Co-creation design for sustainable social innovations: challenges of open data and digital tools

POLICY BRIEF

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Summary

Building upon the experience and the results of the +Resilient project within the Provence Alpes-Côte d'Azur Region (France), this policy brief explores the role and conditions under which open data and digital tools can be supportive within a co-creation design process for social innovation. Digital transition is one of the major societal challenges that most policymakers at different levels need to face, as highlighted by the regional and European priorities on the transition path. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transition and the use of digital tools and the +Resilient project has demonstrated the adaptation and resilience capacity of local and regional stakeholders in using these tools to pursue the project even during the pandemic. In addition, improving data to build enabling ecosystems for social innovation is now acknowledged as a priority. However, the +Resilient project showed that accessing, producing and using open data remains challenging in most regions.

From this perspective, the +Resilient project has confirmed the importance of building an ecosystem enabling social innovation and sustainable transition. Such an ecosystem should involve multiple stakeholders – including public institutions, research institutes, citizens, the social economy and the business community –, design a participative process to enrol them and benefit from strong public support. Developing adequate skills, both hard and soft skills, using participative and user-centric methods and digital tools to and consolidate quality open data are essential vehicles to support the whole process.

Brief overview of the +Resilient project

The + RESILIENT project is part of an INTERREG MED program and is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. Launched in 2018, it is led by the Veneto Region and ends in April 2022. Eight European regions have been participating (from Albania, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain). For France, the partner of the project was Aix-Marseille University, in partnership with the Provence Alpes-Côte d'Azur Region.

One major hypothesis of this project is that the involvement of multiple stakeholders, based on a four-helix approach, within a clustering dynamic is necessary to foster social innovation. The second hypothesis explored in this project is that open data and digital tools can support social innovation dynamics.

These postulates are aligned with EU priorities. As highlighted by the report of the GECES European expert group[1], clusters of social and ecological innovation play a crucial role in fostering innovation toward sustainable transition, at the local level. However, this report also stresses that technological innovation is rarely used in the analysed clusters. Although the EU industrial strategy, as well as the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Region strategy, encourages digital transition through the provision of various tools and instruments, digital innovation remains an issue and a challenge for social innovation clusters.

The objective of +Resilient is therefore to stimulate social innovation through innovation dynamics, multiple stakeholders' partnerships and, potentially, through the production or use of open data and digital tools. The aim is to encourage cooperation between regional public authorities, universities and training centres, for-profit companies and civil society (including social enterprises and social economy organisations), adopting a four-helix approach, to stimulate the development of innovations within "socially innovative or socially responsible clusters''. In this perspective, several pilot actions have been carried out in the partner regions in different fields of activity to support public service innovations, reinforce the capacity building of social economy and foster the social and vocational approach of SME's. In the French case, a dynamic map of food supply in poor neighbourhoods has been prototyped, as a means to better identify "food deserts" and develop relevant

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[1] European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, *Clusters of social and ecological innovation in the European Union, perspectives and experiences: the role of clusters and similar forms of business cooperation in fostering the development of social economy*, Publications Office, 2021, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2873/07591

public instruments to fight against this phenomenon and contribute to increase food justice and security.

Pilot actions, together with the other blocks of the +Resilient project, have confirmed the necessity of involving multiple stakeholders from the beginning of the project to co-design a project that identifies and answers to local needs, mobilises the relevant resources and give it the required legitimacy and political support within the local or regional ecosystem. Several other lessons could be detailed here. Focusing on open data and digital tools however, one major result of the +Resilient project is to highlight that open data and digital tools can be crucial to stimulate social innovation but only under certain conditions and with some points of caution.

Policy context

These lessons and recommendations are fully in line with the policy priorities at a multi-level perspective, both regional and EU levels.

At the regional level: the regional policy context as a favourable environment for the capitalization of the +Resilient project

The Region Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur has chosen to adopt an inclusive approach to the social and solidarity economy since 2016 and to support social economy enterprises like all regional enterprises. Today, the Region wishes to accentuate and make more visible its support to the actors of the social and solidarity economy. In the next Regional Plan for Economic Development, Innovation, and Internationalisation (SRDEII), the social and solidarity economy will confirm its legitimate place as an efficient and exemplary economy, a source of employment and solidarity. This recognition is already included in the Climate Plan "Keeping a step ahead" (« Gardons une cop d'avance ») adopted in April 2021, which describes the social and solidarity economy as an "essential pillar" for the development of a new economy.

Because it is adapted to meet today's societal needs for innovation and transformation of our economy, the social and solidarity economy offers many solutions. Finally, the health crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic has also shown the extent to which we need a more cohesive and supportive society.

