COMPARATIVE AND RECOMMENDATION REPORT ON SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

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Prepared by: Norbert Maur, external expert
Referee: Boris Strecansky, external expert

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Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to compile a collection of methodologies and validated tools from the most recent NCC project implementation. A desk research was conducted in each partner country using the methodology described. Based on the collected data, a common set of tools for mapping and recommendations for further mapping was developed. The comparative collection includes two comprehensive reports from the SEED consortium (Greece, Italy, Romania and Slovenia) and the BuiCaSuS consortium (France, Latvia, Spain and Sweden) and three individual reports from the FUSE consortium (Cyprus, Portugal and Ireland), along with one individual report from the SI PLUS consortium (Slovakia).

The Importance of Mapping for Ecosystem Development

Each national social innovation ecosystem mapping methodology serves as a comprehensive tool to analyse, understand and support the development of social innovation in different countries. The outputs of all reports include maps of existing initiatives, the identification of key actors, legislative and policy frameworks and the development of strategies to strengthen the social innovation ecosystem.

The aim of each methodology is to map existing initiatives, identify actors, analyse legislative and policy frameworks and develop strategies to support systemic change. This comparative report will enhance the understanding of social innovation ecosystem mapping and provide valuable insights for further development of the social innovation ecosystem.

Country Overview of Analysed Methodologies

Consortium	Countries	Main Objective	Methods
BuiCaSuS	France, Latvia, Spain and Sweden	A comprehensive overview of the national social innovation ecosystem, with a focus on mature social innovation initiatives, in the realm of social services, with a significant involvement of public actors.	**Desk research** **Web-based questionnaires** (short fiche, long fiche) **Semi-structured interviews** **Focus Groups**
SEED	Greece, Italy, Romania and Slovenia	Identify key components of existing SI ecosystems; analyse the discourses, practices and tools utilised in SI initiatives; assess the drivers and barriers influencing the promotion, scaling and institutionalisation of SI.	**Bottom-up identifying** SI practitioners, supporters. **Top-down mapping** of institutional actors, public funds and policy instruments **Conducting surveys and interviews** with stakeholders
FUSE	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland and Portugal		
FUSE	Cyprus	Gather insights into the challenges faced by practitioners working directly in social	**Survey with Practitioners**: to explore their challenges, training

		innovation and those in supportive roles (promoters).	needs and educational preferences. **Survey with Promoters**: to understand their perspectives on promoting social innovation. **Panel Discussions**: to explore the concept of social innovation, identify challenges and uncover opportunities. **Desk Research**
FUSE	Ireland	A comprehensive picture of the support structures for social innovation within Ireland. The research aimed to identify their main characteristics, strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for further development.	**Quantitative Data**: surveys with single and multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale ratings and open-ended questions. **Qualitative Data**: semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders.
FUSE	Portugal	Strengthen the support framework for social innovation; it focused on identifying key challenges, such as inadequate funding and limited legislative support.	**Quantitative Data:** Surveys with practitioners and promoters of social innovation **Qualitative Data:** Interviews and roundtable discussions with stakeholders **Desk Research:** Analysis of existing initiatives and case studies
SI PLUS	Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia		
SI PLUS	Slovakia	Assess the state of social innovation through the framework of four contextual layers, known as an “onion”, model, aimed to highlight gaps and opportunities for systemic enhancement and provide insights for policymakers and practitioners.	**Desk research** from existing literature. **An online survey** standardised for all consortium countries **Semi-structured interviews** with individual stakeholders

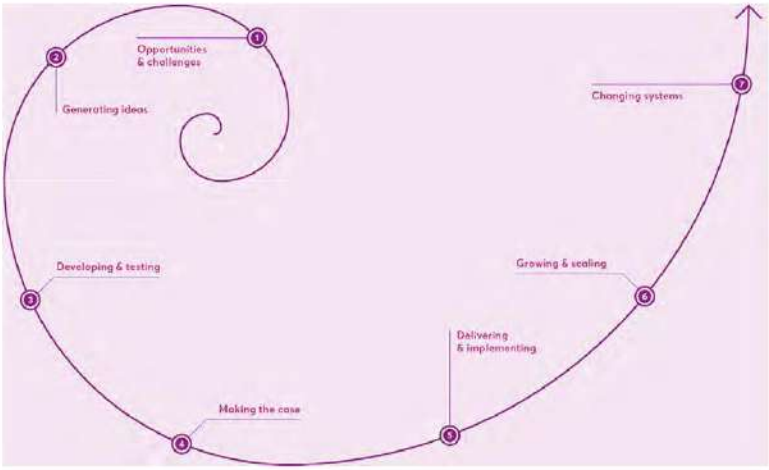
Definition of Social Innovation

Most of the countries studied have adopted the definition of social innovation used in official European documents: 'Social innovation' means an activity that is social both regarding its ends and its means, in particular an activity which relates to the development and implementation of new ideas concerning products, services, practises and models, that simultaneously meets social needs and creates new social relationships or collaborations between public, civil society or private organisations, thereby benefiting society and boosting its capacity to act (REGULATION (EU) 2021/1057).

