



Social Innovation Plus –  
Competence Centres

# Social innovations support system in the Slovak Republic from ESF+ until 2030

June 2023

Developed for the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic

Authors: Mgr. Zuzana Polačková, M.A., PhD.  
Mgr. Jana Žišková

The text has not undergone language editing.



This project is supported by the European Social Fund  
and the Employment and Social Innovations Programme.

## Contents

<b>Social innovations in the context of strategic documents .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Starting points and main challenges in the field of social innovations support .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The principle of partnership in promoting social innovations .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The principle of impact measurement and evaluation in the promotion of social innovations .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The main instruments for supporting social innovations in Slovakia from ESF+ .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>National Competence Centre for Social Innovations .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Main tasks of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Institutional and personnel arrangements for the Secretariat of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Advisory Board of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Financial support allocated from the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027 .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>New selection and evaluation system for Priority 4P7 projects .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Two-round selection of projects .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Participation of interested parties in the call preparation process .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Sources .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Annexes .....</b>	<b>23</b>

### List of abbreviations

4P7	Priority Social Innovations and Experiments
ESF+	European Social Fund plus
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
MoLSAF SR	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic
NRF	Non-repayable funds
NCCSI	National Competence Centre for Social Innovations
NSRDI 2030	National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovations 2030
OP HR	Operational Programme Human Resources
PP	Project plan
FIF	Funds Implementation Framework
MA/IB	Managing Authority/Intermediate Body
P SK	Programme Slovakia 2021 – 2027

## Social innovations in the context of strategic documents

Social innovations<sup>1</sup> is an essential element of success in the process of finding, proposing and implementing new approaches to address societal challenges. In a period of parallel crises, ageing populations, environmental change, increasing social polarisation and other megatrends affecting the social order, social innovations have an important role to play in the search for a new social order and effective public policies.

The importance of social innovations and the importance of a functional system to support social innovations is also recognised in a number of strategic documents adopted at the national level.

[The National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovations 2030](#) (hereinafter referred to as the Strategy), sees social innovations as an alternative to commonly used, but often failing, tools in areas such as education, inclusion, generational poverty or trust building. The Strategy aims to create conditions within which the state is ready to initiate and use social innovations in a broader societal, cultural and inclusive context, and to embed its definition in the forthcoming law on research, development and innovations. The action plan of the Strategy dedicates two separate measures to social innovations, aiming at the existence of a sustainable system of support for social innovations and the existence of a permanent grant scheme to support social innovations across the entire life cycle. The Strategy was elaborated as part of Component 9 of the Slovak Republic Recovery Plan entitled “More effective management and strengthening of funding for research, development and innovations” and its creation was initiated by the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, which is also acting as a responsible authority.

Simultaneously with the Recovery and Resilience Plan, the [Programme Slovakia 2021-2027](#) also addresses social innovations. This is the basic framework of priorities for the development of the Slovak Republic until 2030 and includes the topic of social innovations among the main priorities of policy objective 4 More social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. In the programming period 2021-2027, for the first time in the history of Slovakia, the topic of social innovations is given a separate priority called Social Innovations and Experiments, also referred to as 4P7, with a financial allocation of almost EUR 70 million. The priority funds will be aimed at social innovations as defined in the ESF+ regulation.

---

<sup>1</sup>The word “social” in the term “social innovations” needs to be understood in a broader connotation linked to the word “societal”. The adjective “social” in the term “social innovations” is understood in the sense of “societal”. The term “social innovations” is well established in Slovakia and is also used in this document. However, its meaning is by no means restricted to the field of social innovations or social services. On the contrary, it is seen as synonymous with “societal innovations”.

Support will be given to the introduction of innovations, pilot testing and validation, as well as the spreading of innovative solutions with proven positive impact and their possible transfer to the relevant system. An important part of the support will be to measure and monitor impacts of the innovations and experiments implemented.

In addition to social innovations, a part of the financial allocation will also be dedicated to supporting the social innovations ecosystem by building and developing innovations infrastructure in the regions, using the capacities of citizens and involving partners from different sectors. The funds will be used to build and develop capacities for the development and spreading of innovations and the training of actors in the regions.

In the Programme Slovakia 2021 - 2027, social innovations will be supported in accordance with the definition under the ESF+ regulation<sup>2</sup> article 2, paragraph 8, which states that social innovation is “an activity, that is social both as to its ends and its means and in particular an activity which relates to the development and implementation of new ideas concerning products, services, practices and models, that simultaneously meets social needs and creates new social relationships or collaborations between public, civil society or private organisations, thereby benefiting society and boosting its capacity to act”.

## Starting points and main challenges in the field of social innovations support

The main challenges in the support and development of social innovations in Slovakia were described in the mapping study “[Report on the state of the social innovations ecosystem in Slovakia](#)” (Polačková, Pongrácz, 2022) (hereafter referred to as the Report), which was published by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic in February 2022. The Report largely confirms the results of previous research activities. Therefore, it can be stated that building an ecosystem for the support and functioning of social innovations in Slovakia has long been on the sidelines of public policies and the topic has not gained adequate attention.

