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Social Innovation in LTC in Europe: Towards a common narrative for change

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Supporting INclusive development of community-based long-term CARE services through multi-stakeholder participatory approaches

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Executive summary

Long-term care systems throughout Europe are facing the challenge of ensuring affordable and high-quality care to diverse ageing populations, while responding to the societal effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. As sustainability is of paramount concern, interest in socially innovative approaches that build on local community strengths has been steadily rising. In this short report, we step back, take stock and synthesize the key insights that can be derived from the decades long journey of promoting social innovation in Europe, with a view to supporting policy-makers and organizational stakeholders that wish to engage directly in the implementation of social innovation initiatives in long-term care.

We identify three core elements that make long-term care initiatives socially innovative and we propose a broad conceptualization of successful implementation. We argue that local innovators should **shift focus away from 'best practice' initiatives and towards defining the 'best fit for purpose' initiative**. Successful social innovation in long-term care is built through the process of identifying innovative ideas, adapting them to match the characteristics of local settings and creating a flexible policy framework that supports local implementation. Furthermore, we highlight the need to **match investment in social innovation design and development with investment in scale-up and sustainability of social innovation approaches**, in order to increase societal impact.

We propose **four key principles that can guide social innovators in long-term care:**

- Start with the end in mind – shape a common and inclusive vision for progress;
- Invent the right solution – redesign the best ideas to best-fit local circumstances;
- Bring all aboard – engage meaningfully with as many relevant local stakeholders as possible;
- Think big from the very beginning – partner early on with regional and national stakeholders.

European institutions and national governments can play key roles by focusing their efforts on:

- Supporting knowledge sharing and mutual learning on social innovation within and between countries
- Dedicating resources and attention to the creation of broad partnerships and ally networks that actively focus their efforts not on implementation but on scale-up and long-term sustainability of social innovation initiatives.
- Agreeing to ambitious targets at EU level and financially supporting the development of accessible, affordable and high-quality community-based long-term care services across Europe.

1. Introduction

While the roots of social innovation in EU policy can arguably be traced as far back as the 1990s, the concept gained prominence after 2010, with the adoption of the *Europe 2020 Strategy* (Moulaert et al., 2017; Sabato et al., 2015). Over the past decade, the European Commission has actively and increasingly supported the development, uptake and scale-up of social innovation initiatives, most prominently[1] through the structural and investment funds and investment financing (Reynolds et al., 2017). But nowhere is the increasing relevance of social innovation reflected as clearly as in the volume of research and innovation funding allocated to it. According to the CORDIS database, 531 projects explicitly mentioning 'social innovation' among their objectives and tasks were funded since the year 2000: 525 since 2010, 477 since 2015 and 106 since the beginning of 2020[2]. While the vast majority of these projects address social innovation as a secondary research goal, the sheer numbers indicate that the principles of social innovation are permeating the thinking of innovators and communities of practice beyond the immediate span of social science and humanities research. As a result of sustained investment, both the number of implementation initiatives and the body of knowledge on social innovation have been steadily increasing over the last decades in Europe (Addarii & Lipparini, 2017).

Progress of social innovation principles in EU policies and programmes
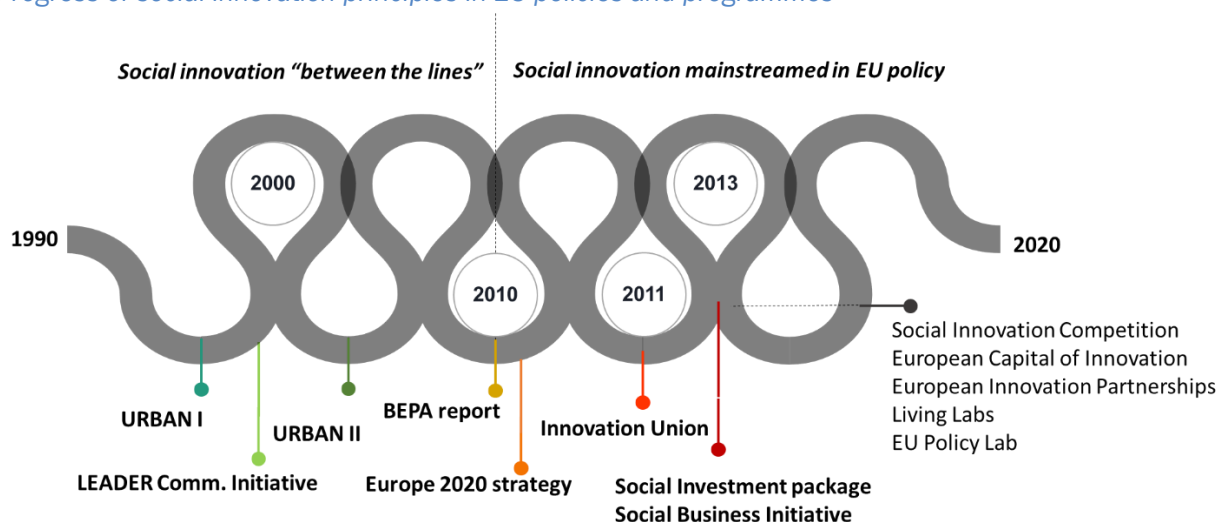
Building on: Moulaert et al., 2017; Sabato et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2017