With other characteristics such as:

- **Multidisciplinarity** – the solution to a problem is usually approached in the context of multiple disciplines and is viewed in a broader context;
- **Multidimensionality** – problem solving is implemented at multiple stages;
- **Scalability** – the capacity to bring about so-called systemic change that impacts a wider group of people than the immediate environment of the innovator;

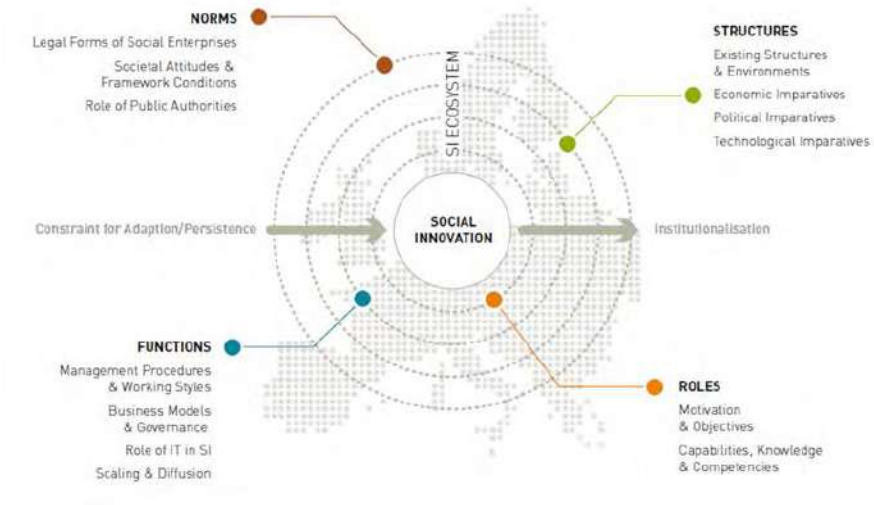
The main notion of how social innovation is evolving is the *innovation spiral*, which represents how innovations are created, identified, developed, tested, upscaled and transferred into the system. (Figure 1) Consortia like BuiCaSuS and SI PLUS refer to the theory of the Innovation Spiral.



Source: Nesta 2019, p 4

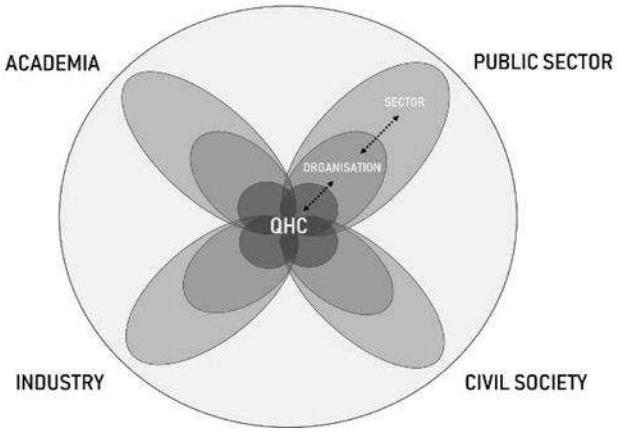
Definition of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

To describe the ecosystem, most countries refer in their methodologies to the "onion" model, in which Norms, Structures, Functions and Roles are described. One of the key claims of the model is: "Context matters" (Kaletka et al., 2016) (Figure 2). This approach was applied, for example, by the BuiCaSuS and SI PLUS consortia.



Source: Kaletka et al., 2016

Another widespread approach in methodologies is the Quadruple Helix approach (Notberg et al., 2020), where social innovation ecosystems are formed by actors and institutions from the public sector/government, industry/businesses, academia/university and civil society/third sector. This approach focuses on the interactions among these actors (Figure 3). This approach was used, for example, in the FUSE consortium, while in other consortia, the approach was not explicitly cited, but the ecosystem was understood as a complex network of relationships between various actors.