The findings and main recommendations summarised in the Report are divided into four groups, each representing a separate topic. These are conceptualisation of social innovations, which includes recommendations on the general perception of social innovations in Slovakia; inter-sectoral and multidisciplinary cooperation, which appears to be one of the conditions for successful social innovation. The third topic is the area of financial support, which includes issues of redistribution and flexibility of financial resources. The fourth area is non-financial support, which can be considered at

---

<sup>2</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing the Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013

least as important as the financial support. Recommendations towards the forthcoming competence centre for social innovations are also included in this topic.

The list of key findings can be summarised as follows:

- Conceptualising social innovations:
  - the topic of social innovations as a respected tool for overcoming various societal challenges is almost completely absent in the political discourse in Slovakia and support for social innovations is mainly of a declarative nature,
  - the perception of the characteristics of “social innovation” is not sufficiently established in Slovakia, also the adjective “social” in its narrow perception is limiting in the discussion of social innovations,
  - proven social innovations is rarely accepted and scaled up at a systemic level.
- Inter-sectoral and multidisciplinary cooperation
  - the principle of multidisciplinary in solving societal challenges is not fully established in Slovakia; the creation of multidisciplinary teams needs to be and can be systematically promoted,
  - the involvement of public institutions, especially the ministries themselves, is crucial for the success of social innovations; the success of social innovation is never the result of one sector.
- Financial support for social innovations and its redistribution
  - the support for social innovations itself and support for the social innovations ecosystem are often confused, with little consideration given to the different stages of the innovations spiral when setting up the financial support,
  - the method of evaluation and selection of applications for Non-repayable funds (NRF) in the field of social innovations needs to be significantly revised to take into account the specific characteristics of social innovations and the different phases of the innovations spiral,
  - the development and testing of social innovations can also be carried out through direct support to social innovators.
- Non-financial support of social innovations
  - there is no organisation/platform acting as a key provider of non-financial support for social innovations,
  - a serious problem in the implementation of social innovations, especially with regard to regions, is the lack of appropriate human capital,
  - awareness of social innovations is highly imbalanced,

- there is also no training or support in the form of mentoring or incubation programmes and the exchange of experience, good practice and systematic networking is only sporadic.

In the context of financial support, the need to change the way of evaluation and selection of projects focused on social innovations was also identified by the [External Evaluation of the Operational Programme Human Resources for the programming period 2014-2020](#) (MoLSAF SR,2020) aimed at evaluating the previous experience with the support of innovative activities from ESF. Based on the results of the evaluation, it is possible to conclude in particular that:

- there was no clear definition of social innovations, there were no clear rules on what is considered innovations and what are its criteria, which resulted in a subjective approach to the definition of social innovation throughout the project cycle,
- the setting of calls and evaluation criteria in the traditional way did not take into account the specificity of innovative projects and the potential for failure, this was particularly evident in the setting of measurable indicators and the conditions for their fulfilment,
- the administrative system was unnecessarily detailed and often cumbersome, not allowing the necessary flexibility for longer projects,
- the calls did not support capacity building in the field of social innovations (for NGOs, SMEs and public administration),
- the application of de minimis aid schemes was also limiting.

The evaluation findings also identified limits on the part of applicants/implementers of projects focusing on social innovations/innovative solutions, including in particular:

- low quality of projects submitted, both in terms of content and fulfilment of formal criteria
- (mis)understanding of the parameter of “innovativeness” as a unique solution and the absence of the characteristic features of social innovations
- persistent (lack of) knowledge of social innovations in the regions of the Slovak Republic and consequently limited capacity to implement innovative projects in the territory.

The findings of both reports (MoLSAF SR, 2020; Polačková, Pongrácz, 2022) suggest that the standard mechanism used in Slovakia for the evaluation and selection of projects implemented with the help of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) has proven to be ineffective in the context of support for social innovations and needs to be reconsidered.

The emphasis on the importance of social innovations strengthens the ability of society to respond more flexibly to changing societal needs. In view of the identified challenges for social innovations in Slovakia, in the period up to 2030, i.e. the year of implementation of the two above-mentioned strategic materials<sup>3</sup>, which are crucial for the development of social innovations in Slovakia in the near future, the development of a supportive environment in Slovakia needs to focus complementarily on four key objectives, which are:

- raising the awareness of the importance of social innovations and strengthening its presence
- stabilizing the definition and perception of social innovations
- ensuring the access to funding to support social innovations at all stages of development and an ecosystem of social innovations in all regions of Slovakia
- ensuring access to the non-financial support needed for the development of social innovations and the enabling environment

The four objectives cannot be achieved in isolation. As the Report suggests, social innovation is never the result of one organization or one sector. Also, the definition of social innovation adopted in the ESF+ Regulation relies heavily on one of the main characteristics of social innovation, which is the creation of new social relations and the cooperation of a wide range of actors. The principle of partnership and open cooperation should therefore be seen as fundamental also in the pursuit of the four objectives mentioned above.