Thousands of social innovation initiatives have been mapped and described to date, and among them hundreds that address responding to the long-term support needs of an ageing population[3]. Many lessons have been learned, challenged and unlearned in the process. In this short report, we aim to step back, take stock and synthesize the key insights that can be derived from the decades long journey of promoting social innovation in Europe. Rather than reviewing and describing previous social innovation initiatives, **we attempt to define a common narrative for socially innovative change and provide practical recommendations for how such change can be promoted and supported**. To this end, we restrict our focus to three important dimensions:

- We refer **exclusively to social innovation in the field of long-term care** (although our conclusions are generalisable beyond this area).

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[1] Most noteworthy are: the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the Social Impact Accelerator.

[2] The search was carried out on February 18th, 2021 at: https://cordis.europa.eu/search

[3] Large repositories of social innovation initiatives have been produced by the SI DRIVE, InnovAge, SIMRA, MoPAct and other EU funded projects.

- We purposefully take the perspective of **policy-makers and organizational stakeholders that wish to engage directly in the implementation** of social innovation initiatives.
- We **narrow our primary focus of analysis to the local level**, where most innovation initiatives take place, in recognition of the **enormous variability of contexts** within and between European countries.

Throughout, we pay equal attention to the characteristics of the social innovation initiatives and those of the implementers and adopters. This reflects our perspective shift from *analysing* social innovation to *doing* social innovation. We propose that **for those stakeholders who wish to engage directly with implementing social innovations** in their local context, **it is less productive to think about the 'best' innovation initiative, than about the 'best fit for purpose' initiative**. Given that both the innovativeness (i.e. the character of being different from previous initiatives in the same area) and success (i.e. effectiveness of addressing local needs) of social innovation initiatives is context dependent (Addarii & Lipparini, 2017), the best solution will arise from a correct matching between the design of an initiative, the issues it is trying to address and the characteristics of the context it is implemented in. **From the perspective of local implementers, the first challenge of social innovation is to select the best-suited approach from an existing pool of relevant ideas and examples.**

While the policy and academic debate around the issue of transferability of social innovation has primarily built on the insights generated in the field of innovation diffusion and adoption, we argue a focus on learning and adaptation is more appropriate. The experiences of the past decades have shown most social innovation initiatives are precarious and remain local, although they can be very valuable in their local context and generate tools and ideas with far reaching impact (Brandsen et al., 2016). **What can be easily transferred with great value to local implementers, is the process of identifying innovative ideas, adapting them to match the characteristics of local settings and creating a flexible policy framework that supports local implementation.**

Lastly, we propose that **sustainability and scale-up of social innovation initiatives often fall outside the reach of early local implementers** and should be pursued in partnership by diverse stakeholders. The local stakeholders that are best positioned to design and implement a local innovation in long-term care (more often than not local service providers or community organizations) are well attuned to the strengths and needs of their local communities, work in close cooperation with them and explore new solutions to existing problems. These are the stakeholders and the experimental initiatives, that social innovation funding in Europe has overwhelmingly targeted. To achieve scale-up and sustainability, a different approach and set of skills is needed, which focuses on a systemic perspective and a profound understanding of the institutional and financial structure of the care system the innovation is embedded in. **We argue that there is a need to match investment in social innovation design and development with investment in scale-up and sustainability of social innovation approaches, by supporting the creation of partnerships between communities, local service providers and policy makers (at local, regional and national level).**

2. What is Social Innovation in LTC? Beyond a concept definition

Defining "social innovation" in itself is a challenge, let alone contextualizing it to the field of long-term care. On the one hand, what could be considered innovative in one local context is more often than not already standard practice in another. On the other, the "social" aspect may refer to: 1) the end goal, in that social innovations address a social need or have a social impact; and/or 2) the process of reaching the end goal, i.e. collaboration between actors, formation of new relationships, etc. (European Commission, 2013a).