Source: Alfonsi et al., 2020

Each national (consortium) methodology is described using the following structure:

1. **Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem:** whether and when legislation supporting social innovations is established in the country, whether there is general awareness of social innovations, and the stage of development of social innovations in a particular country.
1. **Main Objectives of the Mapping:** introduction to the mapping goal, key areas of analysis and additional focus.
2. **Determining the Scope of the Mapping**: whether it involves a general mapping of the entire ecosystem, a detailed mapping or the mapping of a specific area, and whether it is at the micro, mezzo or macro level.
3. **Focus of the Mapping**: a) determining the SI Ecosystem actors or mapping the SIE actors, b) mapping the enabling regulatory environment, c) some other elements relevant to the focus, such as interactions among actors, d) resources available, e) discourses, etc.
4. **Data Collection Methods**: quantitative or qualitative, description of methods used for data collection.
5. **Outputs and Their Application**: visualisations, reports, etc. and how they were utilised.

BuiCaSuS – France, Latvia, Spain and Sweden

Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

The four countries share key similarities in their social innovation ecosystems. Legal recognition varies, with frameworks in France and Sweden fostering collaboration, while Spain and Latvia rely more on regional efforts. Local actors play a vital role, driving innovation through grassroots coalitions. Structured support is crucial, but its development varies, with France and Sweden leading. Challenges include inconsistent funding, limited knowledge exchange and underutilised digital tools, though flexibility and iterative processes are seen as critical.

Main Objectives of the Mapping

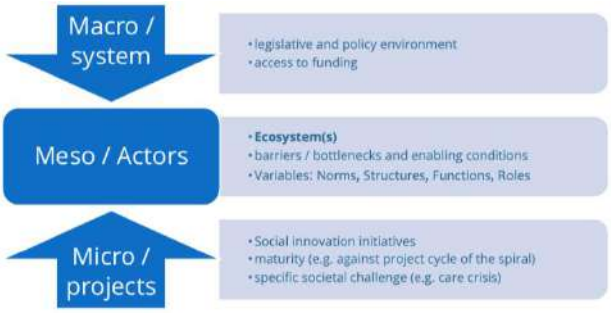
The mapping aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the national social innovation ecosystem, with a focus on mature social innovation initiatives in the realm of social services with a significant involvement of public actors. This process involves identifying the visions, needs, opportunities and priorities of all relevant social innovation actors. Based on these findings, a common strategy and action plan is being developed to support social innovation, including the use of ESF+ (European Social Fund plus) resources.
As the methodology highlights, the aim is not only a quantitative overview of the initiatives, but also an in-depth analysis of their ecosystem. This analysis includes:

- A description of multi-stakeholder interactions throughout the social innovation lifecycle – from inception to systemic change.
- Mapping the legislation, policies and other framework conditions that influence the development of social innovations.
- Identifying key factors that support or hinder the development and scaling of initiatives

Determining the Scope of the Mapping

According to the methodology, the mapping focuses on different levels: micro, mezzo and macro. This multilayered approach is illustrated by the logic of "project – actors – system". Focusing on each level allows a better understanding of how individual projects interact with the broader legislative and policy environment (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Situating "ecosystems" between macro context and particular initiatives



Source: BuiCaSuS

The mapping includes the following phases:

1. **Definition and framing:** policy review and adaptation of research questions.
2. **Registration and selection of projects**: identification of relevant initiatives through questionnaires and analysis.
3. **In-depth research**: semi-structured interviews and focus groups to test hypotheses.
4. **Final document**: development of analysis and recommendations.

Focus of the Mapping

The mapping focuses on three main areas:

1. **Social innovation initiatives:** identifying specific projects and actors.
2. **Legislative processes:** analysis of policies that promote or hinder innovation.
3. **Systemic factors:** exploring the conditions for scaling up initiatives into public policies.

The key element in this methodology is the framing question, which frames mature social innovation initiatives and does not focus on all social innovations during the lifecycle:

What are the factors that foster (enabling conditions) or impede (bottlenecks/barriers) ***mature social innovation initiatives*** *to be upscaled and/or transformed into public policies in the sector of social services?*

Data Collection Methods

The methods used include a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. These methods include:

- **Desk research:** analysis of existing documents and data, policy review.
- **Web-based questionnaires:** short questionnaires (short fiche) to register initiatives and longer ones (long fiche) to screen them in detail. There were about 70 projects in short fiche and about 20 in long fiche. Short fiche initiatives were chosen according to the following sources:
    - By actors from the SI constituency that has been mobilised to collaborate,
    - By the BuiCaSuS local staff, based on a listing of past projects funded by ESF funds,
    - By the BuiCaSuS local staff based on the literature review and web-search.
- Initiatives to long fiche were chosen according to the selection criteria:
    - Novelty, Maturity, Complexity, Access to information, Diversity of the project.
- **Case selection:** according to the sustainability and diversity criteria.
- **Semi-structured interviews (three to six projects):** with selected actors for in-depth analysis. Actors were asked to identify (1) key actors, (2) the competencies they contribute and (3) the factors that have fostered and impeded the growth of the initiative.
- **Focus group:** validation of findings and hypotheses with experts and actors.

