

# SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

Social innovation ecosystems enable or inhibit the development of social innovations. They consist of actors from different societal sectors and their environments with legal and cultural norms, supportive infrastructures and many other elements.

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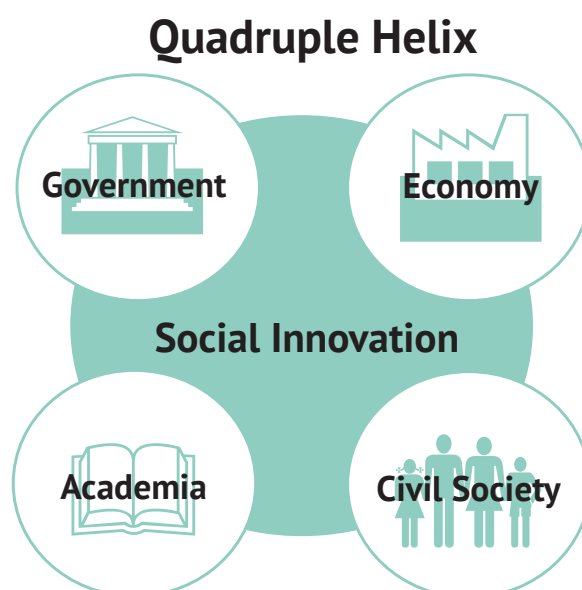
## 1. WHY SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS? A MULTI-SECTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social innovation research does not originate from a systemic concept of innovation (which became dominant in the Innovation Studies during the 1980s), but mainly from quite isolated, often uni-sectoral perspectives or actor-centred approaches. For decades, scientific work in the field of social innovation predominantly focused on social economy and on social entrepreneurship as the main topics. This almost exclusive view fails to recognise other key aspects of a comprehensive concept of social innovation, among them, social innovations in the public sector and the role of business economy as well as of academia. At the same time, contributions regarding such question as “how institutional and social networks and interactions between levels of governance can work to enable or constrain local innovation” [1] have been important for the development of the research field of social innovation.

The need for better understanding the complexity and systemic character of social innovation can also be stressed by taking a closer look at the field of Innovation Studies. While social innovation research has been strongly characterised by focusing on the third sector as the main societal sector and driver of social innovation, or on the social entrepreneur as its protagonist in order to explain how social innovations emerge in societies, concepts such as innovation systems or the triple helix are based upon different components, among them almost always a conceptual operationalisation of drivers, barriers and governance (even if these might be labelled in different terms). The concepts both recognise appropriate constellations of key actors (i.e. in particular universities, industry and government) and complex interactions among them as being important for development of technological innovations. An important question is to what extent such

concept as (national and regional) innovation systems can be useful in order to further develop the concept of social innovation ecosystems.

Empirical results of the SI-DRIVE project show that multiple types of partners are involved in social innovation initiatives. Findings from the project’s global mapping of social innovations confirm that the public and the private sector as well as civil society are relevant for social innovations on a more or less equal footing, with science and research only taking a minor role in social innovation initiatives. Hence, in spite of increasing activities by academia that can be detected in areas such as university social responsibility, social innovation is still far from having a balanced quadruple helix. The potential of science and research remains largely untapped – a strong contrast to the essential role they play in classical innovation processes.



## 2. SOCIAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS: IN SEARCH OF A CONCEPT

A systemic approach to social innovation focuses on the interfaces of the so far differentiated and largely separate self-referential societal sectors of state, business, civil society and academia, of their corresponding rationalities of action and regulation mechanisms, and at the associated problems and problem-solving capacities.

Such collaborations are picked up by at least two different heuristic models, the quadruple helix on the one hand, where government, industry, academia and civil society work together to co-create the future and drive specific structural changes, and the social innovation ecosystem on the other hand, which also asks for interactions between the helix actors, adds the notion of systemic complexity and looks at both, the serendipity and absorptive capacity of a system as a whole. Academic knowledge on social innovation ecosystems is very scarce and the concept is still fuzzy.