Six strategic areas have been identified as issues shared by the State and the Region, which are set out in an agreement

renewed for three years with the Regional Chamber of Social and Solidarity Economy Enterprises (CRESS) and on which work proposals may be developed for the period 2022-2024:

- Affirm the place of the social and solidarity economy as one of the answers to the major challenges ahead (ecological transition, inclusive economy, generational support, territorial equity and new forms of employment).
- Supporting businesses in conjunction with other networks, particularly through the regional "My Business Project" scheme and in addition to the local support scheme.
- Encourage the emergence of new social and solidarity economy projects.
- Develop employment and skills.
- Encourage the responsible territorial commitment of companies (mainly through socially and environmentally responsible purchasing, the challenges of cooperation in the territories, the revitalization of town centres and collaboration with the other consular chambers).
- Contribute to the development of this sector and to the integration of people in difficulty, by promoting the balanced development of work integration social enterprises, adapted companies and employers' groups.

The +Resilient project completely confirms the legitimate role of social economy organizations as "essential pillar" in social innovation processes towards sustainable transition and a more inclusive economy. The territorial commitment of private businesses has been limited in some regions and is now stressed as crucial for the scaling up and the scaling out of the social innovation dynamics that were created.

At the European level: the Social Economy Action Plan to "enhance social innovation, support the development of the social economy and boost its social and economic transformative power"

The main results of +Resilient are also clearly linked to the challenge of building a framework to support the development of the social economy and the scaling up of initiatives at the European level. As presented in December 2021, the social economy action plan[2] stresses the importance of business support and capacity building of the social economy (4.1.) as well as of maximising the contribution of the social economy to the green and digital transitions (4.3.). As developed in more details in the staff working document (SWD 2021, 982 final)[3], the place

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[2] Communication from the European Commission, "Building an economy that works for people: an action plan for the social economy", December 2021; https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=24984&langId=en

[3] See the Commission staff working document, SWD (2021) 982 final, "Scenarios towards co-creation of a transition pathway for a more resilient, sustainable and digital Proximity and Social Economy industrial ecosystem";
https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/47854/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native

given to business networking is central and the need to "promote local business clusters with participation of social economy" is made explicitly in the action plan (4.1 and 3.1). In +Resilient, the importance of setting up an ecosystem to support local initiatives was highlighted, as were the involvement of different stakeholders and the support of public policies at various levels of policymaking. Interactions between social economy stakeholders and mainstream businesses were however not developed enough and should be reinforced in the future. Skills are particularly underlined to support the ecosystem transition (see the Pact for skills p.12 of the SWD).

A second result concerns the use of digital tools, highlighted by the Commission to foster the digital transition of the ecosystem (4.3). Although +Resilient demonstrated the ability to mobilise digital resources to ensure the continuity of the pilot actions in the pandemic context, some points of vigilance were identified. First, digitalisation requires adequate equipment and skills, learning and training, as recommended by the EU. Secondly, the way to maintain interest in this type of tool over time is a crucial issue. Lastly, although the importance of producing open data is acknowledged, it is still a challenge (see p.22 of the SWD) in terms of strengthening data processing, collection and management, as experimented during the +Resilient project.

Finally, we note, and this is undoubtedly another point of caution for the implementation of the social economy action plan, the fragility of the business models of some pilot actions that were deployed during +Resilient and the need to have public funds to carry them out, in a context where relations with the for-profit sector are not yet well developed.

Policy recommendations

From this perspective, **five policy recommendations** are addressed:

First, open data and digital tools need to be designed as means or vehicles for social innovation in line with the priorities identified at the local level, not as an end of the project. They need to be related to the strategies of the project and co-created with the involvement of a diversity of stakeholders. It implies implementing a participatory process involving, at an early stage, users (and preferably all relevant stakeholders) in the design, the implementation and the evaluation of digital tools to secure motivation in the long run and adequacy to the needs.

Second, participatory and user-centric processes are crucial and need to be supported, even more in the pandemic context we had to face. Local and regional stakeholders have shown an impressive

capacity of adaptation and resilience that was supported through participatory methods and tools. Indeed, online participation of citizens needs to be tutored and accompanied to fight against digital divide and ensure large participation.

Third, specific skills need to be acquired to develop social innovation with the help of open data and digital tools, not only hard or technical skills which are essential, but also soft skills such as educational and animating ones, design thinking methodologies to overcome the low level of digital literacy and nourish a participative dynamic overtime. In many cases, adequate training schemes must be created.

Four, open data is not always available, neither of good quality. Producing and using open data is therefore a challenge and needs to be conceived in relation with the objective of the project and monitored. Facilitating access to data and developing data management systems are also priority actions. The development of digital tools raises similar challenges in terms of quality, feed of new data, maintenance and use overtime.

Finally, the +Resilient project highlighted the necessity to think about the sustainability of the pilot action in the long run, after the end of the resources from the EU program. Designing an evaluation method of the project and of its impact are part of this sustainability process. Effective partnership and integration with the local or regional ecosystem, strong political support as well as governance structure need to be settled before the end of the project.

Conclusion

In line with regional and European priorities, the +Resilient project has thus confirmed the importance of building an ecosystem enabling social innovation and sustainable transition. From this perspective, our work has highlighted the necessity of designing a co-creation process for the social innovation ecosystem that involves multiple stakeholders – including public institutions, research institutes, citizens, the social economy and the business community –, design participative methods and tools to enrol them and benefit from strong public support. Within such a framework, reliable open data and digital tools can really become strong vehicles to support social innovation processes toward just and sustainable transition.

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