



# Social innovation in service delivery: New partners and approaches

## Executive summary

### Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research project exploring the involvement of new partners – in particular, the social partners, civil society and people in vulnerable situations – in social innovation. For the purposes of the research, ‘social innovation’ is defined as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously resolve societal challenges, meet social needs and create new social relationships among the groups concerned. Social innovation can involve such aspects as new participation in decision-making, services affecting the social situation of specific target groups (provided commercially or not) and changes in social care systems. It is part of cultural development and societal change.

The research was carried out at EU level – focusing especially on the role of the European Social Fund (ESF) in social innovation – and in six Member States: Austria, Bulgaria, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Sweden. It examined the innovation and social partnership culture in each country, and analysed to what extent national-level policies have been triggered by EU policy. The research also includes three case studies carried out in Ireland, Slovenia and Sweden, presenting initiatives that the social partners, or those in vulnerable situations, have been involved in designing and implementing.

The objective of this study is to inform, with an evidence-based approach, the policy debate on social innovation, and contribute to a better understanding of effective and sustainable processes. The study also aims to explore how social innovation can be most effectively supported in different phases: from initiation of the programme, through consistent delivery of good quality services, to identification of good practice.

### Policy context

The social and economic challenges of the 21st century require a new approach to the analysis and implementation of innovation in general, and of social innovation specifically. Social innovation is increasingly seen as a way of compensating for the ineffectiveness of both the state and the economy in addressing not only deprivation, but greater challenges such as ageing societies and climate change. However, not every new way of tackling social challenges is social innovation: just as technical inventions are considered as innovations only when they become marketable, social innovation has to provide sustainable benefit for its users.

At present, social innovation is at the heart of the EU policy agenda. The Europe 2020 growth strategy makes explicit references to social innovation. Two of its most important initiatives are the ‘European platform against poverty and social exclusion’ and the ‘Innovation Union’.

Social innovation is increasingly seen as a tool to help achieve the key objectives set out by the European Commission in its Communication on the Social Investment Package, ‘Towards social investment for growth and cohesion’.

### Key findings of national-level programmes

The engagement of social partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the design and application of social innovation varies in the six countries studied, as does the understanding of its concept. The main areas of interest of the analysis were programmes and initiatives in the policy triangle of ‘employment–education–social policy’.

However, the majority of socially innovative programmes and initiatives are paid for by the ESF. This may be because these programmes fit into a common structure and are continuously monitored. Socially innovative projects do exist outside the scope of the ESF, but they are not usually branded as 'social innovation'.

The social partners – with a few exceptions – are not familiar with the concept of social innovation. However, on an individual basis, some are engaged in setting up and promoting social innovations that improve conditions for marginalised groups, for example people outside the labour market.

NGOs often carry out social innovations, although their engagement in the design of programmes is mainly informal, with the civil society or voluntary sector having no formal involvement in the ESF at EU level.

Those working in the voluntary sector generally associate the idea of social innovation with the ESF, particularly in relation to working with vulnerable groups. Those who represent employers' organisations mainly connect it with the concept of 'social entrepreneurship'.

## Case study findings and policy pointers

**Relevance of definition** – The case study partners did not focus on the definition of social innovation. Social innovation as such was not the driver or the starting point for establishing the initiative. This is in line with the findings of the analysis carried out in the six countries, which implied that initiatives with a direct reference to social innovation can be found mostly within the framework of the ESF. Given the broad definition of the term, many different projects can be considered as social innovation.

**Responses to the challenge/issues** – The common thread for the individual projects is that they are responding to local challenges rather than fitting into a larger scheme. This would imply that an environment could be created that facilitates more of such bottom-up initiatives, addressing issues that have not yet reached top-level decision-makers.

**Reliance on individuals** – The commitment and enthusiasm of the people involved in establishing and running the programmes was found to be a crucial factor. However, this reliance on particular individuals can weaken the sustainability of the project should the management change. Strong links with other stakeholders and structures could give these individuals the support they need, helping to establish a stronger foundation and a longer life for these projects.

**Sustainability** – Being part of a larger, more structured framework can help individual projects to be sustainable in the long term; however, a balance should be maintained to allow for the flexibility associated with small-scale activities.

**Engagement of stakeholders** – Due to the involvement of the different groups, there should be a better understanding of beneficiaries' needs. This cooperation will also help the expectations of both sides to become more realistic.

**Better evaluation** – While projects are increasingly required to include a set of targets, there seems to be a lack of focus on evaluating this properly in large-scale programmes. More needs to be done to ensure the systematic evaluation of these initiatives.

**Improving funding** – Many of the programmes operate on a once-off or project basis while at the same time trying to ensure a long-term impact. Provision of funding should follow a more predictable and sustainable route. In addition, new ways of securing additional private financing should be explored.

### Further information

The report *Social innovation in service delivery: New partners and approaches* is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1354.htm>

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