

# Summary of the Report on the State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem in Slovakia

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## Introduction

### Summary of the Report on the State of the Social Innovation Ecosystem in Slovakia

The document "Report on the State of the Social Innovation ecosystem in Slovakia" was created as part of the transnational project "Social Innovation Plus - Competence Centres (SI PLUS)", which is implemented by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic in a transnational consortium of organisations from Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria with the support of funds from the EU Employment and Social Innovation Programme.

The findings presented in the Report are based on the results from an online survey conducted with a sample of 113 respondents and a series of ten semi-structured interviews conducted in the second half of 2021

Due to the fact that there is currently no established definition of social innovation in Slovakia, social innovation was defined for the purposes of the survey:

(a) by the definition of social innovation set out in Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013, which states in its Article 2(8) 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'.*

(b) by emphasising the main characteristics of social innovation identified from a review of the available literature, namely

- i) Multidisciplinarity - the solution to a problem is usually approached in the context of multiple disciplines and the solution to the problem is viewed in a broader context;
- ii) Multisectoral - players from multiple sectors are involved in the solution;
- iii) Multidimensionality - problem solving is implemented at multiple stages;
- iv) Scalability - the capacity to bring about so-called systemic change that impacts a wider group of people than the immediate environment of the innovator;
- v) Redefining the relationships between stakeholder groups, changing their hierarchy as well as the way they work together.

Of course, the orientation is to address societal challenges in a way that is more effective than the ways that have been implemented in the past in this environment, while preserving the universally respected principles of ethics and solidarity.

For the purposes of assessing the social innovation ecosystem in Slovakia, social innovation is considered to be the result of the interaction and institutional dynamics of the actors involved. The uniqueness of the organisational, institutional and cultural environment in which social innovation is anchored and implemented creates a broader context, the perception of which in all its complexity is crucial in the implementation of social innovation. The complexity of the context of different geographical or thematic areas or different periods is never the same. The transferability of social

innovation is therefore very challenging, and the reasons why a social innovation that is so successful in one setting and time may be a complete failure in another setting and time can be found in the diversity of contexts.

## Legislative definition of social innovation in Slovakia

The trend of the evident orientation of European policies towards the support and implementation of innovations (social innovations included) has not yet been significantly reflected in Slovakia. The terminology associated with social innovations hardly appears in the political discourse yet, its use is limited even in the currently valid legislative regulations. The term "social innovation" currently appears only in one case in the Slovak legislative environment, but the use of the term "innovation" is also rather limited. On the other hand, the absence of a legislative definition of social innovation does not exclude the possibility that a number of laws currently in force may, if the responsible actors are interested, provide sufficient legal support needed for the implementation of a specific social innovation.

The extent of the current (albeit limited) definition of the term "social innovation"/"innovation" in the legislative regulations of the Slovak Republic also indicates that the need for an exhaustive definition of social innovation/innovation arises especially in situations where social innovation/innovation is the subject of subsidy schemes in the context of possible financial/non-financial support.

In the documents of the central state administration, social innovation was also defined in the document "Scheme to support the implementation of social innovation in the environment of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (de minimis aid scheme) DM-4/2019" developed by the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic as part of the call for applications for the provision of non-refundable financial contribution (NFC) to support the implementation of social innovation in the environment of small and medium-sized enterprises<sup>1</sup>. For the purposes of the above de minimis aid scheme, social innovation has been defined as a project which aims at an innovative solution to societal problems in one of the following areas:

1. providing social assistance and humanitarian care,
2. creation, development, protection, restoration and presentation of spiritual and cultural values,
3. protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms,
4. education, upbringing and development of physical culture,
5. research, development, scientific and technical services and information services,
6. the creation and protection of the environment and the protection of public health,
7. services to promote regional development and employment,
8. housing provision.

The absence of an established definition of social innovation in the Slovak legislative environment is partly replaced by the definition set out in Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021, which is mentioned above.

## General perception of social innovation

Considering the findings from the field, it can be concluded that a bigger problem than the lack of a legislative definition of social innovation is the low level of recognition of the concept of social innovation among the responsible actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Call code OPVai-MH/DP/2019/3.1.1.-3.3.1-22

A representative survey conducted in May 2020 by the Focus agency for the needs of the Pontis Foundation found that up to 81% of the adult population in Slovakia could not name an area in which social innovation could be implemented.

The survey conducted in the second half of 2021 for the purpose of preparing this Report sought to identify the areas in which the respondents of the survey believe that the application of social innovations in Slovakia is most needed. Of the 18 topics offered (see table for a list), (i) poverty and social exclusion, (ii) inclusion of persons with disabilities, and (iii) environment and sustainability were identified as the three most urgent. On the opposite side, the least needed topics were identified as (i) discrimination based on sexual orientation, (ii) the situation of refugees, and (iii) international development cooperation.