The second fundamental principle in promoting social innovations is measurement and evaluation, with an emphasis on impact evaluation. This is key both for efforts to scale social innovations and to increase the visibility of social innovations. The essence of social innovation is built on the search for more effective and better solutions than previous ones. The effectiveness of new solutions can best be argued through exact facts obtained by applying appropriate evaluation methods, collecting relevant data, correctly interpreting the collected data and formulating adequate success indicators.

An effective response to the challenges of supporting social innovations is offered by the plan of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR to support the development and functioning of the so-called National Competence Centre for Social Innovations, which is intended as a central contact point for the field of social innovations and to act as the main platform for linking actors relevant to social innovations.

The National Competence Centre for Social Innovations (NCCSI) was established as part of the European Commission's initiative to strengthen cooperation between ESF and EaSI components in the ESF+ programme in order to exploit the full potential in promoting social innovations and to improve

---

<sup>3</sup> the National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovations 2030 and the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027



transnational cooperation, as the promotion of social innovations is one of the key challenges of the programming period 2021-2027. The established National Competence Centres for Social Innovations in individual EU countries will be networked through the European Competence Centre for Social Innovations based in Lithuania ([European Social Fund Agency](#)).

## The principle of partnership in promoting social innovations

The attention paid to social innovations in the strategic documents adopted at national level is certainly partly conditioned by the emphasis given to the importance of social innovations by the international community as well as by the academic community. Although the term social innovation has been defined in the ESF+ regulation, creating a binding definition for the use of ESF+, a wide range of other definitions are used by donors for other support schemes. Academic literature offers a wide range of definitions, none of which are used universally. Despite the different approaches to defining social innovations, there is a consensus in the professional community that social innovation is defined rather by a set of fundamental characteristics, which include:

- explicit orientation towards addressing a specific societal challenge;
- achieving objectives through inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation;
- bringing together a wide range of actors and orientation towards achieving consensus-accepted new/unique solutions;
- striving for scaling and replication of developed and proven solutions;
- long-term sustainability and potential to bring about systemic change;

Collaboration of a wide range of actors, sectors or disciplines/fields and their interconnection both horizontally and vertically can be seen as one of the main characteristics and principles of social innovation.

However, the findings of the mapping study suggest that the involvement of a wide range of actors representing different sectors or disciplines is not common in Slovakia. Inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation is often limited by high levels of mutual prejudice and mistrust, as well as by strict demarcation of disciplines or sectors by donors.

Involving a wide range of actors in the preparation and building of a supportive ecosystem for social innovations and respecting the principle of partnership is indispensable for being able to take into account the range of aspects (regional, sectoral, social, economic human rights, etc.) that need to be taken into account in the process of preparing and building a supportive environment. The ability to take into account a wide range of perspectives helps achieve a higher quality of both the overall

process of preparation and the resulting tools that will be crucial for the development of social innovations in Slovakia.

In addition to the involvement of relevant central government departments, the involvement of representatives of local and regional government, the non-governmental sector, academia, the business sector and, in particular, social innovators is also expected. Care should also be taken to involve those with relevant expertise in behavioural sciences, social sciences, or evaluation theory and practice, data collection and data analysis.

These interested groups must be given the opportunity to participate fully in the development of tools aimed at supporting social innovations itself, as well as in the identification and evaluation of strategic decisions regarding the creation of a supportive ecosystem for social innovations.

The participation of interested groups in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the social innovations enabling environment will be ensured in particular through:

- the Advisory Board of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations
- a participatory process for the preparation of calls for proposals for financial support for social innovations
- a participatory process for identifying social innovations
- consultation processes in the development of strategic documents related to social innovations

An important role in promoting the principle of partnership is played by the cooperation between the MoLSAF SR and the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society. The latter, in accordance with [Government Resolution No 360/2019](#)<sup>4</sup>, has prepared a document entitled System for managing cooperation and partnership with civil society representatives in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of EU funds within the programming period 2021 – 2027 (MI SR, 2021). The document sets the basic framework for cooperation and partnership with civil society representatives at all levels of EU funds management and implementation so that the participation of civil society representatives is effective, transparent and based on clear rules.

---

<sup>4</sup> Government Resolution No 360/2019 of 21 August 2019 on the Action Plan of the Concept for the Development of Civil Society in Slovakia for 2019 – 2020

## The principle of impact measurement and evaluation in the promotion of social innovations

The presence of a well-prepared monitoring and evaluation system can be considered as an essential tool for controlling the achievement of results against the set objectives. It has the capacity to highlight shortcomings and delays in the achievement of the set objectives, on the basis of which timely corrective action can be taken.

The monitoring and evaluation system needs to be implemented at several levels. This is the level of:

- the whole ecosystem of support for social innovations,
- individual priorities/topics on which the implemented social innovations focus,
- the specific social innovation.

Each of these levels requires the application of a specific methodology and the use of different methods of measurement, monitoring and evaluation.

A condition for an effective monitoring and evaluation system is the identification of indicators against which the progress will be monitored and evaluated. Their identification and definition must respect the availability of good-quality data on the basis of which it will be possible to determine the baseline and target values of the indicators set. Without knowing the baseline value and setting a target value, the monitoring system loses its meaning.

