Social Platform's position on social innovation

Adopted by the Steering Group on December 3, 2013

Executive summary

The meaning of social innovation – is that it's meaningful. As the name suggests social innovation must ensure the well-being of people and bring added social value. Although there has been increased attention being paid to social innovation across the EU agenda, there is no clear common definition. Without clear criteria to define it you run the risk of limiting public financing to practices which are "innovative" but which are not meaningful or do not necessarily take a comprehensive or long-term approach to social policies and services.

Social Platform and its members have outlined nine criteria which must be (mostly) met in order for a social innovation to be considered meaningful. These range from the novelty of the needs being addressed, to its potential for upscaling, and that it goes beyond just technological innovation for the benefit of users.

Throughout the 4 step process of social innovation (as described by the European Commission) the importance of involving civil society organisations (including organisations representing users, users' associations and non-profit service providers) and social economy actors can-not be overlooked. These organizations can bring added value and have a specific role to play at each stage. Often they are on the frontline in identifying new social needs and understanding what does and does not work. They also play a crucial role in helping to assess the impact of a social innovation on social needs which can help authorities to decide which innovations should be scaled up along with the cost of implementing or not implementing them.

To ensure that the EU and other decision makers play their role in supporting social innovation it is essential that they commit to supporting, facilitating, spreading and making sustainable innovations which are meaningful. This paper also outlines a number of policy recommendations in this regard.

Introduction

Social Platform welcomes the growing attention that the EU's agenda has been paying to social innovation: in particular in the frame of the Europe 2020 Strategy and its Flagship Initiatives (the "European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion", "Innovation Union" and its pilot project "Social Innovation Europe"), the New Skills agenda, the Digital Agenda, the Social Investment Package, as well as in the next generation of EU funds 2014-2020 ("Horizon 2020" - the new research and development programme, the "European Social Fund", the "European Regional Development Fund" and the "European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation").

At the same time, we warn that such a high attention to social innovation may lead to limiting public financing only to those practices which are considered innovative. Without clear criteria to define it it risks jeopardising a comprehensive and long-term approach, including financing, to social policies and services.

Taking into account that there is no common EU definition of social innovation, we consider that it is important to point out what Social Platform understands of this concept and which criteria should be used to identify what is a meaningful social innovation.

The first paragraph of this paper intends to clarify what social innovation means, in order to ensure the well-being of people, and lists which criteria make a social innovation meaningful. The second paragraph describes the role that civil society organisations can play throughout the whole process of social innovation. The third and last paragraph provides decision-makers with policy recommendations.

What do we mean by social innovation? What makes a social innovation meaningful?

There are different definitions in different EU instruments[1].

Notwithstanding what definition is used[2], we consider that a social innovation has to be meaningful for the beneficiaries it is intended to address. It is important to stress that a social innovation has to be distinguished from approaches that are simply new but have no real social added value. In the short term, it is sometimes impossible to measure the social impact. Therefore it is essential that a medium / long-term approach is adopted in the evaluation and measurement of social interventions.

For us a social innovation is meaningful when most of the following criteria are met:

- **Novelty**: the novelty can refer to the new social needs that have to be addressed, to existing practices, approaches or solutions that are applied to a new context or a new social need; or to a new way of applying existing solutions (integration of services or policy approaches between different sectors, combination of existing solutions or approaches, etc.)[3]

- **Focus on unmet/inadequately met/new needs by reinforcing the implementation of human rights**: the innovation clearly identifies a social need that needs to be met in a specific context and is backed up by an analysis showing that existing responses are lacking or insufficient and / or do not adequately include a rights-based approach

- **Assessment sharing:** the innovation contributes to gathering more evidence in an area where evidence is limited or lacking and it is shared with all relevant stakeholders

- **Informs policy development**: the social innovation should also help decision-makers to improve existing approaches, practices, services or policies

- **Potential for up-scaling**: the social innovation could work, or be adapted, for different contexts (transferability) or on a larger scale and therefore could be mainstreamed; scaling-up does not necessarily mean transferring a social innovation from one country to another

- **Participation and involvement of users, promotion and respect of users' rights**: the innovation promotes and respects users' rights; users are associated in the identification of the social need, in the design of responses, and in their implementation and evaluation

- **Participation and involvement of all relevant actors in a specific context**: the innovation involves a partnership of public authorities, civil society organisations, social economy actors and all the actors that may be relevant for the specific innovation (such as researchers and academics, trade unions, where relevant businesses, IT providers, etc.)