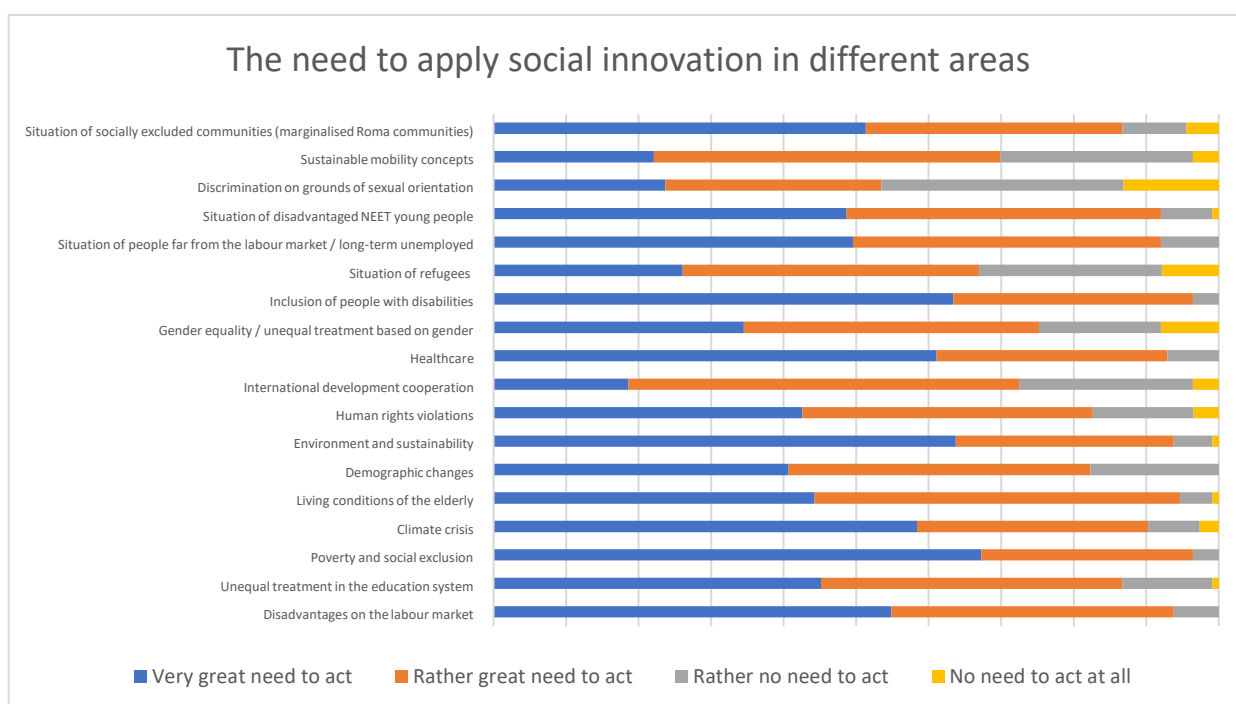


Chart 1: The need to apply social innovation in different areas, source: Evaluation of the online survey

Information on the perceived need for urgent action on particular societal issues is certainly not to be confused with information on the most common areas for implementing social innovations. However, there is an overlap, as most of the social innovations implemented in Slovakia were identified by the survey respondents in the area of addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Significant innovation potential can be identified in relation to access to housing and housing affordability, as a number of noteworthy initiatives have recently been implemented in this area in Slovakia. On the contrary, despite the significant trend towards digitalisation, the issues of interaction between online and offline spaces and the use of new technologies, artificial intelligence or data platforms in social innovation resonated only marginally in the survey. The strongest recognition of this theme emerged among respondents from a business background or those respondents who identified their area of operation as international.

Compared to the situation in Western Europe, it is possible to observe that the discussion on social innovation in Slovakia lacks a link to the Sustainable Development Goals as defined by the United Nations. While abroad the discussion on social innovation is often framed by the desire to contribute to achieving global goals and to implement local initiatives in a way that is compatible and supportive

of international initiatives, in Slovakia the discussion is often and significantly influenced by the situation of the immediate surroundings of the discussant, while the attempt to find a link to hierarchically higher documents or goals is not always obvious. This fact is not necessarily negative, but it is useful to be aware of it.

When discussing social innovation, it is useful to take into account the hypothesis that individual engagement in socially beneficial activities and solidarity in Slovakia takes place mainly at the level of family and friendships, while it lags behind at the level of the wider community or society as a whole. Relative closedness towards global issues can be found in the orientation of Slovak society towards its immediate surroundings and family, while the orientation towards the wider community is at a lower level compared to other countries.

The orientation towards addressing the challenges of the immediate environment without necessarily reaching a national or supranational level is also illustrated by the attitude of the respondents to the survey conducted for the purpose of drawing up this Report towards the claims regarding the spatial impact of social innovation. Support for the claim that social innovation can only be implemented at the local level without the need to achieve supra-regional impact was as high as 82.5%.

Significant consistency between respondents' views and the academic literature was noted in relation to strengthening the participation of disadvantaged groups and their 'empowering'. A statement calling for the need to strengthen the participation and 'empowering' of disadvantaged groups through social innovation received 58.5% support from respondents to the online survey.

Although the role of empowering disadvantaged groups is considered quite important in the context of social innovation among respondents, only a small proportion (17.5%) of survey respondents think that social innovation should be initiated by members of the target group. However, there is a high level of agreement on the need to actively involve members of the target group in the implementation of social innovation activities (73.5%) and in the preparatory phase of social innovation (60.5%). At the same time, however, only 47% of respondents believe that social innovation must be driven by a bottom-up approach.

