EUROPEAN

# POLICYBRIEF

## SOCIAL INNOVATIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Their role and their challenges

This policy brief on Social Innovation in Environment is based on the results of the first empirical phase of the EU funded project "Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change" (SI-DRIVE). It takes stock of challenges and practice fields of social innovations gathered in the SI-DRIVE policy field report on environment and climate change. Policy foresight and recommendations were elaborated in the first Policy and Foresight Workshop which took place in autumn 2015. This policy brief will be updated after the final empirical phase at the end of the project in 2017.

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## INTRODUCTION

Empirical evidence on patterns of barriers and opportunities common in numerous social innovation projects should be the basis for related policy support schemes, if these are necessary. A screening of social innovation initiatives with environmental impacts has shown that they respond to challenges which are also high on the agenda of the European Union and of almost all of the countries covered by this project, albeit with different approaches and perspectives.

An important issue in addressing the challenge of climate change is improving energy efficiency, which is widely recognised as the most cost-effective and readily available means to address numerous environment-related issues. Beyond this, an improvement of resource efficiency is on the policy agenda at the European level, as well as in many Western European countries. Whereas the challenges there are mainly related to recycling processes as such, other countries struggle with the collection of waste, which is a prerequisite for recycling and the realisation of a circular economy. The same holds true for many Southern European countries, where the collection of waste and illegal dumpsites are a problem. Furthermore, (local) air pollution is a still a problem in many urban areas as well, across the European Union. Even though significant progress was made concerning the major air pollutants (sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, ammonia, etc.) air quality remains poor in many areas, frequently violating air quality standards. Consequently, air pollution is estimated to cause more health issues and early deaths than road accidents (European Commission, 2014b). Water pollution, i.e. pollution of the seas is a global challenge, with all the

related governance challenges due to the often unclear origin of the pollution, a lack of regulations, and/or non-enforcement of international obligations. However, as the example of the Danube delta illustrates, water pollution is also a problem with regard to rivers and lakes. Last, but not least, regardless of the type of ecosystem, in the majority of ecosystems a loss of biodiversity can be observed. The main reasons are the destruction of ecosystems by human infrastructures, pollution and climate change.

## Evidence and Analysis

This policy brief is based on evidence generated by analyses preparing and accompanying the global mapping of social innovations and the associated in-depth case studies of selected social innovations that both form the core of the empirical work in the SI DRIVE project.

A screening of policy documents in the field of 'environmental and climate policy' on the national and European levels shows that the term and concept of "social innovation" is hardly used in the SI-DRIVE policy documents. Although only a small number of policy documents explicitly refer to the term and concept of social innovation, many policy approaches take into account social innovation implicitly. In most countries, activities take place which could be referred to as social innovations. More recently, the term and concept of social innovation has been appearing in a number of policy documents, in particular in the Nordic countries, Germany and Austria and in the context of Smart City activities. Furthermore, a standard approach of evaluation of social innovation projects and insights out of these evaluations feeding into policy is made difficult by many social innovation initiatives not using the label of social innovation. Hence the role of social innovation will be hard to quantify and it will be extremely difficult to attribute impacts to specific activities which may or may not be labelled as social innovations.

A first workshop on Foresight and Policy in the field of environmental policy has been organised in the course of the SI DRIVE project. Here, one question that caused extensive debate was that on the role of social innovation in the given context of challenges and policies in the area. Participants agreed that social innovations responding to environmental challenges help building up awareness and reaching the hearts and minds of people. Furthermore, to a great extent their role also seems to be providing feasible alternatives to existing routines. As it is very often existing routines in environmentally relevant behaviour that cumulate and impact negatively on the quality of nature; the variation that is introduced by social innovation projects with the aim of having positive impacts on the environment is a crucial function. In showing good and feasible alternatives social innovations also help empowering society because they increase the capacity of individuals or groups to change behaviour and make choices that may lead to less undesirable effects on nature. Concerning technology and social innovation, in the field of climate and environmental policy, current technological configurations are causing large environmental impacts and are part of the problem whereas new 'green' technologies are at the heart of the proposed solution at the same time. In most of the climate and environmental problems, different technologies play an important role in the origination of the problems as such. Thus, a transition towards sustainability has to include a wide spectrum of innovations, since there will not be a single "technological fix" to the existing sustainability problems in the field. However, technology will probably be a key element to reach the goals in the field of climate and environmental policy. This will include, on the one hand, the replacement of polluting technologies with cleaner technologies, end of pipe solutions (such as filters) in the sectors that contribute to environmental problems nowadays. On the other hand technology plays a role as a platform for social innovations. Social media for instance can play a role in organizing and diffusion social innovations.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

Social innovation initiatives can show a way forward for policy makers and corporate decision makers. They often address social needs that also arise due to system imperfections which cannot be easily tackled by standard solutions. The development and diffusion of social innovations is typically hampered by the following inherent flaws: i) If search processes for new solutions remain too local, they do not consider and integrate possibilities and opportunities found elsewhere. ii) If networks of actors within a social innovation project are too weak, they hinder action and knowledge transfer. iii) Path-dependence, if institutions are in favour of traditional approaches and incumbent actors. iv) Uncertainty (risk aversion) of possible prime movers hampers innovative solutions, and so does v) a lack of allies in order to reach critical masses. It will be a matter further detailed research how policy can issue support in these matters.

