COMPARATIVE AND TEST REPORT

PERCEPTION AND SUPPORT OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

(2021-2025)

Version 1.0

November 2025

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PROJECT DATA

Project ESF-SI-2023-NCC-01-0002 – SI plus

OUTPUT DATA

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Output: Test report; Comparative survey

Prepared for the needs of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic

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Alphabetical list of abbreviations

Full designation	Abbreviation
Early intervention centre	EIC
Bratislava University of Economics and Business	EUBA
European Union	EU
European Social Fund	ESF
European Social Fund Plus	ESF+
Global Government Council for Social Innovation	GCSI
Catholic University	CU
Marginalized Roma communities	MRC
Non-governmental non-profit sector	NGNPS
Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR	MoLSAF SR
National Competence Centre for Social Innovation	NCC SI
Advisory Committee for Social Innovation	AC SI
Programme Slovakia	P SK
Project Plan	PP
Regional Centre for Circular Economy	RCCE
Social Innovation	SI
School Support Team	SST
Artificial Intelligence	AI
Disabled persons	DP
Non-repayable financial aid application	NRFAA

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The main objective of the *"Comparative and Test Report"* is **to evaluate the shift in the perception of social innovation** and **the awareness of support mechanisms for the development of social innovation in the Slovak Republic.** It is designed to compare the results of two questionnaires (2021 and 2025) and provide conclusions and recommendations.

1. Introduction and objective of the analysis

1.1 Context and current state of social innovation (SI) in Slovakia

This document presents a comprehensive assessment of the shift in the perception of social innovation (hereinafter only "SI") in Slovakia. The starting point is the analysis from 2021, which mapped the SI ecosystem, and the findings of the questionnaire survey contained in the Report on the State of the SI Ecosystem in Slovakia. This report aimed to establish perceptions of SI and map the main challenges in Slovakia.

Since 2021, there have been several key changes and activities aimed at the development in this area. In the programme period 2021-2027, within the Programme Slovakia (P SK), SI is given a separate priority 4P7 called "Social Innovation and Experimentation" with a total allocation of 63 mill. EUR from EU sources. This priority focuses on supporting innovation in the areas of employment, education, social inclusion, and the development of a supportive ecosystem.

The most important activities include the establishment of the **National Competence Centre for Social Innovation (NCC SI)** under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (MoLSAF SR). The role of NCC SI is to bring together experts and key players (academia, public institutions, non-profit and local organisations) to improve support for innovative projects and awareness of SI.

As part of its activities, the NCC SI has prepared and published a series of documents to serve as support tools and methodological guidelines. These documents are also key to understanding the development of the ecosystem which is the subject of this analysis:

- *Comparative and Recommendation Report on Social Innovation Ecosystems:* summarises methodologies and proven SI mapping tools from European countries and provides recommendations for future projects.[1]
- *Definition of Social Innovation and Attributes of Social Innovation*: the aim of these documents was to introduce a uniform and established understanding of SI in the Slovak context[2].
- *Communication Guide for Social Innovation Projects*: serves as a practical guide to effective communication in the field of SI[3].
- *System for supporting social innovation in the Slovak Republic from ESF+ funds until 2030*: defines a strategic framework for implementing new challenges and support mechanisms from the European Social Fund Plus[4].

[1] Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. (February 2022). *Report on the State of Social Innovation Ecosystem in Slovakia.*
[2] Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. (September 2024). *Definition of social innovation: PV-SI.*
[3] Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation SR. (31 March 2021). *Communication Guide for Social Innovation.*
[4] Polačková, Z. & Žišková, J. (June 2023). *System for supporting social innovation in the Slovak Republic from ESF+ funds until 2030.* Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR.

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- *Handbook for monitoring and assessing the social impact of social innovation*: provides a methodological framework for measuring and assessing the impact of projects[5].

In addition, several calls for proposals to support social innovation were launched to promote the spreading and application of social innovation in practice. Significant calls from this period include:

- **Call for proposals to support projects promoting social innovation in volunteering** to support social inclusion (PK/GS/2025/142)[6].
- **Calls focused on scaling up proven tools** in social inclusion, education and training (demand-driven calls with codes PSK-MPSVR-058-2025-DV-ESF+ and PSK-MPSVR-060-2025-DV-ESF+)[7].
- **Call focused on developing innovative ecosystems** (demand-driven call with code PSK-MPSVR-059 2025-DV-ESF+) SocInoLab – Developing innovative ecosystems and creating tools to support social innovation[8].
- **Call focused on social innovation in employment** – Job coach for disadvantaged people (PSK-MPSVR-072-2025-PZ-ESF+)[9].
- Call PSK-MPSVR-060-2025-DV-ESF+: Social innovation – **scaling up proven tools in education and training**[10].
- International calls, such as **Implementing the Disability Employment Package**[11].

Another supporting structure which was established in the period from 2021 to 2025 is **the Advisory Committee for Social Innovation (AC SI)**. AC SI has 15 members. Five representatives are from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society, the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Communities, and the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, and 10 members are from the non-profit, business, and academic sectors.

AC SI brings together individuals and representatives of organisations representing a wide range of sectors and areas with expertise in addressing social challenges and focuses on creating conditions for close cooperation with stakeholders in the drafting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of projects related to SI.

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[5] Mikuš, J., & Gombitová, D. (June 2023). *Príručka monitorovania a hodnotenia spoločenského vplyvu sociálnych inovácií*. Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. ISBN: 978-80-89125-22-7.

[6] Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. (02 June 2025). *Social innovation in volunteering to support social inclusion.* Eurofunds. https://eurofondy.praca.gov.sk/2025/06/02/socialne-inovacie-v-dobrovolnictve-pri-podpore-socialneho-zaclenenia/

[7] Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. (02 June 2025). *Call: Social innovation – additional funding for projects supporting social innovation.* Eurofunds. https://eurofondy.praca.gov.sk/2025/06/02/socialne-inovacie-dofinancovanie-projektov-na-podporu-socialnych-inovacii/

[8] ITMS21+. (24 November 2024). *Call no. 3950*. https://portal.itms21.sk/vyhlasena-vyzva/?id=3590

[9] Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. https://www.socialneinovacie.gov.sk/vyzvy/vyzva-na-predkladanie-projektovych-zamerov-psk-mpsvr-072-2025-pz-esf/index.html

[10] Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. (10 July 2025). *Call PSK-MPSVR-060-2025-DV-ESF+: Social innovation – scaling up proven tools in education and training.* Social innovation. http://socialneinovacie.gov.sk/vyzvy/vyzva-psk-mpsvr-060-2025-dv-esf-socialne-inovacie-skalovanie-overenych-nastrojov-vo-vzdelavani-a-vychove/index.html

[11] Social Innovation Plus. (11 June 2025). *New call for proposals: Implementing the Disability Employment Package*. https://socialinnovationplus.eu/new-call-for-proposals-implementing-the-disability-employment-package/

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AC SI has an advisory role, prepares proposals for measures to support SI, and submits them as recommendations to the intermediary body, which is the leading authority to the policy objective 4.

In addition to AC SI, MoLSAF SR also cooperates on SI with the Bratislava University of Economics and Business (EUBA). MoLSAF SR is one of the guarantors of the professionally oriented study programme "Social Management and Human Resources." As part of this guarantee, it participates in the preparation of **study inputs**, provides **internship for students**, and co-creates **topics for student theses**. It is also a member of the Global Government Council for SI (GCSI). The goal of the GCSI is to support the application of systemic solutions to global challenges. The main pillars of these solutions are **equality, sustainability, and systemic transformation.**

This dynamic cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors is advancing the field of social innovation in Slovakia, removing barriers and streamlining support mechanisms. This information provides a comprehensive view of how social innovation can be understood and used as a tool for positive change in society. Together with mentioned documents, these activities create a need to reassess its impact and identify current trends in the perception of social innovation compared to the 2021 baseline.

1.2. Main objectives and purpose of the document

The main objective of this *Comparative and Test Report* is to evaluate the shift in the perception of social innovation and knowledge about support mechanisms for its development in the Slovak Republic and to **compare the perception and knowledge of social innovation and its promotion between 2021 and 2025.** The purpose of the document is to identify trends and shifts in the field of social innovation based on this comparison and to provide a strategic basis for the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. The report is based on a combination of two data collection methodologies. Data collection was carried out through a questionnaire survey and subsequently supplemented by qualitative semi-structured interviews with key actors. This combination not only provides statistical data on the state of social innovation, but also allows for deeper understanding of specific experiences and opinions of the respondents. The knowledge gained will directly contribute to building a better environment for the development of social innovation in Slovakia and will serve as a basis for setting up more effective financial and non-financial support within programmes financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), as well as for the overall promotion of social innovation.

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2. Data collection methodology and statistical data

2.1. Data collection methods used

A combined approach involving quantitative and qualitative data collection was used for the preparation of this report. In the first phase of data collection, an on-line questionnaire was created in 2025, which followed a survey from 2021 conducted by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. Compared to 2021, the questionnaire was supplemented and focused more on shifts in the perception of social innovation and its potential for development in the Slovak Republic.

The main objective of the 2025 questionnaire was to find out how respondents perceive social innovation, what level of support is available in our country, and in which areas they believe it is most needed. The survey also gathered respondents' views on support for pilot projects with elements of social innovation that could bring positive changes to society. The findings from the survey will be used to form strategies and programmes to support innovative solutions to social challenges, mainly in the creation of future instruments such as calls for project proposals/applications for non-repayable financial aids under programmes financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), as well as in the overall promotion of social innovation in Slovakia. The questions from the 2025 questionnaire are listed in the Annex no. 1.

The questionnaires were distributed electronically. The **2021** survey was completed by 113 respondents out of more than 1,000 contacted (11.3%). In 2025, 96 respondents (12%) responded out of a total of 800 contacted. The participation rate is thus comparably high for both questionnaires.

While the aim of both questionnaires was to provide a closer look at the characteristics of the perception of social innovation in the Slovak Republic, their specific focus differs slightly. In 2021, the NCC SI was established, and so the main objective of the 2021 questionnaire was to map awareness of the understanding of social innovation and the characteristics of SI as a concept. Between 2021 and 2025, several actions were taken to consolidate the understanding of SI, including the adoption of an official definition of SI. The 2025 questionnaire was thus developed in a context where greater emphasis was placed on practical issues, such as identifying effective support mechanisms and eliminating barriers to the creation of social innovation in practice. In terms of questions and methodology, the two questionnaires present different approaches to the topic. Despite this fact, there is a sufficient degree of connection between them to allow for a comparative analysis of findings. In the second phase of the analysis, we focused on areas where there was less connection.

The second (qualitative) phase consists of eight semi-structured interviews with randomly selected respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey in 2025. Based on a comparison of findings from both questionnaires (2025 and 2021), a series of questions was prepared to clarify the survey findings. The interviews were conducted in person or on-line, depending on the respondents' preferences. The topics of the interviews covered perceptions of social innovation, practical examples, existing support and barriers, as well as potential and opportunities. The information obtained was then coded into categories according to the main topics. Based on the analysis of such data collected, a report was prepared that includes key findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further activities in this area. The questions used in the semi-structured interviews from 2025 are listed in the Annex no. 1.

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2.2. Scope and focus of the analysis

This sub-chapter presents the design of the qualitative part of the research in detail. It describes how and why the interviews were conducted, which actors were involved, and what main topics they were supposed to cover.

Methodology and purpose of the interviews

The interviews were designed to fulfil three main analytical objectives in relation to the quantitative part:

1. **Validation and cross-checking of responses (verification of reliability) –** the interviews served to verify unclear, extreme, or contradictory responses from the questionnaire. The aim was to determine whether respondents understood the questions correctly and why they responded in a certain way, thereby increasing the validity of the quantitative data. This part also focused on identifying errors in the questionnaire and aimed to reveal whether any of the questions in the questionnaire were poorly formulated, inaccurate, or misleading.
2. **In-depth analysis and contextual understanding (data depth) –** explore why some innovative approaches proved successful, or what the specific obstacles are where they have not. Move from the statistical "what" (e.g., 63% disinterest in challenges) to the deeper "why". The interviews enabled us to identify specific motivations, concerns, stories, and unexpected topics that the questionnaire did not cover. This enriched the statistical data with qualitative details and stories, which increased the practical usage of the analysis.
3. **Improvement of future research tools (optimization) –** identify best practices as well as systemic barriers that can serve as inputs for further recommendations. Findings from the interviews helped identify potentially poorly formulated questions in the questionnaire and propose new hypotheses for future quantitative studies.

Selection and description of respondents

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with **8 key respondents** representing different sectors with proven experience in creating, implementing, or supporting social innovations (SI). They were conducted with a **strategically selected sample** of actors who demonstrated a deep knowledge of SI and whose experience was key to achieving the research objectives. The respondents were approached directly based on their detailed or interesting responses in the previous questionnaire. The aim was to ensure **sectoral diversity** and obtain a comprehensive view of SI implementation from different angles. By addressing this diverse group, the research ensured that it obtained data from the perspective of **initiators, implementers, donors, and experts**, which is essential for comprehensive recommendations for MoLSAF SR.

