

BUREAU POSITION

Regional Social Innovation for Tackling Societal Challenges

Citizens demand and expect the public sector to play an active role in providing new solutions to societal and territorial challenges while ensuring quality public services and jobs. Civil society also demands new spaces for participation and a share in the responsibility for designing and implementing innovative approaches to solving societal challenges.

Social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new collective responses to society's pressing demands through a process of collective empowerment and learning, which should deliver more effective public policies and improved quality of life.

In the period post-2020, the European Union (EU) will promote a shift of research and innovation policies towards missions addressing European societal challenges (climate change, ageing, etc.) with the aim of achieving transformative change. The EU missions will define global goals, set specific targets and develop a set of coordinated instruments and multi-stakeholder actions designed to reach those targets within a given timeframe.

These EU missions, connecting academia, public administrations, companies and civil society through new and evolving forms of partnerships, will require coordinated actions across several sectors and policies as well as citizen engagement and social innovation.

Because of their closeness to citizens and the competences they hold, regional and local governments are key to enabling EU territories and citizens to reach their full potential in contributing solutions to societal challenges.

We therefore call upon the European Commission, the European Parliament and Member States to:

Recognise the role of regions better and more explicitly in tackling societal challenges through social innovation

1. Regions and cities are key actors for addressing the most urgent societal challenges faced by European economies as well as for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. Smart specialisation strategies (RIS3) and S3 platforms are playing a major role in encouraging, coordinating and orienting research and innovation at the regional level towards societal challenges. Many regions are already promoting, under RIS3, bottom-up social innovation and developing new governance structures. These allow a wider range of stakeholders to engage in open and collaborative innovation, bringing new solutions to territorial and societal challenges.
3. Innovative solutions that respond to societal challenges require the active participation of citizens. Because of their closeness to citizens, regional and local governments have an important role in addressing societal challenges.
4. Demand-driven policy instruments, such as innovative public procurement, are of key importance for fostering the contributions of research and innovation (R&I) to addressing societal challenges. Through these instruments end-users can be involved in the design and testing of new solutions, ensuring that the new solutions match existing needs and accelerating the uptake of these new solutions by creating demand.

Facilitate and promote the participation of regions in EU initiatives tackling societal challenges

5. Invite regional governments and other regional stakeholders to actively participate in EU R&I missions and other EU initiatives, facilitating their active partnership in the development and application of new solutions to societal challenges.
6. Develop new forms of governance to ensure vertical and horizontal coordination of stakeholders and to ensure that local and regional actors can contribute effectively and consistently to EU societal challenges.
7. Set a common agenda where the EU defines the general guidelines, the framework and the strategic goals to address societal challenges and where member states and regions define their own priorities and goals within the given framework, complementing EU initiatives.
8. Commit adequate EU funding and resources to strengthen the role of regional innovation ecosystems, ensuring that funds become more flexible and less risk averse, allowing experimentation and the generation of innovative solutions.
9. Define more flexible rules to facilitate potential synergies between ESIF and future framework programmes for R&I in order to tackle common challenges (at regional and European levels) and to achieve higher impact and systemic changes.
10. Reinforce the political commitment to territorial cooperation. Encourage and facilitate the use of EU funds assigned to regions to articulate interregional projects tackling common challenges through social innovation. The provisions in the EC proposals for the new European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) Regulations in this direction are welcomed, but novel and more flexible ways of financing should be promoted. Rules determining funding sources and multi-stakeholder partnerships should become more flexible.
11. Strengthening interregional cooperation through a reinforced new generation of INTERREG programmes and S3 platforms focused on societal challenges.
12. More attention and support should be given to the open and living labs movement - a global, citizen-centric approach promoted by regions and cities.
13. Reinforce mutual learning through novel means to monitor, evaluate and assess the impact of social innovation at the regional, national and European level. Make project-related information accessible, especially results for evidence-based policy and practice as well as the dissemination and replication of successful cases.
14. Foster the use of smart data to support the development of new open government systems and more participative and effective public policies. The sharing and interoperability of open data is essential to support a collaborative knowledge building process within public administrations at the local, regional, national and EU level.
15. Connect investment in innovation tackling societal challenges to the European Semester by monitoring and analysing its outcomes at national and regional levels in the Country Reports and Country-Specific Recommendations. A better definition of common strategic frameworks and a clearer orchestration of policies would contribute to achieving progress towards common goals.