---

[1] For instance, the European Union Programme for Employment and social innovation defines "social innovations as innovations that are social both as to their ends and their means and in particular those which relate to the development and implementation of new ideas (concerning products, services and models), that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations, thereby benefiting society and boosting its capacity to act". The European Commission, in its Guide on social innovation, defines it "as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. It represents new responses to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving human well-being. Social innovations are innovations that are social both in their ends and their means".

[2] Social Platform considers the definition from AVISE (Agence d'ingénierie et de service pour entreprendre autrement) a good one: "*L'innovation sociale consiste à élaborer des réponses nouvelles à des besoins sociaux nouveaux ou mal satisfaits dans les conditions actuelles du marché et des politiques sociales, en impliquant la participation et la coopération des acteurs concernés, notamment des utilisateurs et usagers. Ces innovations concernent aussi bien le produit ou service, que le mode d'organisation, de distribution, dans des domaines comme le vieillissement, la petite enfance, le logement, la santé, la lutte contre la pauvreté, l'exclusion, les discriminations… Elles passent par un processus en plusieurs démarches: émergence, expérimentation, diffusion, évaluation.*"

[3] Phils: "Although innovations need not necessarily be original, they must be new to the user, context or application".

- **Goes beyond technological innovation for the benefit of users, is guided by criteria of public interest and promotes social progress**: there is an evaluation showing that the innovation makes improvements for the users (e.g. in terms of promotion of human rights, well-being, quality of life, empowerment, employability, good health, social inclusion, equality, equity regarding gender and diversity etc.)
- **Has a bottom-up approach to innovation** that starts at the local level.

What is the role of civil society organisations throughout the process of social innovation?

Civil society organisations and social economy actors are essential players in social innovation processes. Developing new solutions or improving existing ones in order to adapt to social changes, better meet people's needs, and promote human rights is an intrinsic part of the daily work of civil society organisations.

Even if the concept of innovation comes from the business sector, social innovation is a feature of social economy and civil society organisations. It is addressed by social research and development.

It is important to note that civil society organisations often act as brokers between politicians and researchers or academics. They help bring research results to politics, as well as assist researchers in navigating complex political systems.

The Commission describes social innovation as a four-stage process[4]:

1. Identification of new / unmet / inadequately met social needs
2. Development of new solutions in response to these social needs
3. Evaluation of the effectiveness of new solutions in meeting social needs
4. Scaling up of effective social innovations.

Civil society organisations (including those representing users, users' associations and non-profit service providers) and social economy actors have a specific role to play and bring added value to each stage of the process[5].

Civil society involvement in research leads to demonstrated better, more relevant results[6].

First step: Identification of new / unmet / inadequately met social needs

Civil society organisations and social economy actors are often on the frontline of identifying social needs, new or unmet or inadequately met, because they are in direct contact with users on the ground (e.g. new typology of users coming to a service, users with multiple complex needs, reasons why new users come to a service, etc.) and on this basis they have a strong understanding of the needs and rights of users and beneficiaries. Furthermore, they are often able to collect data that is not available to authorities (for instance on undocumented migrants; on which sectors of the population are mostly affected by the economic crisis – in some countries the crisis has affected people that beforehand were not in need; on new groups experiencing poverty– e.g. men separated from their partner, the working-poor…).

Therefore, public authorities should always involve civil society organisations in a partnership approach, to more effectively identify a new or unmet or inadequately met social need. The actors concerned by that specific social need (future beneficiaries) also need to be associated in the identification of the need, as well as other relevant actors present in a specific context.

Second step: Development of new solutions in response to the social needs identified

---

[4] European Commission, *Guide to social innovation,* February 2013, p. 6

[5] The following considerations have been inspired by the grid of criteria developed by AVISE to detect a meaningful social innovation and by the *Briefing on social innovation in social services* by Social Services Europe.