A description of respondents is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Semi-structured interviews, types of respondents

Sector representation (8 respondents)	Examples of representatives approached	Reason for the approach/key role
Public sector (local government)	1	To understand the experience with implementing and scaling SI at the regional and local levels, as well as to identify obstacles within public administration and cooperation with local actors.
Private sector	1	To understand the role of the commercial sector, the potential for SI

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(business)		and identify barriers to their involvement in public calls.
Non-profit sector and NGNP	5	To gain insight into innovative practices directly in the field, perceptions of support and experience with specific pilot projects and their impacts. Practical experience with SI implementation, project management, advocacy and direct work with the target group.
Academic and expert sector	1	For in-depth, theoretical, and conceptual context, insight into methodological support, education, and the connection between research and practice in the field of SI. Education of future capacities, research, networking, support for the SI ecosystem.

Method of selecting the respondents: a **purposeful selection** approach was used. The respondents were identified based on their **proven results and reputation** in the field of SI in Slovakia (e.g., award winners, implementers of successful projects, founders of innovative approaches). The data obtained thus comes from experienced experts.

Scope of questions and their focus

The interviews were structured into thematic areas that focused in detail on the **respondents' experiences with SI implementation and its real-world impacts**, while focusing on linking the respondents' experiences with quantitative data and research objectives.

Key areas of interest:

- **Respondent introduction and interview context:** definition of the sector the respondent represents, how their professional field is linked to SI, and the extent to which they are involved in SI.
- **Perception of the concept and practical examples:** identification of specific examples of good practice and understanding how respondents define SI and their vision for the future of SI in Slovakia (validation of the concept). Identification of the benefits and impacts of SI: focusing on what specific need the innovation addresses, what its main benefits were, and whether measurable results were achieved. It was important to find out what measures/systems led to the successful implementation of pilot projects in practice.
- **Support and barriers**: review of the perception of support mechanisms in Slovakia (including the activities MoLSAF SR) and in-depth analysis of barriers, particularly with regard to financial resources and political support, which were identified in the quantitative part. Specific measurable results, successful measures, barriers to implementation and replication (scaling). Perceptions of support mechanisms (grants, legislation), ecosystem and cross-sectoral cooperation, and suggestions for improvement.
- **Potential and opportunities**: obtaining suggestions for improvement, identifying leaders in the field of SI and recommendations for effectively raising awareness of the topic.

The full text of the semi-structured interview questions is provided in the Annex no. 1.

2.3. Characteristics of respondents

In terms of the type of organisation, the composition of respondents in the 2021 questionnaire was as follows: approximately one-third were representatives of social enterprises, another third were representatives of the non-governmental sector, and the remaining third were representatives of

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regional and local governments, universities, and scientific institutions. The representation of respondents was evenly distributed between women and men, and the age structure was as follows: approximately half were aged between 30 and 45, 30% were aged between 46 and 60, and the remaining 20% were respondents younger than 30 and older than 60. In terms of professional links to the ESF, 55% of respondents reported no links, 32% worked on ESF-funded projects, and 5% worked in the area responsible for their funding and setup.

Compared to **2021**, 96 respondents out of 800 respondents addressed participated in the **2025** survey, representing a response rate of 12%.

Comparison of demographic data (2021 vs 2025):

- **Gender**: in 2025, the representation of respondents was as follows: **48%** women and **52%** men, which is very similar to the even representation in 2021.
- **Age**: the age structure of respondents in 2025 was as follows: **13%** younger than 30, **45%** aged 30-45, **32%** aged 46-60, and **10%** older than 60. Compared to 2021, there was a slight increase in the proportion of the 46-60 age group.

Characteristics of respondents by type of organisation and professional context (2025): the 2025 survey took a closer look at the context in which respondents are involved in social innovation. The largest proportion of respondents who deal with the topic professionally were from **non-governmental non-profit organizations (53%).** This is a difference from 2021, when social enterprises were more strongly represented. This was followed by representatives of **state administration/local government bodies (9%), universities and colleges (6%)**, and representatives who indicated the option **Other (6%)**. Respondents from **local government and professional associations/umbrella organisations** had the same representation of **4%**. Representatives from **social enterprises** had the smallest representation **(1%).** This significant change in the structure of respondents in the field of social enterprises is important for the interpretation of results. Barriers and opportunities manifest themselves differently for different types of organisations.

Geographical reach and connection to ESF+ (2025):

- In terms of the **geographical reach** of organisations in which respondents operate, organisations with **national reach** were the most represented **(37%).** This was followed by organisations with international reach (**22%**), regional reach (**22%**), and local reach (**16%**).
- In terms of **professional links with the ESF+**, as many as **63%** of respondents stated they had no professional links with ESF+. Other **23%** worked in the implementation of ESF+-funded projects, while only **2%** worked in the area responsible for funding these projects.

2.4. Analytical tools used

Comparative analysis was used to process and compare quantitative data from both surveys. This method enabled systematic comparison of results from 2021 and 2025, thus identifying a shift in the perception of social innovation in Slovakia.

When processing qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, the information obtained was coded into categories according to main topics, which enabled in-depth analysis and more accurate findings. The main topics analysed included:

- the context of the respondent's involvement in social innovation,
- the perception of the term "social innovation" and practical examples,

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- support and barriers to the implementation of social innovation, and
- the potential and opportunities for social innovation in Slovakia.

The analytical tools and methods were chosen to ensure a comprehensive and balanced assessment of the data from both surveys, and to enable the preparation of a report containing key findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further activities in this area.

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3. Key findings and comparison of results

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of key findings from the 2021 and 2025 questionnaires on social innovation (SI) in Slovakia. It focuses on the dynamics of development (both continuity and shifts) and concentrates on a direct comparison of the results of both periods, without changing the significance of the original findings.

Managerial summary of the content of the sub-chapters

3.1. Perception and awareness of social innovation: between 2021 and 2025, the perception of SI shifted from a narrower understanding (often associated with social entrepreneurship or charity) to a broader, more complex concept – solving social problems across sectors (education, healthcare, environment). According to this management summary, the level of professional involvement increased from 35% (2021) to 55% (2025). In 2025, 82% of respondents consider SI to be important or very important.

3.2. Knowledge of support mechanisms: awareness of grants and funds increased slightly (e.g., from 25% to 32%), with a more significant increase in non-financial support (mentoring, accelerators – from 15% to 40%). Awareness of the Advisory Committee for SI and NCC SI remains low, although there has been a slight increase (e.g., 8% → 14%).

3.3. Perception of barriers and opportunities: financing remains the main barrier; in 2025, bureaucratic burden and a shortage of skilled people will also come to the fore. The growing need to address societal challenges is seen as an opportunity in both surveys, with cross-sectoral cooperation and digital technologies being emphasised in 2025.

3.4. Examples of successful SI: the examples given demonstrate the diversity of SI. (Note: Specific projects will be added according to selection – see comment in the document).

3.1. Perception and awareness of SI

The aim of this sub-chapter is to **identify and analyse common features as well as key differences in the perception of SI** that emerged from a comparison of both surveys. In 2021, the perception of SI focused on theoretical aspects and the identification of definitions of "social innovation" existing in Slovakia. This result is partly due to the design of the survey itself. At that time, the National Competence Centre for Social Innovation (NCC SI) was working on adopting the European definition of SI. This fact signalled the initial stage of a discussion in which the NCC SI sought to understand and define the concept. In 2025, the activities of NCC SI will focus more on building an ecosystem and identifying key areas of support, which is also reflected in the questionnaire from this period. **The topics covered in the two questionnaires therefore differ slightly.** Nevertheless, it is possible to identify basic similarities and differences in the perception of social innovation between 2021 and 2025.

A comparison of 2021 and 2025 shows a **shift from a theoretical anchoring of the concept to a practical orientation** towards building a support ecosystem. In 2021, the discussion reflected the initial stage, while in 2025 the focus shifted to implementation, identification of key areas, and support tools.

Involvement and profile of respondents: in 2021, 56.3% of respondents said they worked with SI in a professional capacity (15.2% were involved as private individuals). In 2025, 77% of respondents were working with SI. This shift indicates the professionalisation of the agenda and a greater emphasis on systemic solutions.

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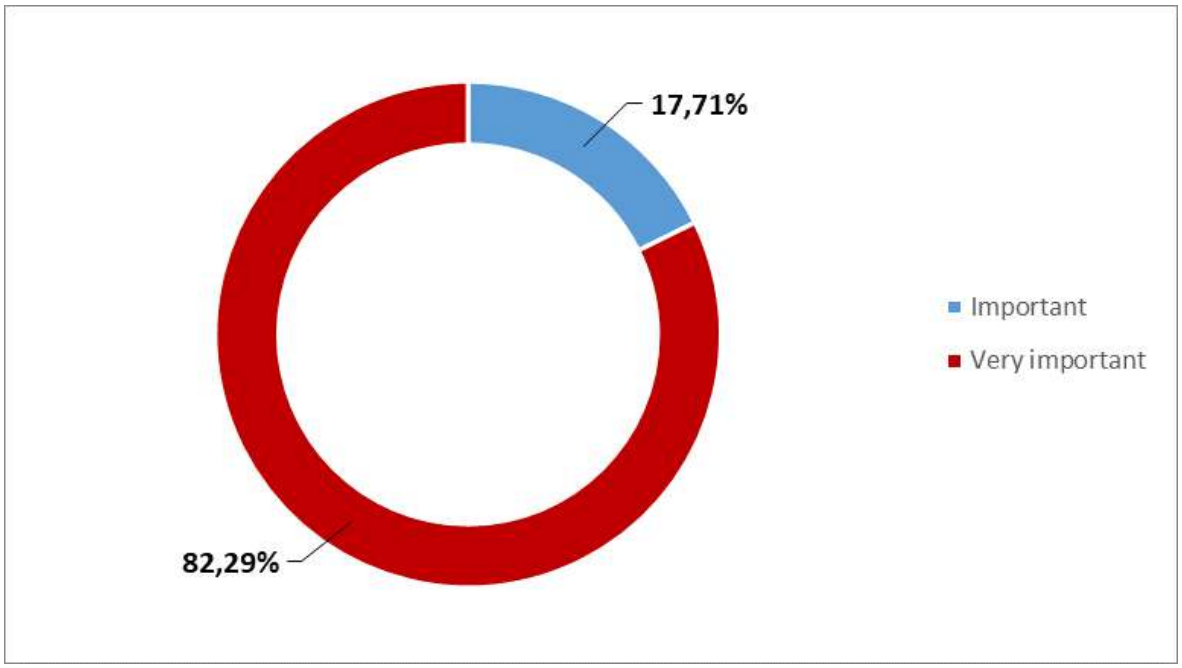
Multi-level understanding of SI: in 2021, up to 96% of respondents agreed that SI can be implemented at the local/regional level, and 77% acknowledged that government-initiated measures can also be SI. In 2025, this multi-level view is reflected in practical requirements for scaling up proven solutions and demand for systemic support.

Perception of importance: in 2021, importance was assessed implicitly through areas of need, where **respondents associated them mainly with traditional social problems** such as poverty and social exclusion, the inclusion of people with disabilities, or the environment and sustainability. In 2025, the importance is explicit: 82% "very important" and 17% "rather important". The reasons are repeated: tackling poverty and exclusion, strengthening cohesion, improving service quality, resilience, and space for piloting with scaling.

Graph 1: Assessment of the importance of SI



MoLSAF SR 2025 questionnaire survey, own processing

In terms of sectors, SI was considered most important for civil society (84%), social enterprises (80%), and the public sector (77%). This result reflects the belief that **SI is a key tool for addressing complex challenges** that transcend the boundaries of a single sector and require cross-sectoral cooperation.

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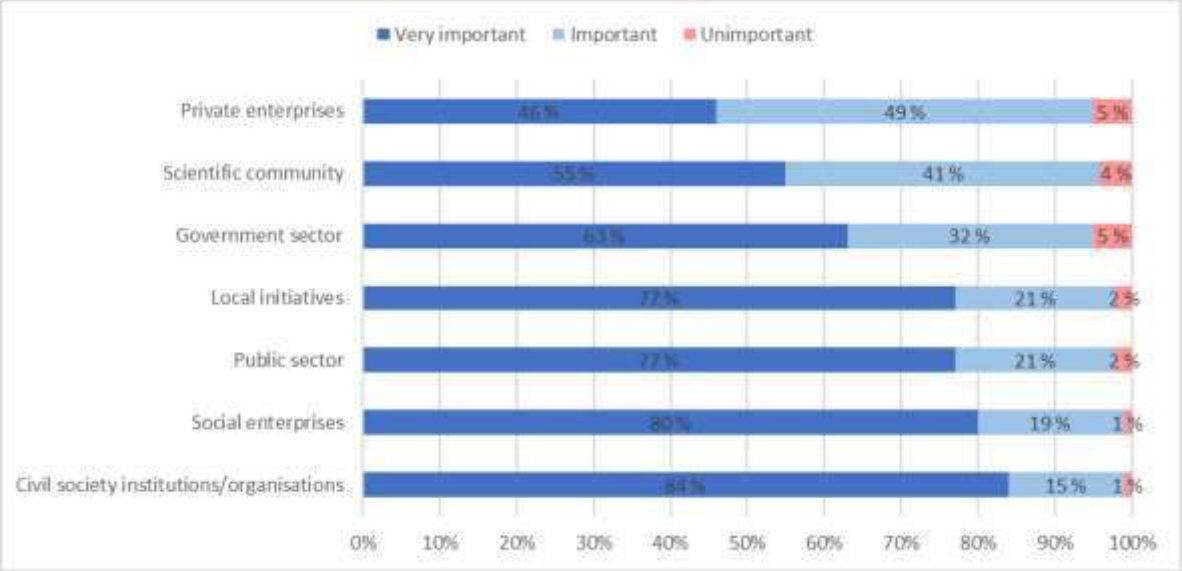
Graph 2: Areas in which SI is important according to respondents



MoLSAF SR 2025 questionnaire survey, own processing

Respondents cited the following as the main reasons why SI is important:

- tackling poverty and social exclusion;
- building community and social cohesion;
- improving the quality and efficiency of services;
- social resilience;
- space for testing and piloting new solutions;
- supporting creativity and flexibility.

