INSPIRE

Creating an Engaged Community

June 2022

Aims

A principal aim of INSPIRE is to create a focal point for international comparison, shared learning and collaboration between actors in the social enterprise ecosystems of each partner's country (France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal & Turkey). This will subsequently be expanded across Europe and beyond.

Social entrepreneurship has been around for a long time (long before the term was invented), but its rapid expansion in recent years calls for a better, common understanding of 'what works', not just for social entrepreneurs themselves but for those who stimulate, develop and sustain them – especially support agencies, funders and policymakers.

The aim is not to create a 'one best way' blueprint – this is a logical impossibility in a field of activity characterised as social *innovation*. Rather, the intention is to celebrate the diversity of social entrepreneurs' experiences internationally, and to harness their power as generative resources to stimulate and inform fresh innovation and new knowledge creation, both at enterprise level and in the wider eco-system.

Above all, our task is not just to create a 'network', an overused term that often means little more than a loose set of contacts. We plan to instigate a process of social capital building that is dynamic, dialogical, and multi-voiced. To borrow a term from an Irish support agency, we're aiming for an 'Engaged Community', an international social movement which combines shared learning channels, ideation, collaborative action, and advocacy.

Propositions

Our first task has been to understand the nature of social entrepreneurship itself, drawing on insights from each of INSPIRE's partner countries. From this analysis we have forged three principal propositions on which our Engaged Community will be constructed.

PROPOSITION 1: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP ADDRESSSES THE LIMITATIONS OF PUBLIC POLICY

Public policy is excessively focused on:
- *short-term funding,* often reflecting electoral cycles and the perceived need to demonstrate immediate impact;
- *quantifiable outcomes* which are relatively easy to measure in demonstrating impact;
- *political fashion,* distinguishing each administration from its predecessor rather than focusing on evidence-based practice;
- *media reaction,* leading to risk aversion.

The result is:
- *limited impact on 'landscape change',* when disadvantaged communities and groups are the recipients of successive short-term initiatives with little cumulative effect;
- *weak core capacity in NGOs and community organisations* because quantifiable deliverables neglect the need to strengthen competencies, governance structures and renewal mechanisms required for sustainability;
- *the suppression of enterprising behaviour by public sector staff,* often linked to a blame culture and both tacit and explicit incentives to maintain established practices;
- *transactional rather than transformational relationships between public agencies and other key actors* because the funding relationship leads to unequal distribution of power and the dominance of contract compliance as the focus for interaction;
- *few spaces for innovation* because competitive procurement processes encourage bidders to pursue established approaches, resulting in *conservative interventions.*

Social entrepreneurs identify innovative ways of addressing persistent societal problems lying beyond the reach of traditional policy measures. Whilst their actions may be constrained by current policy frameworks (especially in terms of public funding), social entrepreneurs can bring longer term perspectives and more consistent engagement with beneficiary groups; they may also deploy market-based solutions not wholly dependent on public funds.