Relatively strong support (54.5%) was recorded in favour of the statement regarding the condition of intersectoral cooperation. On the other hand, relatively low support (34.5%) is observed regarding statements about the capacities of government and public institutions to implement initiatives that are compatible with the principles of social innovation. Interestingly, the highest level of scepticism was recorded among public administration respondents, with only 16.5% believing that government or public institution initiatives can be compatible with the principles of social innovation. On the contrary, in the NGO environment, for example, support for government and public administration initiatives was as high as 45%.

The above values are cumulative values representing the opinion of all survey respondents. However, significant differences can be observed between the different groups of survey participants (divided by gender, sector of activity or territory of operation) in terms of their perception of the principles of social innovation. Examples of differing perceptions are represented in the graphs below (a value of 100 represents the highest value of agreement).

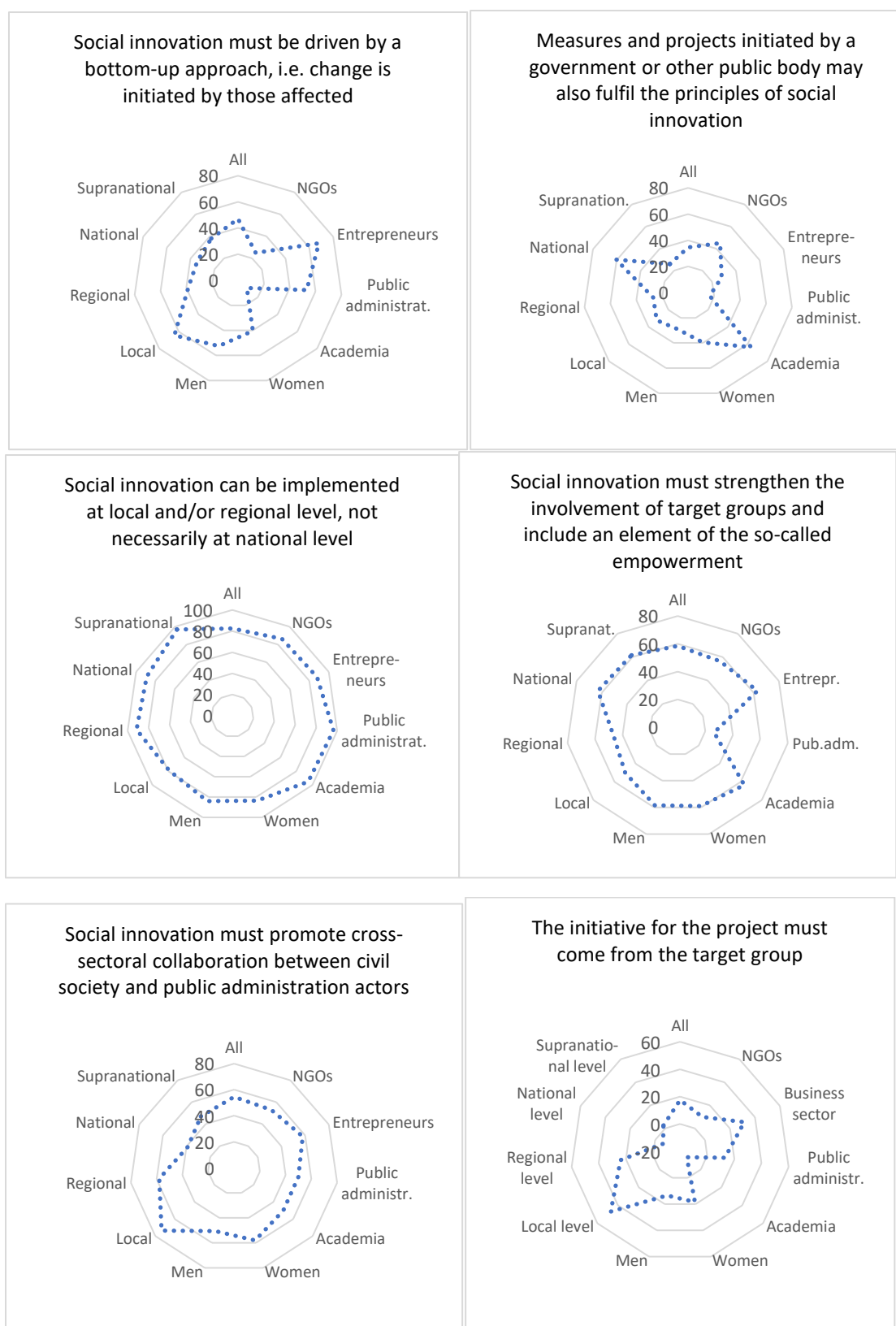


Chart 2: Identification of respondents to the online survey with the above statements in the distribution of individual groups of respondents, source: Evaluation of the online survey

## Barriers to the implementation of social innovation in Slovakia

When asked whether Slovakia as a country favours social innovations, several interviewees expressed rather scepticism. According to them, the support has a rather declarative character, as at a theoretical level we all understand that in many areas Slovakia needs new approaches.

Respondents point out that the quality of the supportive environment and the courage to design or pursue social innovation is significantly influenced by the level of mutual trust, either within society as a whole or between the individual actors of social innovation. However, according to several measurements, this trust is currently going through a crisis in Slovakia, which directly affects the ability to promote and scale up social innovations.