Indicators against which the progress in building a supportive ecosystem for social innovations will be measured and evaluated have not yet been formulated in Slovakia. Their formulation should therefore be among the priorities of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations as well as its Advisory Board. In the discussion on possible indicators, it is possible to build on models that have been verified abroad (see e.g. OECD, 2021). The achievement of the objectives set out in this document should also be taken into account.

In the framework of the Programme Slovakia 2021 – 2027, which represents the most extensive scheme to support social innovations in the near future, the principle of measuring and evaluating the impact of supported projects will be ensured through:

- measurable programme indicators
- external organizations that will evaluate the implementation of the whole programme and its priorities
- monitoring of the social impact of the project by the target audience itself

The monitoring process set up under the P SK includes regular and systematic data collection on project implementation, leading to the tracking of progress and achievement of objectives at project, programme and national level and the fulfilment of the performance framework targets. The focus is not on the reasons for deviations from targets, as this role is performed by the evaluation process. Monitoring is carried out by means of measurable indicators which record partially implemented or completed activities over a given time period and represent one of the sources of information for the following assessment. Each supported project is assigned project-specific measurable indicators that are aggregated to the level of the programme itself.

The relevant measurable indicators are listed for each programme priority depending on the type of actions supported and are also defined in a [single methodological document on the development of measurable indicators and intervention dimensions](#), which explains in more detail the process of their monitoring. Under the P SK, it is planned to carry out evaluations as ex-ante, on-going and ex-post, which will be provided by an external evaluation company. These evaluations will assess the fulfilment of specific objectives of the programme priorities being evaluated, the assessment of the achievement of the performance framework, or the assessment of the fulfilment of the strategy and the achievement of results and impacts through the interventions implemented. The evaluation reports will be used in particular to make recommendations for a possible revision of the P SK, to use the outputs in the preparation of the background to the Information on the state of implementation of the ESIF, as well as in the preparation of the annual and final reports on the implementation of the P SK, etc.

The P SK will support the implementation of social innovations in particular through Priority 4P7 Social Innovations and Experiments, while it will be important to assess the social impact of projects supported under this priority in order to identify possible systemic change or further scaling up. In order to obtain the most relevant information on project implementation, the measurement and evaluation of social impact should be carried out by the social innovators themselves.

In the context of identifying indicators at the level of specific innovations, much attention needs to be invested in building the capacity of potential implementers of social innovations. The formulation of appropriate indicators as well as the implementation of monitoring and evaluation is the responsibility of the social innovators themselves, who often do not have sufficient capacity to carry out these activities. The National Competence Centre for Social Innovations has prepared a Guide to social impact monitoring and evaluation of social innovations to facilitate this process and orientation in the issue and will continue, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR itself, to develop tools to support both personnel and financial capacities of social innovators necessary for the implementation of monitoring and evaluation.

## The main instruments for supporting social innovations in Slovakia from ESF+

The four bearing targets and two horizontal principles will be prioritized through three instruments designed to strengthen the position of social innovations in Slovakia.

These instruments are:

1. National Competence Centre for Social Innovations
2. Advisory Board of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations
3. Financial support allocated from the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027

The implementation of the above instruments must be carried out in mutual compatibility, so that the potential impact is intensified by the synergistic effect achieved by mutual interconnection.

### National Competence Centre for Social Innovations

The National Competence Centre for Social Innovations (hereafter NCCSI) acts as the central contact point for social innovations.

The establishment and functioning of the NCCSI largely follows the findings of the mapping study, which concluded that Slovakia lacks a platform focused on non-financial support for social innovations. According to many social innovations actors, non-financial support in the form of networking of social innovators, presentation of good practice, capacity building of social innovators, education and spreading of information on social innovations, stimulation of professional discussion on social innovations and other activities, is in many ways as important as the financial support. This kind of support is almost completely absent in Slovakia. It is the NCCSI that should fill the gap.

However, for NCCSI to become a respected actor, it needs to be implemented in a cross-sectoral partnership. Irrespective of the institutional provision of the NCCSI, the principle of inter-sectoral partnership will be ensured at least through the Advisory Board of the NCCSI. However, the principle of partnership must be an immanent part of all activities implemented by the NCCSI. As repeatedly stated, successful social innovation is neither the domain nor outcome of one sector or one organization. In practice, it can be observed that the degree of success of a social innovation is directly proportional to the quality and extent of partnership inter-sectoral cooperation. The NCCSI should aim to create an atmosphere and conditions that will systematically cultivate the principles of inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary partnership.

The functioning and execution of the activities of the NCCSI shall be ensured by the NCCSI Secretariat. The quality of the activities carried out by the Secretariat is overseen by the Advisory Board of the NCCSI.

The establishment of the NCCSI was initiated by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family SR. The ministry actively supports the activities and development of the NCCSI, holds the position of guarantor and provides financial means necessary for the functioning and implementation of NCCSI activities.