These reasons were reflected in specific priority areas, where it is obvious that in 2025, SI is associated not only with social issues, but also with technological and systemic innovations, which represents a significant shift from 2021:

- **Education and skills development** – critical thinking, reading/financial/entrepreneurial literacy, AI education; teacher support, extracurricular centres, tutoring.
- **Physical and mental health** – health literacy, innovation in aids, integration of social and health care.
- **New forms of solutions and financing** – social entrepreneurship, circular economy, microcredit, results-oriented financing; emphasis on scaling.
- **Inclusion in the labour market and housing** – employment of disadvantaged groups, integration of migrants, social housing for seniors.
- **Technology and digitalisation** – digitalisation of services, automation of care, combating digital poverty.

Characteristics of SI: in 2021, sustainability, efficiency, measurability, participation, networking, and respect for rights dominated. In 2025, these topics remain relevant and are complemented by implementation preconditions: scaling, stable financing, and capacity building.

Participation: while in 2021, 89% agreed with strengthening the involvement of target groups (empowerment), in 2025, the feasibility of quality participation is being addressed – simpler

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processes, stable financing, scaling, and skills to measure impact. Respondents call for "less burdensome administration, setting realistic project conditions" and "systemic support – stable funding, targeted legislation and a clear strategy for supporting SI".

Across the years 2021 and 2025, it is possible to observe continuity in the perception of the need for SI and its main characteristics. **The main shift in the perception of SI** is a change in approach **to greater consideration of the practical needs of support.** Respondents in 2025 linked characteristics to specific tools and institutional changes: they called for "stable support from above (including financial instruments)", the development of an active civil society at the local level, and cooperation between the public, private, and civil sectors. In the context of "creativity and experimentation" from 2021, respondents in 2025 emphasised practical verification and scaling of proven solutions - illustrated by examples such as Darujme.sk (digital philanthropy), the DOM.ov project (self-help construction in MRC), and REDI – Roma Business Clubs (combining mentoring and access to microfinance). These findings indicate continuity in the perception of social innovation as a multi-level process, but may also be due to the composition of respondents and the design of the questionnaires.

3.2. Knowledge of support mechanisms

This sub-chapter focuses on the analysis and interpretation of data obtained from a questionnaire survey focusing on the **perception of support for social innovation in Slovakia**. The aim is to identify the level of awareness of support mechanisms and the involvement of relevant actors, and to compare key findings that will help to better understand the current situation in this area. The sub-chapter deals with the development of awareness and engagement in the field of **social innovation** between 2021 and 2025. First, it compares how many respondents dealt with the topic professionally and then analyses their **connection to ESF/ESF+ funds.** It then addresses the **forms of support** that were most in demand in 2021 and the **involvement of respondents in calls for SI support in 2025**, including reasons for non-participation. Finally, it focuses on **awareness of new institutions and mechanisms** such as the NCC and AC SI.

The 2021 survey focused primarily on the professional connections of respondents and their level of engagement in social innovation, as well as the **identification of needs and types of support** required by actors. The results clearly indicated that respondents perceived the need for support in a comprehensive manner.

The proportion of respondents who worked with SI indicates a possible shift in knowledge of support mechanisms: 2021 = 56.3% (15.2% as private individuals); 2025 = 77%. Respondents who worked with the topic in 2025 were further asked about the **context of their involvement**.

Graph 3: Context of respondents' involvement

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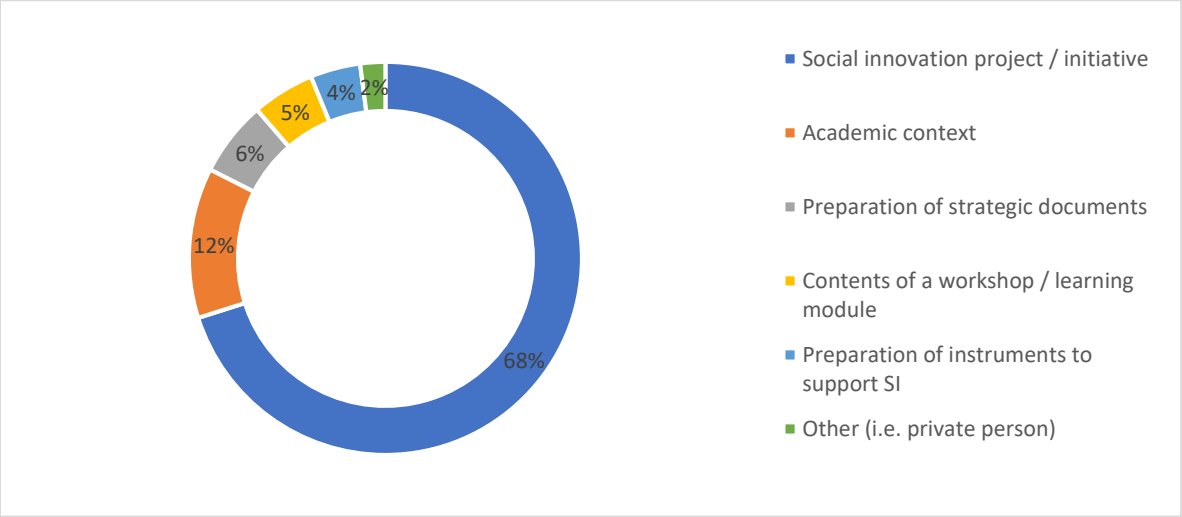

MoLSAF SR 2025 questionnaire survey, own processing

Connection to ESF/ESF+: The data shows an **increase** in the number of respondents without a professional link to the funds (from 55.4% to 61%) and a **decrease** in the number of those involved in project implementation (from 32.1% to 23%). At the same time, there was a high level of initial involvement, with **56.3%** of respondents stating that social innovation was part of their job description at the time.

Table 2: Respondents' connection to ESF+

Link to ESF/ESF+	2021 survey	2025 survey
Not professionally connected	55.40%	61%
Works in the area of implementation of ESF/ESF+ projects	32.10%	23%
Works in the area responsible for financing ESF/ESF+ projects	5%	3%
Wishes not to answer	7.10%	11%

Questionnaire survey by MoLSAF SR 2021 and 2025, own processing

Desired form of support

In 2021, the most requested forms of support were almost 100%: **financial resources for SI (100%)**, **human resources (99%)**, and **support in preparing project applications (96%)**. There was also high demand (also **96%**) for **cooperation between public authorities and civil society.** The remaining forms of support, such as exchange of experience, networking, and general advice on defining SI, were also requested by a majority of respondents. Unfortunately, the 2025 questionnaire did not address forms of support.

Table 3: Forms of requested support

Support form application	2021 survey	2025 survey
Financial resources for SI	100%	N/A
Human resources	99%	N/A
Support in the preparation of project applications	96%	N/A

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Cooperation between public authorities and civil society	96%	N/A
Exchange of experience and know-how with other countries	94%	N/A
Networking of actors at the local level	94%	N/A
Networking at the supra-regional and national levels	84%	N/A
General advice and guidelines on the definition and criteria of SI	75%	N/A

Questionnaire survey by MoLSAF SR 2021 and 2025, own processing

Participation in ESF+ calls (2025) and reasons for non-participation

An analysis of the reasons for not participating in calls (e.g., for submitting grant applications) confirms existing problems. **The most common obstacles were a lack of information about the call (34%)** and the perceived **complexity of the call conditions (16%).** A smaller proportion of respondents cited a lack of capacity to process the application or insufficient preparation of the project plan. These results confirm previous findings about low awareness and also point to **practical obstacles** that prevent organisations from participating in projects:

- awareness of announced calls: 62% (no: 22%, only in general: 12%),
- participation in ESF+ calls: 51% (of those who knew),
- fulfilment of call conditions/SI attributes: 75% (no: 24%),
- submission of NRFAA: 36% (not participating: 63%),
- Reasons for non-participation: lack of information 34%, complex conditions 16%, ineligibility 9%, lack of capacity 6%, lack of plan preparedness 4%, uncertainty about benefits 3%, other 24%.

Knowledge of key institutions and definitions (2025)

Despite the establishment of key institutions such as the **NCC and AC SI**, awareness of their existence and roles among the target group is **low**. Only one-fifth (**20%**) of respondents is familiar with the functioning of NCC, and only one-third **(32%)** knows about the AC SI. The situation is similar with regard to the official definition of SI. **Although an official definition and its attributes have been developed in the Slovak Republic, only 57% of respondents were aware of this fact, while 42% were not informed.** The 2021 survey does not contain a direct question on this topic, but even then it was noted that respondents had different opinions on its characteristics, indicating an inconsistent understanding of the term.

While the 2021 survey pointed to a general lack of institutional and political support, in 2025 this deficit persists in the form of **ineffective communication** of the activities of these institutions to the general public.

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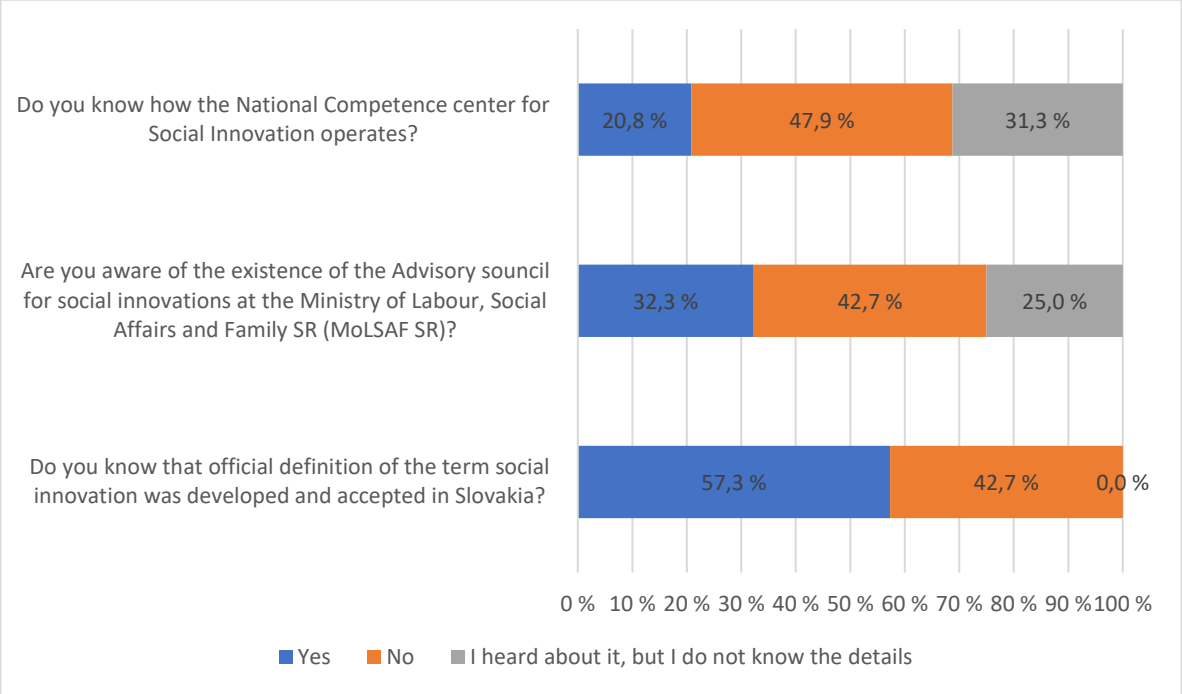
Graph 4: Key findings from the 2025 questionnaire



MoLSAF SR 2025 questionnaire survey, own processing

Comparison and key shift

The growth in practical engagement (56.3% → 77%) contrasts with the continuing information deficit about financial instruments and institutions. Low or no level of involvement in calls is most often explained by a lack of information and the problematic perceived complexity of the processes. To fully exploit the potential of SI, it is therefore essential to improve information and simplify administration.

3.3. Perception of barriers and opportunities

The aim of this sub-chapter is to compare the development of the perception of barriers and opportunities for SI in Slovakia based on the results of two main surveys conducted in 2021 and 2025. The analysis focuses on comparing the identified barriers to their development and key areas with high potential for SI use, while monitoring changes in the nature of obstacles and opportunities as perceived by respondents. As in the previous chapters, the questions on this topic vary across surveys, so we will also work with implicit statements: **2021 survey**: we will focus on identifying the **support needs** for SI implementation. Although the 2021 data are formulated as a demand for support (e.g., financial and human resources, networking, cooperation), they implicitly represent the main barriers at that time.

According to the 2022 Report on the State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem in Slovakia, most respondents also believed that SI support in Slovakia was more declarative in nature. Although strategic documents contained references to innovation, in practice there was a lack of political priority and institutional support. The report emphasises that "the implementation of SI in Slovakia exists despite the system rather than because of it".

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Survey 2025: presents explicitly **identified barriers** and their strength (level of agreement: "Strongly agree", "Rather agree", "Rather disagree"), as well as specific **additional barriers** (e.g., bureaucracy, low political support, lack of knowledge)

The results of the analysis are therefore based on a comparison of the implicit meanings of the statements and knowledge of the ecosystem. **The development of the perception of barriers and opportunities between 2021 and 2025** thus shows the stability of the core obstacles (financing, human resources, cooperation), but also a strengthening of the perception of systemic barriers in 2025 (political support, bureaucracy).