The lack of mutual trust significantly affects a number of other areas, such as the degree of administrative rigidity or the degree of conservatism in the interpretation of individual regulations, which often limits the implementation of social innovation.

Another obstacle is the frequent attempt to describe the processes and outcomes of the proposed social innovation at a level of detail that essentially excludes any modification or adjustment adopted during the process in order to better achieve the objective.

Voices from within state administration speak of the presence of a cascade of control mechanisms that are systemically interconnected and hinder the implementation of social innovations. The individual official has only extremely limited possibilities for applying innovative practices, or often implements deviations at the risk of negative consequences for his or her own person.

Respondents often mentioned the presence of a leader on the part of the actors involved, including the public administration, as one of the conditions for the success of an implemented and scaled social innovation. A good illustration of this condition is the implementation of anti-pandemic measures implemented during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic at the local and regional self-government level. Several of these measures exceeded the competences of self-government. Despite the fact that the implementation of the measures did not lead to a breach of competences, let alone a breach of the law, many self-governments felt apprehensive to implement any of the measures. Only those whose leader had the courage to step outside his or her comfort zone and act beyond the call of duty did so. The attitude of the leaders of the actors involved is absolutely crucial for the implementation of social innovation.

Low levels of cross-sectoral knowledge and connectivity were also identified as a real barrier to cultivating a supportive environment. This manifests itself in stereotypical perceptions of other stakeholders and low levels of mutual respect. Stakeholder representatives often enter into interactions burdened by their misconceptions about the other sectors involved, and they do not always have the capacity/interest/time to overcome these stereotypical and often very incorrect perceptions. It should be noted that this is not a sector-specific problem; the gaps are on the side of all sectors involved.

Another problem in promoting social innovation in Slovakia is the low level of awareness of existing examples of good practice. With regard to the presentation of good practice, it should be noted that awareness of social innovation is highly imbalanced. Often initiatives are presented as social innovation that does not meet several of the social innovation criteria. Usually it is an innovative service/product, but often without a fundamental capacity to reorganise existing relationships and the distribution of the positions of the actors involved.



There may be several reasons for unbalanced innovation. One is the duration of the entire cycle of the so-called innovation spiral. By the time a social innovation can be designed, tested, evaluated and scaled up (or systemic change achieved), a very long time will have passed, during which time many will have forgotten that it is, in fact, still an innovation. Another problem is the lack of capacity on the part of the implementers of many major initiatives to communicate their work. Social networking is fast becoming an essential communication channel, which requires specific skills that many do not have, nor do they have the resources enough by means of which they could perform this activity. The environment also often becomes confusing, as the term "social innovation" is also often devalued by initiatives whose implementers have understood the marketing potential of the term and use it in the context of common, rather banal, activities. Another problem is the general perception of the concept of social innovation, which is often confused with startup in Slovakia.

In discussing social innovation, it is also necessary to focus on explaining the adjective "social" in the term social innovation. The connotation of the word "social" in the Slovak language is perceived in the context of social assistance or social services, rather than in the context of "societal" topics. The perception of the concept of social innovation is in many cases narrowed to the field of social assistance or social services, while the spectrum of other areas in which social innovation can play a crucial role is neglected.

### (Non-)presence of support tools for the implementation of social innovations in Slovakia

The situation with regard to the support tools necessary for the implementation of social innovations in Slovakia is characterised by their significant absence.

Explicit support (whether financial or non-financial) for social innovation from public sources is not common in Slovakia. Although an orientation towards innovative practices should be an automatic feature for projects supported by the ESIF, only two calls can be mentioned in the context of support for social innovation from the European Structural Funds in the 2014–2020 programming period, both of which focused on support for social innovation in the development or pilot validation phase.

The first was implemented in the context of the Operational Programme Research and Innovations. Its main objective was to support social innovation in the environment of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in order to commercialise and market them. The potential for commercial exploitation of a social innovation was perceived as key in the evaluation criteria of the call, thus significantly limiting the range of possible social innovations. After the closure of the call, the call implementers themselves called for the need to simplify access to finance and to focus on alternative forms of funding that allow for a less strict approach. Despite the energy invested in the preparation of the call, the call was cancelled and the funds were reallocated to other projects.

The second is a call implemented in the context of the Operational Programme Human Resources, but at the time of preparation of this Report it was still in the process of evaluation, so it is not possible to ascertain what type of social innovations it has supported as a priority.

Although there is little experience with financial support for social innovation in Slovakia, it can generally be stated that the need to finance all phases of social innovation and the need to link financial schemes designed to finance individual phases is overlooked in the design of financial support schemes. In Slovakia, the emphasis has so far been mainly on the pilot phase, with other phases, such as the research or scaling-up phase, remaining in the background.

The strict focus on traditional forms of selecting suitable projects also remains questionable. Currently in Slovakia we are familiar with selection made on the basis of a formal written application without the

need for personal advocacy or personal contact. This form is of course suitable for mainstream projects aimed at supporting already standardised activities, but in the case of social innovations it can cause difficulties and may limit the innovative potential of the project in an attempt to meet formal requirements.

