

International Thematic Network meeting 27 July 2023

SI PLUS – Bulgaria: Navigating the Landscape of Social Innovation Infrastructure

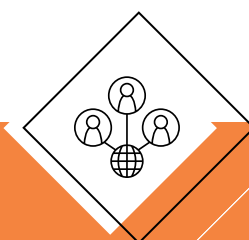
Contribution by Denitsa Lozanova, Sofia Development Association

The SI PLUS initiative embarked on an exploratory expedition, seeking optimal routes to construct a robust framework fostering social innovations. Our journey delved into Bulgaria's social innovation ecosystem, uncovering developmental needs and prospects.

One key outcome was the wealth of insights garnered from diverse approaches, projects, and stakeholders championing social innovations. This illumination resulted from exhaustive research and mapping in Bulgaria, augmented by lessons imbibed from established European entities operating in this realm.

Another pivotal achievement was our pursuit of a shared conception of social innovation across Bulgaria – the quest for a collective social innovator identity. Our collaboration with the L&R Institute, Arbeit Plus, and other partners enabled us to operationalize a functional definition of social innovation. Central to our odyssey was the collaborative creation of the Competence Center, achieved alongside stakeholders from Bulgarian cities and FUSE consortium's Bulgarian partners.

This endeavor yielded the social-innovations.club platform, serving as a testbed for scaling up social innovations. Our insights, chronicled in a report, are envisioned to guide supportive structures for social innovations, including Managing Authorities, municipal grant programs, mentorship initiatives, and more.



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Building upon co-creation and pilot assessments, we formulated the Social Innovation Blueprint to bolster infrastructure supporting social innovations. This blueprint envisions key functions:

- **Inclusive Network Creation and Support:** These networks, cultivated locally, nationally, and transnationally, provide platforms for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and partnerships. Looking ahead, the Competence Centre envisions further expanding and managing these networks through transnational cooperation with National Competence Centres established in different European countries. This transnational exchange will address a pressing need identified during the mapping and needs assessment of the Bulgarian social innovation ecosystem: the lack of opportunities for transnational exchange and partnership building among social enterprises. This scarcity stems from limited knowledge and skills to develop transnational projects, bureaucratic obstacles within operational programs, and a lack of interactive platforms for networking.
- **Societal Challenges Analysis and Needs Assessment:** we managed to explore different approaches (such as participatory workshops and design thinking, participatory data collection such as Photo Voice) and we believe that this fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment within the community.
- **Database Development and Curation:** A comprehensive repository of social innovation information, resources, and best practices aids evidence-based decisions and innovation promotion. SI PLUS gave us the opportunity to start the process, but are still at its beginning.



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- **Tailored Learning and Capacity Building:** We believe there are enough capacity building programmes for entrepreneurship and that the Competence Center should focus on on-demand mentorship services to social innovators, offering personalized guidance and support tailored to their specific needs and market niches. Experienced mentors provide one-on-one sessions, helping participants navigate challenges, refine their strategies, and unlock their full potential. The blended learning and on-demand mentoring will take into account the growth level of the social innovators – whether they are at start-up phase or they are advanced and will be blended to the specifics of the area they are intervening. Recognizing the value of peer-to-peer support, lets learn from each other – not to make the same mistake was the appeal of most actors at the ground – this is why also the vivid networking opportunities are so important.
- **Publicity and Visualization of Social Innovators:** Sharing inspiring stories, raising awareness, and encouraging engagement in innovative solutions.
- **Access to Financing and Resources:** Facilitating access to funding and resources, forging partnerships, offering fundraising guidance, and connecting innovators with pertinent resources.

As SI PLUS concludes, its legacy thrives – we created the social-innovations.club platform. The journey's insights are meticulously documented, while ongoing efforts include a regional Competence Center project in Sofia. The prospect of a structured organization by year-end looms promisingly. The journey continues, fueled by the spirit of transnational cooperation and the aspiration to fortify the ecosystem nurturing social innovations.

[http://](http://social-innovations.club/)

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