Financing and human resources: In 2021, respondents identified financial resources (100%) and human capacity (99%) as absolutely key needs. This demand implicitly signalled a lack of stable financing and qualified personnel. In 2025, these areas become the biggest explicit barriers: 89% of respondents state the lack of financial resources and 74% state the lack of personnel. This suggests that despite the problem being identified in 2021, systemic solutions have not been sufficiently implemented.

Cooperation and networking: In 2021, there was high demand for cooperation between public administration and civil society (96%) and for networking among actors (94% at the local level, 84% at the national level). In 2025, this demand turns into an explicit lack of cooperation and coordination, as stated by 66% of respondents. The problem persists as a key systemic barrier.

Political support and regulatory environment: In 2021, the need to eliminate legislative barriers was presented only indirectly. In 2025, it has become one of the three biggest barriers: 86% of respondents state the lack of political support. At the same time, bureaucracy is emerging as a separate barrier – respondents describe complex and unclear calls for proposals, slow decision-making, burdensome administration, and difficult access to EU funds.

Know-how and skills: In 2021, the demand for the exchange of experience and expert advice (94%) was general. In 2025, it is specified as the lack of knowledge in areas such as design thinking, impact measurement, and advocacy, reflecting the higher demands for the professionalisation of SI.

New factors: In 2025, barriers related to resistance to change and low trust will increase. The same is true for external factors such as economic and political instability and the consequences of crises. These elements were not significantly articulated in 2021.

Opportunities: In both periods, the main opportunity remains addressing urgent social issues and supporting creativity. In 2025, however, it appears that the greatest opportunity lies in breaking down persistent barriers: moving from short-term project funding to a stable model, from formal bureaucracy to effective political support, and from isolated initiatives to systemic collaboration.

Detailed results from the 2025 survey, which were directly aimed at specific barriers, are presented in Figure 5 below.

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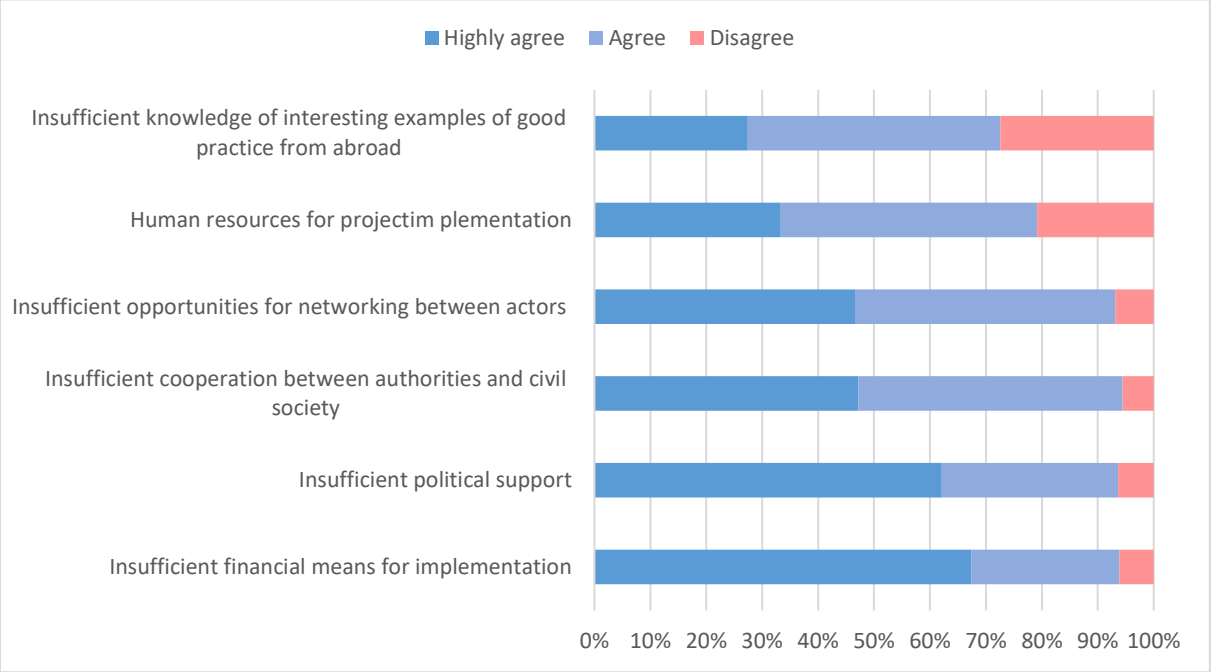
Graph 5: Perception of barriers within the SI ecosystem



MoLSAF SR 2025 questionnaire survey, own processing

Key shift

The analysis shows that **fundamental problems** (finance, human resources) persist. However, we can also observe the **growing importance of systemic obstacles**, such as political support and bureaucracy, which are becoming dominant barriers. The survey comparison also revealed a shift from a general need for know-how to a requirement for specific skills and professional SI management. External factors and resistance to change are also increasing, which make the implementation more complicated. However, this is most likely due to the design of the 2025 questionnaire, which directly aimed at the forms of obstacles.

The results are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of findings on the perception of barriers in 2021 and 2025

Area of barriers/support	Finding 2021 (need for support)	Finding 2025 (barrier)	Persistent/changed
Financing:	Highest need: financial resources for SI (100%)	Biggest barrier: lack of financial resources + stability of financing	Persistent critical barrier
Human resources	High need: human resources (99%)	Highly perceived barrier: human resources for project implementation + brain drain	Persistent critical barrier
Cooperation/networking	High need: cooperation between public authorities and OČS (96%);	Big barrier: lack of cooperation between administrative bodies and OČS + lack of networking	Persistent critical barrier

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Table 4: Summary of findings on the perception of barriers in 2021 and 2025

Area of barriers/support	Finding 2021 (need for support)	Finding 2025 (barrier)	Persistent/changed
	networking (94%)	opportunities	
Awareness/know-how	Need: exchange of experience (94%); specific advice/examples (we would like to have...)	Barrier: lack of knowledge of examples of good practice; lack of knowledge (design thinking, impact measurement)	Persistent, partially changed (emphasis on skills)
Political support	Not explicitly stated as a priority need, rather implicitly (legislation, budgets)	Big barrier: lack of political support	Articulated/newly formulated barrier
Regulation/bureaucracy	Need: elimination of negative barriers in legislation and rules	Big barrier: bureaucracy and regulations (formal calls, administration, Eurofunds)	Articulated bureaucratic barrier

Questionnaire survey by MoLSAF SR 2021 and 2025, own processing

3.4. Examples of social innovation – comparison of the 2021 and 2025 portfolio

The aim of this chapter is to present specific examples of projects from the survey divided into thematic areas. From the original list of 50 examples of SI mentioned by respondents in 2021, 10 initiatives are mentioned in 2025, indicating continuity in key areas (education, social housing), but at the same time, a number of new initiatives have been added that reflect current challenges – energy transformation, gender equality, and digital inclusion. Among the SI examples mentioned in 2021 and 2025, there has been a shift from local and community projects to systemic and technological innovations. While initiatives focused on education and social services dominated in 2021, new categories emerged in 2025: public administration, culture and media, digitisation, and new financial instruments.

Some initiatives/projects were repeated across the years. These include projects Divé maky (Wild poppies), Budúcnosť inak (Different future) (Pontis Foundation), Omama, Dom.ov, Regional Center for Circular Economy, and Duke of Edinburgh Award. However, these are not the only projects and initiatives that can be considered proven, as several of the examples have a multi-year history and demonstrable results.

In the 2025 questionnaire, respondents identified nine areas as important, namely:

- education and schooling;
- social affairs and services;
- healthcare;
- civil society and engagement;
- economy and business;
- culture;
- communication and media;
- local government and public administration; and

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- community development; and international cooperation.

We decided to use these areas to map individual examples of SI that the respondents mentioned in both questionnaires. Unlike in 2021, when awareness of SI primarily related to bottom-up activities, in 2025 respondents also mentioned several systemic and top-down initiatives.

In 2021, examples of SI focused mainly on education and schooling, social services, and the social enterprise economy. Projects focused on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, support for educational opportunities for children and young people (e.g., Omama, Supertrieda (Super class), Divé maky (Wild Poppies)), and the development of the circular economy (e.g., Hrhovské služby (Hrhov Services), Regional Center for the Circular Economy – RCCE) dominated. In the social sector, these were initiatives addressing affordable housing and family support (e.g., DOM.ov, Dostupný domov (Accessible Home)). There were no examples of digital innovation, technological solutions, or links to public administration. The projects focused more on local needs and less on systemic changes or new financial mechanisms.

In 2025, the portfolio of SI examples mentioned above expanded. In addition to traditional areas (education, social services), projects in public administration and local government, digital platforms for financing and civic engagement (e.g., Darujme.sk, Donio, Startlab) and innovations in healthcare and gender equality (e.g. the Initiative Against Period Poverty) emerged. There was also a visible emphasis on technology and the digitisation of services, new forms of financing (microloans, crowdfunding platforms) and international cooperation. Projects such as STICS[12], DECA[13], and participatory budgets indicate the existence of systemic initiatives. However, as illustrated in the previous chapter on the perception of barriers, their ability to bring about the desired change is questionable.

The initiatives mentioned by respondents in these areas were concentrated as follows:

Table 5: Examples of SI mentioned by respondents in 2021 and 2025

Area of activity	Number in 2021		Number in 2025	
Education and schooling	Mobilný pedagóg (Mobile Teacher), Divé maky (Wild poppies), Supertrieda (Super Class), Omama, IncluDidActiv, Odyseus, Budúcnosť inak (Different Future) (Pontis Foundation), I AMbitious academy	8	Omama, Divé maky (Wild poppies), IncluDidActiv, Učenie pre život (Learning for Life), Budúcnosť inak (Different Future) (Pontis Foundation), Piata Žena (Fifth Woman), Dasato, Rozmanita (Diversity), Emocionálny kompas (Emotional Compass), Superar, Aj ty v IT (You Too in IT), Emogym, OdPerinky, TeachForSlovakia, Buddy, MyMachine SkillED	16
Social area and services	DOM.ov, SOCIO, Tenenet.sk, Vagus - Cverna, Dostupný domov (Accessible Home), Spokojnosť n.o.,	6	DOM.ov, Municipal Rental Agency BA, Help Centre for Displaced Persons, DEDO Foundation, Fenestra, sociofórum, OZ Návrat, Ipečko, Housing LED, Femina, BACH, Oáza, Kolégium Márie Romero, Senior taxi, HomeLab, Infocentrum pre	18

[12]Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, *Smart Transformation and Innovation Consortium Slovakia* (27 April 2025), https://vvi.gov.sk/podporene-projekty/smart-transformation-and-innovation-consortium-slovakia
[13] Technical University in Košice, Danube Energy Communities Accelerator (n.d.), https://www.interregeurope.eu/deca

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			mladých (Infocentre for the Young), Dobrý pastier (Good Shepherd), Človek v ohrození (Man in Danger)	
Healthcare	AP-Nurse, Odyseus – sex/drugs	2	DEDO Foundation, Initiative Against Period Poverty, Láska v každom dotyku (Love in Every Touch)	3
Civil society and engagement	Recyklovať hravou formou (Recycle in a playful way), Institute of Active Citizenship	2	ImpactLab (Pontis Foundation), Active citizens fund, Demohráč, Koľko Lásky sa zmestí do krabice od topánok? (How much love fits into a shoe box?), Terapeutické bábiky pre láskyplné spomienky (Therapeutical dolls for loving memories), kufrík pre Kukulíka (Trunk for Kukulík), Koľko lásky v sebe máš? (How much love do you carry?), Roma spirit, Demdis, Mosty k človeku (Bridges towards man) (DCHZA)	10
Economy and business	HendiKup, Regional Centre for Circular Economy RCCE, Prasnica, Hrhovské služby s.r.o., leadernsk.sk, Čevas s.r.o., sobi-eco, growni.sk	8	Ľudia a hrady (People and Castles), Dorka Bags, Sociálni inovátori (Social Innovators), Startlab, darujme.sk, donio, ETP Slovensko, Kaviareň Radnička (Coffee Bar Radnička), Zo školy do života – ALTERNATÍVA – Centrum nezávislého života n. o., Upre ženy, Otvor dvor – komunitný cowork Rožňava (Open the Yard - Community Cowork Rožňava)	12
Culture, communication and media		0	Mission 1000 – Babice, Impact Games, Kubo media	3
Self-government and public administration		0	Smart Transformation and Innovation Consortium Slovakia (STICS), Danube Energy Communities Accelerator (DECA), Integrated Care Agency near Slaná, Inter-Labor Market, Step by Step II, National Project PRIM II, National Project REDIPOM, Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society, Strom Association, Ulita, Odyseus, Young Nitra Philanthropists, Spišský Hrhov, Man in Danger project CRIS, NEET projects, Atlas of Roma Communities, Primary School Alma Zvolen, Meditation Office at the Municipal Court Bratislava II, Participatory Budget	20
Development of communities	Roma Mission Centre, Help Centre Kalná nad Hronom, BiVIO, Nová cvernovka, Úsmev pre druhých (Smile for the Others), okolo o.z.	6	Orientation Days (Youth Association), Monse, Women Alliance, Silvergon, BiVIO, Trenčín na korze	6
International cooperation	Tulip Foundation	1	DG NEAR, Catching-up regions	2

Other	Duke of Edinburgh Award	1	socialeasator.com, Furniture Bank, I CARE	3

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4. Qualitative analysis (semi-structured interviews)

The fourth chapter of the research report focuses on the **qualitative analysis** obtained through **semi-structured interviews**. It represents a key step within the mixed research approach, which aims to **deepen and validate the findings** from the previous quantitative part (questionnaire survey). While the questionnaire provided statistical data on the state and perception of social innovation in Slovakia, this chapter offers **in-depth context, experiences and opinions** of key actors. These interviews are a key tool within the mixed research, where quantitative data from the questionnaire needs to be supplemented and verified with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews.

