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Introduction

+RESILIENT puts together a 4-helix partnership of 8 MED countries to tackle the need for innovation conducive to increased socially-responsive competitiveness of SMEs & stimulate new jobs, especially for companies operating in the social economy. It aims to kickstart a process of policy change at regional level in the involved areas resulting in the integration of successful elements into the new Cohesion policy (EU2020+). It is an integrated project that establishes a structural approach to policy & practice improvement of emerging dynamics in social innovation through an overarching process based on the intertwined use of open data & the creation of a transnational socially-responsive value chain. This includes studying existing initiatives, adapting and testing, with the final objective of capitalizing them in the MED area.

Prizma Foundation is one of the 14 partners of the project. As part of the project activities in cooperation with the Municipality of Maribor and other key stakeholders the Virtual social innovation hub that, consists of digital platforms for participatory budgeting (Hey, participate – Čuj, sodeluj!) and Lets Improve Maribor (Izboljšajmo Maribor) was developed to boost participation and social innovation in Maribor to bring back the joy & improve the quality of life in the city.

IMPORTANCE OF COOPERATION AND PARTICIPATION FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Cooperation of local self-governments with its citizens and with other stakeholders brings all kinds of benefits and contributes to the development of the local community. They are aware of this in an increasing number of Slovenian municipalities and to this end they are developing and introducing various mechanisms to ensure the exchange of information, initiatives, and proposals for addressing current social and environmental challenges perceived in the local environment. In local communities, residents are closest to the authorities and the right to participate in decision-making is the easiest. Participation can take place in different ways—from consultations, proposing referendums, meetings with mayors (Open Doors Day), citizens' assemblies and online. The participatory budgeting mechanism is also increasingly being implemented in Slovenian municipalities, where citizens are free to propose and select projects to be financed when adopting the municipal budget. They therefore decide directly on the use of part of the budget.

Citizens are the most important source of information about when changes are needed and what solutions they need to make life easier and more successful and thus faster development of the municipality.

The involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes provides better measures and increases citizens' confidence in the work of the municipality. At the same time, an innovative community capable of transforming and (socially) innovating with the aim of building a sustainable society can also gradually develop. Innovative communities encourage the





development of new ideas, seek knowledge-oriented solutions, networking, and exchange of information. One of the most important parts of innovation in the community is to absorb and disperse knowledge and information towards all members of a community.

Good and thoughtful organisation and use of relevant tools are crucial for the successful implementation of collaborative processes, which can also lead to the creation of innovative communities. It makes sense for the municipal administration to take care of them. They must be accessible to the widest possible range of users, understandable and easy to use in order to achieve effective cooperation and good results. For this, the most important information to be made available to citizens is up-to-date, accessible, and comprehensive.

On the basis of monitoring the implementation of the processes of public involvement in the decision-making processes in the Municipality of Maribor in recent years, we find that these processes have occasionally taken place (e.g. the preparation of the Local Culture Programme), but are most often challenged by the public and are not systemically regulated or even encouraged by the municipal administration. An online channel "Improve Maribor" has been set up, which, however, did not provide more than the opportunity to comment from the citizens and therefore did not achieve the desired cooperation between the municipal administration and the citizens to jointly address the challenges in the city. Attempts to introduce a participatory budget proposed by civil society have not been fully successful in recent years and have created a certain degree of mistrust in this participatory mechanism among citizens. In 2020, the municipal administration decided to reintroduce the participatory budget, based on the initiative of civil society organisations. Good cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal administration and other key stakeholders has been established, contributing to successful implementation while at the same time consolidating awareness of the importance and benefits of public participation and decision-makers for community development and creating greater mutual trust.

The introduction of an online social innovation hub, which represents an upgrade of the online application developed (Lets Improve Maribor) and used in the context of the implementation of the pilot project + Resilient, for the implementation of a participatory budget, is providing an online environment in which cooperation between citizens and local self-government can take place in a transparent and simple way, ensuring the exchange of information, initiatives and at the same time ensuring control over the implementation of the necessary tasks for the implementation of citizens' initiatives. The latter is essential if the confidence of the citizens is to be built and thus a greater interest in cooperation.

Since it is not only important for the development of municipalities and communities to provide adequate infrastructure conditions for living, changes and improvements in the social sphere are also important, it is necessary to encourage citizens to think about how to improve community life through different approaches, services, and products, while equally addressing all population groups with their diverse needs. The development of social innovation through participatory and co-creative methods and processes is an integral part of the Virtual Social



Innovation Hub Maribor and needs to be given additional attention in order to encourage citizens to think about this aspect of development and to include their proposals in municipal development plans. On the other hand, the Virtual Social Innovation Hub in Maribor itself is a social innovation in the city.