It is therefore hard to imagine a definition can be both concise and clear enough to be operationalisable but at the same time encompass sufficient detail to capture the wide variability of contexts and approaches. Some of the most commonly used definitions are summarized in Text Box 1.

Social innovation in long-term care can refer to…

… "innovations that are both social in their ends and in their means" and to "the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations" - European Commission's *Guide to Social Innovation* (2013)

… "new responses that are able to meet pressing social needs, and that also affect social interactions between all actors involved in welfare provision" (The InnovaCAre Project – **focusing on long-term care**)

… [initiatives] "satisfying human needs through (an empowering) change in the relations between local civil communities and their governing bodies" (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016 – **focusing on local development**)

… "initiatives that seek to empower older people to improve their self-efficacy in caring for themselves and their peers, maintain their well-being and promote social cohesion and inclusiveness" ((World Health Organization, 2019 – **focusing on ageing communities**)

Given these difficulties, **we propose stakeholders who are directly involved with the implementation of social innovation in long-term care should focus on three core elements:**

1. Community Engagement

In the context of LTC, social innovation requires engagement with care users, their families and their communities. Viewing them as active contributors in the design of innovative services rather than simply beneficiaries of these services, shifts the dialogue in a way that enriches both the implementation process of social innovations and the local communities in which they are imbedded. Engaging care users in the design and implementation processes is the best way to ensure that their needs are properly understood and addressed. This shift empowers care users, their families and communities to actively participate in the development and delivery of services they use (i.e. role of co-producers), rather than be merely consulted for their inputs (i.e. seen as clients) (Schulmann et al., 2018).

2. Collaborative processes

Social innovation is an inherently collaborative concept that brings together a variety of stakeholders and replaces existing social roles and relations with new ones (Avelino et al., 2019; Ziegler, 2017). It requires collaborative processes to occur between different actors in the system, which in the long-term care context, may include (although not limited to) care users, their families and informal carers, the local community, care service providers, voluntary groups and associations, local and regional public organizations and policy makers at all governance levels. New ideas may be formed as the result of these new relationships and the active participation of stakeholders that have largely been excluded from decision-making processes (Ayob et al., 2016).

3. Positive social impact

Social innovations lead to a positive social impact by addressing a social need or a societal challenge/issue and increase society wellbeing overall (European Commission, 2013b; Murray et al., 2010). What can be defined as a social need or social problem will vary according to context and should be established through multi-stakeholder consensus locally. The value created by social innovation should enrich society as a whole, rather than (groups of) private individuals (Phills et al., 2008). This precludes profit from being the end goal of a social innovation initiative.

3. When is Social Innovation successful?

Successful social innovations are based on participative approaches which **promote a shift from consultation and engagement to empowerment of users and the public.** The Tubbe social innovation model (Sweden) provides an example, as it is built on the belief that residents of nursing homes should be given the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making on how their care is organized. This ranges from participating in choosing leisure activities and the food served all the way to the recruitment of staff. Both older residents and staff report high levels of satisfaction with the model and the opportunities for meaningful interaction it affords for all involved in the process of care.

Successful social innovations **promote collaborative processes which allow for the redefinition of stakeholder roles, broader sharing of decision-making power and the promotion of new ideas generated throughout the stakeholder network.** The Buurtzorg model (Netherlands) exemplifies this, as it aimed to redefine the role and autonomy of local teams of nurses, who provide home-based care in small catchment areas (neighbourhoods). By 'working with nurses, for nurses', Buurtzorg gained a strong foundation and the interest of highly qualified and engaged nurses, which in turn form close links both with care users and their families and with other care providers. Buurtzorg is currently recognized both locally and internationally as one of the most successful community care models in Europe.

While notoriously difficult to measure, the success of social innovation initiatives should also be reflected in their **lasting impact on local communities and the LTC sector. This can be achieved through scale-up and sustainability** (i.e. an initiative grows into a national project or a standard service continued over the long-term) **or through raising awareness of a potentially new solution to a common problem** (i.e. widespread change to the ways things are done outside the scope of the initiative itself). The creation of Alzheimer Cafés, a meeting place for everyone with questions about dementia, is a case in point. The first cafe started in 1997 in Leiden, bringing together informal carers, people with dementia and all those interested in supporting each other and sharing knowledge and experiences about dementia. Presently thousands of organisations across Europe organise peer-to-peer support groups for informal carers and older people with support need, whether they face dementia or other challenges. Tracing all these initiatives to the original development of the Leiden Alzheimer Café would be challenging, but it is easy to recognize in all its current guises the value of the innovative idea of building shared strength through the creation of peer communities.