The chapter also includes a **complete list of questions** to respondents to ensure transparency and replicability of the research.

The sub-chapter will focus in detail on the qualitative analysis of data obtained through semi-structured interviews. The aim is to comment, interpret and supplement quantitative data with respondents' views on practical obstacles and proposed solutions in the field of SI in Slovakia. The analysis will be structured according to the main thematic areas that were the subject of the interviews.

Areas of analysis according to the interview questions:

A. Area of operation, connection and extent of SI

This field was focused on the area in which the respondents operate, how their area of operation is connected to the topic of SI and to what extent they devote themselves to SI in their work.

B. Perception of the concept and characteristics of SI

The analysis focused on how the respondents perceive and define the concept of "social innovation" (including its main characteristics). The key part is dedicated to specific examples of good practice (initiatives) in Slovakia, which the respondents identified as social innovations. In this section, the analysis focused on processing a description of the problem/need that the identified innovation addressed, its main benefit, and its manifestation in practice (including the resolution of the original need and follow-up steps after the pilot project).

C. Barriers to the creation and implementation of SI

The section focused on awareness of the barriers existing within the system of creation and implementation of SI into practice, including barriers in the support system. We have investigated whether respondents consider the existing support for SI to be sufficient and what type of support should be available for the implementation of SI. This was followed by a detailed analysis of attitudes towards the activities of MoLSAF SR (e.g. the introduction of a uniform definition of SI or the establishment of a AC SI) and the identification of reasons why respondents did not participate in the calls announced within P SK. The analysis further focused on specific obstacles, in addition to financial resources and political support, that respondents encountered during implementation. Finally, the field is completed by a question on the perception of the importance of SI and suggestions for effective awareness-raising on the topic.

D. Potential and opportunities

The fourth field focused on findings on which areas (sectors/problems) respondents see the greatest potential for SI implementation and findings on the preferred types of support needed for their successful implementation. In the sub-chapter that addresses these questions, we will highlight specific examples/comments from the interviews that best illustrate practical obstacles and proposed solutions from key actors.

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4.1. Key findings from introductory area 1 (area of activity, connection and the extent of SI)

Based on the analysis of area 1, the key findings are as follows:

Area of activity

Although the public sector, local government - regional development and academia are represented, most of the practical implementation and piloting of SI takes place in NGOs. These organisations, thanks to their flexibility (*"The non-profit sector is perceived as more flexible, it is not bound by structures…"*), become the engine and creators of SI, which later move into the public sector. The respondent states that *"the goal is to create innovations until they become the norm, and then look for new ones"*. We can define such a cycle of cooperation between NGOs and the public sector as ideal. The most dominant area of activity within SI is in the thematic focus on the **social sphere and education**. Within SI, specific goals include:

- inclusion and support of specific vulnerable groups;
- transformation and innovation in education;
- systemic change;
- regional and community development.

Broad understanding of the meaning of SI

SI is understood broadly, from **new approaches** (affirmative, trauma-respecting), **support models** (whole family, holistic approach) through **systemic and legislative changes** (anchoring in laws, standards) to **piloting and expanding** (scaling) proven solutions. Respondents define the goal of SI as finding new solutions **until they become the norm/standard**.

SI as a strategic mission

For the majority of respondents (especially from NGOs), SI is not just a project, but a key part of their DNA and a strategic mission. The majority of respondents report a high systemic or strategic level of involvement in SI. This is often defined as the DNA of the organisation or a necessity. The respondents emphasises that their mission is to bring innovations, often by licensing and adapting successful foreign models. Several respondents explicitly mention work on scaling SI, which indicates an advanced stage of their SI activities.

4.2. Perception of the concept and characteristics of SI

Qualitative data from interviews with 8 respondents confirm and further deepen the findings from the 2025 quantitative survey, especially in relation to the professionalisation of the perception of SI and the emphasis on implementation and system aspects.

Perception and definition of the concept of Social Innovation

The respondents overwhelmingly declare a **clear and comprehensive idea** of social innovation, although they point out that this perception may not be completely common and **uniform throughout society**. The perception of SI is significantly shaped by **professional practice and involvement in grant calls**, which corresponds to the increase in professional involvement of respondents in the quantitative survey (from 56.3% in 2021 to 77% in 2025). The findings confirm the **shift from theoretical anchoring to practical orientation**, indicated in the quantitative data, where the focus has shifted to implementation and systemic support.

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Key aspects of the perception of SI:

- **Solving a social problem in an innovative way**: this point is universal. SI is understood as an **approach** or **any change that positively changes society for the better**, while addressing a **social need with impact**.
- **Systemicity and filling gaps:** SI is perceived as **innovating an existing system** or **filling a missing space.** One respondent states that it also reflects needs that people are not aware of (e.g. school support team – SST).
- **Process nature:** the respondent describes SI in detail as a process with clear phases, which indicates a very advanced and technocratic perception, influenced by practice:
  1. **piloting/approach verification**
  2. **scaling/expansion**
  3. **institutionalisation/inclusion in the standard service portfolio**

Main characteristics of SI

The characteristics of SI overlap with most respondents and confirm the priorities identified also in the quantitative survey (sustainability, measurability, scaling). The emphasis is on **implementation assumptions and systemic change**.

Table 6: Main characteristics of SI according to respondents

Characteristics	Interpretation and connection with quantitative data
Novelty/innovation	A **new way** of solving the problem or a solution that has not been **systematically introduced** must be proposed. The key perception is that we are validating something that is not yet the norm.
Scalability/replication potential	The solution has the ability to **expand** or has the potential to be **transferred and modified**. When scaling for the purpose of systemic change, appropriate speed is important so that the quality of the original SI is not lost.
Measurability of impact	The project delivers **measurable results or benefits.** Measurability is key **to validating change.** The requirement for **qualitative evaluation, setting measurable data** and measuring positive social impact is confirmed.
Multi-sectorality/connecting sectors	This condition is key for **sustainable change**. It means connecting different sectors or experts – e.g. architecture and social work. Most respondents consider it the key characteristic.
System change/institutionalisation	SI aims to **institutionalise and** integrate into the system (and thus improve it). Quantitative data confirms the **requirement for systemic support**.
Problem solving/public benefit	The project verifies a **model for solving a serious social problem**. It must have a **positive social impact**. The project is focused on **preventing a social problem (social exclusion).**
Redefining relationships/participation	The project involves **changing the hierarchy of relationships** and decentralisation. **User involvement** is a key factor. This characteristic is related to the requirement from quantitative data for **high-quality participation** and strengthening the position of target groups in the creation of measures that concern them.

The examples given from the practice of all respondents prove that respondents in 2025 **connect the characteristics of social innovation with specific tools and institutional changes**, confirming the shift from theory to **verification in practice and scaling of proven solutions.**

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Key findings confirm that the perception of SI among key actors has shifted to a **professionalised, implementation-oriented level:**

- **SI as a process with the goal of institutionalisation** - not only **problem solving** is a key factor, but also the **process management of individual phases** (pilot, scaling, institutionalisation), which requires setting up **measurable data**.
- **Emphasis on systemic change** - SI is not just a new idea, but an **improvement of the existing system** and **a redefinition of relationships/hierarchies.**
- **The key role of intersectorality** - connecting different, otherwise separate, professional communities, as seen in the example of ***Universal Design***, is perceived as a prerequisite for sustainable and broader change. The example of universal design shows that only by combining two different professions (social work understands the needs of users, architecture knows how to design the environment) is it possible to create a permanent and sustainable solution (accessible buildings and services) instead of one-off assistance.
- **Counterproductivity of rapid scaling** – respondents point out the risk of quality loss when scaling up systemic changes quickly, which indicates the need for **stable and realistic funding** for long-term verification. This requirement is consistent with the demand for less demanding administration and realistic project conditions from the quantitative part.

Ultimately, the qualitative data clearly illustrate the **continuity and deepening of the perception of SI** as a multi-level process that requires **systemic support from above** (long-term funding, political support, support for applicants) and **capacity building from below** (sectoral cooperation, education).

Examples from practice (initiatives in Slovakia)

This part of the analysis focuses on identifying and categorising specific initiatives that respondents perceive as examples of SI in Slovakia. The key question we asked was: *Have you recently noticed any initiatives (examples of good practice) in Slovakia that you would describe as SI?* The responses provided a wide range of examples, which are divided into categories according to the target area of their work. Respondents provide specific examples that illustrate their comprehensive perception of SI:

- **School Support Team (SST)** – stated as an example of social innovation that **fills a gap** and reflects an unmet need. SST was initially adopted with the question: *What will it be for us?* However, today schools cannot imagine functioning without this concept. This is a clear sign of its **necessity and success**. The highest added value and innovation is the fact that SST has **created a new role/function in the system** that provides **direct support not only to the child, but also to the school management and teachers.** Initially, only support for students was expected, but the discovery and establishment of support for school management was groundbreaking. SST has transformed from a misunderstood concept to a **key and irreplaceable element** of school practice.
- **Universal Design** – standard established in the field of construction and interior design, cited as an example of intersectoralism and interconnection of sectors (architecture and social work). This is an international project that has transformed into a new field of study at STU.
- **The European Joint Master in Social Work with Children and Youth project** within the Erasmus Mundus programme (Catholic University) – a new university subject combining social work with research and innovation was created within the project. This programme was created in cooperation with 4 universities from different EU countries, the key element of which is international migration and practice with the local community, thus supporting a change in the mutual perception of international students and the local community in which they live and work during their studies.

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- **The concept of quality of social services (Volunteer programme, Rada pre poradenstvo v sociálnej práci o.z.)** – in the 1990s, the concept of quality of social services and the evaluation of the inspection of quality of social services were created, which was subsequently enacted into law – this represents the complete cycle of SI from idea to institutionalisation.

These examples, together with projects Darujme.sk, Projekt DOM.ov and REDI (listed in quantitative data), demonstrate that respondents in 2025 **associate characteristics with specific tools and institutional changes**, which confirms the shift from theory to **testing in practice and scaling proven solutions.** Further examples of the mentioned SI are listed in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Practical examples by focus area

Area	Examples of SI
Employment and inclusion	Profesia Lab (employment of disabled people/neurodiversity), Up for Women (supports employment of Roma women), Regional NEET analysis and partnerships for young people in Prešov Region
Education and school climate	Trauma-respecting approach, School Support Team (SST), Academy of Great Works (critical thinking/relationships), MyMachine (STEM, skills), New methodology of working with pupils, From School to Life, Youth Guarantee
Social services and accessibility	Support for independent living, Universal design/Design for all (architecture/accessibility), Creation with understandable/easy-to-read language, Introduction of early intervention centres (CVI), Housing First, Silvergon and informal caregivers
Health and prevention	Tatra Academy (sexuality of disabled persons)
Community work and empowerment	Cesta von (The way out)/Omamy (Omamas), Development of self-advocacy (advocacy) groups, Chance for the young (community work), Film/return to the roots of life (generational connections)
Gender equality	Women's algorithm (IT sector), You Too in IT
Cross-sectoral/systemic	Od perinky (From Baby Duvet) (platform for early childhood development), Map of Social I(Pontis Foundation)

Analysis of the rationale for SI

This analysis focuses on a deeper understanding of the respondents' perception of SI. The core of this section was the question: *Why you think it is a SI?* The answers allowed us to identify the key characteristics and attributes that, according to experts, make a specific initiative a social innovation with an emphasis on the cooperation of multiple experts and systemic overlap. Table 8 below lists the reasons why respondents considered specific examples to be SI.

Table 8: Practical examples by focus area

Factor	Specific manifestations in the answers
Systematicity and complexity	The problem is solved systematically and comprehensively (e.g. Profesia Lab, Up for Women, SST, Universal Design).

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Involvement of multiple actors	Manifested in the cooperation and involvement of multiple experts/sectors (e.g. the business sector solves a social problem; connection of secondary schools/universities/market; architects and social workers; Platform).
Targeting vulnerable groups/new need	Initiatives are targeted at vulnerable groups (e.g. disabled people, autism, Roma women) or address a neglected problem (e.g. regional NEET analysis and partnerships for young people in Prešov region; low employment of Roma women).
Change in attitudes/climate	Climate change is taking place (e.g. climate change in school – Trauma Respect; change in attitude towards children/problems) and social barriers and concerns are being reduced (e.g. among employers).
New method/function/approach	A new methodology/approach is being introduced (e.g. Trauma Respect, PPS, Universal Design) or a new role/function in the system (e.g. SST).

Analysis of the problems solved and the benefits

This section deals with the impact of the identified SI. The aim was to find out what specific problems the initiatives tried to solve and what real benefits they had in practice, with regard to the actual solution of the identified needs. The questions asked were: *Can you describe what specific need or problem this innovation was trying to solve? What was its main benefit? How was it manifested in practice? Did this innovation actually solve the identified need? If so, how?* Respondents analysed the problems, needs, and benefits of their own projects or examples they knew.