In addition, the MoLSAF SR, through a designated procedure, appoints the members of the NCCSI Advisory Board; cooperates with the NCCSI in making strategic decisions related to the promotion of social innovations, proactively spreads information about the existence and activities of the NCCSI in the environment of the state and public administration of the Slovak Republic, and supports the implementation of social innovations in the areas that fall within the competence of the MoLSAF SR.

### Main tasks of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations

With the support of the MoLSAF SR the NCCSI shall, in particular, strive to:

- create conditions for conceptualizing social innovations in the context of a wide range of societal challenges,
- create conditions for networking and meaningful dialogue with actors in the field of social innovations, including in the process of developing support measures and projects to promote social innovations,
- identify needs for the development of the social innovations ecosystem at local, regional and national level,
- identify the appropriate financial support instruments needed to ensure social innovations,
- identify public services for the development of social innovations and set up a functional system to support it,
- spread information on the issue of support for social innovations,
- map social innovations actors using the existing expertise of organizations active in this field.

The NCCSI Secretariat also focuses on supporting the ecosystem and social innovations projects within the priorities of the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027, specifically on:

- capacity building of social innovations ecosystem actors at local, regional and national level,
- creation of tools supporting social innovations at different stages of the innovations spiral (Ideathon, Hackathon, Accelerator, Incubator).

The list of the above activities is also defined in measure 3.4.1.1. of the Action Plan of the National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovations 2030 introducing Sustainable system of support for social innovations.

Beyond the activities listed above, the core tasks of the NCCSI also include:

- setting up and implementing a way of searching for innovative projects/initiatives across Slovakia,
- promoting the readiness of territories to support and implement social innovations through education and training of actors in the field of social innovations,
- implementing educational programmes/events in the field of social innovations for a wide range of actors,
- ensuring a participatory process for the preparation of calls for proposals for ESF+ projects (with emphasis on Priority 4P7 funding),
- ensuring the implementation of specialised information and training events for potential applicants for financial support, aimed at strengthening their capacity to benefit from social innovations funding,
- operating a common on-line information platform for social innovations aimed at the presentation of innovative projects and good practice, spreading information on the existing support schemes, networking actors and training (including on-line forms of training),
- providing the methodological support needed for social innovations through the organisation of professional events and professional publications,
- promoting and popularising the importance of local and international partnerships,
- providing, supporting and coordinating the collection of data necessary for the measurement and evaluation of the relevance and performance of social innovations and providing, supporting and coordinating the implementation of evaluation, with an emphasis on the evaluation of the impact of social innovations,
- creating a learning society atmosphere open to experimentation and the implementation of innovative approaches.

A specifically important role of the NCCSI is to participate in the legislative process of drafting and updating relevant legislation and to strive to create a legislative environment that is supportive of the implementation of social innovations. The highest attention will be paid to legislation and topics that are under the responsibility of the MoLSAF SR, i.e. preferably topics such as social services, social protection, social inclusion, family support, equal opportunities, employment and employability support, market place adaptability, dignified and safe working conditions. In connection with these topics, it is necessary to ensure that the current legislation in force does not hinder social innovations,

but actively promotes it. This can also be achieved by updating the current legislation in force and by including information on the implementation of public policies, including through social innovations, in the content of this legislation.

### **Institutional and personnel arrangements for the Secretariat of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations**

Financial support for the operation of the NCCSI until 2030 is foreseen from the ESIF. Any other funds used for the operation and implementation of the tasks of the NCCSI in the period up to 2030 shall be in the form of additional financial resources.

The NCCSI does not have the status of an independent legal entity, the performance of the NCCSI's activities is ensured through its Secretariat. The quality and content of the activities carried out by the Secretariat are supported and overseen by the Advisory Board, which brings together individuals and organizations with expertise in addressing societal challenges through social innovations tools (a proposal for the functioning of the Advisory Board is discussed in the next chapter).

The NCCSI Secretariat ensures the performance of the NCCSI's activities through a team of experts who are NCCSI employees. Their main work tasks are related to the promotion and development of social innovations in Slovakia. The size of the team is conditioned by the current needs and capacities of the NCCSI. The expert activity is supported by administrative and coordination personnel whose presence is essential for the functioning of the NCCSI

The NCCSI Secretariat may be established within the structures of the MoLSAF SR or within the structures of another organization selected for this purpose through a transparent process, and its functioning will be financially secured through the planned call of the [European Centre of Competence for Social Innovations](#) under the Employment and Social Innovations Programme (EaSI).

### **Advisory Board of the National Competence Centre for Social Innovations**

The Advisory Board of the National Centre of Competence for Social Innovations (hereafter referred to as the NCCSI Advisory Board) is the main instrument for the implementation of the partnership principle in the promotion of social innovations.

The NCCSI Advisory Board brings together individuals and representatives of organisations representing a wide range of sectors and disciplines with expertise in addressing societal challenges through the principles characteristic of social innovations. The structure of the members of the NCCSI Advisory Board should respect the principle of parity representation.