SOCIAL INNOVATION LINKED WITH COOPERATION & PARTICIPATION

Modern societies face increasing risks such as food and water scarcity, climate change, financial crises, stratification of society, which require ever new solutions, but which existing structures and policies no longer succeed in creating. The participation of society at large as a generator of social innovation is therefore increasingly important. If in the past innovation was in the domain of the business environment, which mainly pursued profits and the development of new technologies, innovation is increasingly moving into a society due to various crises, where innovation is becoming an open and inclusive process that is made with people and no longer just for them, in order to pursue social goals. When we talk about social innovation, we talk about cooperation or participation, and its formation always involves end users, experts and social environments that enable cooperation. Social innovation is open to everyone, ideas are revealed, everyone's responses are desirable. The integration of people into the economy and society is encouraged, and the participation of the economic, non-profit, public sector and knowledge bearers is crucial, in order to best create the necessary creative action leading to the desired solutions. Social innovations are usually more sustainable, efficient, and effective solutions to social problems than existing solutions, but also address human and social needs to which we do not yet have answers. Social innovations are new things, concepts and strategies that not only aim at providing new services, products, and models, but also develop new social relationships and collaborations. They represent a new solution to the social problem while strengthening society's capacity to act.

Social innovation is therefore understood as new ideas (products, services, processes, models) that at the same time respond effectively to the needs of society and create new social relationships and cooperation. They are innovations that, in addition to the overall benefits for society, also increase the capacity of society to act (Robin Murray, Julie Caulier-Grice, Geoff Mulgan, *The open Book of Social Innovation*, 2010). Social innovation in itself not only represents a product, service, model or process that effectively solves a perceived problem in society, but also contributes to increasing the capacity of society/people to act on their own through the collaborations created.

Virtual social innovation Hub – Let's improve Maribor



PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF ESTABLISHING THE VIRTUAL SOCIAL INNOVATION HUB MARIBOR

The Virtual social innovation hub Maribor is a tool set up for the effective participation of residents, population groups, organisations to encourage their active participation in finding solutions to the challenges facing the city. With its help, users have direct access to city administration and related key stakeholders, as well as to decision-makers through their initiatives and issues. At the same time, they are informed about what is happening in implementing terms with their initiatives or questions. The municipality can have a sustainable tool to systematically consider and implement the proposals submitted in accordance with its possibilities and competences.

The establishment of the Virtual social innovation Hub Maribor follows three main objectives:

- ✓ increased participation of residents, population groups, organisations in identifying problems in the city and proposing solutions
- ✓ increased number of socially innovative ideas with potential for realisation in the social economy sector
- ✓ improved cooperation between residents, population groups, organisations and city administration (Municipality of Maribor and other key institutions and organisations in the city)

Together with both platforms (participatory budgeting (Hey, participate – Čuj, sodeluj!) and Lets Improve Maribor (Izboljšajmo Maribor)), the Virtual social innovation hub Maribor also represents one of the building blocks of a smart city.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN MARIBOR – HEY, PARTICIPATE! & LETS IMPROVE MARIBOR

Through the participatory budget mechanism, the municipality, when adopting its annual or two-year budget, allows citizens to decide directly on the use of part of the funds and thus to propose and select projects they consider necessary to improve the quality of living or otherwise contribute to the development of the community. The process of implementing the participatory budget therefore takes place periodically and within a limited period of time during which the municipality must consider, present and vote on project proposals. The mechanism is certainly important to strengthen citizens' participation in decision-making processes, and the proposal gives the municipality a broader insight from the field about the needs of citizens and the problems they face. However, in order to achieve a high level of citizen engagement and cooperation, it is necessary to set up a mechanism that allows this to be done on a continuous basis and in an appropriate manner that ensures the effectiveness of the handling and resolution of initiatives. This is precisely what the social innovation hub — a tool for continuous communication and cooperation between citizens and the city administration — is intended for. Some citizens' initiatives are resolvable within the existing budgetary frameworks, may already be part of the urban administration's work plans, and some provide information relevant to future investment planning. While implementing the participatory budget, some may turn into proposals submitted and voted for by the general





public. By publishing initiatives and ideas, they become public and enable citizens to get involved in their development. The Lets Improve Maribor (everyday use) and the participatory budget platform certainly complement and build on each other, and both approaches make an important contribution to strengthening the empowerment of citizens and representatives of the municipal administration to manage cooperation processes and to increase the desire and need for cooperation. The advantage of linking the participatory budget mechanism and the Lets Improve Maribor lies in the use of the same technical solution (Consul), which provides users with a similar user experience. The interplay between the two areas is also important from the point of view of consolidating awareness of the importance of participation, cooperation, and co-creation.