Table 9: Analysis of practical examples

Innovation (example)	Problem/need	Main benefit (manifested in practice)
Profesia Lab	Extremely low employability of people with disabilities/neurodiversity (up to 90% unemployment in autism).	• specific employed people • reducing barriers among employers • complete SI cycle (piloting and institutionalisation)
Trauma Respect/SST	Reaction to children's behaviour, focusing on the symptom, not the cause. Insufficient support for school leadership.	• change of approach/climate in school • spread to other sectors (social sphere, health) • creation of support for school leadership (SST)
Up for Women	Extremely low participation of Roma women (only 14%) and gender inequality in the labour market.	• 30% activation in the labour market • internal empowerment of women • change of mindset of families (relaxation of patriarchal control) • advocacy/influence on donor/EU
Academy of great works	Low reading comprehension, polarisation, weak critical thinking.	• improvement of interpersonal relations and atmosphere in school • redefinition of relationships (student-

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		teacher-parent) ● deeper social dialogue
Universal design/Easy-to-read language	Inaccessibility of physical environment, services and information (information incomprehensibility) for disabled people, seniors, etc.	● legislative anchoring (quality standards, law) ● emergence of universally applicable buildings (sustainability) ● addressing the information barrier in practice (contracts, patient information)

Scaling and institutionalisation

The final table examines the long-term sustainability and systemic impact of successful SI. The key question was: *If it is a pilot project, what measures or systems were introduced into practice based on its success? What steps followed after its completion?* This analysis revealed how the pilot projects tried to move to the institutionalisation, legislative anchoring or scaling phase, and what obstacles remain (e.g. stability of funding).

Table 10: Analysis of practical examples with a focus on scalability

Innovation (example)	Status/continuation	Measures/systems implemented based on success
Profesia Lab	Successful pilot, in the process of institutionalisation/scale-up (3. year).	Annual recruitment was introduced, a cohort of facilitators/coaches trained, a questionnaire validated (study) and know-how exported abroad.
Trauma Respect	Start, international experience is important.	Working on building up education.
Up for Women	Successful pilot, scaling up (another 120 women) thanks to EU funds and private sources.	Change in funding (donor): Norwegian Funds created a specific area for the inclusion of Roma women, advocacy with the EU. However, the problem of ensuring stable funding persists (funding is not followed up, which causes a loss of experts).
Universal design/Easy-to-read language	Systemic solutions, legislative anchoring.	Standards were legislatively anchored in the Act on Social Services and quality standards. They have thus become a mandatory criterion for financing investment projects from the Recovery Plan/P SK.
Regional analysis NEET and partnerships for youth in Prešov Region	Ongoing.	Establishment of the Regional Partnership (REPA) and subsequent approval of the action plan. At the time of preparation of this analysis, the delayed follow-up financial coverage of the activities is awaited.

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Conclusions from the analysis of area 2 (supplementation of data from the questionnaire through semi-structured interviews) were directed at the perception of the concept of SI, practical examples, definition of needs, as well as specific benefits. The main findings are:

- **Confirmation of key attributes of SI**: according to respondents to semi-structured interviews, SI is characterised primarily by a **systemic/comprehensive approach, cross-sectoral/cross-disciplinary cooperation** and a **focus on vulnerable groups**.
- **Diversity of sectors with SI application**: examples cover a wide range of needs: employment, education, social services, accessibility and the fight against social polarisation.
- **The importance of changing the attitudes of target groups:** several examples (Trauma Respect, Profesia Lab, Academy of Great Works, Universal Design) emphasise that the main benefit is not only in specific numbers, but in **changing the climate/attitudes** of the target group, employers, families and professionals.
- **Scaling and institutionalisation of innovations is a key factor:** successful innovations move to the **institutionalisation** (legislative anchoring) or **scaling/export of know-how** phase. The biggest systemic obstacle in this phase is the **instability and sustainability of financing**.
- **Innovations can arise everywhere:** examples come from both commercial companies with a social aspect and non-profit organisations and initiatives with an international context/inspiration. According to the respondents, SI is not a matter of one sector, which emphasizes the need for systemic support available to all actors.

4.3. Barriers to SI creation and implementation

This sub-chapter combines the results of the questionnaire survey (Chapter 3) with the findings from semi-structured interviews. Chapter 3 confirmed that the biggest obstacles to the creation and implementation of SI are finances, administration/bureaucracy, lack of capacity, weak support from public institutions and limited cooperation. The interviews confirm and expand on these barriers – mainly in two directions: a) what these barriers look like in practice when implementing and scaling up, and b) that the barrier is not only a lack of resources, but also the way in which change is handled in the system.

The following sections are divided according to the types of barriers, each of which builds on the results of Chapter 3 and adds new layers from the interviews.

Financial barriers and sustainability

In Chapter 3, respondents identified financing as the biggest barrier to the development of SI. The interviews confirm this picture, but shift the focus from a lack of resources to their instability. **The biggest obstacle to social innovation is not only the amount of resources available, but also how they are distributed over time.**

A key problem is the weak continuity of funding. Teams built during a project often disintegrate after its end, because there is a vacuum of several months to more than a year between one challenge and the next. In practice, this means that teams and partnerships that have developed in the region and started to function as a coordinated network of actors will either remain in maintenance mode without resources after the end of funding – in the case of larger organisations, or will disappear completely because people will leave for more stable work. In practice, it is often impossible to continue activities that have already proven effective but have not yet managed to establish themselves within existing systems. Another aspect of this problem is the single-source nature of financing. This means that SI is not created with financing from various sources, is often dependent on grants from the state or companies, but not being in a long-term partnership co-financing, which would reduce the risk of sudden loss of financing.

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The short-term nature of the available instruments is also related to this. **Grants lasting one to two years are not enough to cover the entire innovation cycle:** identify a problem, create a solution, test it in the field, modify it, expand it to multiple environments and implement it into regular operations. In such an environment, innovations become a highlight – something extra and not a regular part of the organisation's work. In practice, organisations switch to survival mode between individual calls or program periods, in which the priority is to maintain basic services, not to develop new approaches.

The financial barrier also has a technical level – **small teams have a very limited ability to independently finance activities, when payments from public schemes come late or only after the completion of project activities** that require their own capital. For smaller actors, delayed payment of eligible costs represents an existential risk. Similar to rigid cost eligibility limits (e.g. de minimis schemes), which do not at all reflect the functioning of organisations that are not primarily economic entities, but carriers of a public service.

By connecting these moments, a pattern emerges: the financing system does not filter according to the quality of the solution, but according to the resilience of the cash-flow and project apparatus. The result is that smaller and often the most innovative actors cannot keep up the pace - not because they do not have influence, but because they cannot survive between challenges and single-source financing of activities.

Administrative and procedural barriers

Chapter 3 identified the administrative burden as one of the obstacles to the implementation of SI. The interviews confirm that this is a fundamental obstacle, but at the same time show that the **problem of bureaucracy is not only quantitative, but also qualitative.** The rules of calls are often set as if innovations were fixed products, not a living learning process.

The first component of this barrier is the extremely demanding preparation of applications. **Respondents stated that preparing to submit an application within the call is a full-time job and is difficult to do in addition to other activities.** Such a level of burden affects every type of organisation, but for a small organisation this barrier is often insurmountable. This correlates with the low level of participation in the calls of MoLSAF SR found in the questionnaire survey (32%). It is often an unpaid, uncovered activity that is done in addition to or at the expense of regular work with the target group.

The second component is low implementation flexibility. Project applications require a specific implementation plan, without the possibility of its later adaptation to findings during implementation. If during implementation it turns out that a certain activity is not working, or that the need in the field is slightly different, the procedural rules often do not allow for a quick change of plans. Changes are only possible through lengthy change procedures that can take months. This means that organisations are pushed to complete the project according to the original plan, even though they already know that some of the planned steps will be missed.

The third component is weak operational support from public institutions. Organisations often need additional support related to their specific situations when preparing projects and during their implementation. Formally, there are manuals, but there is a lack of people who would be available, competent and able to advise in the context of a specific target group or type of service. Added to this is the slow evaluation, which postpones decisions for many months, thus further increasing uncertainty and combining the administrative barrier with the financial one.

The fourth component is **trust in the process itself**. Experience with public calls often discourages applicants from further participation in state support schemes. Applications are evaluated for a very long time and with an unclear result. There is also a degree of distrust that the specifics of the target group are not understood during the evaluation (e.g. the specific needs of people on the autism

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spectrum). The decisions of the committees are also not always clear to applicants. These reasons lead to the fact that smaller teams simply stop believing that it is worth entering the challenge. This is critical - if actors with high expertise and trust in the field leave the process, the potential for SI development decreases.

The administrative barrier understood in this way manifests itself in different parts of the innovation cycle. As a result, the innovation spiral sometimes resembles a loop for smaller teams. This mismatch significantly reduces the ability to transfer a successful pilot to the next level.

Systemic and conceptual barriers

Chapter 3 pointed out that cooperation between actors and political support for SI are not sufficient. The interviews confirm that the **problem is not only in the volume of support, but also in the very setting of relations between actors and in the unclear ownership of innovations.**

The first factor is the low and inconsistent awareness of what is actually considered SI. Many organisations do new things in terms of content, demonstrate impact and know how to name it, but do not perceive themselves as carriers of SI. In the field, there is still an automatic association between SI and socially excluded groups, to whom the perception of SI is limited. This difference in terminology means that at the level of public policies, SI is easily reduced to either technological solutions or narrowly understood topics. **As a result, some forms of work are not recognised as SI, while they are systemically important.** These include community programmes, mentoring in schools, connecting families with services, supporting school principals, or bridging people with specific needs to the labour market.

The second aspect is resistance to change. Innovation tends to be received defensively, especially in the field of public administration. Change is perceived as a factor bringing uncertainty rather than simplifying work. If this resistance is not addressed, innovation remains temporary (in the case of SI funded purely from public sources) or marginal and does not run into the system.

The third factor is the unclear path of institutionalisation - the transition from pilot project to common practice. The interviews show that the main creators of SI are NGOs, which is explained by their direct contact with the affected groups, the multidisciplinary composition of the teams and the high level of organisational flexibility. After successful testing, these SIs created from the bottom try to push the NGOs to the system level, in which case the public and state administration organisations are their natural partners. However, it happens that a public institution takes over an idea or methodology from a smaller carrier without a real partnership, without professional guidance and without ensuring the quality and fidelity of the original approach. For the original actor, this means a double loss – it loses control over the content and at the same time is not financially or symbolically recognised as a partner in the implementation. For the system, this means a weakened version of the solution and ultimately a lower effect. This phenomenon often arises due to the incorrect and overly limiting setting of challenges and programs, which excludes a certain type of organisations as partners for the public sector.

Together, these systemic barriers create a social environment in which SIs hardly become part of common practice. It is not clear who owns them, who transfers them, who is responsible for them after the project ends, and who ensures that they do not degenerate into a formal output.

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Barriers to personnel and development

Chapter 3 identified the lack of personnel as a recurring weakness of the system. **The interviews confirm this barrier, but they significantly describe it in detail.** The capacity problem is not only about the low number of people. It is also a problem of the type of work that these people are supposed to do.

The first level concerns small organisations. Smaller organisations in particular do not have dedicated people for writing projects, communicating with partners, for PR and presenting results, for measuring impact, or maintaining a network of contacts. These activities are then done outside working hours, often for a long time without entitlement to remuneration. This naturally leads to exhaustion and also to the fact that the organisation, after the first experience, will no longer apply for the next call for proposals for financial support.

The second level is based on the excessive dependence of SI on individual leaders. **Schools, social services and local governments often rely on individuals** - school principals, social workers, coordinators, who are personified carriers of change. **These people are at the same time the most valuable and the most fragile resource.** High burnout rates, a feeling of loneliness in decision-making and weak succession mean that even where innovation is demonstrably working, its future is tied to one or two specific people. After they leave, the innovation also ends.

The third level is at the level of setting performance evaluations. University employees and parts of public administration often perform a type of work that is dependent on the allocation key of their funding organisations. **Universities declare their interest in participating in SI, but the performance evaluation system has long been based on the number of publications.** Cooperation with practice, support for communities, or transfer of solutions are considered a good thing, but they do not have the same weight in performance evaluation, and therefore in funding. The result is that the academic environment does not participate in the innovation ecosystem to the extent that it could. Not because it does not want to, but because it is rewarded for something else. Respondents specifically mentioned the so-called third mission of universities - their contribution to society, as a prerequisite for a higher level of engagement with SI.

Together, these layers form the finding that capacities are not only a quantitative problem (lack of people), but above all a qualitative problem - NGNPOs struggle with the accumulation of diverse functions. Specialists (e.g. social workers) are often forced to perform functions for which they have no expertise (e.g. project management, writing SI), and this work is not sufficiently recognised or systemically supported. This leads to an overload of key actors and reduces the possibility of developing deep specialisation in key areas such as social innovation.

Barriers of social climate and trust

Chapter 3 drew attention to the lack of political support for SI. The interviews develop this theme towards the overall climate of trust between civic actors and public institutions.

First, there is the issue of the image and perception of the civil sector. Several respondents describe that in recent years, a negative narrative towards NGOs has been growing, which are portrayed in some parts of public administration and political discourse as opponents or threats rather than partners. **This is not just a symbolic issue of reputation.** It has a direct impact on the approach to cooperation, the openness of authorities and the willingness to adopt solutions from outside.