In the context of the redistribution of funds, it is also appropriate to raise the topic of the intermediary of financial resources. The current set-up for the redistribution of the ESIF financial resources does not provide opportunities for personal contact with the applicant, as well as the work system and organisational culture of individual ministries and established intermediary bodies do not inspire their staff to seek information from the field, or to meet and connect with the field. It would therefore be advisable to consider the involvement of non-public intermediaries who can design and implement more flexible structures and can respond in a more targeted way to the challenges coming from the field.

In the context of the implementation of financial support for social innovation, it should be noted that it is not only the scale of the funding itself that matters, but in particular its availability, the way it is redistributed, the way it is directed towards all phases of social innovation and the channels through which it is distributed.

A serious problem in the implementation of social innovations in Slovakia is also the lack of appropriate human capital. The problem is particularly present at the regional level, as many regions are suffering from a trend of significant brain drain. On the other hand, in many cases, organisations' HR policies and efforts to find talent are underestimated. Organisations that manage to create functional and effective teams unanimously claim that their recruitment processes are open almost permanently and that they invest a lot of energy and time in the search for suitable employees. However, not every organisation can afford enough time to find the most suitable candidate, as many are pressed by project timelines and a lack of financial resources that would allow them to retain staff also beyond the project period.

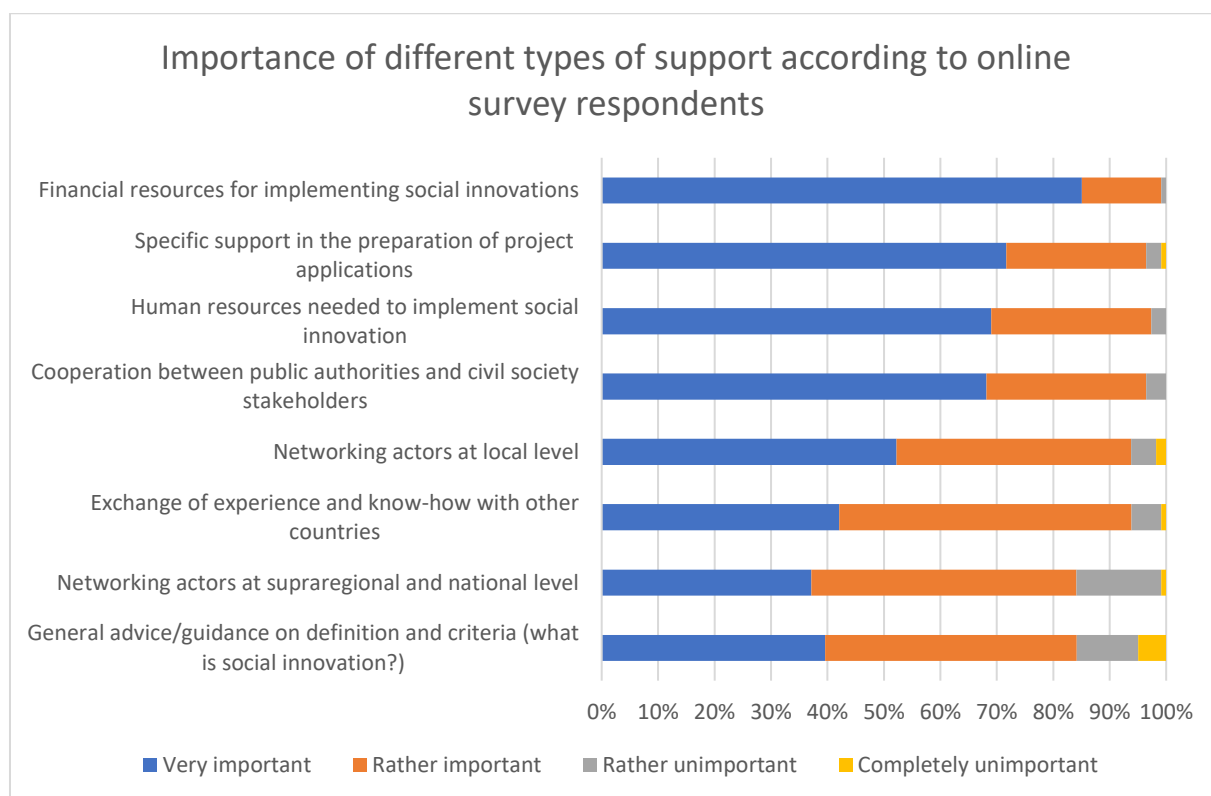


Chart 3: Importance of different types of support according to online survey respondents, source: Evaluation of the online survey

Participants in the qualitative interviews identify tools aimed at connecting and networking of actors, regular sharing of experiences and mentoring as the most desirable form of support. The call for the creation and maintenance of a platform whose main role would be to systematically connect and network individuals from diverse fields and sectors in order to strengthen their potential, inspire each other and create synergies in their individual endeavours is intense. Many social innovators claim that the social innovations they have implemented or are implementing are mainly due to the fact that they have had the opportunity to meet and talk to people who have been inspiring to them.

Apart from a few initiatives implemented mainly in the non-profit environment, there is no systematic networking of people and organisations active in the field of social innovation in Slovakia. The activities that are sporadically carried out tend to be of an organic nature or result from the implementation of a project. The most prominent role in networking social innovators in Slovakia is certainly played by the Pontis Foundation, which has a long-standing profile in the field of social innovation and also promotes the topic in the business environment. The Pontis Foundation is also dealing with mapping social innovators and devotes considerable energy to the professional debate on social innovation.