[6] http://www.livingknowledge.org/livingknowledge/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/STACS_Final_Report-Partic.research.pdf

Civil society organisations and social economy actors are also on the frontline in the development of responses to social needs and reinforcement of human rights. They have an understanding of solutions that work, that do not work, or that need to be improved. This is embedded in their social objective that is manifested in their statutes and mission statements. As social needs change rapidly in society for different reasons, they are naturally confronted with situations where they need to give answers to new or insufficiently met needs. Therefore they often find themselves in the position of developing new and creative solutions at ground level.

For this reason, it is important that institutions involve civil society and social economy organisations, as essential actors who can contribute to the development of new responses, beginning from their design to their implementation, as well as in the governance processes. At this stage the involvement of users and other relevant stakeholders is also crucial. Institutions should provide funding opportunities for social experimentations which are accessible to all relevant actors, including civil society organisations, and that require the involvement of users.

Third step: Evaluation of the effectiveness of new solutions in meeting social needs

Social experimentations and innovations need to be assessed to identify if their impact is positive and meaningful. Depending on the experimentation / innovation, evaluations should be qualitative and / or quantitative. Universities and research centers can be involved at any stage, but it might be particularly valuable for them to be involved in this stage.

Civil society and social economy organisations should be involved to ensure that the evaluation process assesses the pertinence of the response to the identified social need, so that it is not only driven by efficiency gains and goes beyond pure technological innovation. Of course meaningful experimentations / innovations can prove to be sustainable in the longer term, but economic sustainability should not be their sole driving force as for some responses public financing will always be essential.

Users and all relevant stakeholders have to be involved in evaluations. It is worthwhile for evaluations to assess other direct or indirect impacts on other social needs and on other factors, such as economic development in a specific area and the impact on job creation, on the environment and ecological transitions, on new forms of work and of enterprises.

Fourth step: Scaling up of effective social innovations

Once it has been assessed that experimentations are potentially suitable to be transferred or scaled up[7], civil society and social economy organisations should assist policy-makers in the decision on which experimentations could and should be scaled up, taking into account users' needs and the costs of implementing or not implementing innovative solutions. This involves also readapting existing legislation and regulation, if needed.

Policy recommendations

Decision-makers have a role to play in supporting social innovation, throughout the whole process, but in particular the third and fourth stage.

It is essential that decision-makers and institutions commit to supporting, facilitating, spreading and making sustainable innovations which are meaningful. In particular, the EU has a role to play when it comes to the promotion of exchanges of good practices, funding projects (research and development, social experimentations, evaluations, assessment of transferability and scaling-up), transferring social innovations in services or policies, and promoting a shift from a project-based approach to long-term strategies. The EU should also support the development of environments favourable to social economy, such as support structures that can provide different forms of advice to project leaders.

---

[7] AVISE suggests as indicators the capacity of project leaders to set up new actors in other areas (e.g. *essaimage,* consortia), the willingness of other actors to develop the project in another area, the fact that the project is mainstreamed in a bottom-up approach and institutions intend to transpose the project into policy interventions.

- The primary aim of social innovation is not to save public money: social innovations can contribute to promoting efficiency and effectiveness in social services and policies, but it's not their *raison d'être.* If a reduction in costs implies a decrease in the quality of the service or the policy intervention, it cannot be considered a social innovation. Especially in the case of social services - which contribute to the enjoyment of human rights - social innovation should not aim at replacing the state responsibility for ensuring high standards of living and working conditions.

- Public authorities, foundations and the EU should financially support social experimentations and social policy experimentations, whilst recognizing that experimentations can also fail. Failure should not mean that finance is automatically withdrawn or not disbursed.

- Public authorities, foundations and the EU should not finance the scaling-up of social innovations without first assessing that they benefit users and people. Funding opportunities from the EU and public authorities should include support for gathering evidence concerning a social experimentation or innovation (qualitative and quantitative analysis), research and evaluation of results.

- Funding opportunities from the EU, public authorities and foundations should strike a balance between the experimentation of new innovations and ensuring the sustainability in the medium and long term of proved meaningful innovations. For this reason, it is important that funding is ensured not only to support experimentations and projects, but along the whole chain, including evaluations and transferability. Finally, public authorities should have the ultimate responsibility for the sustainability of social innovations.