The main tasks of the NCCSI Advisory Board as a whole are to approve the NCCSI Action Plan, to supervise its implementation by the NCCSI Secretariat and to evaluate the impact of activities implemented on the fulfilment of the stated objectives of promoting social innovations. The members of the NCCSI Advisory Board provide their expertise to the NCCSI Secretariat on specific technical issues related to the promotion and development of social innovations, such as conceptualisation of social innovations, development of methodological documents, identification of metrics and performance evaluation methods, performance of individual types of assessment, identification of social innovations actors etc.

The basic principles of the functioning and composition of the NCCSI Advisory Board will be regulated by the Statute of the NCCSI Advisory Board, which will be adopted at the level of the leadership of the MoLSAF SR as well as the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development of the Slovak Republic. A draft of the principles for the functioning of the Advisory Board, which should be further elaborated in the proposed statute, is attached to this document.

In addition to the cooperation with the NCCSI Secretariat, the members of the Advisory Board are actively involved in the implementation of Priority 4P7 “Social Innovations and Experiments” implemented under the objective 4 A More Social and Inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. Their participation in the implementation concerns in particular the collaboration in the expert preparation and definition of calls for proposals to support social innovations itself as well as the promotion of the social innovations ecosystem, participation in the participatory process of preparing calls, but especially in the identification of potential beneficiaries of support, and in the first round of two-stage project selection focused on the substantive quality of the proposal.

## Financial support allocated from the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027

Supporting social innovations is one of the key challenges of the new programming period 2021-2027 and represents one of the main instruments to support social innovations in Slovakia in the period up to 2030. For the first time in the framework of the ESIF programming, a separate priority is dedicated to this topic – 4P7 Social Innovations and Experimentation, under the objective 4 A More Social and Inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights of the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027.

The priority funds are aimed at social innovations as defined in the ESF+ Regulation. The support will be implemented along two lines:

- a) support of ***social innovations in all stages of the innovations cycle***: support will be given to the introduction of innovations, pilot testing and validation, as well as the spreading of

innovative solutions with proven positive impact and their possible transfer to the relevant system. The testing of innovative solutions will also take into account their possible failure. Measuring and monitoring the impact of innovations and experiments will be an important part of the support, as well as building and developing capacities for the development and spreading of innovations and training of actors in the regions,

- b) supporting the ***development of innovations ecosystems in regions*** based on mapped needs, by building and supporting innovations infrastructure, using the capacities of citizens and involving partners from different sectors.

In addition to supporting innovative projects, the priority also aims to increase the capacity (quality and impact) of actors whose activities contribute to the development of an environment favourable to social innovations in Slovakia, which will lead to an increase in the impact of social innovations created, spread or supported. Incentives for experimentation in the field of social innovations are expected from both public and non-public actors active in this field.

Priority 4P7 will support social innovations in three areas:

1. ***labour inclusion, promoting the labour market entry of disadvantaged and inactive people*** (e.g. cooperation between public and non-public employment services, supporting the labour market entry of young adults after leaving institutional care, promoting the employment of vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities)
2. ***inclusive education and training*** (e.g. development of key competences, social and emotional skills, democratic and civic competences and for the prevention and elimination of undesirable phenomena such as bullying, extremism, racism, intolerance and xenophobia, education, prevention and awareness-raising programmes, linking formal and non-formal education)
3. ***active inclusion of disadvantaged groups*** (e.g. new and innovative solutions to the life situations of the most vulnerable groups – individualised approach, prevention, counselling and accompaniment, early intervention, living conditions of people with disabilities, issues of domestic violence and violence against women; health, as well as issues of violence against children)

Under the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027, activities and projects aimed at supporting existing or new innovations infrastructure in the three areas mentioned above through innovations centres and supporting social innovators in the different phases of the innovations cycle, e.g. through hackathons, incubation, acceleration, mentoring and outreach programmes, will also be supported. Capacity development will also be ensured by promoting data platforms, networking, a space for sharing

experiences and good practice, as well as stimulating expert debate on social innovations and promoting inter-sectoral collaboration and the creation of multidisciplinary teams.

### New selection and evaluation system for Priority 4P7 projects

The basic condition for effective support of social innovations and the social innovations ecosystem in Slovakia from the ESIF is the setting up of a new system for evaluation and selection of projects in cooperation of all partners, which will take into account the specificity of social innovations and the individual phases of the innovations spiral. Given the specificity of social innovations, it is necessary to create separate evaluation and selection criteria within the evaluation and selection process, designed only for the field of social innovations. In the case of social innovations, with an emphasis on those that apply an element of experimentation, it is also appropriate to consider the possibility of a personal defence of the proposal before the members of the expert selection panel.