Findings from the field regularly confirm the presence of a large number of noteworthy and valuable initiatives with enormous innovative potential. However, most of these initiatives remain invisible in the wider environment. The most common reason is limited capacity, both in financial and personnel terms. Education or support in the form of mentoring or incubation programmes is almost non-existent and rather sporadic.

Examples of existing programmes in Slovakia are the Social Impact Award, currently implemented by Coworking Cvernovka, which is part of an international network, or the Social Innovation Relay programme implemented by Junior Achievement Slovakia. A significant added value of these programmes is their orientation towards young people, their capacity to identify talented young people and to work with them to develop their proposed social innovation.

However, similar programmes addressing other groups of potential social innovators have not been identified in Slovakia. The gap can be filled by organisations such as Ashoka. These focus on supporting leaders who, through their actions and activities, positively influence solutions to various societal challenges. However, the implementation of this type of programmes in Slovakia faces issues of financial sustainability, which is why their visibility in Slovakia is rather marginal.

According to several respondents, a good tool for strengthening the ecosystem of social innovations in Slovakia and sharing experiences could also be a detailed description of case studies of implemented social innovations. A detailed analysis of individual examples could help understand the barriers to social innovation, spot the signals more quickly and then make better decisions.

Tasks related to networking, sharing of good practice and mentoring could in the future be performed by the Competence Centre for Social Innovation prepared by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. The ultimate condition for the success and acceptance of the upcoming competence centre in the community of social innovators is its implementation in a multi-sectoral partnership with relevant players.

## Social innovators in Slovakia

The issue of social innovation is widely associated with the social economy sector in international discourse. Despite the fact that the latter is considered a strong player in the context of social innovation also in Slovakia, the findings of the surveys conducted do not clearly confirm its dominance. Self-government is repeatedly cited as the most prominent vehicle for social innovation. Local self-government in Slovakia has to constantly balance between a situation of highly decentralised public

administration, i.e. a large number of direct and delegated competences that it has to fulfil, and a situation of incomplete financial decentralisation, in which it has only limited capacity to influence the size of its budget. This situation is leading to great and growing frustration on the part of one group of municipalities and towns, and to the mobilisation of innovative potential on the part of another group. Practice suggests that smaller self-governments implement individual initiatives leading to social innovation on their own, while in the case of larger self-governments, the dominant trend is to support other actors and create an environment that fosters the emergence and growth of social innovation.

Social economy entities (for the purposes of this document, social enterprises and non-governmental non-profit organisations) were identified only second in the survey conducted. They were identified as a leader in social innovation by organisations outside of their environment, particularly by respondents from self-governments. Despite perceived doubts about the capacity of non-governmental non-profit organisations, there is ample evidence to argue that they often act as a research and development laboratory for social innovation and are the inspiration for many other social innovation implementers from other sectors.

The capacity and role of the business sector, especially SMEs, is often forgotten in the debate on social innovation in Slovakia. The topic of social innovation is still relatively unknown in the SME environment in Slovakia and there are very few initiatives that raise the topic of social innovation in the SME environment. An example is the Via Bona award in the "Socially Innovative Company" category, which is announced annually by the Pontis Foundation.

Increased involvement of the business sector, specifically the IT sector, is also important given the trend towards digitalisation and the use of artificial intelligence. However, when creating social innovations that have a strong technological character, the IT sector often needs a problem intermediary to which it can then respond. These intermediaries are often organisations from the non-governmental, non-profit environment, thus offering opportunities for strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation.

The findings suggest that it is almost impossible to implement social innovation in Slovakia only in a bottom-up direction, i.e. through bottom-up pressure on the relevant authorities. Cooperation and support "from above", i.e. from the relevant state administration bodies, is essential. Ministries must become an active innovation actor that actively contributes to the professionalisation of the environment in which social innovations are implemented.

The role of academia in promoting social innovation should not be forgotten. This is currently associated in Slovakia mainly with technological research and research in natural sciences. However, everyday life highlights that the role of the social sciences is indispensable in efforts to deconstruct processes and understand the social situation and should be significantly strengthened.

## Findings and recommendations

The findings on the state of the social innovation ecosystem in Slovakia largely confirm the conclusions of research carried out in the past. Social innovations in Slovakia are implemented in an environment that is poorly supportive, strongly shaped by a conservative interpretation of regulations, a dominant orientation towards administrative control at the expense of content, and characterised by a lack of available resources, resulting in unhealthy competition and limited willingness to cooperate.

Despite an environment that is extremely challenging and creates a large number of barriers to the implementation of any innovation, everyday life demonstrates the presence of an innovative potential that is characterised by a high level of commitment. However, to unleash and further stimulate it, it is

necessary to build a culture that is explicitly supportive of social innovation, whether in administrative, financial, personnel and professional or normative terms.

Given the strong pressure from the European Community and the relatively large financial allocation of the ESIF funds intended to support the implementation of social innovation in Slovakia in the coming years, it can be assumed that interest in social innovation will also grow among the political elite and central state administration bodies in the coming years. It would therefore be advisable to harness the anticipated growing interest not only for the benefit of social innovation itself, but in particular for the benefit of fostering an ecosystem within which the design and implementation of social innovation will be facilitated.