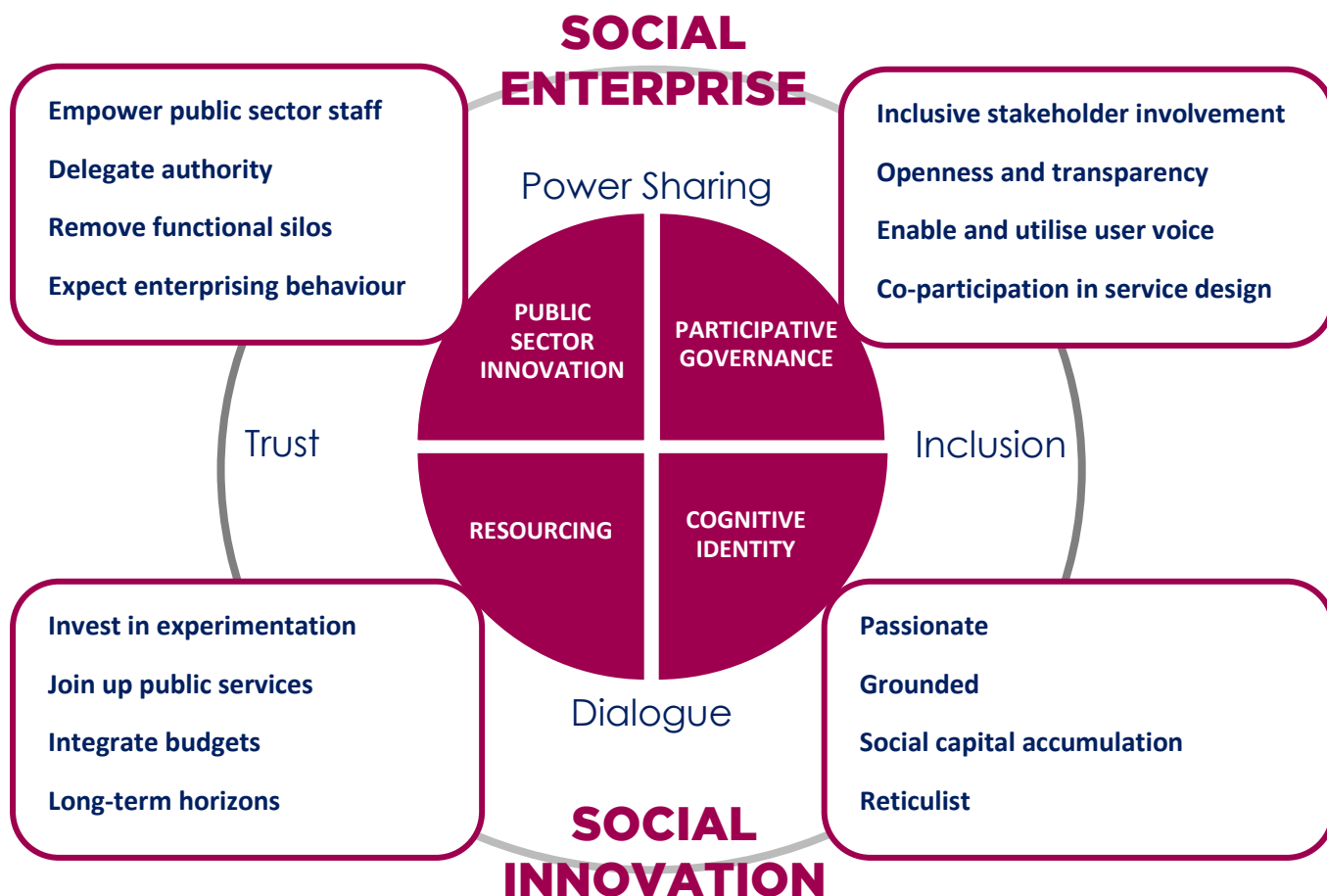**PROPOSITION 2: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IS SHAPED BY ITS INSTITUTIONAL MILIEU**

Social entrepreneurship cannot be understood solely in terms of the individual psychological attributes of the entrepreneur. The public policy, institutional, educational, cultural and relational contexts within which actual and potential social entrepreneurs operate shape their cognitive identity as well as objective possibilities for creating and sustaining social enterprises.

In seeking to increase social entrepreneurship and the growth potential of social enterprises, it will be important to examine the characteristics, functions and interactions of each actor within a given national, regional or local ecosystem.

Our analysis of literature and primary data leads us to define the characteristics of a successful social entrepreneurship ecosystem in terms of four 'Enablers', grounded in values of Trust,

Inclusion, Power Sharing and Dialogue common to all actors. This framework can be used to test the effectiveness of current ecosystems and stimulate stakeholder dialogue about the need for improvement:

Figure 1: The Enablers of a Social Entrepreneurship Eco-System

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Power Sharing

Empower public sector staff

Delegate authority

Remove functional silos

Expect enterprising behaviour

Inclusive stakeholder involvement

Openness and transparency

Enable and utilise user voice

Co-participation in service design

PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION

PARTICIPATIVE GOVERNANCE

Trust

Inclusion

RESOURCING

COGNITIVE IDENTITY

Invest in experimentation

Join up public services

Integrate budgets

Long-term horizons

Dialogue

Passionate

Grounded

Social capital accumulation

Reticulist

SOCIAL INNOVATION

1. **Public Sector Workplace Innovation.** *Innovative public sector organisations, with empowered and enterprising staff who use their knowledge and experience to engage stakeholders in critical thinking and the identification of creative solutions.*

2. **Participative Governance.** *Enabling disempowered communities and groups to find a voice and to share their knowledge and experience in service (re)design.*

3. **Cognitive Identity.** *Positive reinforcement of social entrepreneurship and social enterprises in public discourse and education, reinforced by readily accessible opportunities for learning and development, coaching, mentoring, and peer-to-peer interaction.*

4. **Resourcing Social Innovation.** *Ensuring that the process of public resource allocation is fully aligned with the other three Enablers, focused on supporting 'the force of the better argument' as it emerges from stakeholder dialogue, including budget integration, long-term funding horizons and double loop learning.*

PROPOSITION 3: AN 'ENGAGED COMMUNITY' CAN ADD SIGNIFICANT VALUE TO ECO-SYSTEMS

Social entrepreneurship can be lonely and isolating. We know from our interviews with social entrepreneurs in each of the partner countries that opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge, experience and problems are highly valued. Such opportunities can reinforce entrepreneurial identities, build social capital, create common resources, stimulate collaborative ventures and open channels for public advocacy.