Outputs and Their Application

The results of the mapping include:

- **Index card:** background information on the identified initiatives.
- **Extended questionnaires**: detailed information on the projects.
- **Final Report**: analysis of legislation, policies and case studies.

These outputs are intended to support strategic decision-making and planning. This methodology represents a robust approach to mapping social innovation ecosystems.

SEED – Greece, Italy, Romania and Slovenia

Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

Social innovation (SI) varies significantly across the participating countries. In Greece, SI is a relatively new concept, with limited awareness and nascent initiatives. Italy recognises SI as an umbrella term for emerging social practices, though its "social innovation ecosystem" concept has only gained traction in the last decade. Romania's SI ecosystem remains in its nascent state, with little public knowledge or structured efforts. Similarly, in Slovenia, SI and social economy concepts are relatively new, with the first notable study on social entrepreneurship dating back to 2004. Across these nations, legislation and systemic support for SI are inconsistent, reflecting diverse stages of development and adoption.

Main Objectives of the Mapping

The mapping exercise aimed to:

- Identify key components of existing SI ecosystems.
- Analyse the discourses, practices and tools utilised in SI initiatives.
- Map principal stakeholders and their roles.
- Assess the drivers and barriers influencing the promotion, scaling and institutionalisation of SI.
- Establish a foundation for competency centres focused on advancing SI across regions. The goal was to provide actionable insights into how SI can be better integrated into policy and practice frameworks.

Determining the Scope of the Mapping

The study addressed SI at multiple levels, encompassing macro (national frameworks), mezzo (regional initiatives) and micro (specific projects or practices) perspectives. In each country the current state of actors, the initiatives, support systems, funding mechanisms and impact measurements were described. The mapping of SI projects focused on the thematic areas of SI:

- Circular economy and environment,
- Digital transformation and smart cities,
- Health,
- Education,
- Cultural heritage and creative industries,
- Poverty,
- Migration,
- Urban regeneration,
- Welfare and work.

For each thematic area, the specific elements were described:

- Societal and cultural discourse,
- Objectives,

- Territorial context and Tools (methodologies, approaches) which social innovations use.

Focus of the Mapping

The mapping targeted a diverse range of stakeholders:

- Citizens and social movements.
- Social economy actors (e.g., associations, foundations, social enterprises).
- Private companies, incubators and accelerators.
- Universities and research institutions.
- Public institutions at local, regional, national and European levels.
- Multi-stakeholder initiatives and other relevant actors.

Additionally, efforts extended to mapping legislative frameworks and policy tools relevant to SI promotion and mainstreaming.

Data Collection Methods

The methodology combined desk research and bottom-up/top-down approaches, leveraging existing databases, scientific literature and organisational input. Specific activities included:

- Bottom-up identifying of SI practitioners. Information was structured into 3 macro-areas:
  - Organisation information,
  - Description of social innovation,
  - Impact and support
- Bottom-up identifying of SI supporters (promoters); e.g., incubators, accelerators, social investment platforms, etc.
- Top-down mapping of institutional actors, public funds and policy instruments. Mapping activities were divided into three different levels of analysis:
  - identifying relevant public institutions, policies, projects and resources for the competency centres set up,
  - main barriers and enablers for policymakers, beneficiaries, practitioners (for the promotion, testing, upscaling and mainstreaming of social innovation),
  - a common framework to compare experiences, needs, challenges and opportunities
- Conducting surveys and interviews with stakeholders.
- Comparing initiatives across countries for insights into common challenges and opportunities.

Outputs and Their Application

Key outputs included:

- National reports detailing the state of SI in each country.
- Thematic analyses of SI areas, such as the circular economy, digital transformation, education, health and urban regeneration.
- Stakeholder classification divided into five main categories:

- Citizens and social movements;
- Social economy actors;
- Private companies and incubators/accelerators;
- Universities and research centres;
- Public institutions.

- Identification of drivers, barriers and recommendations for policy and practice. These outputs informed the development of competency centres and future strategies for SI ecosystem building, providing a baseline for comparative analysis and policy alignment.

FUSE – Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland and Portugal

Ireland

Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

The Irish social innovation ecosystem is currently embedded within a supportive context characterised by mature and high-quality public institutions, a highly competitive and innovation-driven economy and a well-educated population. These factors provide a solid foundation for fostering innovation. However, low expenditure on public services and R&D limits its growth, and civil society remains heavily reliant on government funding. While the ecosystem is still in its early stages, it features diverse actors and a strong foundation for development.