The main findings regarding the status and the need to support the social innovation ecosystem in Slovakia include:

#### 1. Findings on the conceptualisation of social innovation

##### ***Support for social innovation in Slovakia is mainly of a declaratory nature***

Thanks to pressure from the international community, the emphasis on social innovation is rapidly taking centre stage in various policy documents. However, it remains mainly at a declaratory level. The perception of the conditions necessary for the implementation of social innovations is very simplistic, often even ignored. Careful attention needs to be paid to describing in detail the barriers facing the implementation of social innovations and a systematic effort to remove them needs to be made. Currently, social innovations in Slovakia are implemented, so to speak, "in spite of the system", it is necessary to reach a state where the implementation of social innovations will be supported by the system.

##### ***The topic of social innovation as a respected tool for overcoming various societal challenges is almost completely absent from political discourse in Slovakia***

The adoption of social innovation as one of the tools for overcoming societal challenges in formulated policy commitments, whether at national or regional level, increases the degree of openness of all actors involved towards their design and promotion. There is a need to strengthen the emphasis on the importance of social innovation in policy discourse so that social innovation is seen as an important tool for overcoming various societal challenges. However, every effort should be made to base the discussion on experience and theoretical knowledge. Information on the results of implemented social innovations must therefore be easily accessible, systematically disseminated and framed in the established terminology of social innovation.

##### ***The perception of the term "social innovation" is not stabilised in Slovakia***

The concept of social innovation has been elaborated in detail in foreign literature and offers a number of definitions and theoretical approaches. However, this discussion is lacking in Slovakia. There is also a fairly strong call for a precise definition of social innovation. One of the definitions is offered by the European Regulation on ESF+, this is the starting point for the use of ESF+ in favour of social innovation. However, practice suggests that more important than the existence of a precise definition is a social consensus on the main characteristics of social innovation, on the basis of which the perception of social innovation could be stabilised. Therefore, a debate on the characteristics of social innovation should be initiated and stimulated.

***The success of a social innovation depends on the context in which the social innovation is implemented.***

Perceiving context in all its complexity is key when implementing social innovation. This needs to be taken into account in efforts to transfer successful models to new environments. This is particularly true in efforts to transfer good practice from abroad.

***Proven social innovations are rarely accepted at a systemic level***

Committed support from public policy makers is needed for social innovation to be accepted at a systemic level. Also, given the type of financial support most often available for the initial phases of social innovation, it can be argued that there is a tendency to look for new ideas rather than scaling up and developing proven ones. When implementing initiatives aimed at promoting social innovation, central state administration bodies should clearly declare their interest in the further development of successfully proven social innovations, including in terms of their scaling up and acceptance in programmes implemented at national level.

***The adjective "social" in its narrow sense is limiting in the discussion of social innovation***

In Slovakia, the perception of the concept of social innovation is in many cases narrowed to the field of social assistance or social services, while the spectrum of other areas in which social innovation can play a crucial role is neglected. The adjective 'social' should therefore be seen in the context of 'societal' and examples of good practice that go beyond the narrow perception of the word 'social' should be systematically highlighted.

## 2. Findings on intersectoral and multidisciplinary collaboration

***The principle of multidisciplinary in addressing societal challenges is not fully established in Slovakia***

Practice shows that the involvement of multidisciplinary teams increases the likelihood of social innovation success. There is a need to cultivate a culture that will support multidisciplinary in the proposed social innovations. Indeed, it is currently not uncommon for efforts to build a multidisciplinary team to be constrained by a strict definition of the disciplines that are accepted by a superior body. The formation of multidisciplinary teams also needs to be and can be systematically promoted. For this purpose, formats commonly implemented in the startup environment (e.g. hackathons, the so-called challenge days, etc.) can be used, which bring together actors from different fields to solve a specific problem.

***Social innovations carry a strong element of experimentation, the creation and involvement of a cohort of behavioural economists has the potential to enhance the quality of the social innovations proposed***

The use of behavioural economics methods offers unambiguous evidence on the effectiveness of a particular social innovation from multiple perspectives. Given the relatively small number of behavioural economists in Slovakia, there is a need to focus on networking these experts and involving them systematically.

***The success of social innovation is not the result of one sector***

Cross-sectoral cooperation in Slovakia is limited by high levels of mutual prejudice and mistrust. Cross-sectoral cooperation does not arise spontaneously; it needs to be nurtured and opportunities created.

### 3. Findings on financial support for social innovation and how it is redistributed

#### ***Supporting social innovation itself and supporting the social innovation ecosystem are often confused***

Supporting social innovation and supporting the environment in which social innovations are designed and implemented are two interlinked but distinct themes that need to be strictly distinguished. There is a need to create tools that specialise in each of the areas separately, but taking into account the other area.

#### ***The individual stages of the innovation spiral are only minimally taken into account when setting up financial support for the implementation of social innovation***

The implementation of a social innovation has several phases, each of which needs a different level of financial support and flexibility. Currently, financial support is most readily available for the initial phase. The scaling phase and the phase of transfer to the system level are rarely funded, which is one of the reasons why many social innovations remain stuck in the testing phase. Financial support needs to be balanced and accessible to benefit all phases of social innovation development and implementation. It is also necessary to ensure that programmes supporting the different phases of social innovation build on each other and that there are no unwanted gaps in the implementation of social innovation, which significantly jeopardise the success of social innovation.