In particular, in the context of the review of the existing evaluation and selection model for projects on the topic of social innovations, the following should be considered:

- clearly defining the characteristics of social innovations and define common criteria for assessing elements of innovations in projects (based on the definition of social innovations) – i.e. jointly define the basic characteristics/principles of social innovations, attributes that the supported projects must meet in order to be considered social innovations, the degree of originality, the possibility of transferring social innovation etc.
- enabling the support for a wide range of beneficiaries (NGOs, entrepreneurs, public administration, individuals...)
- emphasising inter-sectoral cooperation and the implementation of projects in inter-sectoral partnership of a various subjects, favouring the participation of multiple partners from different sectors in the evaluation and selection of projects
- including an assessment of the capacity of the proposal in relation to the possible scaling-up of the proposed social innovation among the evaluation and selection criteria for projects
- expanding the range of support forms and mechanisms (national projects, demand-driven projects, financial instruments, results-based contracting, recruitment schemes, scholarships, vouchers, impact procurement...) to support social innovations at different stages of the innovations spiral and to ensure that these build on each other and that the different phases of social innovation can be continuously supported
- seek opportunities to overcome the barriers posed by the application of de minimis schemes to wider support for social innovations

- in the project selection and evaluation process, give priority to the content of the proposed project, which can be ensured through a two-round project selection process
- reviewing the list of measurable indicators and the obligations to meet them, so that social innovations using the principles of experimentation can take into account the alternative of failure
- increasing the flexibility of the change rules for the implementation of social innovations projects (with emphasis on projects using experimental principles), so that experiments and social innovations can respond more effectively to unforeseen situations and modify the implementation of activities in the light of new needs.

### Two-round selection of projects

The Act No 121/2022 Coll. on contributions from the European Union funds in section 15 „Project plan” defines the possibility of implementing a two-round selection and evaluation of projects. This should also represent a fundamental change in relation to the currently implemented system of evaluation and selection of projects in demand-oriented calls.

The application of two-round selection and the implementation of pre-selection of projects through project plans is specifically relevant and important in the context of social innovations, i.e. in the context of the introduction of procedures that go beyond the commonly applied models and may therefore be difficult to present in a structure suitable for standardised procedures.

Previous experience in supporting social innovations suggests that it is the initial identification of project intentions that is crucial in the case of social innovations. Submitting project plans that are not presented in the form of an administratively rigorous NRF application offers an opportunity for strengthening content orientation without the need to adapt the proposal to the structure of an administrative application. The submission of project plans, which should not be lengthy in scope and difficult to prepare, can also represent a significant simplification for potential applicants, as they will not be forced to invest in the preparation of an administratively demanding NRF application for projects that do not meet the established quality standards.

The application of a two-round selection of projects and the introduction of a project submission model can have a significant positive impact on the interest of potential applicants to participate in the call and to submit proposals for social innovations. Feedback on submitted project proposals provided in the form of individual evaluation reports can also be an important tool for capacity building of potential applicants on the topic of social innovations.

In the case of specific calls for social innovations, with an emphasis on those with an experimental element, the possibility of a personal defence of the social innovation by the project proponent before

the selection committee members could also be considered, thus creating room for clarification of possible uncertainties and a detailed verification of the quality of the social innovation proposal.

From the point of view of the call for proposals, the two-round selection of projects can be considered more demanding in every aspect, but in the field of social innovations it offers an effective tool for

- identification of innovative project plans,
- filtering out those that do not meet the characteristics of social innovation,
- providing relevant feedback to the applicant, as well as
- motivating the potential applicant to refine their innovative plan and subsequently submit the application for a non-repayable financial contribution.

From the long-term perspective, in the context of the support and development of social innovations in Slovakia, it may therefore be the right investment.

#### **Participation of interested parties in the call preparation process**

A well-designed engagement process of interested parties can also increase the interest of potential applicants in a call. In this context, actors that go beyond the group of members of the NCCSI Advisory Board and include a broad spectrum of representatives of the professional public, socio-economic partners, civil society, municipalities, etc., bring a practical perspective to call development that can increase the quality and targeting of the support implemented in a fundamental and positive way, and contribute to increasing trust in the support schemes implemented.

The competence and relations of the entities entering into the management of the system of partnership and cooperation with civil society representatives, taking into account the ways and extent of involvement of civil society representatives in the processes of preparation, implementation and monitoring of EU funds in the programming period 2021-2027 are regulated by the framework document [System of management of cooperation and partnership with civil society representatives in preparation, implementation and monitoring of EU funds in the programming period 2021-2027](#) (the system of cooperation and partnership management), issued by the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society (OPGDSC SR) in cooperation with the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic (MIRDI SR).

MIRDI SR is responsible for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the partnership principle during the implementation of PP 2021-2027 in accordance with the general regulation.

The OPGDSC SR carries out the tasks defined by the cooperation and partnership management system, is responsible for coordinating the selection process of civil society representatives to the monitoring

committee as well as other working groups, and proposes criteria, monitors and evaluates the process of civil society involvement in the implementation of PP 2021-2027. The NGOs Chamber of the Government Council for NGOs is synergistic with the OPGDCS SR in carrying out its activities in this area.

Cooperation during the implementation of EU funds should include in particular the following activities:

- collecting suggestions from the civil society environment in relation to the practice of implementation of projects supported by EU funds and discussing them with the participation of beneficiaries,
- participation of civil society and professional public representatives in the preparation of demand-driven calls, in the form of surveys, membership of working groups for the preparation of call documents, consultations, etc.
- participation of civil society representatives in the preparation of national project plans, where relevant

Therefore, the MoLSAF SR, as the Intermediate Body of the Programme Slovakia, will ensure a participatory approach in the development of calls for proposals in the field of social innovations in cooperation with the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society.