Despite these strengths, the social innovation ecosystem remains at a nascent stage, hindered by the lack of official and comprehensive statistics on social innovation organisations. Nevertheless, the ecosystem is rapidly evolving across public, private, academic and civil society sectors.

Main Objectives of the Mapping

The primary goal of the mapping was to provide a comprehensive picture of the support structures for social innovation within Ireland. The research aimed to identify their main characteristics, strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for further development. Additionally, the mapping sought to highlight the growing awareness of social innovation among various stakeholders and assess the rapid development of support structures.

Determining the Scope of the Mapping

The mapping of Ireland's social innovation ecosystem adopts a targeted, multi-level approach:

1. macro level, it examines national policies, governance and systemic influences, utilising frameworks like the Quadruple Helix.
2. mezzo level, it explores regional and sectoral dynamics, including intermediary organisations like Rethink Ireland and Innovate Communities.
3. micro level, it focuses on specific organisations and initiatives, analysing their activities and interactions with support structures.

This approach highlights key strengths, gaps and opportunities for strategic improvements while emphasising the need for comprehensive data and long-term support strategies.

Focus of the Mapping

The research targeted a diverse range of stakeholders involved in social innovation, including:

- Social innovation organisations and initiatives,
- Representatives from the public sector (Government Departments and Agencies),
- Industry (business sector and philanthropy),
- Academia,

- Support networks and organisations from civil society.

It also aimed to map and analyse the complexities of the ecosystem, identifying the interplay between different actors and the role of support structures in fostering social innovation.

Data Collection Methods

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for data collection:

1. **Quantitative Data**: 62 Surveys with single and multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale ratings and open-ended questions. The survey focused on three main sections:
    a. General overview of the ecosystem.
    b. Utilisation of social innovation support structures.
    c. Suggestions for improving support structures.
2. **Qualitative Data**: Semi-structured interviews conducted with 19 representatives of multiple stakeholder representatives of social innovation support structures:
    a. Public sector (government departments and agencies).
    b. Private sector (businesses and philanthropic organisations).
    c. Academia.
    d. Civil society (third-sector organisations).

    Content of the interview was divided into three sections:

1. Interviewees were asked about the work of their organisation/institution, their understanding of social innovation (main features/characteristics) and the types of supports their organisation/institution offers to social innovative organisations/initiatives.
2. Interviewees were asked about the characteristics of support structures for social innovation within different sectors (public, business/for-profit, academia, civil society/third sector) and about the role of these support structures within the Irish social innovation ecosystem.
3. 25 interviews focused on understanding stakeholders' roles, the types of support offered and the strengths and weaknesses of existing support structures.

Outputs and Their Application

The report presented findings on the strengths, weaknesses and potential improvements for support structures in Ireland. Key outputs include:

- Identification of 321 social innovation initiatives across Ireland.
- Analysis of the relationship between social innovation organisations and support structures, highlighting variations based on geography, organisation size and sector.
- List of strengths and weaknesses.

Cyprus

Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

The social innovation ecosystem in Cyprus is in its early stages. Until 2017, there was no national policy explicitly supporting social innovation. Till 2017 it was mostly used as “social enterprise”, connected with commercial activities, primarily with social aim. Currently, only one law exists that specifically relates to the creation of social enterprises, but there are no substantial policies in place to streamline social innovation efforts from a governmental perspective. Awareness of social innovation is growing among stakeholders, but the ecosystem remains underdeveloped, with limited institutional support and strategic focus.

Main Objectives of the Mapping

The primary objective of the mapping was to gather insights into the challenges faced by practitioners working directly in social innovation and those in supportive roles (promoters). The study aimed to understand their training needs, educational preferences and the broader gaps and opportunities in the field of social innovation.

Determining the Scope of the Mapping

The mapping focused on a general national-level overview of the social innovation ecosystem in Cyprus. It did not target specific micro or mezzo-level analyses but rather provided a comprehensive assessment of the overall landscape.

Focus of the Mapping

The mapping targeted two key groups:

1. **Practitioners**: Those working directly in the field of social innovation.
2. **Promoters**: Stakeholders involved in promoting and indirectly supporting social innovation.

The mapping also explored the legislative landscape and the roles of various sectors, including civil society, government, academia and business.

Data Collection Methods

1. **Survey with Practitioners**: Involved 20 stakeholders, using open and closed questions to explore their challenges, training needs and educational preferences.
2. **Survey with Promoters**: Engaged 8 stakeholders with similar methodologies to understand their perspectives on promoting social innovation.
3. **Panel Discussions**: 2 Facilitated roundtables to explore the concept of social innovation, identify challenges and uncover opportunities. Participants included representatives from the media, academia, government ministries and social innovation promoters and practitioners.
4. **Desk Research**: Conducted a review of existing social innovation initiatives to provide additional context and evidence.