One of the biggest issues faced by local implementers of social innovations is the achievement of **sustainability.** This **depends on a correct matching of the initiative with the local context and requires in depth knowledge of local demand that needs to be met, as well as of the strengths and resources of local communitie**s. Very often social innovation initiatives are created by a small, motivated group of people, closely linked with their local community. But a dependence on small and highly specialized early implementers undermines the potential for sustainability of social innovation initiatives. It is therefore important to make sure that local coalitions of various stakeholders come together in order to maximize sustainability potential.

Finally, the key to the successful diffusion of social innovations is the profound understanding of local contexts and of the adaptations and partnerships necessary for implementation in each local setting. As an example, the Buurtzorg model started with one team of four nurses and currently employs more than 15,000 nurses in over 950 teams across the Netherlands, without significantly changing its service organization. However, what is most recognizable in the numerous replication attempts in other European countries is the principle of case management in the neighbourhood pioneered by Buurtzorg and not the organizational structure of autonomous teams that formed the core of the original initiative. The successful spread of the ideas Buurtzorg pioneered demonstrates that it is important to separate the core principles and innovative ideas embodied in a successful social innovation from the organizational and practical components that allow it to work well in its original context.

4. How can Social Innovation be supported? Beyond a focus on diffusion and adoption

Much of the European level investment in social innovation to date has focused on supporting early stage experimental interventions (Addarii & Lipparini, 2017). While this has certainly been of great value and has encouraged the creation of a vibrant innovation start-up and social entrepreneurship community, it has done little to define and promote the system-level changes needed for the creation of enabling environments for social innovations. To encourage the latter, a shift in approach is necessary. Firstly, more emphasis should be placed on the characteristics of the implementers and the local implementation setting rather than on the characteristics of the social innovation initiative. Secondly, scale-up and sustainability should be actively pursued as goals right from the beginning alongside the implementation of social innovation initiatives, by a broad coalition of stakeholders and collaborators.

1. The "best-fit" initiative

The academic literature recognizes the crucial role played by a broad variety of actors and circumstances in the successful implementation of social innovation initiatives. But much of the practical material and advice directed to local stakeholder and implementers pays disproportionate attention to the technical content and characteristics of particular best practices and models. The risk inherent in this orientation is that specific local factors and processes may be overlooked, if implementers dedicate most of their time and resources to ensuring close replication of best-practice initiatives. From the perspective of stakeholders who wish to engage directly with social innovation initiatives in their local settings, the processes of adaptation and joint learning in local innovation contexts deserves more attention. Instead of taking a particular model or innovation as the point of departure, local implementers should start from their local perspective. Building on a shared understanding of local circumstances, strengths and weaknesses, they can then identify social innovation approaches that respond to local needs and shape the social innovation initiative to their local circumstances.

From a policy perspective, a focus on local strengths and priorities implies that a good policy framework is sufficiently flexible to facilitate and support innovation, implementation and adaption on a local level. No blueprints or one-size-fits-all policy conditions exist and innovations need to be tailored to local contexts. Policy makers should therefore create a policy environment with enough plasticity that local actors have the space to choose and adapt the best-fitted solutions.

From best-practices to 'best-fit for purpose' practices

The term 'best practice' can be misleading when applied to social innovation initiatives. It suggests to the reader that what has been successful in one context may easily be picked up and dropped into another, but this is hardly the case. Social innovation is highly context dependent and while each best-practice can act as a source of inspiration, new ideas and potential solutions, they should always be read with a focus on understanding relevance and fit to local characteristics.

A best-practice is...	Local implementers should ask...
... addressing a specific social need/ challenge	Is the social need addressed by this initiative sufficiently similar with the most stringent needs of our local community? Do we have sufficiently close ties and exchanges with the community to determine those needs?
... building on previous experiences & available knowledge	What are the main strengths and resources of our local community? What skills and experience exist already and which should we try to enhance?
... proposing new approaches and ways of working	Would these approaches work well in our context? What changes to these approaches would make them more coherent with our local conditions?
... bringing together the right stakeholders	How can we encourage participation of the target group the initiative seeks to benefit? Who are our local allies? How can we bring other local groups on board? What changes could we make to ensure all our allies and collaborators are as engaged as possible? What support can we get from national/international stakeholders?
... capitalizing on opportune timing	What on-going policy or social processes can support the development of a local social innovation initiative? And how? What funding, joint learning & exchange opportunities are out there?
... tracking progress and community-level impact	What is important for our community and collaborators? How can we measure our contribution?

