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PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF THE PERFORMANCE OF THE COMPETENCE CENTRE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADJUSTMENTS

Deliverable.4.2

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Participatory evaluation of the performance of the competence centre and recommendations for adjustments

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I. Introduction

SI PLUS aim is to provide professional support services for development and scaling social innovation. It intends to establish national competence centres in four countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia in order to support ESF Managing Authorities in planning and implementing subsidy programs for boosting social innovations, as well as social innovators in order to benefit from these programs.

This report focuses on the participatory evaluation of the performance of the competence centre pilot activities in Bulgaria and provides recommendations for adjustments.

The purpose of SI PLUS Activity 4 in Bulgaria was to go through the entire cycle of selecting pilot projects for scaling up and their scale-up implementation – also referred to as scale, replication, and expansion - and learn from this experience. More specifically:

- Factors/principles of successful scaling.
- How do we know the scaling is successful - participatively developed key performance indicators (KPIs).
- How can we use the acquired knowledge in the light of the Bulgarian Center for Social Innovation competences.

II. Pilot scaling up

Selecting pilots for scaling up followed a three-step process:

1. Participative identification of social innovation projects suitable and relevant for scaling up.
2. Creating a supportive environment and implementation of the social innovation solution.
3. Evaluation of results.

The first pilot project selected for scaling up was renovating and enlivening an open-air urban stage in one of Sofia neighbourhoods with the aim to strengthen the local community, to increase cultural participation and make attractive peripheral and run-down areas. The initiators mobilized community resources such as unused paint and materials, and voluntary design and labour to regenerate an open-air stage and started a community festival to enliven the stage and set the model of its community programming and use. The pilot is relevant and useable for numerous large cities with underprivileged areas.

The second social innovation pilot selected for scaling up was The Bureau for information and services for third-country nationals – a joint initiative of Sofia Municipality and a few NGOs and companies. Sofia Municipality provides the venue, the Bulgarian Red Cross – social workers, Sofia Development Association - staff and Bureau own events, around 15 NGOs provide services on rotational principle. The pilot project became very relevant with the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the refugee influx.

However, while launching and then scaling a pilot sounds like a perfectly logical strategy, there is plenty of evidence that shows that even successful pilot projects often don't lead to successful scaled implementations.

There are many reasons that a pilot project can look good. The people chosen to participate are often particularly receptive to trying new things, they often feel they're "special" for being chosen and therefore work particularly hard (a variation of the Hawthorne effect), extra staff provide training and support, managers are incentivized to make the pilot work, and the usual cultural and administrative barriers to change are temporarily suspended.

But during a wide-scale rollout these conditions no longer exist. Instead, everyone is told to follow specific directions to ensure that the new approach is implemented consistently, training and support are spread thin, there is no relief from other goals, and the change is often viewed as just one more requirement on top of everything else.

No two people will use the tool or solution in exactly the same way, nor will they necessarily have the same conditions around them. Motivation, skill, comfort with the old way of working, and a host of other factors become as important in achieving the desired outcome as the tool itself. And in many cases, there are multiple organizations or units, comprised of tens, hundreds, and thousands of people that need to work together in new ways, using the new solution, in order to achieve the desired outcome. No wonder that so many major rollouts fail despite a successful pilot.

III. Participatory evaluation

a/ Process

The SI Plus approach to participatory scaling, monitoring and evaluation followed the community coalition building and co-design and co-creation. The process included social innovators, representatives of vulnerable groups, policymakers, programme managers, applied researchers and trainers, both during meetings back-to-back with other relevant events (such as Academy for Visionaries¹; AGORA Interreg Danube funded project², Sofia Culture and Creativity partnership³ and others), and online. Most of the respondents that participated in D1.1. and D1.2., as well as stakeholders linked with the two pilots, were engaged in the participative evaluation. The major practical scaling-up lessons emerging from these deliberations.

¹ <https://www.themayor.eu/en/a/view/sofia-seeks-young-people-s-innovative-ideas-in-academy-for-visionaries-2023-11637?trans=en-US>

² <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/agora>

³ <https://www.sofia-da.eu/en/news/3021-партньорство-култура-и-креативност-2.html>

b/ Lessons learned

As the two pilot projects were being scaled up and unfolded, the lessons learned emerging from these experiments got richer, creating more and more local evidence and building blocks for subsequent experiments of success.