Outputs and Their Application

- **Examples of Initiatives**: Highlighted projects in thematic areas such as agriculture, farming, environment, nutrition, civic engagement, health care and technology.
- **List of Challenges**: Identified gaps in infrastructure, funding and financing opportunities, as well as the need to foster a culture of innovation and improve awareness and training.
- **Solutions**: Provided recommendations to address the identified challenges, including strategies for capacity-building, networking and collaboration.

Portugal

Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

Portugal's social innovation ecosystem is developing but faces significant challenges. The legislative framework prioritises traditional philanthropy over investments in social innovation. There is no dedicated legal status for social enterprises, limiting their ability to operate effectively. Despite these barriers, innovative practices are growing, driven by a blend of public, private and civil society actors.

Main Objectives of the Mapping

The mapping aimed to strengthen the support framework for social innovation in Portugal by conducting a SWOT analysis and providing recommendations to guide local decision-making. It focused on identifying key challenges, such as inadequate funding and limited legislative support, while proposing actionable solutions to address these gaps effectively.

Determining the Scope of the Mapping

The mapping provided a national-level overview of Portugal's social innovation landscape, incorporating macro, mezzo and micro perspectives. It examined the legislative environment, financial frameworks and the role of ecosystem intermediaries, such as incubators and public bodies.

Focus of the Mapping

The mapping targeted diverse stakeholders:

- **Practitioners:** Organisations directly engaged in social innovation.
- **Promoters:** Entities supporting social innovation through funding, capacity-building and advocacy.

It also highlighted the roles of academia, public administration and intermediaries in fostering innovation.

Data Collection Methods

- **Quantitative Data:** Surveys with practitioners and promoters of social innovation, focusing on their experiences and challenges in the field.
- **Qualitative Data:** Interviews and roundtable discussions with stakeholders, including representatives from academia, government and private organisations.
- **Desk Research:** Analysis of existing initiatives and case studies to contextualise findings.

Outputs and Their Application

Key outputs included:

- A comprehensive report identifying gaps and opportunities within the ecosystem. Analysis by region (5 Regions), online social innovation map.
- Recommendations for enhancing financial incentives, legislative frameworks and capacity-building programmes.
- A strategic roadmap to mobilise resources.

SI PLUS – Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia

This summary is written only from the Slovak report (SI PLUS). The methodology and the particular questionnaire on which the survey was based were standardised for all SI PLUS partner countries.

Current State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem

The state of social innovations in Slovakia is characterised by a lack of legislative and institutional frameworks explicitly supporting them. European policies promoting innovation have not been significantly reflected in the Slovak context. While the term "social innovation" appears in one instance in the legislative environment, its practical application and understanding remain limited. A broader term – "innovation" – is also underutilised. The ecosystem is still in its developmental stage, with challenges including insufficient public awareness, collaboration and funding.

Main Objectives of the Mapping

The primary objective was to assess the state of social innovations in Slovakia through the framework of four contextual layers, known as the "onion" model, where Norms, Structures, Functions and Roles are described (Kaletka et al., 2016). This involved identifying key factors influencing the ecosystem and recommending strategies for improvement. The mapping aimed to highlight gaps and opportunities for systemic enhancement and provide insights for policymakers and practitioners.

Determining the Scope of the Mapping

The mapping covered macro, mezzo and micro levels, with a focus on both general and specific aspects of the social innovation ecosystem. With the focus on the "onion" model of mapping, it showed:

- what legislative and social norms influence the implementation of social innovation,
- the local government setup or infrastructure/financial resources that are (not) available,
- cooperation between different actors, their roles within the cooperation or how to manage the cooperation,
- the roles of stakeholders and target groups of social innovation, their attitudes, motivation, self-perception, capabilities and skills.

Focus of the Mapping

The mapping targeted a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including actors from civil society, the public sector and businesses. Attention was also given to mapping relevant legislation and understanding its impact on the ecosystem.

Data Collection Methods

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed:

- Desk research from existing literature.
- An online survey standardised for all consortium countries, with a sample of 113 respondents (11% response rate).
- Ten semi-structured interviews with individual stakeholders from civil society organisations, the business sector and the public sector. These interviews aimed to identify factors that support or hinder the development of social innovations in Slovakia.

Outputs and Their Application

The primary output was a comprehensive report detailing the state of the social innovation ecosystem in Slovakia. The report included findings and actionable recommendations aimed at fostering collaboration and improving systemic support for social innovation.