In the preparation of calls for proposals, more specialised working groups will be formed consisting of employees of relevant departments of the EU Funds Section as well as relevant substantive sections of the MoLSAF SR in relation to the specific area of support to which the upcoming call will relate. Representatives of other ministries, state organisations, municipalities, NGOs or private sector, etc. will also be invited to participate in the more specialised working groups. After elaboration of the call/national project plan, participatory participation of relevant actors will be ensured in cooperation with the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society.

Involving interested actors in the preparation of calls helps to more effectively set the parameters of calls so that they are fit for purpose and reflect the needs and specificities of different types of eligible applicants and target groups.

## Sources

MoLSAF SR (2022). Programme Slovakia 2021-2027, Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation, Bratislava, 2022,

MoLSAF SR (2020). External evaluation of the OP HR for the programming period 2014-2020, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Bratislava,

MI SR (2021). System for managing cooperation and partnership with civil society representatives in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of EU funds in the programming period 2021-2027, Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Civil Society Development, Bratislava, 2021,

MI SR (2022). Involving interested actors in the preparation of calls for proposals, Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development, Bratislava, 2022,

OECD (2021). Building Local Ecosystems for Social Innovations. A Methodological Framework. OECD LEED Papers, 2021/06,

Polačková Z., Pongrácz, E., (2022) Report on the State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem in Slovakia, MOLSAF SR Bratislava,

GO (2022). National Strategy for Research, Development and Innovations 2030 “Self-Confident Slovakia “, the Slovak Government Office, Bratislava, 2022,

Act No 121/2022 Coll. on contributions from the European Union funds as amended,

## Annexes

### **Draft Framework / basic parameters of the statute of the NCCSI Advisory Board**

- The NCCSI Advisory Board is the main instrument for fulfilling the principle of partnership in the promotion of social innovations.
- The principles of the functioning the NCCSI Advisory Board are regulated by the Statute of the NCCSI Advisory Board, which is adopted at the level of the leadership of the MoLSAF SR as well as the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development of the Slovak Republic. It sets out the basic principles for the functioning and composition of the Advisory Board.
- The structure of the members of the NCCSI Advisory Board respects the principle of parity representation, where the number of members representing central government bodies does not exceed the number of members representing local and regional self-government, NGOs and academia, while the total number of members of the NCCSI Advisory Board should not exceed 15.
- The members of the NCCSI Advisory Board shall be appointed by decree of the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic on the basis of their expertise in the field of social innovations. The NCCSI Advisory Board brings together individuals and representatives of organisations representing a wide range of sectors and disciplines with expertise in addressing societal challenges through the tools of social innovations.
- The NCCSI Advisory Board as a whole monitors the actions of the NCCSI Secretariat, the quality and the extent of implemented tasks, while the members of the NCCSI Advisory Board provide

their expertise to the NCCSI Secretariat on specific technical issues related to the promotion and development of social innovations, such as conceptualisation of social innovations, development of methodological documents, identification of metrics and performance evaluation methods, performance of individual types of assessment, identification of social innovations actors etc.

- The members of the NCCSI Advisory Board are remunerated for their expert activities.
- The role of the NCCSI Advisory Board is to agree on the plan of activities of the NCCSI Secretariat, to evaluate the impact of the implemented activities on the fulfilment of the set objectives of supporting social innovations on the basis of available and accurate data. The NCCSI Advisory Board takes note of the annual report on the activities of the NCCSI Secretariat.
- The NCCSI Advisory Board has no influence on the personnel of the NCCSI Secretariat, which is the sole responsibility of the organisation in charge of the NCCSI Secretariat.
- In case of identification of significant irregularities in the performance of the NCCSI Secretariat, insufficient quality of implemented activities or possible non-cooperation of the NCCSI Secretariat with the NCCSI Advisory Board, the NCCSI Advisory Board shall inform the Intermediate Body of the Programme Slovakia of its findings, which shall intervene within its possibilities.
- The NCCSI Advisory Board shall meet with the representative(s) of the NCCSI Secretariat at least 3 times a year, the rules for convening such a meeting are regulated by the NCCSI Advisory Board Statute. Consultations provided by the members of the NCCSI Advisory Board and collaboration on technical topics shall take place throughout the year and within the scope of the actual need and the adopted plan of activities.
- In addition to the cooperation with the NCCSI Secretariat, the members of the Advisory Board are actively involved in the implementation of Priority 4P7 “Social Innovations and Experimentation” implemented under the objective 4 A More Social and Inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights of the Programme Slovakia 2021-2027. Their participation in the implementation concerns in particular the collaboration in the expert preparation and definition of calls for proposals to support social innovations itself as well as the promotion of the social innovations ecosystem, participation in the participatory process of preparing calls, but especially in the identification of potential beneficiaries of support, and in the first round of two-stage project selection focused on the substantive quality of the proposal.