- Pilot or experimental projects are of limited value unless they have larger policy and programme impact. Even with one or two scale-up opportunities, these social innovations would still follow acupuncture approach unless they also result in policy, or policy instrument changes.
- Even proven social innovations cannot simply be handed over with the expectation that they will automatically become part of routine programme implementation, with little or no practical guidance on how to proceed with scaling up.
- Taking a more generative, customized approach to scaling a pilot isn't as straightforward or fast as just telling everyone to implement a specific pilot-tested solution or tool – but it gives you a much greater chance of large-scale, durable impact. Instead of expecting (or pushing) those that scale up to use exactly the same tools, steps, resources, it is important to help communities analyze their own data to understand the issues and stakeholders, create their own alliances to accelerate their progress towards the same targets.
- Scaling up must be concerned with sustainable policy and programme development, including both institutional capacity and availability of financial resources. Scaling up often involves an institution-building task that requires a variety of special technical, managerial, human resource, leadership, and financial inputs as well as longer timeframes than typical project cycles.
- Public reporting of the scale up process is critical for gaining and maintaining community and public trust – and therefore the success of the scale-up process. Special attention to monitoring and evaluation is needed as scaling up proceeds to ensure that results inform strategic adjustments and adaptations.

c/ KPIs

How to determine if the project/scale was successful? This is where the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) come into play. Setting specific and measurable targets early on, at the planning stage, in order to define what success (or failure!) looks like, will reduce uncertainty and help inform the decision process.

But what type of KPIs should you use to measure the performance of a new solution that has never been tested before? The SI PLUS stakeholders identified these 6 metrics:

1/ *User satisfaction*

Build a survey and set a "satisfaction target" to measure the satisfaction of the future potential users of the product or service your organization is testing. Keep it simple - "how likely are you to recommend this new product or service?" - using a scale of 1 to 5. Make sure to survey enough people to get statistically significant results

2/ *Numeric goal to track usage*

Setting a numeric goal to track usage, such as a target number of users or of deliverables – e.g. 100 residents will sign up for the new service or 5 sensors will be installed - is very helpful, especially when rolling out a new product or a new service that did not exist before.

3/ *Percentage (or numerical) target to measure engagement*

Setting a goal in percentage, such as a target share of users or a target percentage of usage – e.g. 10% of the employees will use the new service or the service will be accessible to 80% of the residents, or minimum 15 organizations representing different stakeholders - is a good place to start with a new social innovation that hasn't been implemented before.

4/ *A savings target to measure efficiency*

Keeping in mind the interlinked targets of the Green, Just and Digital transition, savings targets are critical to measure the expected economy made or reduction in resources (time and money!) resulting from the implementation of the social innovation – e.g. 20% reduction in water usage or 15% reduction in waiting time or unemployment benefits.

5/ *A growth goal to assess impact*

Growth is the best way to measure the expected impact and the improvement generated by the implementation of a new service or product – e.g. 15% increase in ridership or 20% increase in user satisfaction.

6/ *Implementing organization/s capacity*

At the end of the day social innovations depend on the champions and policy entrepreneurs who promote them and advocate for them, therefore the capacity of the organization is critical – e.g. 10% of staff trained or the organizations participates in at least one consultative body.

IV. Relevant learning takeaways for the Social Innovation Competence Center

A. Definition

Key lessons learnt about successful scaling up shape the definition of scaling up used in previous project deliverables. The adapted proposed definition is:

“Scaling up is defined as deliberate efforts to increase the impact of social innovations successfully tested in pilot or experimental projects so as to benefit more people and to foster policy and programme development on a lasting basis.”

“Deliberate efforts” mark scaling up as a guided process, in contrast to spontaneous diffusion of innovations. “Successfully tested” points out to the need to have local evidence of the relevance and effectiveness of the practice. “Policy and programme development on a lasting basis” points to the importance of institutional capacity building and sustainability in scaling up: developing, establishing, and sustaining the political support, managerial structures, human and budgetary resources, and service components necessary for successful large-scale programmes and policies.

B. Strategic choices

The experience gained by SI PLUS Bulgarian partners and stakeholders and the deliberations regarding the Social Innovations Competence Center point out to a number of strategic choices that need to be made in order to guarantee efficiency and effectiveness. Some of them are presented below.