The development of a scientific concept of social innovation ecosystems is much more demanding than just trying to adapt concepts such as innovation systems or triple helix to the area of social innovation. This task implies a much better understanding of what social innovation ecosystems are about. One precondition for

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fulfilling this task has to do with understanding social innovation from a multi-sectoral perspective. In this regard social innovation research could learn indeed from the area of Innovation Studies. Another precondition is to comprehend such ecosystems as environments in which social innovations emerge: these innovations are different from technological innovations, which take centre stage in the established concepts mentioned above. Furthermore, the ecosystem perspective goes beyond actor-centred concepts and has to include governance models, potentially supportive infrastructures, and even legal and cultural norms which take effect in a specific ecosystem and which make a difference. Therefore, social innovation ecosystems consist of actors from different societal sectors and their environments.

The results of the first global mapping of social innovation initiatives conducted within the project SI-DRIVE provide empirical insights into these environmental conditions that initiatives are depending on today. They show that

new ways of developing and diffusing social innovations are necessary (e.g. design thinking, innovation labs etc.) as well as the necessity of a new role of public policy and government for creating suitable framework and support structures, the integration of resources of the economy and civil society as well as supporting measures by science and research.

## 3. CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The five key dimensions of social innovation, a methodology used in the SI-DRIVE project, help to better differentiate internal and environmental factors initiatives are facing.

### 3.1 Concepts and understanding of social innovation

The global mapping of SI-DRIVE uncovers countless approaches and initiatives that illustrate the strengths and potentials of social innovations in different parts of the world, with their different economic, cultural, religious and historic backgrounds. Overall, social innovations are gaining in importance, not only in relation to social integration and equal opportunities, but also in respect to the innovative ability and future sustainability of society as a whole. At the same time, the understanding of social innovation varies a lot from actor to actor and also from ecosystem to ecosystem. For example, while in some ecosystems, the understanding of social innovation is mainly influenced by

a strong involvement of cooperatives and a dominant role of the social economy, in other ecosystems the issue of social inclusion through technological innovations shapes the concept. Also common is the lack of a clear understanding of social innovation through those who are part of the ecosystem. Better understanding social innovation, including its relationship to technological innovation and innovations which

seek for economic rather than social value creation, would help the actors within the ecosystems to work in a more targeted way.

### 3.2 Objectives and social demands, societal challenges and systemic changes that are addressed

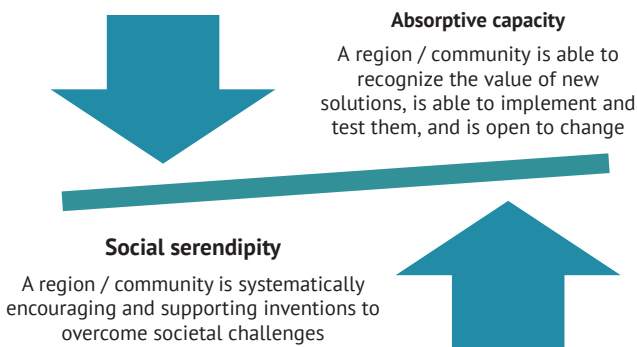
This research dimension focuses on the desired output and motivation of social innovation and its initiatives. With regard to the different levels on which output is generated, BEPA suggests that “the output dimension refers to the kind of value or output that social innovation is expected to deliver: a value that is less concerned with mere profit, and including multiple dimensions of output measurement” [2]. In this understanding, social innovations:

- respond to social demands that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions and are directed towards vulnerable groups in society [...],
- tackle ‘societal challenges’ through new forms of relations between social actors, [...] respond to those societal

challenges in which the boundary between social and economic blurs, and are directed towards society as a whole [...], or contribute to the reform of society in the direction of a more participative arena where empowerment and learning are both sources and outcomes of well-being” [2].

Results of SI-DRIVE's global mapping reveal that actors of innovative projects and initiatives increasingly try to address social needs and societal challenges instead of focusing primarily on economic success and profit. The need to respond to a specific societal challenge or a local social demand are by far the main motivation and trigger for initiating and running a social innovation. More than 60% of the initiatives have started from this perspective.

As the mapping reveals, there is an abundance of approaches and initiatives exploiting the strengths and the potential of social innovation in order to support societal integration through education and poverty reduction, to implement sustainable consumption patterns or to manage demographic change. However, social innovations do not only become increasingly important for ensuring social cohesion and equal opportunities, but also for the innovative capacity and resilience of companies and society as a whole.