The burning question concerning social innovations is if they can (and should) be advanced on the basis of support schemes which overcome the notion that every social innovation project is singularly knit into its constellation of agents, networks and institutional context. Still, if support schemes are necessary they should be recharged from empirical evidence on patterns of barriers and opportunities common in numerous social innovation projects. This requires empirical evidence over a multitude of social innovation projects. The SI-DRIVE project is in the middle of this process that is of course aggravated by all the contingencies mentioned above.

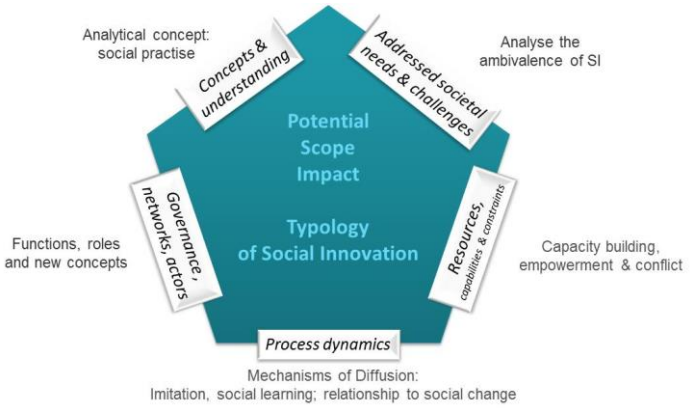
## Research Parameters

**Social Innovation – Driving Force of Social Change**", in short **SI-DRIVE**, is a research project aimed at extending knowledge about social innovation (SI) in three major directions:

- Integrating theories and research methodologies to advance understanding of social innovation leading to a comprehensive new paradigm of innovation.
- Undertaking European and global mapping of social innovation, thereby addressing different social, economic, cultural, historical and religious contexts in eight major world regions.
- Ensuring relevance for policy makers and practitioners through in-depth analyses and case studies in seven policy fields, with cross European and world region comparisons, foresight and policy round tables.

SI-DRIVE involves 15 partners from 12 EU Member States and 10 partners from all continents, accompanied by 13 advisory board members, all in all covering 30 countries all over the world.
Research is dedicated to seven major policy fields: (1) Education (2) Employment (3) Environment and climate change (4) Energy (5) Transport and mobility (6) Health and social care (7) Poverty reduction and sustainable development.
The approach adopted ensures cyclical iteration between theory development, methodological improvements, and policy recommendations. Two mapping exercises at the European and the global level are carried out in the frame of SI-DRIVE: Initial mapping captures basic information of about 1000+ actual social innovations from a wide variety of sources worldwide, leading to a typology of social innovation. Subsequent mapping will use the typology to focus on well documented social innovation, leading to the selection of 70 cases for in-depth analysis in the seven SI-DRIVE policy areas. These case studies will be further analysed, used in stakeholder dialogues in seven policy field platforms and in analysis of cross-cutting dimensions (e.g. gender, diversity, ICT), carefully taking into account cross-sector relevance (private, public, civil sectors), and future impact.

Up to now five key dimensions (summarised in the following figure) are mainly structuring the theoretical and empirical work:
The outcomes of SI-DRIVE will cover a broad range of research dimensions, impacting particularly in terms of changing society and empowerment, and contributing to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy.




## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME**

SI-DRIVE - Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change.

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**CONSORTIUM**

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Applied Research and Communications Fund – ARCF -, Sofia, Bulgaria
Australian Centre for Innovation - ACIIC -, Sydney, Australia
Austrian Institute of Technology – AIT -, Vienna, Austria
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| **BUDGET** | EU contribution: 4 888 551.20 €. |
| **WEBSITE** | www.si-drive.eu. |
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| **FURTHER READING** | SI-DRIVE Policy Briefs on Social Innovation in Employment, Environment, Energy Supply, Transport and Mobility, Health and Social Care, and Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development http://www.si-drive.eu/?p=1934<br>Scoppetta, Anette: Compilation of State of the Art Reports on Policy Fields, SI-DRIVE Deliverable 3.4 (http://www.si-drive.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/D3.4_Compilation-report_policy-fields_30062015.pdf)<br>SI-DRIVE Newsletter (http://www.si-drive.eu/?page_id=333) |