- Ensure that the resource team or organization has necessary skills and capacities. The resource team or organization refers to the individuals and organizations that seek to promote and facilitate wider user of the innovation. The resource team serves as a catalyst for change and provides guidance and technical assistance to the deliberate efforts to utilize the innovation on a large scale. Researchers, programme managers, trainers, service providers, community representatives, advocates and policymakers are examples of people who may play this role. Representatives of various organizations—government, NGOs, research centres and technical assistance agencies—can make up the resource team.

- Involve the user organizations in a participatory process. This includes co-development of calls, of training opportunities, demo sites selection, indicators, communication, and dissemination, to name a few areas.
- Locate the resource team as closely to the user organization as possible to promote effective communication. This is particularly valid for a heavily centralized country like Bulgaria, where certain tensions between the capital city and the countryside exist, in addition to significant territorial inequalities.
- Offer a guided process from the outset. Tailor the social innovation to the context. Cooperate with the implementing organization beyond funding and reporting. When consideration is given to the outcome during the development of the interventions, they tend to be attuned to a given policy, programmatic, economic, and sociocultural context, and therefore are likely to be “doable”. Developing nationwide programmes begin with policy dialogue and move through experimental and replication research phases, before scaling up is initiated. Such approaches involve policymakers, programme managers and other users of research in conscious deliberations of the financial and organizational requirements of scaling up an innovation from the outset.
- Design research (M&E) to test the innovation in the light of the objectives of the programme and decision-makers expectations.
- Support user organization ownership of the innovation and process.
- Use multiple channels to tell a compelling story (identifying key audiences (policymakers, managers, providers, community members, professional groups, donors, and others) and learning about their different informational needs; tailoring messages and format to each audience; presenting data clearly, concisely and in a timely manner, so that they are relevant and usable).
- Organize training strategies to address both content and process.
- Use successful demos for multiple purposes - opportunities for learning, dissemination, additional testing, advocacy, etc.
- Develop appropriate indicators for process, outputs/outcomes, and results/impacts, and combine them with quantitative success stories to capture the wholistic picture.

C. Key performance indicators

Examples of possible indicators for monitoring the Social Innovation Competence Center **process** include:

- extent to which essential features of social innovation developed and implemented;

- extent of community participation and resources mobilisation and support for the innovation;
- extent that management tools and procedures are used to address constraints;
- appropriate adaptation of innovation;
- adjustment of social innovation strategy based on findings of monitoring and evaluation.

Monitoring and evaluation should also be able to capture the outputs/outcomes of the Social Innovation Competence Center operations.

Examples of indicators of **outputs/outcomes** include:

- number of sites/organizations implementing the innovation;
- number of start-ups and scale-ups supported;
- evidence of political support;
- use of local and national resources to support the innovation;
- client and community satisfaction with services that include the innovation;
- number of successful participants in the Competence Center professional development courses, online training courses and other education/training activity delivered, including data on gender;
- number of success stories per year;

Monitoring and evaluation also needs to examine the overall **results/impacts** of Social Innovation Competence Center operations and its sustainability.

Examples of indicators of the results/impacts are:

- number of people with access to quality social innovation services/products over time has increased;
- number of previously underserved persons using improved services has increased;
- the innovation is incorporated into the programmatic and technical standards, norms and practices of local/national government and other relevant systems;
- policy influence – integration of social innovation approach into government strategies or programmes, adoption or amendment in policies;
- the innovation is funded through national and local budgets/total EUR amount of private and public capital attracted;
- social and economic status has improved.

V. Conclusion

Scaling up is a never-ending relationship building and partnership development activity. The roles, rules and institutions evolve in the process, and assumption for determining them change.

Fostering lasting change is not solely a rational process of looking at evidence and acting accordingly; the ingenuity, passions and commitment of those who support and implement the process play a key role in success.

Fostering social innovations is a social, political, and institutional process that engages multiple actors, interest groups and organizations. It often involves struggles for influence and conflicting interests, and therefore is not neutral. The real world is disorderly. Launching and scaling up social innovations to ensure equitable access to quality lifestyle will require that advocates appreciate this disorder and decipher how to navigate it.

As an institution-building task, building capacities for social innovations requires longer time horizons than those frequently mandated by funding programmes and expected by policy-makers keen to show results. Patience, persistence, flexibility, and a sense of humour are essential in negotiating complex bureaucratic systems.

Appendix 1: List of abbreviations

D	Deliverable
ESF	European Social Fund
EUR	Euro
KPI	Key performance indicator
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental organization