actors at regional and local level creates great value for SI.
- Collaboration and co-creation in SI are an important prerequisite for a successful innovation process. At the same time, they can only exist with the suitable preconditions. They depend on a variety of factors. Decision-makers are therefore called upon to facilitate SI processes through targeted support. Central roles are played here by protected spaces, scope for participation (e.g. by policymakers), support in the recruitment of co-creators and development of trust and collaboration.
- Participation in SI processes is not possible for all social groups. Decision-makers are called upon to provide new structures and pathways for inclusion of marginalised groups in the participation of SI.
- In their role as decision-makers, policymakers, public administration and funding agencies, play a central, determining role in SI processes. In order to enable participation in SI, decision-makers are called upon to reflect on power structures and to experiment with and establish new concepts to renounce power in SI processes in order to enable the participation and co-determination of other groups.



- Policymakers, public administrators and elected representatives not only define the framework but can also play an active role in SI processes. In the sense of cross-sectoral collaboration and co-creation, they are called upon to contribute with their specific resources, perspectives and knowledge to the development and dissemination of SI.

...to enable experimentation:

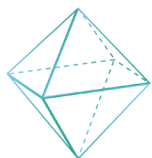
- Public administration is called upon to provide infrastructures for experimental spaces, such as physical places, complementary technical innovations or good transport infrastructure.
- Novel SI can emerge in the context of experimental settings. These experimental spaces must be made possible and accessible. Decision-makers are therefore called upon to recognise and enable the value of experimental spaces. Policymakers may need to reflect on their own perspectives and accept the uncertainty of experimental outcomes and recognise their potential.

...to enable benefits on a wider scale:

- Decision-makers are called upon to enable SI in their own context as well. Public administration, funding and policy frameworks can benefit from new social practices – for example in the context of service innovation or participatory policymaking.

The policy suggestions presented are to be understood as first interpretative interim results of the work process of the German mapping team in ESIA.





Participants:

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Slovenia – Tanja Tamse (Center Noordung) - SEED

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Spain – Stefan Meyer (fresnoconsulting)³

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Other institutions - Max Bulakovskiy (OECD)

Background

Social innovation (SI) is on the rise worldwide and is receiving more and more attention. In order to tap its full potential, we must better understand the framework conditions of social innovation to better recognize drivers and barriers and to provide evidence for the support of social innovation. Social Innovation Competence Centres are currently being established throughout the European Union, funded by the ESF Plus and the EaSI programme. These Competence Centres will be supported with evidence-based knowledge. Project partners of ESIA (European Social Innovation Alliance) are about to start mapping ecosystems in Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Poland and the United Kingdom.

² Link shared: <https://www.seedeuproject.eu>

³ Link shared: https://buicasus.eu/mapping_methodology/

