# SOCIAL INNOVATION WITH ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT: CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

In the future, social innovation in Environment is seen to have an even stronger role in enabling positive changes in behavior and often they have an explicitly local role. However, it is also the ambition of many social innovation initiatives in Environment to bring new solutions to environmental problems in providing a local context to often global environmental problems.

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# **ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND SOCIAL INNOVATION**

Detrimental environmental impact can take a multitude of forms, many of these, like the deterioration of oceans and marine habitats, the stratosphere or rainforests, cannot be felt everyday by individuals on a local level. However, these areas of the environment are influenced by the everyday behavior of individuals on a local level which is often motivated by short-term profit thinking and an emphasis on individual over social benefits (tragedy of the commons).

It is the ambition of many social innovation (SI) initiatives to bring new solutions to environmental problems in providing a local context to often global environmental

Environmental 
goals

♣ Reduce waste
♣ Repair items
♣ Spare food

Social 
goals

♣ Integrate homeless
♣ Engage rural populations
♣ Employ jobless

♣ Start a business
♣ Survive on the market
♣ Grow in size

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problems. SI in the area of Environment combines at least social and environmental goals. However, it seems a particularity of the area that many SIs add economic goals as well (see figure on the goals of SI in environment and below).

A more sustainable economy is a major issue in SI in the area of Environment. This is hinged to more sustainable production chains, to all aspects of the circular economy (i.e. long-lasting design, maintenance, repair, reuse, remanufacturing, refurbishing, and recycling) and to consumer patterns and consumer choice. The strong dependence on consumer choice entails increased awareness of (un)sustainable behavior and puts emphasis on citizens' engagement and inclusion more generally. Manifold challenges in the areas of environmental and climate policy are currently addressed at different levels – national, EU and global; and focus on e.g. climate change, air pollution, energy efficiency, resource efficiency and sustainable consumption & production, biodiversity, or water management and water pollution [1].



Topics of SI in Environment; Wordle

## **SOCIETAL CHALLENGES**

The societal challenge perspective motivates most SI initiatives in the policy field of Environment, more than in any other policy field (except for Poverty Reduction)[2]. It reflects the view that preserving nature seems often against other players' interests, against interests of incumbent industries, against interests of economic growth. The social perspective is integrated in many initiatives through seeking re-employment for vulnerable groups in

labor-intensive activities of SIs that are operating in the market, but it is more often not a first order goal. The realization of winwin-situations lies in the heart of many SI initiatives in the field. What may be useless to some people, may be of high value and use to others. To organize e.g. the change of ownership that grants a second life-cycle to goods that would otherwise have been thrown away (environmental impacts), also provides job opportunities for the less advantaged and supports the re-integration of long-term unemployed (social impacts) at the same time.

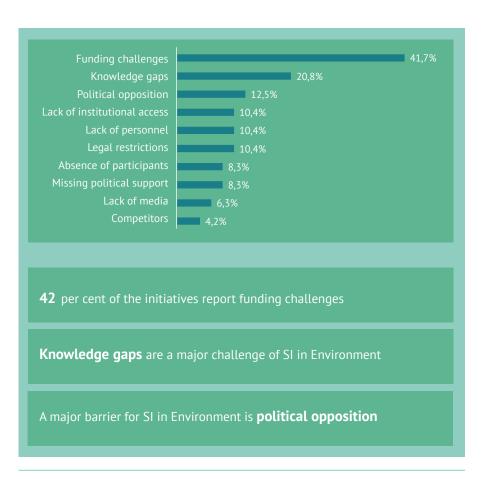
It seems important in this respect that SI initiatives in Environment, more often than in any other policy field, see themselves as part of a social movement, as activists. Accordingly, public bodies are, compared to other policy fields, underrepresented in Environment. In contrast, non-governmental and non-profit organisations are frequent initiators of SI initiatives

and political opposition is mentioned as one of the three major barriers (see respective figure). Many efforts to counter environmental damages and the extinction of species were defeated by the vested interests of those that benefit from the current situation. The consequences are the absence of political support or outright political resistance.

Knowledge about what are the environmental challenges, about waste in all forms, and damages

to oceans or earth's atmosphere on the basis of reliable statistics, is a major source of learning and awareness of consumers and a frame for legitimacy of action at the same time. Its lack represents a major barrier for SI in the area.

Media contributions on the environment, or on SIs are important vehicles to raise awareness, increase knowledge and enhance demand for SI services. Cooperation with media is pursued by social innovators to gain attention and position SIs. Conversely, lack of media (see figure on the barriers of SI in environment) is a barrier for the growth of SI in Environment.



# **FUNDING CHALLENGES**

In Environment, many initiatives rely on private companies. This seems a "special feature" of all three sustainability related areas, i.e. Environment, Energy Supply and Transport and Mobility. The strong involvement of private companies as actors in the SI initiatives in Environment also explains the prominent role of economic returns from own products and services in the funding of these SI initiatives. In general, internal funding through own contributions are most relevant for environmental initiatives (53 %), followed by partner contributions (see figure on the main sources of funding).

As many SI initiatives actually add a third set of goals – economic goals – to their predefined social and environmental goals, latent demand becomes a critical factor. The supply of environmentally motivated, innovative social services often starts without actual estimates of markets, customers, or demand. Initiators of the SI initiatives perceive a tension or societal challenge, often kickstarted by statistics or personal experiences, and they do not have in advance knowledge if their business ideas sell. Successful SIs are those where demand "pops up" as soon as service offerings take concrete form. Thus, SI initiatives have an important role as they provide real feasible alternatives to the existing ways of doing things. But they face additional challenges in coping with economic goals as well.

# 60% 50% 40% 20% 10% Economic return from own products/services Education Energy Supply Transport and Mobility Poverty Reduction Employment Energy Supply Transport and Mobility Health and Social Care

# **POLICY CHALLENGES**

In the policy field of Environment, relations to policy are not one-directional [3].

On the one hand, there is impact from policy on SI. SI initiatives do receive active public support, be it in the form of financing through public programs or buy-ins through politicians. On the other hand, SI initiatives in Environment often develop because they want to have an impact on policy, or compensate for missing policy – social innovators want to influence policy. Here, policy change is in focus and policy is seen as the arena to achieve change. And a third connection to policy is that some social innovators desire explicit measures to support SI initiatives, e.g. more favorable fiscal and legal conditions for SIs to be implemented.

# CONCLUSION – THE FUTURE ROLE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN ENVIRONMENT

The future of SI is very much seen as a bridge between society and government, where governments are in a (governance) crisis and prone to populism. They may provide feasible alternatives to incumbent practices in matching hidden supply and demand (e.g. repair, food waste). Thus, in the future SI is seen to have an even

stronger role in enabling positive changes in behavior and often they have an explicitly local role. However, there is also a fear expressed by many social innovators that the increase of SI is connected to a withdrawal of governments' responsibilities (austerity policies).

Main sources of funding of SIs in Environment

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