Findings: Analysis and Comparison of Mapping Methodologies

Shared Analytical Framework

To evaluate and compare the methodologies, this section applies a unified analytical framework encompassing the following dimensions:

- **Systemic Focus**: How each methodology defines and conceptualises the ecosystem of social innovation, including its boundaries and the interplay between key elements.
- **Components and Dimensions**: A consistent analysis of actors, resources, relationships and systemic factors.
- **Lifecycle Approach**: Mapping the stages of social innovation from ideation to scaling and systemic integration.
- **Data Collection and Validation**: Examination of the tools, techniques and validation mechanisms employed.
- **Impact and Utilisation**: Assessment of outputs, their practical applications and alignment with stakeholder needs.

This framework provides a structured approach to identify commonalities and divergences, ensuring analytical rigour and consistency across the methodologies.

Key Findings from the Comparison

Systemic Focus

The methodologies differ in their systemic focus and definitions. While the “onion” model emphasises the layers of norms, structures, functions and roles, the Quadruple Helix model focuses on the interactions between four core sectors: public, private, academic and civil society. The SEED consortium and BuiCaSuS focused on mature social innovation initiatives and the factors influencing their transition into public policies, rather than covering the entire innovation lifecycle from ideation and testing to scaling up social innovations. A lack of uniformity in defining the ecosystem’s boundaries, however, remains a challenge, as it affects comparability and coherence.

Components and Dimensions

Across all methodologies, stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, public institutions, private actors and universities, are consistently mapped alongside resources like funding and infrastructure. The SEED consortium extends this approach by exploring thematic areas, such as urban regeneration and digital transformation, and analysing systemic barriers and enablers.

BuiCaSuS, on the other hand, focuses specifically on social services, examining factors that enable or hinder the scaling of mature social innovations into public policies.

However, approaches to mapping relationships and collaboration dynamics differ significantly. For example, the BuiCaSuS methodology prioritises formal partnerships between institutional actors, such as public authorities and intermediaries in the social and solidarity economy, leveraging their established roles to scale innovations. Conversely, SEED also emphasises grassroots networks, particularly through local coalitions that integrate diverse actors, including civil society and private sector stakeholders, to address localised challenges.

Lifecycle Approach

SEED's approach stands out for explicitly mapping the entire lifecycle of social innovation, from ideation and prototyping to scaling and integration into policy frameworks. Other methodologies, such as those employed by BuiCaSuS, focus more on specific stages, like stakeholder engagement or policy alignment, which limits their ability to offer a holistic perspective. On the other hand, they focus on the stage according to their needs for creating and implementing public policies.

Data Collection and Validation

All the country methodologies analysed use mixed methods (e.g., desk research, interviews, surveys, focus groups), but the depth and breadth of data collection vary. For instance, BuiCaSuS relies heavily on participatory techniques, such as workshops, to validate findings, whereas SI PLUS emphasises desk research and surveys, along with the FUSE consortium. Validation mechanisms, such as triangulating findings across multiple data sources, are inconsistently applied, which affects the reliability of conclusions. Some studies also mentioned their limitations. BuiCaSuS, for example, highlighted its focus on social services and the maturity of social innovations within the scope of its research.

Impact and Utilisation

The outputs of the methodologies include national reports, thematic analyses and visual tools like network maps. While these deliverables aim to inform policy and practice, their practical utility depends on how well they align with stakeholder needs. For example, France's mapping efforts under BuiCaSuS directly informed ESF+ funding strategies, demonstrating a strong link between outputs and actionable outcomes. However, in other cases, such as Slovakia's SI PLUS, limited stakeholder engagement weakened the practical application of findings.

Critical Reflections

Strengths: The integration of structured frameworks, such as the "onion" model or the Quadruple Helix model, provides analytical consistency by addressing multiple layers of the ecosystem (e.g., norms, structures, functions and roles). For example, the BuiCaSuS or SI PLUS consortium's use of the "onion" model allowed for a comprehensive analysis of systemic factors, including public policy and legislative processes. Similarly, the lifecycle approach adopted by SEED adds depth by mapping social innovation initiatives from ideation to systemic integration, offering a dynamic perspective on innovation processes.

Weaknesses: A lack of standardised definitions of social innovation across methodologies undermines comparability and hinders the development of cohesive conclusions. For instance, while SEED explicitly defines the stages of social innovation and maps interactions across systemic, regional and local levels, the FUSE consortium varied in defining social innovation between countries. This limits its capacity to offer a holistic view of the ecosystem. Additionally, validation mechanisms vary significantly. While BuiCaSuS employs participatory workshops to refine findings, SI PLUS in Slovakia relies predominantly on top-down approaches and few grassroots perspectives and engagement.