2. The "best-fit" network of allies

Social innovation investment in Europe has thus far overwhelmingly focused on the development and implementation side of social innovation. Given their knowledge of the local context, alongside close relationship with the community, local implementers have been best positioned for this and have therefore been the primary target of social innovation investment. Less has been invested into understanding and creating the conditions necessary to achieve sustainability and scale-up of promising and successful local initiatives and pilots (Farmer et al., 2018).

Several barriers exist that prevent the sustainability of a social innovation, among which are short-term initial grants, a lack of dissemination and awareness-raising, and lack of stable funding (Schulmann et al., 2018). Similarly, barriers to scale-up include a lack of initial scale-up planning, lack of collaboration networks at the level scale-up is desired and lack of "innovation intermediaries" (Mendes et al., 2012). To overcome these barriers, a systemic perspective and an understanding of the regulatory and financial structure in which the innovation is embedded are required. Many social innovations disappear once the pilot funding ends not because they were unsuccessful, but because no mechanisms are in place to support the innovative service within the existing financing and regulatory

structures. Furthermore, even though local implementers often advocate for the necessary adjustments, without strong and diverse ally networks they cannot succeed in shaping funding and regulatory systems at higher governance levels. Larger organizations (i.e. governments, service providers and non-governmental organisations) with regional and national reach are better suited to understand and influence these structures and can be instrumental in achieving sustainability and scale-up, when partnering with local implementers. In such a collaboration each side provides what the other may lack: local implementers can define creative and tailored solutions to local problems and are ideally positioned to implement them; while the support of regional and national partners will ensure higher resilience, better alignment with existing structures at higher governance levels, and access to broader knowledge and advocacy networks.

The creation of partnerships between communities, local service providers and policy-makers is therefore key to ensuring social innovations are sustainable in the long-run. Such collaborations help to create a shared vision and shared expectations, thereby increasing the likelihood of scale-up (Hatzl et al., 2016). Most importantly, support from policy-makers is an indication that the innovation is aligned with the strategic direction at higher governance levels and therefore more likely to receive continued financing and support to build additional capacity and integrate within existing networks (Davies & Boelman, 2015).

5. Learning from experience: a common narrative for change

With a context-specific definition of success and the absence of one-size-fits-all best-practices, the question arises: what prospects are there for the transferability of a social innovation? The experiences of the past decade attest that replicating social innovations is rarely straightforward and that transferred social innovations often "take shape as local varieties" (Larsson & Brandsen, 2016, p. 173). More often than not, transferred initiatives do not survive past their piloting phase.

What is repeatable and is, in fact, repeated in virtually every successful social innovation initiative in long-term care, is a structured and participatory development process that can be narrowed down to four key principles:

- **Start with the end in mind** – Shape a common vision for progress by engaging care users, their families and communities, as well as care providers and policy-makers in defining what is desirable, relevant, timely and feasible;
- **Invent the right solution** – Identify promising, innovative ideas and adapt them to fit the skills of local implementers and the characteristics of the local context (best-fit for purpose);
- **All aboard!** – Create a broad network of collaborators by engaging meaningfully with all local stakeholders and ensuring they can participate as co-producers or active allies throughout the design and implementation process;
- **Think big from the very beginning** – Partner early on with stakeholders at higher governance levels who can support sustainability and scale-up.

Within this common narrative for socially innovative change in long-term care, **European institutions and national governments can play key roles in supporting knowledge sharing and mutual learning within and between countries.** To begin with, there is great value in supporting platforms where stakeholders already involved with social innovation in long-term care and those who are just embarking on the process can share ideas, experiences and concerns. This can be achieved by expanding the activities of already established networks of local stakeholders (e.g. Eurocities, European Social Network) or by supporting the creation of new, dedicated virtual communities of practice. But it is

equally important to **dedicate attention and resources to the creation of broad partnerships and ally networks** that actively focus their efforts not on implementation but on scale-up and long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, the efforts of EU Member States to address the current challenges of accessibility, quality and affordability in long-term care provision should be monitored through the **adoption of ambitious targets for long-term care system development at EU level**, which crucially hinges on harmonized and systematic data collection and **strengthening data infrastructure in long-term care**. in Europe. In order to achieve these targets in a timely and efficient fashion**, national efforts can be supported through the European Semester and the Recovery and Resilience Facility**. Funders and promoters of the social innovation agenda at European and national levels can directly support innovation scale-up by **matching investment in the design and development of social innovation with earmarked resources for the creation of partnerships** between communities, local implementers and policy-makers at all governance levels.

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