'Engaged Communities' take traditional concepts of 'networking' to the next level, requiring a degree of psychological investment and 'ownership' by participants. Once mature, the members of a community will largely shape its activities. Our analysis of experiences from other communities suggests that the following actions might emerge:

- **Create peer-to-peer learning channels**

- **Create and share knowledge banks**

- **Create bridges between academic knowledge and practice**

- **Create collective solutions to common problems**

- **Create new market opportunities together**

- **Create spaces for ideation**

- **Create pressure for change**

- **Create social impact**

- **Create social capital**

- **Create fun**

The recent pandemic has led to widespread familiarity with the use of video channels, and in many instances has enabled more regular contact between remote groups than would previously have occurred. On the other hand, it is increasingly well understood that video communication alone places limits on the scope and depth of relationships, especially when first established. It also inhibits innovation when compared with in-person interaction.

INSPIRE has limited resources for enabling in-person interaction, especially at international level. We also recognise the challenges involved in creating vibrant, sustainable online networks, and have learned from both positive and negative experiences including those documented elsewhere. Our approach is informed by an emerging body of thinking and practice that goes beyond traditional network formulations.

INSPIRE will create a facilitated, multi-channel online platform with a range of user-driven, interactive functionality, designed to stimulate knowledge sharing, knowledge creation,

ideation and collaboration, bringing together social entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in national, regional and local eco-systems across several countries.

Our vision is further described in the following section.

Towards an Engaged Community

The analysis of literature and primary data summarised in preceding sections has enabled project partners to understand how INSPIRE can add value to local, regional and national eco-systems across Europe and beyond, leading to an ambitious vision that seeks to transcend the limitations of traditional networking.

We start with an advantage. The Fresh Thinking Labs platform[1] was initially developed by INSPIRE partner Workplace Innovation Europe (WIE) in 2016. The recently updated platform includes both closed and open Labs for different communities, facilitated forum discussions, integral video conferencing, and interactive courses. WIE has subsequently gained significant experience of building online communities, highlighting the importance of multiple channels for engagement to reflect the diverse preferences and interests of different participants. Experience also points to the importance of active facilitation, drawing participants into platform activities based on knowledge of their individual circumstances and aspirations.

INSPIRE's Engaged Community will be hosted in an open Lab, targeted at social entrepreneurs and other eco-system actors. Development of the Lab involves six overlapping strands:

1. **Set Up (June – October).** The Lab will be created on the Fresh Thinking Labs platform, populated with a core body of material (including INSPIRE country reports, case studies and practical resources for social entrepreneurship) and forum topics. Project partners will test the functioning of the Lab during this period.

2. **Initial Recruitment (October onwards).** Each social entrepreneur, support agency representative and policymaker interviewed by INSPIRE partners will be invited to join the Lab, and to create their own profiles.

3. **Community Building (November onwards).** Partners will instigate a programme of community building involving bespoke introductions based on mutual interests, facilitated forum discussions on key topics (including the ecosystem-building challenges identified in Proposition 2), and entrepreneur-led webinars on case histories and specific challenges.

4. **Expansion (early 2023 onwards).** Having established a core portfolio of activities, further recruitment will initially be targeted at other social entrepreneurs and stakeholders in partner countries, gradually extending to other geographical areas.

5. **Co-ownership (mid-2023 onwards).** Once the value of the Community to social entrepreneurs and other stakeholders has been established, 'Champions' will be recruited from the membership who will gradually assume ownership and responsibility

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[1] https://workplaceinnovation.eu/community/

for instigating and facilitating platform activities. Project partners will remain active in the Lab whilst ceding leadership to the Community itself.

6. **Resource Building (throughout).** A knowledge bank will be established as an integral resource within the Lab, including curated case studies, articles, practical tools and course materials contributed both by INSPIRE partners and members.

Conclusion

INSPIRE embodies the innovative attributes associated with social entrepreneurship itself. Nowhere is this more the case than in our aspirations for a highly interactive and self-sustaining Community designed to build social capital, competence and collaboration across the international social enterprise movement.