Social climate and trust are therefore not soft barriers. On the contrary, in practice they determine whether a partner is found on the other side at all, with whom one can seriously talk about scaling, transferring or taking over the service into regular operation.

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Summary

A comparison of Chapter 3 and the interviews shows that SIs in Slovakia encounter five interconnected types of barriers: financial instability, administrative and procedural fragility, systemic unanchoring of innovations, exhausted human capacities and a tense climate of trust between the actors. While Chapter 3 names the barriers from above – finances, human resources, bureaucracy, cooperation and support from the state, the interviews show how these barriers specifically operate from below – where exactly the cycle is broken, why the pilot does not roll over into the system and how good solutions become isolated islands instead of a new standard.

4.4. Opportunities for the development of the SI ecosystem

This sub-chapter describes the opportunities that open up precisely where innovation projects are struggling today. The sub-chapter is therefore designed on the basis of the barriers identified in Chapter 3, supplemented with information from the semi-structured interviews from the previous sub-chapter. Chapter 3 showed that the main problems of the system (financing, bureaucracy, cooperation, human resources, political support) do not change. The interviews also add to this the mechanisms in which the effects of these barriers materialise (discontinuity between calls, rigid implementation, weak institutionalisation path, exhaustion of people, resistance of beneficiaries). In 2025, the demand for stabilisation of the support system and clarification of the institutionalisation path of SI is clearly heard.

Each sub-chapter has a uniform structure - first, it briefly follows up on the qualitative findings, then presents the opportunities identified in the interviews, and finally describes the benefits of the recommendations according to the respondents.

Financial barriers - long-term and flexible financing

Chapter 3 has confirmed that financing is perceived as insufficient. The interviews clarify this: it is not only the volume of resources that is the problem, but especially the fluidity and length of projects (long time between published follow-up calls, short projects will not cover the entire innovation cycle) and the liquidity of smaller actors (late payments, limited ability to finance transition periods).

Opportunities:

- **Grants lasting more years (three-five years) and/or core institutional support** for proven solution holders. Set impact milestones and ongoing evaluation instead of annual reset.
- **Bridging mechanisms** between programming periods (rolling micro-grants to maintain the core team, partial pre-financing, advance payments).
- **Standardised budget flexibility** – predefined transfer ranges (e.g. ± 15-20% on main items), shortened deadlines and a clear protocol for rapid changes.
- **Stratification of support according to the size and maturity of the organisation** (microgrant – pilot – scaling – institutionalisation, with appropriate administration and reporting.
- **Alternative forms of financing** – for example, “social impact bonds” focused on specific indicators of successful service delivery, thus providing a more flexible approach to implementation, multi-source financing of SI.

Stable and reliable financing would help (especially smaller) organisations to progress from initial testing to scaling, while maintaining networks of project partnerships and teams on which to build in the future. In projects such as holistic support for women from marginalised communities, it is confirmed that results mature in a 24-36 month horizon; shorter grants force to choose smaller ambitions and interrupt the scaling trajectory. A system supplemented by bridging mechanisms would also make life easier for smaller organisations and reduce the level of existential stress. Teams

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would thus did not have to choose between building SI and seeking funding, or moving to more stable professions.

Administrative and procedural barriers – simplified entry and flexible implementation

Chapter 3 highlighted the excessive administrative burden on actors associated with long deadlines for procedural decisions. The interviews bring two clarifications: unpaid, capacity-intensive preparation of applications and rigid rules in implementation, which prevent adaptation according to findings from the field.

Opportunities:

- **Wider introduction of two-round calls** – build on the successful example of two-round calls of MoLSAF SR, which in the first round comment on the project plan before entering a sharp call in the second round.
- **Reduction of the number of annexes, simplified budgets** – standard rates, simplified cost reporting, fewer categories, rational requirements for annexes.
- **Enabling ongoing project adaptation** – allowed ranges of activity and budget adjustments, accelerated mechanisms for change requests, emphasis on achieved results and quality.
- **Proactive support and advice** – in addition to manuals, also individual consultations and domain expertise (type of applicant or specific topic), introduction of support for first-time applicants.

Introducing two-round calls can increase the level of success. The possibility of flexibly responding to detected changes compared to assumptions would help shift the emphasis to results, not just to fulfilling the plan. Integrating accessibility principles and easy-to-read language directly into calls and contracts can reduce error rates and accelerate adoption. For projects for people with specific needs, e.g. on the spectrum, it is crucial that evaluators understand the specifics of the target groups, otherwise relevant proposals will fail and the entire mechanism will appear unreliable.

Systemic and conceptual barriers – an opportunity for institutional design

Surveys identified cooperation, political support and regulations as persistent weaknesses. Interviews explain why a pilot often does not transition to the system – there is a lack of a defined future owner, a map of integration into standards/procedures, a budget for the current regime and quality protection during transfer, mainly by supporting the adoption of the solution in partnership with the SI holder. While in 2021, interest in support in the area of guidelines for the definition and criteria was the lowest among other types of support (only 75% of respondents wanted this type of support), the need for clarification of concepts was repeatedly voiced in interviews from 2025. The importance of understanding the concept may be reflected in the perception of the work of social innovators themselves and their role in the system.

Opportunities:

- **Institutionalisation design already in the project** – every social innovation should already include a plan in the project phase for how it will be incorporated into regular practice after the pilot. This means that the theory of change should be supplemented with, among other things, specific steps, responsible partners and an impact measurement system. The project could also include a designated future owner of the solution on the public administration side and a framework budget for its operation. This makes the pilot project a solution ready for institutionalisation.

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- **Obligatory partnership when transferring SI to public organisations** – the transition from the pilot phase to the system should take place in close cooperation between the innovation owner and the public organisation that takes it over. The introduction of a mandatory partnership with supervision of the owner and qualification requirements for the recipient would represent a shift from the practice of simply taking over ideas to a model based on cooperation and shared responsibility for the quality of the solution. SI holders would thus be a respected partner in SI systematisation.
- **Effective communication utilising the existing networks** – Information on support opportunities and the importance of SI should be spread through existing professional and project networks. Such an approach will enable organic knowledge transfer between actors who already have built trust and professional background. Projects and programmes aimed at building partnerships, for example with regional innovation agencies, can be an effective tool for involving new organisations and strengthening systemic links in the ecosystem.
- **Involving the academic sector (third mission to practice)** – universities can play an important role as laboratories of societal impact that connect research with practice. Their participation in consortia together with NGOs and local governments would enable better scaling of proven models and systematic collection of impact data. An important condition will be the adjustment of the assessment of academic performance so that social impact and cooperation with practice are evaluated equally with publication activity. In practice, universities will prioritise activities for which they will be financially evaluated by the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic. Universities involved in this way would strengthen regional partnerships and support the professionalisation of the social innovation ecosystem.

Innovations that have been anchored in quality standards (e.g. accessibility of information) will cease to be projects and become the norm. This shows that the greatest opportunity is not only to finance the pilot, but to prepare its trajectory into the system. Clarification of this process and its assumptions will thus enable preparation on the part of system actors during project implementation. If individual actors understand their position in the system, their connection will be easier and more effective. SI consists of several stages and steps, for which different organisations such as high schools, universities, local governments or NGOs are best prepared to varying degrees. Each organisation has different expertise in the activities it performs. Better connection of actors understanding their role in the SI system would thus facilitate the course of the innovation spiral. Finally, universities can be accelerators of the SI transfer and skill building (impact measurement, methodology calibration, training), but they are currently systemically evaluated for their performance in the field of academic publications.

Personnel capacities – an opportunity for layering support

The shortage of human resources in 2025 is significantly associated with the need for specific skills (impact measurement, service design, partnership management). The interviews show that the most lacking is the funded superstructure: PR/communication, training of beneficiaries, impact measurement and community learning – activities, without which the pilot is difficult to transfer. At the same time, professional burnout and disproportionate stress of functioning in unclear conditions and with irregular support are often mentioned.

Opportunities:

- **Making work such as writing project applications and funding visible –** respondents perceive PR, management or preparation of applications as unfunded activities, although

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they can be covered from the existing 40% flat-rate payment. The problem is low awareness and unclear interpretation of the rules. There is room for improvement in clearer communication (e.g. a short overview of "what the flat-rate can be used for") and in including these topics in training for applicants.

- **Mentoring and technical assistance as standard for entry of smaller teams** – interviews describe that without accompanying the initial steps in requesting support from the state, the capacities intended for project creation and project application are spent on finding a way through the system.
- **Stratified claims** – easier reporting and emphasis on results for smaller projects from a funding perspective, and at the same time higher demands for evaluation for larger organisations/projects.

After introducing clear communication about the possibilities of using flat-rate payments, uncertainty around financing of so-called invisible work, such as PR, management or impact measurement, will be removed. Mentoring and technical assistance will help smaller teams navigate the process and strengthen their ability to successfully apply for support. The introduction of stratified claims will bring an appropriate administrative burden according to the size of the project and a greater emphasis on actual results, not on administrative capacities. This will also reduce the level of stress caused by applying for support and project teams will have more space to develop the content and quality of innovative services.

Social climate and trust: an opportunity for investment in change recipients and a positive narrative based on existing results and collaborations

In addition to big barriers (finance, bureaucratic obstacles when applying for support), soft factors such as collaboration, networking, and political support were often mentioned in the questionnaires and interviews. Analysis of the interview results shows that resistance in the public sector stems mainly from overload and uncertainty. New procedures often appear as additional administration and burden. At the same time, the creation of a negative image of NGOs is increasing. In practice, this often means that NGOs are not perceived as a partner for cooperation.

Opportunities:

- **Investment in change recipients (schools, facilities, offices)** – time for preparation, sandbox for safe testing, micro-support for first workplaces, peer-learning, and supervision – this turns concerns into co-ownership.
- **Equal partnerships between the state/higher administrative authority and NGOs instead of hierarchies** – common goals and shared responsibility increase the quality of transfer and legitimise the solution holders.
- **A fair narrative building social trust** – strengthen the positive perception of NGOs as IS holders, on which the provision of services in the field, as well as the IS process, often rests.

The main piece of the puzzle is people. Trust between change actors is crucial for the success of any IS projects. In a society-wide narrative that does not undermine this trust, but on the contrary builds it, it will be easier to implement IS on a sustainable basis. Building trust between actors is most effective through direct experience or at least communication of positive results. An example is the topic of neurodiversity, where trust increased significantly where the other party (HR, teachers, officials) had the opportunity to experience the first steps and see small, quick success. Similarly, in inclusive community programmes, visibility of results is the best PR communication.

Sub-chapter summary

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The interviews confirmed that the key condition for the development of a social innovation ecosystem is stability, flexibility and trust between actors.

Funding must shift from short-term projects to multi-annual and more fluid forms of financial support, complemented by mechanisms to bridge the periods between available support from the state - for example, micro-grants or advance payments to maintain teams. However, the main condition is a long-term financial framework that can be relied on. The processes of setting up grant calls and subsequent processes related to the implementation of projects need to be simplified, made accessible and allow for ongoing adjustments according to developments in the field. The experience with the two-round calls of MoLSAF SR has proven to be a good example. Even though the introduction of innovation into the system is only the last step, it is necessary to address it from the very beginning of the project. System solutions should therefore include a plan for institutionalisation, clear ownership and partnerships ensuring quality in transfer in the project phase - similar to the introduction of standards for the assessment of the quality of social work and accessibility standards in architecture.

Human capacities require more targeted support. It is necessary to communicate more clearly and practically that so-called invisible work can also be financed within projects - for example, PR, management or impact measurement. At the same time, mentoring needs to be strengthened and requirements adapted to the capacity of applicants and the size of the project. Social climate and trust between the public and civil sectors are prerequisites for successful scaling of innovations, as confirmed by experience in areas such as inclusion or neurodiversity, where cooperation has brought measurable improvement. If these elements become part of standard support mechanisms, the SI ecosystem will gain the prerequisites for long-term stability and effective transfer of proven solutions into practice.

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5. Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter presents a summary of the main findings from the comparative analysis of the development of social innovations in Slovakia between 2021 and 2025. It will briefly outline how perceptions, awareness and practice in the field of social innovations have changed, and what trends quantitative and qualitative data indicate.

5.1. Key findings and trends

The comparative report analysed the dynamics of the development of perception, awareness and the SI ecosystem in Slovakia, with a main focus on comparing key data from 2021 and 2025 and synthesising qualitative insights from interviews with key actors. Based on the insights gained, we can argue that the ecosystem has moved from an initial phase of individual solutions to a more systemic perception of practical implementation and demand for systemic support. The key findings and trends strongly synthesised quantitative shifts with qualitative findings on barriers. The analysis of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from NGOs confirmed that although this sector is a major source of "bottom-up" innovation, its potential is systematically hampered by a set of administrative, structural, financial and societal barriers.

The analysis of quantitative data and qualitative findings from interviews identified key shifts and persistent structural barriers:

1. **Professional evolution and embedding of SI in practice**

- **A shift from theory to strategic implementation:** the perception of SI has shifted to a **broader, more comprehensive concept** as a systemic solution to societal problems across sectors. This is supported by a significant increase in professional engagement in the topic of SI from **56.3% (2021) to 77% (2025).**
  For stakeholders, i.e. NGOs, SI has become the **"DNA of the organisation"** and not just a project.
- **Emphasis on measurable systemic change:** key actors understand SI as a process with phases of **piloting, scaling and institutionalisation** (inclusion in the standard portfolio of services). The main benefit of innovation is perceived in **changing attitudes and systemic climate change**, but actors in the field are also becoming more interested in measuring social impact and its quantification.
- **Awareness of non-financial support:** growing awareness of non-financial support (mentoring, accelerators) signals the demand of actors in the field for **professionalisation of support**. Applicants sometimes need professional consultation on specifics that were not named in the call. Support should therefore go beyond methodological manuals. We also noted interest in building the skills of actors (impact measurement, *design thinking*).