Challenges: Countries employed mixed methods, ranging from desk research to community-driven data collection. Challenges included engaging new initiatives and ensuring sufficient survey participation, underscoring the need for recognisable local partners with adequate capacity. For example, the response rate for the Slovak mapping in the SI PLUS project (11%) was significantly lower than the 61.7% achieved in the Map of Social Innovators (Nadácia Pontis: Mapa sociálnych inovátorov), highlighting the importance of effective methodologies.

Another challenge is the static nature of the mapping process. The reports provide only a snapshot of a specific moment in time. Therefore, if a country intends to adopt any of the mapping methodologies, it must consider this limitation.

Opportunities: Future mapping efforts could benefit from a unified framework that incorporates lifecycle analysis, participatory validation and a balanced focus on systemic and grassroots elements. For example, integrating SEED's lifecycle approach with the participatory techniques used by BuiCaSuS could create a more comprehensive methodology. Additionally, leveraging successful practices from Slovakia's Nadácia Pontis Map of social innovators, such as more time for filling in the questionnaire and active follow-up, could improve data reliability and stakeholder engagement.

Also, the Austrian study shows a case of mapping in a relatively structured ecosystem with variety of functions of different actors. There is perhaps an opportunity to learn between countries that exist in a different stage of the SI ecosystem and explore how their ecosystems differ and whether there are any lessons learned about what to avoid or support. Also, there may be an opportunity to better understand the variations among countries that are in different stages of the SIE development in order to avoid a mechanistic comparison and develop a country-based approach that is relevant to country-specific conditions and development potential.

Recommendations for Future Mapping:

Building on the findings, an ideal mapping methodology should:

Adopt a Lifecycle Perspective: Integrate all stages of social innovation, from ideation to systemic integration.

Key Elements: Any mapping should include key dimensions – actors (all sectors), relationships (cooperation between sectors), resources (funding, infrastructure), systemic factors (legislation, policies) and the functions needed for ecosystem to develop (support functions, field building functions, acknowledgement, analytical and research/reflection).

Establish Common Definitions: Clearly define the ecosystem's components, boundaries and interactions.

Enhance Validation Mechanisms: Use triangulation and participatory techniques to ensure data reliability. Using a mix of data collection methods, for example, combining desk research with participatory methods, such as focus groups or participatory workshops.

Balance Systemic and Local Focus: Address both macro-level systemic factors and micro-level grassroots dynamics.

Focus the Mapping According Data Level: When considering the level of mapping for a social innovation ecosystem, customise the methodology and target research question. For example, if the country has not yet mapped and is starting from scratch, or if the country has already mapped and needs a detailed probe into a specific part of the social innovation ecosystem life cycle:

- **Mapping the ecosystem from scratch:** In cases where the ecosystem structure is unclear, the actors are not identified and contexts are not well-defined, a phenomenological study is recommended. This involves collecting as much information as possible and grouping phenomena or patterns. For example, in Cyprus, the mapping exercise followed social innovation/social enterprise themes, forming thematic categories such as agriculture, farming, environment, nutrition, civic engagement, health care and technology.
- **Mapping with specific needs:** In ecosystems such as those in the BuiCaSuS consortium countries, the methodology focused on mature social innovation.

Flexibility: adapting the methodology to local conditions and the needs of regions or countries.

Align Outputs with Practical Needs: Ensure that deliverables are actionable and directly inform policy and practice.

Graphical Representation: Visualisations, such as social innovator maps, enhance dissemination and raise awareness of social innovation through organic sharing.

Stakeholder Engagement: Use focus groups to confirm or redefine hypotheses.

Adaptation to National Contexts: Adjust timelines for open questionnaires based on local needs – consider more time than couple weeks.

Incentives for a higher response rate:

- For better success and incentive for mapping in the registration phase, consider linking the mapping to a future event where the initiatives can be presented.
- **Engaging recognised local partners (promoters)** with adequate capacity to lead mapping efforts. Local partners should have also a recognisable track record in the topics of social innovation area and have a sufficient capacity for recalling respondents.
- **Active Recalling of Respondents**: Sending a questionnaire alone is insufficient to ensure high response rates. Active recall methods are essential, including follow-up telephone calls, personalised communication and clear explanations of the study's purpose. These strategies significantly increase response rates by building trust and engagement with respondents.
- **Guiding questions**: research questions that will help choosing research methods (not an exhaustive list):

Questions	Research method
What factors support or hinder the development of social innovation?	Quantitative survey Focus group with practitioners or supporters
What are the key factors that make it easier or harder to grow and scale initiatives?	Semi-structured interviews Focus Groups
Who are the key stakeholders in the social innovation ecosystem?	Bottom-up identifying SI practitioners, supporters.
Who are the key institutional actors, and what public funds and policy instruments strengthen the social innovation ecosystem?	Top-down mapping Desk research

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