Serendipity and absorptive capacity in social innovation ecosystems

### 3.3 Actors, networks and governance

Who are the actors that shape social innovation ecosystems? At a first glance, the answer seems quite obvious: NGOs and NPOs, companies, social enterprises, public authorities, universities and research centres, just to mention the most typical ones. However, it is not always easy to identify what type of organisation is involved in social innovation, as many social innovation actors are hybrid organisations. Also challenging for work on ecosystems is that many actors are actively participating in social innovation initiatives without using the term social innovation and often without even knowing that they are working on social innovations. While social innovations may play an important role in a national or regional ecosystem, an explicit focus by actors is often missing. It is a task of research to consider all relevant actors which requires a careful study of an ecosystem far beyond the usual suspects.

Moreover, a true challenge for both research and practice has to do with the development of new governance models for social innovation ecosystems. Regarding the importance of empowerment, co-creation and citizen involvement for social innovation, traditional patterns and mechanism seem obsolete. Against this background, Sgaragli's approach to social innovation ecosystems in terms of "a paradigm shift where grass-root, bottom-up, spontaneous movements and communities of change are shaping new ecosystems" as well as regarding the "replacement of existing governance models with ones that are more open, inclusive and participatory" [3], opens up a different perspective that needs to be explored through empirical studies.

### 3.4 Process dynamics

Questions about transferability and scalability within a given or to another ecosystem dominate social innovation discourses. Scaling in terms of different modes of organisational growth is a typical way. While scaling is a more prominent strategy within a given ecosystem, transfer and adaptive replication more often takes place in a different setting, which helps to reach completely new target groups. The initiating actors – social entrepreneurs, project managers,

Approach	Strategy	Overview
Replication	'Scaling out'	Organisation attempt to replicate their social innovation in other geographical areas
	'Scaling up'	Organisations attempt to affect a wider system change by tackling the institutional causes of a problem
	Mission networks	A social entrepreneur rids of traditional aspects of organisational control (brand, intellectual property, etc.) to influence and create other 'change makers' within the system
Non-replication	Open Source	The core intellectual property of the innovation or organisation is turned into an open source tool for others to take up
	Other (less explored potential strategies)	Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Affiliation with new partners</li> <li>Direct/indirect dissemination of ideas</li> <li>Working to change policy environments</li> <li>Social movement building</li> </ul>

Summary of main scaling strategies [4]

activists, groups, networks and so on – have a motivation, an intention or a strategy to disseminate their solution for a social problem. There are even further activities an actor can initiate in order to overcome the limits of organisational growth. The summarising table shows the different modes of scaling or dissemination strategies that had been discussed in the Critical Literature Review of SI-DRIVE.

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### 3.5 Resources, capabilities and constraints

Social innovation initiatives are enabled or inhibited through different types of resources, capabilities and constraints, depending on the co-operation of actors, (supporting) networks, cross-sector triple and quadruple helix collaboration, combinations of knowledge backgrounds, user involvement, and institutional conditions. They are closely related to the social innovation ecosystem and infrastructure for social innovations. Resources (financial or other) for social innovation ecosystems are definitely not a big issue on most of policy-makers' agendas. Many ecosystems are poor in terms of resources available for social innovations: funds are scarce, experts are seldom and knowledge is missing.

SI-DRIVE's global mapping shows that lack of funding is the biggest barrier for social innovators and that own resources represent their main financial source. However, it is much

more than just money. Social innovation ecosystems can only develop their full potential if there are people who have the necessary skills to work in this area. Here, universities could play an important role. At the same time, developing capabilities for social innovation ecosystems is a key task for actors from all societal sectors.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The ecosystems of social innovation are in different stages of development across Europe and beyond. In all countries “there are a number of important factors enabling the development of social innovation, including important support and impetus from the EU” [5]. The status of the social innovation activities differs in the different world regions, in regard to the existence of a (shared) understanding of social innovation, the dissemination of the initiatives, the societal challenges addressed, the actors involved, and more. The societal and governance systems, in which the social innovations are embedded, are complex and the problems addressed are deeply rooted in multifaceted societal and structural issues. At the same time, many initiatives are small in scale: Only a minority of social innovations are leaving the narrow context of the initiative and the local or regional level, and if so, mainly scale within the own initiative. Therefore, an important task for future research is not only to better understand social innovation ecosystems themselves (e.g. along the different dimensions presented above), but also to explore connections between ecosystems which would facilitate diffusion of social innovations.

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