All stakeholders invited to the cooperation processes need specific skills or need to be adequately empowered for their role in the process. Active participation as well as various forms of training, consultations, exchange of experiences, etc. contribute to this. All these activities are part of the implementation of the participatory budget, where the citizens are invited to workshops and consultations where, with the help of experts and moderators, they “learning” the technique of cooperation and jointly develop ideas.

The Lets Improve Maribor provides a friendly user experience and has been adapted and upgraded to the needs of the city of Maribor. In the preparation of the platform, the starting point was to provide a tool that will serve for the participation of residents, communities, organisations and municipalities in identifying and co-creating, jointly finding solutions to the challenges/problems of the environment and adapted to their different types and complexity. Regardless of the latter, the tool is easy and understandable enough to be used by everyone, allowing all segments of society to be involved. It is important that everyone is able to participate, co-create and cooperate, regardless of education or level of competence to use digital tools. The functionalities of the platform are designed to guide users throughout the process, from identifying and evaluating the challenge/problem through the creation of a solution/idea, to eliminating the problem with an appropriate system solution, product, or one-time intervention, if this is sufficient. The platform includes a developed protocol of all necessary operations, including the identification of responsible services and persons for the implementation of individual operations from the Municipality of Maribor and other key stakeholders as well.

Experience from environments, where cooperation between municipal administration and citizens and civil society organisations is already well developed, tells us that more public participation requires time, multiple implementations of collaborative process cycles and continuous information and promotion.

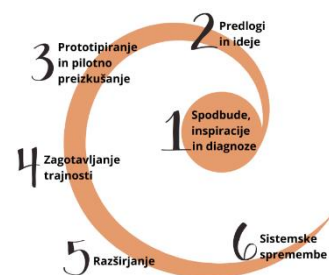




Creating policy framework for boosting participation & social innovation in Maribor – policy recommendations

To boost social innovation and increase participation of the citizens and other stakeholders and to improve cooperation between municipality administration and them we encourage the Maribor municipality to:

1. Take in to account the social innovations as an important part of the Sustainable Urban Strategy of Maribor 2030 and to use the 6 steps of the social innovation process approach underpinned with digital tools to boost social innovation in the city:
 - **Incentives, inspiration, and diagnosis** (identification, diagnosis, classification of social problems)
 - **Suggestions and ideas** (design of proposals, ideas for solving social problems)
 - **Prototyping and pilot testing** (testing ideas in practice)
 - **Ensuring sustainability**
 - **Dissemination** (solution/(social) innovation)
 - **Systemic changes** (where possible)



In this respect we propose that the Maribor municipality sets up an interdisciplinary working group for the development of the Sustainable Urban Strategy of Maribor 2030 that also involves social innovation and social economy experts and practitioners.

2. We propose to the Maribor municipality to underpin social innovations development and citizens participation by using digital platforms developed, tested and evaluated during + Resilient project (HEY, PARTICIPATE! & LETS IMPROVE MARIBOR). Both are the online junction that provides a tool for the implementation of the process of social innovation from the stage of diagnosing the social challenge to the system solution. In order to do that we propose to the Municipality to set and sign the agreement on governance and usage of the platforms developed in + Resilient project to boost social innovation and citizens participation in the next programming period (by the end of 2028) with PRIZMA Foundation as the responsible partner for implementing +Resilient pilot action in Maribor. It is also recommended that Maribor municipality assures municipalities employees training that they will be able to use the platforms. As well it is recommended to assure sufficient financial resources for external experts and technical support so that the platforms will operate and be used smoothly.





3. It is also proposed that Maribor municipality launches a new round of Participatory budgeting 2022-2023 in spring 2022 following the developed model and the digital platform “HEY, PARTICIPATE» that was developed, tested and evaluated during +Resilient project. Related to the new round of the participatory budgeting cycle we propose to the municipality as well to assure sufficient budget for participatory budgeting implementation (from 500.000 – 1 mio EUR) that includes also sufficient budget for managing the implementation of the participatory budgeting process (promotion, workshops for citizens, platform adjustments, involvement of experts to cooperate in the “evaluation committee”, etc.).

To assure efficient and successful implementation of the new cycle of the Maribor municipality participatory budgeting, an expert and stakeholders group, responsible for smooth and professional implementation of the new cycle is proposed to be set up in spring 2022 to steer the process of implementation. It is recommended that the group involves experts, development and NGO organisations involved in pilot testing during +Resilient project and representatives of the Maribor municipality administration.





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