- Social experimentation and social service innovation should lead to social policy innovation. In particular, in the social service sector it is important that innovation is mainstreamed through policies and not through short-term projects, as this can jeopardize the continuity and comprehensiveness of the services provided.

- Processes that lead to social innovation should also be considered part of social innovation: for example, social innovation should also encompass the design of health and social care systems and how care is delivered, including for example alternative housing concepts, as they trigger innovation. This should extend to best practices for training and the retention of health and social workforces.

- The EU should give priority to funding social experimentations and social innovations that contribute to the achievement of EU strategies, such as the Europe 2020 strategy, the Active Inclusion strategy, and the Social Investment Package.

- The European Commission should promote a collaborative approach between the different DGs (Employment and Social Affairs, Enterprise, Internal Market and Services, Research, Regional Affairs, Public Health, Justice, Communication networks, content and technologies), as well as a partnership with civil society organisations, social economy actors, national, regional and local authorities, universities and research centres and other relevant actors in the development of social innovation programmes and policy.

- The European Commission should ensure that civil society organisations have access to all funding programmes that support social innovation (research and development, employment and social affairs, cohesion policy funds, competitiveness and innovation framework programme), including in the capacity of lead partners.

- The EU should play a role in supporting the transfer of social innovations from one context to another beyond national boundaries: including a thorough examination and assessment of the feasibility, to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. In fact transferring a social innovation from one country to another is not always feasible.

- The funding of social innovation at EU level is often linked to the social and economic return on investment. This is an important but very delicate process. In measuring the social impact, it should be possible to choose among the existing methodologies and tools, the ones which suit best the specific innovation. Public authorities and investors should avoid supporting financially only those social innovations whose results can be easily measured, while neglecting meaningful initiatives that address very complex needs and whose impact can be assessed

only in a medium or long term. Any project should be given sufficient time to be able to demonstrate its social impact.

- While transferring innovations to a different context, where relevant use the existing mechanisms that protect the intellectual property rights of innovators (patents) and balance the public interest of having access to essential innovations, in line with EU commitments under the Millennium Development Goals and the Doha Declaration on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights and Public Health. Facilitate the transferring of innovations, where relevant, by favoring "*essaimage*", creation of partnerships or consortia[8], which are more suitable to social economy actors.

- The EU should play a role and encourage the dissemination of results of social innovation projects, e.g. by developing a proper and lively tool (database, repository) to facilitate dissemination, exchange of practices, synergies and link-up between relevant actors.

- As part of the social innovation exploration at EU level, Horizon 2020 offers an excellent opportunity for the EU to explore new models of innovation that ensures research results in affordable and accessible services and technologies. This programme allows the experimentation of research models that prevent socializing the risks of investment while privatizing the profits of innovation by ensuring the public receives a return on its investment.

- The EU and Member States should recognise that market-driven research and development (R&D) must be supplemented with additional incentives for needs-driven R&D, as well as initiatives to ensure that these advances are affordable and accessible[9].

- For many civil society organisations that conduct or use research, limited access to studies represents a barrier. This requirement applies to research supported in whole, or in part, by EU funds. Open access to results and data, or additional exploitation, and dissemination should be promoted. This will allow research to address societal challenges. In many areas there is an overwhelming public interest for swift and broad dissemination of results and in universal accessibility products. Open access allows the results of publicly-funded research to be made more accessible and available, improving research information systems through fostering collaboration and interoperability.

Contact person for this paper:

Valentina Caimi – Policy Adviser
Telephone +32 (0)2 5081636 – email: valentina.caimi@socialplatform.org

---

[8] "*essaimage*" of social innovation consists in a geographical extension of social innovations without having recourse to a company group, consortium or holding. Every social enterprise "essaimée" keeps its juridical independence and its own governance models. Only the adherence to a Charter and to the principles which are defined by the trademark guarantees that the social enterprise "essaimée" complies with the initial social innovation. The word "consortia" is used in general terms, without referring to any existing national definition.

[9] For example, the World Health Organization initiative on Consultative Expert Working Group on Research and Development: Financing and Coordination