#### ***A number of activities that are essential to the success of social innovation are implemented only to a limited extent or not at all***

Implementing social innovation requires the investment of significant resources and energy in acquiring the necessary information, data and knowledge. There is currently no support for this type of activity in Slovakia, and only few organisations can devote themselves to the research that precedes the development phase of social innovation.

The monitoring and evaluation of implemented activities also lags behind. The use of experimental evaluation methods based on the presence of a control group is minimal in Slovakia. The main reason is the difficulty of implementing similar activities, whether in terms of time, expertise or finances.

It would therefore be appropriate to strengthen the implementation of the above activities in the context of the implementation of social activities. In the case of initial research activities, the use of 'unit payments', a form of simplified reporting of funds, may also be considered.

#### ***The method of evaluation and selection of applications for NFCs in the field of social innovation needs to be substantially revised***

The model of redistribution of European funds, as it is currently set up in Slovakia, does not allow for a personalised approach and any individualisation in selection processes. In the case of supporting standardised programmes, this is the right approach, but in the case of innovative initiatives that break out of the defined frameworks, this approach causes difficulties.

Inspiration on possible models of choice can be drawn from organisations specialised in supporting social innovation from abroad. They usually carry out a detailed pre-selection of projects based on personal contact with the project proponent and his or her team. The method of project selection should also be conditional on the phase of the social innovation to be supported.

#### ***Non-public intermediaries need to be involved in the process of redistributing the ESIF funding for social innovation***

In addition to the fact that non-public intermediaries are often able to design and implement more flexible structures and respond more responsively to calls from the field (see the experience with the implementation of the EEA NGO Support Fund), these intermediaries are also the bearers of expertise in the different areas of application of social innovations, and they know the environment of a particular area in detail. The involvement of non-public intermediaries in the redistribution of resources for social innovation offers an opportunity to improve the quality and success of the individual social innovations supported.

***The financial support system as we know it today provides only limited scope for revising originally proposed plans/proposals or for the whole plan to fail***

The essence of social innovation is the search for the most appropriate possible solutions. This is only possible if the implementation of the social innovation is subject to detailed reflection. However, taking it into account may necessitate the need to revise the originally proposed plans.

Given the high contextual conditionality of social innovations, it is also necessary to take into account the alternative that the implementation of the whole plan will fail. Such cases should not necessarily be assessed as a failure of the implementer of the social innovation but as a failure of the proposed solution, and the reasons for the failure should be documented in detail.

***The development and testing of social innovations can also be carried out through direct support to social innovators***

A good example of this approach is the model implemented by Ashoka. This focuses on supporting leaders who, through their actions and activities, positively influence solutions to various societal challenges. However, the implementation of this type of programmes in Slovakia faces issues of financial sustainability, which is why the visibility of similar programmes in Slovakia is relatively marginal.

Supporting social innovation leaders also supports the entire social innovation ecosystem, as social innovators themselves also act as ambassadors for social innovation. It would therefore be appropriate to strengthen this type of support.

***The use of experimental methods for evaluating invested resources based on the involvement of a control group is at a low level***

This is not only due to the low level of domestic expertise to carry out this type of evaluation, but mainly due to the lack of financial resources needed for this type of evaluation; the costs associated with carrying out this type of evaluation are usually not among the eligible project expenditures. This restriction should be reconsidered.

#### **4. Findings on non-financial support for social innovation**

***A serious problem in the implementation of social innovation is the lack of appropriate human capital***

The lack of human resources needed to implement social innovations is perceived as one of the most serious obstacles to the implementation of social innovations. Significant resources need to be invested in building the capacity of potential social innovators, and the topic of social innovation needs to be included in the curriculum of both secondary schools and higher education institutions.

***Awareness of social innovation is highly imbalanced***

The term "social innovation" is often devalued by initiatives whose implementers have understood the marketing potential of the term and use it in the context of common, rather banal, activities.



Reasons for this include the weak level of conceptualisation of social innovations in Slovakia as well as the absence of a platform through which social innovations would be systematically presented or searched for.

***Education or support in the form of mentoring and/or incubation programmes is almost non-existent, their implementation is rather sporadic***

Although none of the currently existing mentoring and incubation programmes aimed at supporting entrepreneurial skills in Slovakia excludes the participation of a social innovator, mentoring and incubation programmes specifically aimed at supporting social innovation are implemented only sporadically, most of them targeting young people. The lack of education and training opportunities can also be filled by supporting existing programmes that can expand their target group or their focus. Mentoring and incubation programmes specifically designed to meet the needs of socially oriented programmes can also be revived, but have been discontinued due to lack of financial resources.

***Exchange of experience and good practice, peer-to-peer learning or systematic networking is almost non-existent***

Many successful social innovations have come about as a result of people meeting and talking and being inspired by each other. The existence of a currently absent platform that would allow for systematic networking and linking of individuals from a wide variety of fields and sectors can be considered extremely important.

Detailed case studies of implemented social innovations can also be a good tool for sharing experiences. A detailed analysis of individual examples could help understand the barriers to social innovation and be able to identify and eliminate them better and earlier.