2. **Persistent structural barriers and a crisis of trust**

Despite the growing commitment of MoLSAF SR, systemic obstacles persist and deepen, which NGOs define as an **interconnected chain** of discontinuity and rigidity:

- **Discontinuity of funding as a critical barrier:** the absolute biggest obstacle is the **short duration of grants** (one to two years) and the **discontinuity** of funding, which leads to the loss of know-how, the disintegration of teams and the departure of experts. In these conditions, SIs are unable to overcome the initial phase and establish themselves at the level of a sustainable service.
- **Administrative liquidation of capacity:** the high and inflexible administrative complexity of projects filters out smaller, innovative NGOs that do not have the capacity or sufficient financial

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coverage for administrative capacities in their regular activities. **Rigid implementation rules** do not allow for the crucial flexibility to adjust course in the pilot phase, prioritising bureaucratic compliance over quality and impact.

- **Social resistance and crisis of trust: Lack of political support (86%) and resistance to change** in the public sector, combined with a **negative narrative towards NGOs** spread by politicians, creates **distrust** and **frustration**. Successful innovations get stuck at the pilot level because there is a lack of will and a roadmap for integration into standard operations (institutionalisation).
- **Non-targeted performance measurement:** The current performance evaluation system is not set up to reward SI. For example, universities are financially evaluated primarily based on publication performance, which hinders the connection of universities with practice and weakens their potential for accelerating innovation.

3. Information deficit and low level of institutionalisation

Respondents approached information about support mechanisms based on their needs – if they need information to obtain support, they will find it, but they will not search for it unnecessarily. This approach explains the finding that only **14%** knew about the AC SI in 2025. Another example is that almost all respondents in the second phase stated that they knew about the existence of the SI definition, but that they would have to study its 7 characteristics again. A worse finding is that only 62% of respondents knew about the calls announced by MoLSAF SR, and that only 51% of them participated in them. This creates a situation in which the main reason for low awareness of SI and the support system is the complexity of the topic itself, while the reason for low participation in support schemes is the **complexity of the processes**.

Identified barriers

Funding and administrative complexity as connected vessels

The most fundamental problem is the connection between the **discontinuity of funding and rigid administration.** Subsidy opportunities are **very short-term**, which does not allow NGOs to go through the demanding process of piloting, scaling and institutionalisation. This **project provisionality** leads to the loss of trained teams and the departure of experts to a more stable environment. Moreover, organisations that are trying to survive do not have the personnel capacity (time or mental) to devote themselves to the extremely **time-consuming** preparation of complex applications, with an uncertain outcome. The system thus filters out small but innovative organisations and prioritises bureaucratic power over content quality.

Lack of systemic and cultural consensus

Low and inconsistent awareness of SI persists. More critically, however, **resistance to changes** in the public sector and **distrust** of NGOs prevent successful pilots from transitioning to the system. Innovation often gets stuck at the border between project and system, because there is **no map of integration** into existing norms and procedures and a secured budget for the “business as usual”. This lack of political will and system planning leads to public administration either adopting innovative ideas without equal partnership or rejecting them as an inconvenient administrative burden.

Insufficient human resources and low flexibility

The non-governmental sector does not have the necessary infrastructure. Organisations lack **human resources** for **networking, PR, communication and impact measurement.** These key activities,

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essential for the dissemination and institutionalisation of innovations, are forced to be carried out by NGOs in their free time. The situation is aggravated by the **rigid setting of rules** that does not allow them to adapt to the realities of the field. If the grant scheme operates as a rigid corridor in which changes are difficult to allow, the innovation process, which is essentially about learning and course adjustment, becomes ineffective and its impact is reduced.

5.2. Recommendations for strengthening the social innovation ecosystem

To overcome these barriers, a shift from irregular and reactive project support to a **stable, systemic approach covering the entire SI process from piloting and testing, to the transition of sustainable services into practice**, with an emphasis on longevity, flexibility and building trust, is essential. The recommendations reflect proposals based on data analysis and identified barriers (long-term grants, standardised flexibility, changing the narrative).
Breaking barriers is possible in three main strategic lines:

Long-term and flexible funding: implement stable, long-term and continuous funding (3-5 years) and bridging mechanisms with proactive support and standardized flexibility in the budget, which will enable rapid changes in the innovation process. Focus on supporting proven SI, not just project cycles. Transition to continuous and flexible funding:

- **Long-term grants and institutional support:** Instead of annual to two-year calls for project funding, introduce three-year to five-year calls that allow NGOs to maintain teams and plan for scaling. Alternatively, introduce regular funding to the area. Introduce bridging mechanisms to avoid losing know-how and staff between programming periods. It is also important to support multi-sourcing of projects, thereby reducing the risk of sudden loss of funding.
- **Standardised flexibility:** grant schemes must include pre-defined change ranges and simplified processes for "quick changes" to prioritise quality and impact over dogmatic adherence to the original plan.
- **University involvement:** support the fulfilment of the "third mission" of universities by increasing their involvement in SI projects. This goal would be helped by adjusting the criteria for evaluating universities so that their social impact and connection to practice become equivalent to publication activity.

Capacity support and partnership: ensure an equal partnership between NGOs and public administration and accessible, high-quality professional support in project preparation and active involvement of NGOs in the institutionalisation of proven solutions. Provide NGOs with funding and mentoring for human resource development and external communication (communication with experts, sharing practice with foreign partners). Strengthening human and administrative capacities:

- **Proactive support:** Introducing a system of **proactive professional and technical support** and mentoring in project preparation. This will alleviate the capacity constraints of NGOs and increase the quality of submitted proposals.
- **"Superstructure" financing:** enable and finance **sufficient resources** for capacity development, impact measurement, communication, PR and networking within projects. These components are key to systemic change.
- **Support for smaller NGOs:** create a stratified support system that takes into account the current capacities of small organisations and frees them from excessive bureaucracy so that they can focus on the essence of innovation.

Systemic and cultural shift: focus on **building trust** and **communicating successe**s from the state. Create mechanisms that actively overcome resistance in the public sector and ensure a smooth transition of successful pilots to standard operation (institutionalisation). The state should start actively pointing out the important contribution of NGOs and also finance the measurement and communication of impact. Trust building and systemic continuity:

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- **Equal partnership:** change the approach from hierarchical to **partnership**. Involve NGOs as **full-fledged implementers** (not just as sources of ideas and thoughts) in public administration/higher regional government projects.
- **Investing in change recipients:** overcome public sector resistance by investing not only in NGOs but also in **change recipients** (schools, authorities) – providing them with time to explain and space to safely "try out" the new approach.
- **Active state communication:** change the **negative narrative** of the state towards NGOs and actively disseminate examples of good practice and successes of social innovations in the media, thereby increasing awareness and trust.

5.3. Space for discussion and future research

The conclusions define key challenges for discussion and research that are necessary to break down current systemic barriers.
Suggested topics for discussion:

1. **Stable and hybrid financing model:** discussion on the introduction of pilot **hybrid financing models** (e.g. *Social Impact Bonds*, long-term framework contracts for the replication of proven SIs) that will break the cycle of discontinuity and ensure long-term financial sustainability.
2. **Effective debureaucratisation:** designing specific legislative and administrative changes that will reduce the **time and financial burden** of the administrative cycle of SI projects and free up the capacities of NGOs and state administration for the innovation process instead of bureaucracy.
3. **Investing in change recipients:** how to ensure that investments target not only innovators (NGOs), but also **change recipients** in the public sector (schools, offices) – providing them with training, time for explanation and space to safely "try out" a new procedure to overcome aversion to change and get out of the rut.
4. **In-depth analysis of the implementation of SI projects:** finding out whether implementation concerns (bureaucracy, controls, cash flow) were actually confirmed by those organisations that participated in the calls and why most organisations did not participate.
5. **Trust and flexibility framework:** exploring the possibilities of introducing an "innovation grant" (inspired by the 1990s or Scandinavia) based on a **higher level of trust and budget flexibility**, where the primary focus is on the **achieved output/impact**, rather than on strict adherence to the original plan.
6. **State-NGO relationship:** to propose mechanisms to improve mutual trust and cooperation. The **creation of equal and functional partnerships for strategic themes such as social innovation is key, in order to strengthen shared ownership and innovative cooperation (especially at regional level).**

Suggested topics for future research:

1. **Quantification of SROI and political will:** in-depth research focused on developing and testing a robust model for measuring societal impact (SROI) and its connection to the decision-making process of budget allocation (analysis of how SROI translates into political will to institutionalize the solution).
2. **SI institutionalization model:** comparative study focused on mapping legislative, budgetary and organisational obstacles to **include successful SI in the standard operation** of municipalities and state administration, including analysis of the ownership framework for NGO know-how.
3. **Exploring the potential of universities:** research quantifying the potential contribution and impact of the third mission of universities (involvement in SI projects) on regional development and innovation, regional innovation centres form cross-sector innovation partnerships in which universities can play an active role. However, the key will be the way in which this work is

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incorporated into the assessment of academic performance by the state, to which university funding is tied.

The conclusions of Chapter 5 confirm that the social innovation ecosystem in Slovakia has reached the stage of **professional implementation and demand for measurable systemic change.** The analysis of the dynamics of the SI ecosystem in Slovakia (comparison 2021 and 2025) confirmed the **shift from theory to professional implementation** and demand for systemic support. Key actors, especially from the non-profit sector (NGO), perceive SI as the "**DNA of the organisation**" and focus on **measurable systemic change**.

Conclusion and main message

A comparison of the development between 2021 and 2025 confirms that the social innovation ecosystem in Slovakia has moved from the initial phase of definition to the stage of implementation and systemic embedding. This shift is the result of the purposeful work of MoLSAF SR, which created the basic institutional pillars – the *Advisory Committee for Social Innovations, the National Competence Centre* and new calls for support for SI. Their introduction represents a fundamental step towards creating a comprehensive framework for the development and financing of innovations with social impact.

The perception of the topic of social innovations has stabilised and professionalised. Actors across sectors perceive that support is no longer fragmented, but is moving into a systematic phase. Social sectors are not yet equally involved in the creation of SI. The non-profit sector is profiled as the main carrier of the creation of social innovations, while the role of the state is to ensure continuity, quality and the transfer of proven solutions into practice. However, within the framework of a multisectoral approach, the presence of the university and business environment, which should be a natural part of this ecosystem, is weaker. The corporate sector remains on the margins of both discussion and practice, although its capacities, innovative know-how and social impact represent significant potential for the development of sustainable solutions. Its systematic involvement in the creation and implementation of SI should be the subject of further research and strategic attention. There is also increasing emphasis on measuring impact, sharing experiences and developing partnership networks.

The obstacles that continue to persist – short-term financing, administrative burden and weak trust between public and civil institutions – represent a challenge, not a limitation. The existing initiatives and the active approach of MoLSAF SR prove that the system of support for social innovations has the potential to be further strengthened.

If continuity of financial and methodological support can be maintained, mutual trust strengthened and the quality and transfer of results focused, Slovakia has a real opportunity to build a stable, credible and effective system of support for social innovations – a system in which innovations will not only be created, but will also be sustainable and integrated into everyday practice.

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Annex no. 1

Questions of semi-structured interviews for the comparative survey Social Innovations in the Slovak Republic

Respondent introduction and context of the interview

- What area do you work in?
- How is this area connected to the topic of social innovations?
- To what extent do you devote your work to social innovations?

Perception of the concept and practical examples

- Do you have a clear idea of the meaning of the concept of "social innovation"?
- What do you consider to be the main characteristics of social innovation?
- Have you noticed any initiatives (examples of good practice) in Slovakia recently that you would describe as social innovation?
    - Please state why you think it is a social innovation.
    - Can you describe what specific need or problem this innovation was trying to solve?
    - What was its main benefit? How was it manifested in practice?
    - Did this innovation actually solve the identified need? If so, how?
    - If it is a pilot project, what measures or systems were introduced into practice based on its success? Or what steps followed after its completion?

Support and barriers

- Do you think that sufficient support for social innovation is created in Slovakia?
    - What type of support should be available for the implementation of social innovations?
- How do you perceive the activities of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic in the area of supporting social innovations?
    - The majority of respondents in the questionnaire stated that they did not participate in the calls of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic for the support of social innovations. Why do you think so?
- What positive things have already happened in Slovakia in the area of promoting social innovations? What initiatives can be built on?
- Who are the leaders in the area of social innovations (which sector), why this one and not another?
- Based on the survey, the need for financial resources and political support was perceived as the biggest barrier. Have you noticed any other barriers that you have encountered in the implementation of social innovations?
    - What barriers need to be overcome on the way to the desired state and what opportunities do you see?
- Why do you think that some respondents consider social innovation unimportant?
- How do you think it is possible to effectively raise awareness of the topic of social innovations?

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Potential and opportunities

- In which area do you see the greatest opportunities for the implementation of social innovations?
- Do you know an example of a country where social innovation is thriving? Why do you think this is the case?
- What type of support should be available for the implementation of social innovations?

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